Sacraments of Healing: Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick.

Introduction.
The Eucharist is the essential sacrament that unites us with Christ and his Church. It also brings hope and healing, spiritual as well as physical. From the Eucharist two sacraments came to stand apart to accentuate the healing power of God's grace: Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. These notes reflect on the historical development and refinement of each of these sacraments, the communal character of their celebration, and the theological understanding of God's grace that is evident in them. They will focus on the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Sick in separate sections.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation.
I. Historical Developments.

A. The Scriptural Basis.

Jesus forgave sinners during his public life. This forgiveness reintegrated the sinner with the community of the People of God from which he or she had alienated him/herself. He received sinners at his table expressing in it God's forgiveness and the return of the person to the bosom of God's People. (CCC, 1443)

Jesus imparted to his apostles the power to forgive sins and reconcile sinners with the Church. He solemnly expressed this in his words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mt 18:18, CCC, 1444)

The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God. (CCC, 1445)

The Christian community continued a practice that had existed in the Jewish community. Rabbis practiced "binding and loosing" and the authority of Jewish law, Christians did it on the authority of Christ. Paul wrote that it should be done "by the power of the Lord Jesus" when the community was gathered. (I Corinthians 5:4-5) In the gospels Jesus was the sacrament of divine forgiveness. He called to repentance (Mk 1:15), announced to those who showed sorrow for their sins that they were forgiven by the power of God (Lk 5:18-26, 7:36-50), declared that he had been sent to the "lost sheep" of Israel (Mt 7:24), and responded to the question how often we should forgive with "every time" (Mt 18:22). Jesus' name actually means "Yahweh saves" and his blood was poured out "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28).

One could argue that the early Christian community itself was a sacrament of reconciliation for those who heard the message of salvation and tried to live up to it. (Doors to the Sacred, 313-314)

B. The Early Church.

In the course of history the Church refined its understanding of the need for forgiveness. It realized that members of the community could lapse and fail to live out the calling of
the Christian life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives a short overview of the major developments of the Church's practice of forgiving of sins. It gives the following description of this development up to the Middle Ages:

"Over the centuries the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord varied considerably. During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitent had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation. To this "order of penitents" (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime." (CCC, 1447)

Idolatry was a significant issue after a period of severe persecution. Christians who had fallen away from their faith requested re-admittance into the community. From the very beginning Church leaders realized that re-baptism could not be an option. A procedure of arbitration developed. The apostate presented himself to the bishop. Because of his/her sin the person had excommunicated himself from the believing community. He/she could no longer receive Communion, and lead a life of utter austerity: wearing coarse clothing, keep his/her hair cropped and abstain from sexual relations. The penances varied in different communities but some features were universal: penance was always public, could be administered only once in a lifetime, and if one relapsed he/she was left to the mercy of God. After the completion of the penance the person was sacramentally reconciled with the Church (normally on Holy Thursday), but was enrolled in the "order of penitents" for the rest of his/her life and relegated to an inferior status in the community. (A Concise History of the Catholic Church, 47-48, see also A New Look at the Sacraments, 169-172)

The purpose of this system was to bring the penitent to guide him/her away from sin but the process came to be viewed more and more in legal terms. Since canonical penance and reconciliation could be received only once in a life time people postponed the sacrament until they were near death. The era from 313 till 600 AD came to be known as the era of "deathbed confession." The sacrament was not part of the Christian's life and reform became necessary. (Sacraments Alive, 82)

C. The Monastic impact on Reconciliation during the Middle Ages and beyond.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church continues its review of the sacrament's history with the following observations:

"During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of the sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day." (CCC, 1447)

The system of private, frequent confession of all sins developed from the practice the monks had among themselves. A younger monk would reflect on his life's shortcomings with an older monk. This older monk became what could be called a "soul mate", a
spiritual advisor. With him he would pray, reflect on where he fell short. The older monks would give him guidance and the assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness. Often the older monk was not a priest and so, in the strict sense of the word one might not call it a sacrament. But the practice found an application in the Church. Individual penitents started to confess their sins to a priest and receive absolution as often as needed. Harsh penances disappeared. With this individual, private confession the emphasis on what was important in the sacrament of Reconciliation changed. No longer was there an emphasis on the reconciling community and on the call to turn away from sin through penance. Now confession, satisfaction for sins, and the absolution of those sins became central. In the course of time repeated, private confession became an official requirement in the Church. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed that all Catholics were required to confess grave sins at least once a year. We still know this today as “Easter Duty.” The shift of emphasis became evident in the way the Church referred to the sacrament. Instead of calling it the Sacrament of Penance it became know as the Sacrament of Confession. (Sacraments Alive, 82-83)

This new approach to the sacrament had positive and negative consequences. On the positive side was the assurance of God’s repeated forgiveness and goodness. The negative side was that now more attention was paid to make sure to list all the sins and to “pay the price” for those sins. Something like a “tariff system” developed. Penitential books were composed that listed what kind of punishment fit what kind of “crime” or sin. One might have to pay for the sin of gluttony, for instance, with ten days of fasting on water and bread. This kind of “tariff system” expressed itself in another way: indulgences. It was understood that the merits of the good works of martyrs and saints and indeed of Christ himself supplemented the penitent’s actions of penance when they fell short. An indulgence system developed that became scandalous enough that Martin Luther drew attention to it and that the Council of Trent reformed to bring back the importance of God’s forgiveness in spite of our sins. (A New Look at the Sacraments, 174-175, Doors to the Sacred, 354-355)

D. The Council of Trent.

By the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) the attention for reconciliation had shifted. Now the emphasis was on making satisfaction for sins. Confession had its own power to reconcile the sinner. The sinner was to express contrition, and the priest’s absolution became the essential formula that effected the forgiveness for one’s sins. (Sacraments Alive, 84)

Private confession that had served as a ritual for spiritual direction all but completely disappeared. The penitent went into a darkened box like cell, confessed his/her sins often to an unknown priest, and received absolution. Still the sacrament served for many as an inspiration for personal growth. Thousands went to confessors like the famous John Vianney in France and experienced God’s mercy in a personal way. (Sacraments Alive, 84, A New Look at the Sacraments, 178, Doors to the Sacred, 354-355)

E. Reform and Renewal of the Rite of Reconciliation by the Second Vatican Council.

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacro sanctum Concilium [SC]) the bishops pointed out that the liturgy is not a magical rite that is removed from the people:
“Liturgical services are not private functions but are celebrations of the church which is 'the sacrament of unity,' namely, the holy people united and organized under their bishops. Therefore, liturgical services have to do with the whole body, the church. They make it visible and have effects on it. But they also touch individual members of the church in different ways, depending on ranks, roles, and levels of participation.” (SC #26)

Clearly the Council showed the communal aspect of all liturgies and rejected the custom of past times in which members of the congregation often became passive onlookers.

The Church did not reject the decrees and directives that the Council of Trent had made. In the case of the Sacrament of Reconciliation it adopted the elements that Trent had identified and incorporated them in a more dynamic way. This incorporation is reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The rubric *The Acts of the Penitent* starts out with a quote from the Penitential Rite that lists the traditional observations on what is required from the penitent:

“Penance requires ... the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction.” (CCC, 1450)

This formula clearly identifies what is expected on the part of the penitent. It continues to clarify what is meant by each and emphasizes how each can assist the penitent in spiritual growth.

**Contrition.**
Contrition expresses ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.’ (Council of Trent, 1551 CCC, 1451)
The stirring of one’s conscience initiates this interior process and will, under the prompting of grace, be brought to completion by the sacramental absolution. (Council of Trent, 1551, CCC, 1453)
An examination of conscience will bring one to this stage of contrition. Such examination should be made in the light of the Scriptures: the moral teachings of the gospels and the apostolic letters. (CCC, 1454)

**Confession of sins.**
The confession, or disclosure of one’s sins helps one to look directly at one’s sins and helps to take responsibility for them. In this way he/she opens him/herself up to God again and can receive communion with the Church. (CCC, 1455-1456)
Confessing one’s sins helps the person to fight evil tendencies and allows him/her to be healed by Christ and grow in a life of faith. (CCC, 1458)

**Satisfaction.**
It is important to repair the harm that sins cause to our neighbors such as restore stolen goods, or repair one’s reputation. This is simply justice. But sin weakens the sinner him/herself and he/she still must recover his/her spiritual health. Therefore he/she must make amends for the sin, make "satisfaction" also called "penance."

In the reformed rite of the sacrament the elements listed above were not abandoned but incorporated into the understanding of the sacrament and its communal dimension.

**II. The Sacrament of Reconciliation after the Second Vatican Council.**
As mentioned above, the Council stressed that liturgical services are not private affairs. Thus the sacrament of Reconciliation is a communal celebration of God’s forgiveness.
A. A Journey.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (better labeled as the Parable of the Forgiving Father) reflects a basic understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here is the story of the young man who went off the "deep end," came to his senses and found acceptance by his father. The dynamics of the sacrament are vividly reflected and find a parallel in life. The young man has a change of heart and decides to own up to his selfishness and ask for forgiveness. Now the parable takes an unusual twist. The young man does not get a chance to complete his declaration of sorrow. Dad calls for a celebration that costs him another fortune. Anyone in his right mind would suggest that he demand his son to work and restore the fortune that he spent on his wild parties. God's love does not work that way and that is the reason to call the sacrament of Reconciliation a celebration: it is a celebration of God's unending forgiving love. It is a celebration of what God does in our lives. (Update, Sacrament of Reconciliation, 1, Sacraments Alive, 85-86)

Life itself is a journey. It is a sequence of falling and picking oneself up again, a life of conversion, confession, and celebration. We find this back in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

B. Conversion.

Conversion is a realization that we do not live according to the right values. Jesus in the New Testament called repeatedly for a change of heart, a conversion, a metanoia. If cannot see that our values and actions are in conflict with Christian values, we will not see the need for change. But when we see how we "miss the mark" when we look at what we do and what we should be doing we enter the conversion process which brings us to contrition: sorrow for what we did and a resolution to amend for the future. In this contrition we wish to "make up" for the wrongs we have done. The "make up" or reparation is not a matter of self punishment but rather a correction of one's sinful lifestyle. This is a form of penance, but not in the sense of self inflicted pain but of changing one's life in a positive, faith filled way. (Update, The Sacrament of Reconciliation, 1-2, Sacraments Alive, 86-89)

C. Confession.

As indicated above, it is important and helpful to "own up to" our sins vocally. It is an external expression of our change of heart and strengthens our commitment. Confession is very important in this sense, but it is not the essence of the sacrament. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, it is not important that the son can hold his "speech" to his father, what is important is the fact that he has returned. God is not interested in our listing of all the things we have done so he can see whether we left something out and get to us for that. The recitation of our sins can help us detecting our "disease" or sinfulness maybe see a pattern and give direction to the conversion process. It also stresses the most important element of the sacrament: rather than paying attention to all specific sins it is God's love that covers/forgives them all. Reflecting on the significance of confession in this way, the priest, the confessor, does not have the function of judge who is called to make a judgment. Rather he is a counselor to give guidance and the Church's representative to proclaim God's mercy in our lives. In
this function too, the priest’s prayer of absolution signifies God’s forgiveness of us and our reconciliation with the Church, a reason for celebration. (Update, The Sacrament of Reconciliation, 2-4, Sacraments Alive, 89-92)

D. Celebration.

We do not easily associate the idea of celebration with the sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet, if we really experience the life-giving force of God’s forgiveness we have a reason to celebrate. In a society where individualism reigns supreme we need to find ways to give expression to the celebration of this sacrament. There can be significant ways to celebrate this sacrament in a meaningful way. It does not have to take place in a communal ritual. It can take place in simple things that make God’s forgiveness evident in our own simple actions. Being able to say “I’m sorry,” “you’re forgiven,” “I accept your forgiveness,” and being able to forgive ourselves are aspects of the celebration of this sacrament. (Update, The Sacrament of Reconciliation, 4, Sacraments Alive, 92-95)

E. A Communal Celebration.

The sacrament has a horizontal and vertical element: it happens in people who are in relationship with each other and with God. This sacrament celebrates the restored relationship with the believers and with God. The idea that forgiveness can only be achieved if you recite a list of your sins, suffered a bit for them and heard the words of the absolution is not a correct understanding of the meaning of the sacrament. (Update, The Sacrament of Reconciliation, 5, Sacraments Alive, 95-96)


A. The most important thing that happens in the sacrament of Reconciliation is not what I do, but what Jesus does. In the sacrament Jesus announces through the Church and its ministers that our sins are forgiven and we are loved by God.

B. In the past the sacrament has been called the “Sacrament of Penance” and those receiving it were known as “penitents.” The emphasis here seems to be on doing penance in order to be forgiven. A more common and popular reference to the sacrament was “Confession.” One went to “confess” his/her sins to the “confessor” in the “confessional.” In both the emphasis is on what the penitent does. “Reconciliation” is not what the penitent does, it is what Jesus does: restore the broken relationship between God and us and between ourselves and others.

C. The community is always part of this sacrament. This is difficult to grasp. For many Catholics sin is a personal and private affair. But every sin has repercussion on the entire Church and on the human family. No matter how private the sin may be, through my sinful action I diminish the human dignity in which one shares.

D. If you want spiritual guidance, moral advice, or counseling this sacrament is not the way to go. If you want to restore your relationship with God and his Church then you do want to celebrate this sacrament.
E. It is important to experience some type of reconciliation before you celebrate the sacrament. To confess to the incidents of getting angry with your neighbor does not get to the essence of the sacrament. Don't use the sacrament for this because it does not reflect the more important content of the sacrament: your reconciliation with God and Church.

F. Feeling guilty is not good enough. Guilt feeling pays too much attention to "breaking rules." It does not necessarily bring one to the need for conversion. Also, sin is not the same as guilt. If sin gets reduced to "not following the rules" or "feeling guilty" it prevents us from seeing that sin is a failure to grow, to respond to God's love.

G. The Scriptures serve as a guide to see and realize how one has responded to God's Word. This reflection makes one's sins stand out more clearly. The more one searches for unity with God the more he/she realizes his/her sinfulness. Many saints are prime examples of showing us how they saw themselves fall short in holiness. So don't figure out what sins you can detect the moment you participate in the celebration. Come to it after you have reflected on your sinful tendencies and actions so that in the proclamation of God's love at the Rite of Reconciliation you can experience the greatness of God's mercy and respond to it.

H. Some specific time may be an important occasion to make the sacrament of Reconciliation particularly meaningful. It could be the season of Advent or Lent or the preparation for an important family celebration.

I. The experience of forgiveness is very important. Repeatedly the appreciation of that forgiveness is expressed in the Eucharist which repeatedly refers to God's forgiveness throughout the Liturgy of the Eucharist. (Update, Ten Tips for Better Confessions, 1-5)

IV. The Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation after Vatican II.

A. The Intimate Connection of the Mass with Reconciliation

As noted above, during the liturgy of the Mass repeated references are made to God's mercy. In the Eucharistic prayer we hear after the consecration of the wine: "... this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven."

This ritual meal, as many ritual means, has become a time of forgiveness and reconciliation. The question may occur whether one must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before participating in the celebration of the Eucharist. "The current law of the Church states that a person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is not opportunity to confess." (Canon 916). On average Catholic who participate in the Eucharist are not guilty of grave sin. The sacrament of Reconciliation celebrates God's forgiving love. The Eucharist celebration is a continuation of this celebration. (Update, How to Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation Today, 1)

B. Reconciliation is a Communal Celebration.
The Vatican Council declared that liturgical services are not private function but involve the community. The sacrament reflects the communal nature of sin and this is reflected in the rite and in the four steps that are part of this celebration.

Gathering
The priest welcomes the person but not as a sinner but one who expresses repentance. He represents the whole Church and speaks in the name of the Church ensuring Christ's forgiveness and Christ's presence: “Where two or three are gathered in my name I will be present with you.”

Reflection on the Word of God.
The sacramental action that takes place is a response to the Word of God. Those present reflect on God’s love as is evident in the gospels and other Scripture readings. The examination of conscience is not one to figure out how we broke the law. We examine ourselves on how we fell short in the response to God’s love for us.

Following this reflection, the priest (confessor) invites the penitent to express his/her sins, fears, questions, doubts. He responds to this by applying the message of the Scripture in this particular situation and suggests a penance to express the penitent’s commitment to conversion.

Reconciliation.
The priest invites the penitent to express his resolve in a prayer and then says the prayer of absolution That prayer is not a legal formula. It is an assurance that our merciful Father restores us in harmony with the Church and the risen Christ. This is the basis for naming the rite “Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

Commissioning.
The rite simply closes with the priest formula: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.” The emphasis here is not on what I, the sinner, have done but on what God does.

(Update, How to Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation Today, 2-4)

(Notes assembled by Tony Verhallen)
Some questions for reflection.

1. What were some of the major changes in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and how does this help or interfere with your understanding of the sacrament?

2. In what way do contrition, confession, and absolution continue to be meaningful in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

3. What are the communal characteristics of the new Rite of Reconciliation and how can they help the penitent in her/her personal life?

4. How has the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick evolved from a private service to a communal celebration?

Vocabulary

Anointing of the Sick  Absolution  Confession
Confessor  Contrition  Conversion
Grace  Liturgy  Penance
Paschal Mystery  Purgatory  Reconciliation
Penitent