

Metanoia: Conceptual Resources for the Revitalization of The Sacrament of Repentance in Eastern Christian Practice

Stephen Wojcichowsky

Abstract

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This article brings together scholarly research and pastoral concerns about the practice – or lack of practice – of the sacrament variously known as repentance, confession, penance, and reconciliation. With insights from ancient Eastern sources (as well as such modern authors as John Erickson, Jim Forest, Stanley Harakas, Alexander Schmemmann, Tomáš Špidlík, Kallistos Ware, and John Chryssavgis) and from Western theological sources both ancient and modern (including Jean Vanier, Pope John Paul II, Robert J. Kennedy, Monika Hellwig, James Dallen, Robert Barringer, and John Haliburton) as well as insights from recent spiritual, psychological, and pastoral research, the author reviews some of the historical variations in practice of this confession alongside the current and numerous obstacles to its more frequent and vibrant celebration. This review highlights three factors (repentance is God's initiative; repentance is a synergy of action involving God and us; and repentance is never perfected in our lifetime). The author concludes with ten suggestions for action on the part of confessors, pastors, spiritual directors and elders, hierarchs, and pastoral, liturgical, and sacramental theologians so that the people of God may today know and enter more deeply into the heart of the Lord's forgiveness and mercy in Christ.

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I. Introduction

Writing two years after the horror of the events of September 11, 2001, Jean Vanier declared that the road to peace and hope for the world must cross the barriers that lie between nations, governments, and diplomats. This crossing, he emphasizes, can only be accomplished when we cross the barriers *within* us personally. As such we need to be “cleansed,” cleansed in a way that allows us to become “open to a new knowledge of the Infinite and of others.”¹ To illustrate the dynamics of such a cleansing, he presents “I Am Disarmed” – a “confessional poem” by Athenagoras of Constantinople who served as Patriarch from 1948 to 1972:

I have waged this war against myself for many years.
It was terrible. But now I am disarmed.
I am no longer frightened of anything because love
banishes fear.
I am disarmed of the need to be right and to justify
myself by disqualifying others.
I am no longer on the defensive holding onto my
riches.
I just want to welcome and to share. I don't hold onto
my ideas and projects.
If someone shows me something better – No, I
shouldn't say better but good –
I accept them without any regrets. I no longer seek to
compare.
What is good, true and real is always for me the best.
That is why I have no fear.
When we are disarmed and dispossessed of self, if we
open our hearts to the God-Man
Who makes all things new, then He takes away past
hurts and reveals a new time
Where everything is possible.²

¹ Jean Vanier, *Finding Peace* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 58.

² Jean Vanier's translates this poem from the original French. It is found in his *Finding Peace*, 59.

And how are we to be cleansed? How do we “open our hearts to the God-Man who makes all things new then ... takes away past hurts and reveals a new time where everything is possible?” Vanier argues that this cleansing “is not something we can do by ourselves, by our own will-power or self-control. It is deeper than that. It is done through acceptance of certain events that may break or hurt us; it is done with the help of wise men and women; and it is accomplished through a gift of God, who leads us into greater life and to greater freedom.”³

For the estimated 1.416 billion Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Christians of the world,⁴ as they read the phrases cited above, “If we open our hearts to the God-Man who makes all things new, [this cleansing is] deeper than ... something we can do by ourselves, by our own will power or self-control; ... it is accomplished through a gift of God ... with the help of wise men and women, ... a mystery ... that flows from the deepest, most vulnerable part of our being, ... [leading] us into greater life and to greater freedom,” Vanier could be describing the essence of the sacrament of reconciliation.

This is not to make the claim that, if only more people availed themselves of sacramental reconciliation, the world would be at peace. It is not even to suggest that sacramental confession ought to be the primary remedy for the fragmenta-

³ Ibid., 60.

⁴ See Adherents.com for estimates of the number of adherents of the major churches of the world. I have adjusted their statistics on the Catholic world population to accord with the *Annuario Pontificio* 2005. These three church bodies have, for the most part, retained a tradition of sacramental confession, although it is recognized that not all parts of the Anglican communion are in uniformity in this regard. See Geoffrey Rowell, “The Anglican Tradition from the Reformation to the Oxford Movement,” in *Confession and Absolution*, Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell, eds. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 91–119. A notable exception is found in *The Order for Reconciliation of a Penitent Person* of the United Church of Christ (a union of Evangelical and Reformed Anglican Churches with Congregational Christian Churches in the USA) published in full by Martin Dudley and Jill Pinnock in “Rites of Penance and Reconciliation,” in *Confession and Absolution*, 198–202.