

## 1. Introduction

Forgiveness is not the ultimate product of the Sacrament of Confession but is already ours through the Cross. Forgiveness is “not the reward for having changed one’s life, but the source and condition of that change.”<sup>1</sup> There is a powerful *metanoia* that takes place through honest Confession and true repentance, bringing us into a fuller union with God and one another. Confession has often been seen as the act of the individual seeking to “get right” with God. Yet, the act of Confession has broader implications for individuals and societies. If an individual or group can follow the steps of Confession and Reconciliation, there is a liberating healing that may take place. The Sacrament of Confession is identified by various titles such as “*Sacrament of Conversion*,” the “*Sacrament of Forgiveness*,” the “*Sacrament of Penance*” and the “*Sacrament of Reconciliation*.” All of these indicate important aspects of pardon and grace and illuminate dimensions relevant to its understanding and practice. Therefore, these terms will be interchanged with some frequency in this essay as various Sacramental and non-Sacramental expressions are highlighted.

It is undeniable that wrongs have taken place over the course of the histories that our church and our society share with other faiths, cultures, and nations. Broadening our understanding of the Sacrament of Confession and Repentance could deepen our understanding of our shared histories, inform our mission partnerships, and create fuller relationships with our brothers and sisters in faith around the world. Moreover, such an understanding of reconciliation, repentance, and renewal of life might serve to lift from us the paralyzing guilt which continues to linger in our collective conscience,

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<sup>1</sup> Martin L. Smith, Reconciliation: Preparing for Confession in the Episcopal Church, (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1985). p. 5.

anesthetizing evangelism and engendering a potentially myopic view of mission that is limited by our own regrets. By looking first at a theology of Confession, then an example of contemporary churchwide Confession, and finally mission as Confession, it may be possible to gain insight into how the Sacrament of Confession might inform our self-understanding and mission helping to guide us toward participation in the *poesis* of God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of clarity, *poesis* refers to the act of artistic creation. For Plato, *poesis* was a thing of charm that had to be part of life for life to be lived in fullness according to Professor Ian Johnston of Vancouver Island University in his lecture on Plato's *Republic* of November 4, 1997.

## 2. Ontology and Discerning Community: A Theoretical Latticework

Christian ontology is fundamentally linked to Confession and pardon. The search for truth and the awareness of grace are at the heart of the Christian identity. Moreover, there seems to be, at the core of evolutionary processes, a growth into and awareness of sin and our impact on other beings. Both our anthropology and ontology as Christians and human beings more broadly is intrinsically linked to our awareness of other and clarity regarding self.

Archbishop Rowan Williams writes, in an essay on Trinity and ontology,

To confront both the suffering of the victims of racism and my own *de facto* involvement in and responsibility for this, without fantasizing and self-lacerating guilt, requires specific encounter and the possibility of its continuance; not reconciliation, but a kind of commitment without evasion. The ‘reading’ of our situation in certain terms rests on existing small-scale transformations—and also, of course, assists in the creation of further transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Confession, as a search for truth, allows us to participate in small-scale transformations that lead to a fuller and more vibrant understanding of our participation in the Body of Christ and in all of our communities and relationships. The search for God must be deeply rooted in the search for Truth, a part of our core mystery, that is shared with Creation and God. Our Confession as the Church, our willingness to open ourselves fully in humility, enables us to receive wisdom, offer service, and form relationships in Truth. Confession encourages transformation by enabling the recognition of fundamental self and the inviolable other. Our evolution and life in community depends on that awareness of self-motivation, self-deception, and pardon. God’s nature is to form relationships and build community and the church must reflect and live that priority of liberative self-realization rooted in the primal and primary awareness of communal self and other.

Through honest self-examination, we are brought to convergence and out of the nadir of opposition and competition. Our self-identity acquires and reflects truth when we have

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<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). p. 164.

had the opportunity to honestly discern where our desires come from and how those desires impact others and God. Rowan Williams states, “I become a self only in the self-dispossession of discovering that there are things I cannot acquire, goals I cannot attain.”<sup>4</sup> Confession encourages this process of self-dispossession by bringing us to the recognition that we are not God, we cannot have all, do all, or be all. Much of sin and pain both individual and corporate are rooted in the pursuit of unmoored self. This unmoored self is deceived into believing that not only is it free from the constraints of the Creator, but that other creatures are not also aspects of and participants in Created essence.

James K. A. Smith writes that “Every sphere of creation, and our inhabitation of it (including the labors of human *poesis* and culture making), participates in the primal gift of the Creator. Simply because the world is creation demands that every aspect of that world be investigated *as created* – which must also mean *in light of the cross* (so that this perspective cannot become another natural theology.”<sup>5</sup> When our own self and the fundamental essence of the other are viewed in light of the cross, they take on inviolability. That inviolability defines us and the other as linked to the Creator in such a way as to soften the need for competition and redefine common interest as opposed to simple self-interest.

Confession encourages us to see the other as more than what is observable. Catherine Pickstock claims, “This determination of what is knowable, and therefore of what ‘is,’ according to a set of unchanging rules, apparent to the single mind, inverts the traditional movement from ontology to epistemology, yet nonetheless assumes an ontological redefinition of reality as the clear and distinct.”<sup>6</sup> Confession at once lays low and exalts the penitent for it annihilates self-definition and what ‘is’ while glorying in the observable and yet

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<sup>4</sup>Williams, 243.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, James K. A. Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

invisible grace of Christ. The grace of God remakes and ever-remakes Creation and all creatures as they discern and plumb their relationship with and in God.

Our “presence” can often be the cause of our loss in Christian understandings as well. For example, Miroslav Volf writes, “Because God has made us to reflect God’s own triune being [as social creatures], our human tasks are not first of all to *do* as God does—and certainly not to make ourselves as God is—but to let ourselves be indwelled by God and to celebrate and proclaim what God has done, is doing, and will do.”<sup>7</sup> Part of our work, as Christians, is simply to get out of the way of God’s action in us. This is more simply stated than actualized. This process is the gradual emptying of attributes that inhibit God’s action in us and the opening up to the filling grace of God.

The very emptying of the attributes gives the creation access to inherent rank and dignity and enables it to manifest a possession by God worthy of respect. This respect moves beyond superficiality and the observable difference. It is “A model of transcendence that affirms the rootedness of all creation in the ineffable God, the analogical nature of its images, and the infinity of the relationship to the Other, moves beyond the notion of exteriority.”<sup>8</sup> We are moved, through repentance, to a place where the exteriority of the creature is not its definition. For such an exterior definition is surely ascertained only in such a way as to be useful and therefore violable. We are moved to a place of profound respect in which our view of the other is suffused with an awareness of their fundamental mystery, their belovedness as an inheritor of the cross.

That respect acknowledges that there is something unknowable, mysterious, and inherently both immutable and immaterial. Each individual is a local pathway to the divine. Each person is *Creatio simpliciter*. This might also be understood by contemplating that “...

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<sup>7</sup> Volf, Miroslav. “Being as God Is”, *God’s Life in Trinity*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2006). p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Rivera, Mayra. *The Touch of Transcendence: A Post-Colonial Theology of God*. (London: Westminster John Knox, 2007). p. 77.

each subject mirrors the cosmos by being also an intrinsically relational reality: the human person is a subject-in-community. Community pre-exists and is constitutive of the individual, regardless of choice.”<sup>9</sup> That community, the Church, is one that is ever on the cusp of revelation and is ever-called to greater depths of relationality. Such relational reality is truly possible with honest appraisal and self-examination.

The challenge is, in some ways, an aesthetic one as much as a theological one. Our perceptions have become the measure by which we map reality. The sublime or the transcendent ideal is not factored into the equation of relation. The ideal is “reduced to a merely mental existence...by placing empirical sensations under the rules and sets of its own understanding...synthesizing the diverse formlessness of materiality into those discrete informed perceptions of which the mind is able to make sense.”<sup>10</sup> The dilemma, as Phillip Blond articulates it, is to develop an analysis and synthesis that is not simply a (non)self-sufficient materialism or a self-sustaining idealism that disregards actuality. Blond answers this by stating, “...only in Christian theology does the ideal visibly and sensately persist in our reality without this ideality ever being reduced to our reception of it.”<sup>11</sup>

All knowledge and observation must be understood in the context of God’s ideal. The danger is that, as Milbank writes, “Ideas and mental fictions...acquire ontological equality with real beings as all equally ‘things’ constituted through their self-standing, rather than instantiation of an essence, or real inter-relation.”<sup>12</sup> It is in God’s ongoing revelation that essence is discerned and mental fictions are dissolved. Part of this ongoing revelation in creation is our participation in the sacraments, such as Confession, in which we are re-unified and re-vivified in Christ. Miroslav Volf writes, “My assumption, however, is that we *can*

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<sup>9</sup> Rivera, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Blond, “Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ” in Radical Orthodoxy. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999). p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Milbank, John. Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon. (Routledge: Abingdon, 2004). p. 115.

know God on the only basis on which God is knowable: God's self-revelation. In God's self-revelation, we are by definition dealing with God as God is in relation to creation, not with God apart from creation."<sup>13</sup> Our history, our historical relationships, our conflicts and cooperation are aspects of creation as they are, in part, elements of *poesis*. These aspects must be investigated and interrogated to discern whether our remembrance of them is accurate and to seek deeper awareness of our self and our encounters with others.

Theology simply redescribes the world as created, offering the testimony of the ideal so that we may make it so. We are not equal to the gift we are given but are part of that gift. What is, however, does not adequately deliver what could be. The mystical traditions lead us to examine how an "I" can be part of a transcendent "we". In much of our seeking (that not rooted in a sense of the immanent divine), however, we position ourselves out of false perceptions as to where and who we are in relation to other perceivable aspects of creation.

Confession and the spirit of Confession is a process of conversion and a reflection of the ongoing transformation of the Incarnation and the cross. Rowan Williams writes, "The Christian is involved in seeking conversion - the bringing to judgment of contemporary struggles, and the appropriation of some new dimension of the transforming summons of Christ in his or her own life."<sup>14</sup> It is the encounter with the ongoing Trinity that makes tragedy bearable and recovers our sense of humanity after inhuman capitulations to sin. Williams states, "God is constitutive of the identity of Jesus; God is also constitutive, in a different sense, of the process of the Church continually coming to judgment—the encounter of believers with the encounter of Father and Son."<sup>15</sup> In honest Confession, we are able to engage anew the Trinity and discern and seek to bridge the distance between ourselves,

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<sup>13</sup> Volf, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, 165.

others, and God. This is a “seeing of the cross” and is the “coming into being of a community with distinctive forms of self-definition.”<sup>16</sup>

The real agent of transformation is not simply self-definition, but the essence of an individual is the soul. John Milbank writes, “...*esse* was no longer thought of as something superadded to essence; the latter conception renders an arriving accident paradoxically more fundamental than the essential itself in the constitution of the creature.”<sup>17</sup> The soul is the site of our participation in God. That soul is burdened by the super-impositions of the individual that distance them from understanding their life in, with, and of the divine. Confession allows for the interrogation of our self-definitions. In Confession, we ask God to make us aware of our constitutive begracement, and to free us of the need to acquire new forms of self-definition which propel us toward sin and away from true self (*esse*), other, and God.

We are participants, with Christ and the other, in a dependent co-arising. Karl Barth stated, “Man is no longer single, but a couple.”<sup>18</sup> If we are dependent in our rising in Christ and in Creation, then we are part of more than discreet encounters between self-contained creatures. Indeed, “when subjects are envisioned as always already in relation to multiple others, the scene of an encounter between two persons begins to reveal previously hidden complexities.”<sup>19</sup> For Thomas Aquinas, “...it is surely clear that this new theological ontology of constitutive supernatural supplementation and ecstatic relationality reveals a cosmos already in a sense graced, and in such a fashion that the supplement of grace will not seem in discontinuity with existing principles of ontological constitution.”<sup>20</sup> Thus grace is not an addendum to creation, but a constituting characteristic of creation. John Milbank writes in “Therefore everything, for Aquinas, not

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Milbank, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth cited Ward, Graham. Cities of God, (New York: Routledge, 2000). p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> Rivera, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 121.

just humanity, is already as itself more than itself, and this more is in some sense a portion of divinity.”<sup>21</sup> The material is a modality of divine expressiveness. Ralph Del Colle states, “Protology, soteriology, and eschatology require that the efficacy of grace find expression in creaturely modalities.”<sup>22</sup> Those creaturely modalities are our visible link to grace and pardon. The practice of Confession regards sin seriously but regards grace even more seriously.

There is never an absence of grace in the creature of creation but a lack of awareness of that grace (and unity) which is a fundamental error. Our encounters with one another are, when held with an awareness of the other’s created mystery, grace-filled instantiations in which autonomy may participate in unity. Confession is not simply a wallowing in sins. It is not a Sacrament of the past, but one of the future. It is a chance to evaluate the past but commit ourselves to a future course that is informed by but not trapped in historical patterns. It is a Sacrament that reawakens us to grace. The individual can spend a lifetime relearning who it is that they actually are. That relearning is the twin enlightenment that we are simultaneously affirmation and negation; the affirmation of our divinely ordered ground and unity and the negation of the ego-self which feeds lack, sin, and division from self and other.

Confession explores the fundamental unity between “I” and “you.” Ramon Pannikar addressed the relationship between the “I” and “You” in the Spirit,

If the I knew itself totally, the I would be pure knowledge without any space for a you. And if this being were real, its knowledge would then be identical with reality. If God were this absolute I without a you who knows itself in total identity, Being would be completely intelligible and reality purely unintelligible, and reality pure intelligibility. The unintelligible would not be real. That, however, is pure idealism.<sup>23</sup>

Pannikar maintained that the distance between “you”s could be understood on a range from total awareness or “pure consciousness” of the Trinitarian unity to an empirical

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<sup>21</sup> Milbank, 115.

<sup>22</sup>Ralph Del Colle, *Life as a Holy Penitent: The Catholic Call to Conversion* in Mark J. Boda, ed., *Repentance in Christian Theology*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006). p. 237.

<sup>23</sup> Pannikar, Ramon, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004). p. 73.

consciousness of material things. Thus, an insistent consciousness of simply the material removes us from an awareness of the unity of the Trinity. That interplay, that unity, is our reflection on and participation in perichoretic exchange outside of the constraints of the rationalist insistence on materialism. Moreover, it is outside the post-modern insistence on definitive subjectivism, for our very essence is dependent and defined by our relation to the other (as opposed to *our perception* of the other), to the grace of perichoretic exchange.

This subjectivism is “described as constituted in relation, always unfinished: produced in relation to the transcendence of the Other.”<sup>24</sup> It is the Spirit, which bridges I and you, that leads toward perichoretic unity, for it fills the gaps between perfect consciousness of the I (which cannot be) and full awareness of the you. The Spirit in which we participate represents “the *advaita*, the non-dualism between the Father and the Son—hence they are neither two nor one.”<sup>25</sup> That non-dualism is the pursuit of the Christian life; our personal encounter with a Christ present in the Sacraments (and in us) and the Church catholic in which we experience the other and the Other. It is in the Church that we encounter the risen Lord in our Sacramental life. The present grace of God does not, in and of itself, constitute relationship and Sacrament. For it is “Only divine action and human reaction in a concrete situation which form the basis for possible sacramentality.”<sup>26</sup> The objective grace of Christ must be met by a Spirit-filled desire for reconciled living made possible by reflection and Sacramental inquiry.

The Church is the ever-present Nativity in which Christ is found re-born, re-living, and in unity. Volf states, “There is no equality between God and creature; yet, paradoxically,

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<sup>24</sup> Rivera, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kenan B. Osborne, Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999). p. 75.

God gives so that the relation between God and humans can be brought to greater parity. Christ's gift makes each of us a 'Christ.' When Christ gives to us, inequality remains—categorical inequality—yet we become, in some regard, Christ's equal."<sup>27</sup> Through Christ, we participate ever more in divine community and communion. Christ came, according to Volf, "not just to live in us, or even just to live through us. He came to make us into one body—his body, the church."<sup>28</sup> To fully participate in this body-gift, some things must fade away (or as in baptism, die). Confession is one process by which those things which need to die for the Body to have fuller and more representative life may die. It is a way of living in grace rather than an instantiation of grace and is the arrival of a dusty apotheosis for man.

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<sup>27</sup> Volf, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Grace, Confession, and Memory

Some working theology of Confession should, perhaps, be outlined so as to understand its implications for mission. This section will examine the processes and fruits of Confession. Five key steps to true reconciliation are the wrong itself, recognizing the wrong, regretting the wrong, repentance and amendment of life, and finally forgiveness. The final step is, ultimately, out of our hands. We can be forgiven by the wronged party and by God whether or not we move through the first four steps toward reconciliation, but we cannot experience the full grace of that forgiveness without understanding the depth of our wrong and committing honestly to amendment of life. According to Rabbi Scherman cited in Miguel A. De La Torre's work *Liberating Jonah*, the Hebrew word for sin is *hātā* which literally means 'lack' or 'diminution.' The result of this diminution is that it "makes him [or her] a lesser human being. It engenders within him [or her] an indifference to evil – and eventually, a distaste for good."<sup>29</sup>

Part of the 'lack' that is sin is, perhaps, the lack of understanding. However, forgiveness, the gift of God, transforms this lack, this absence, into a palpable presence in an act of sublime Creation. This forgiveness is offered in the grace of Confession. Milbank states, "The aim of forgiveness was not a lone, self-righteous certainty of the will to exonerate (without regard to circumstances or the repentance of the other), but rather charity, which the Middle Ages regarded less as a performance than as a state of fraternal, friendly, and harmonious co-existence."<sup>30</sup> Forgiveness is the re-completion of the human being and the re-pairing of humanity with God after the excavation of sin.

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<sup>29</sup> Miguel De La Torre, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007). p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Milbank, 47.

Not only is the individual Christian made lesser by sin, he or she damages the very Body of Christ by absenting himself or herself from its full communion. Sin is, at its essence, an insult to the Body of Christ for "if one member suffers, all suffer together." It is the awareness, the understanding of our impact on another part of the body that is the root of the Sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation. Part of remedying this lack of understanding is undertaking a careful and thorough review of our history, becoming more fully human through the recognition of our impact on those we encounter (and those we do not as well). The Sacrament of Confession brings us to a reconciling of the person that God intends for us to be with the person that we have become through anger, willful pride, or indifference to the needs of the other.

Identifying those places in our lives where we have gone astray is not solely the work of the individual or the product of a moment of regret. It is part of a series of exchanges with ourselves, others, and God through which we come to recognize that we now stand alone and outside the community of faith no matter how crowded our home, church, or community may seem. Confession is a process of faithfully returning to God and reintegrating into the community of faith. This faithful return journey is our outward witness to a change that is taking place inside us through the grace of God. Believing in and living through that grace is an act of profound faith but "In seeking to live graciously, in acknowledging the mystery of sin through Confession, in hearing the declaration of forgiveness, the church offers glory to the God who made all things and sustains all things."<sup>31</sup> That sense of grace enables us to appreciate the good in others and eliminates the need to scapegoat, allowing us to move on in amended life.

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Lockhart, *Sin and Atonement* in Duncan Reid, ed. *Sin and Salvation* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2003). p. 183.

Our commitment to an amendment of life, service to and understanding of the other, and offering forgiveness when others are in need of it are the marks of a faithful people. "When Jesus saw their faith he said, 'man, your sins are forgiven' " reads the Gospel.<sup>32</sup> Thomas Merton once wrote, "Outside in the world, where it is night, perhaps there is someone who suddenly sees that something he has done is terrible. He is most unexpectedly sorry and finds himself able to pray." Mission-minded churches must reach the point where they find themselves able to pray, eager to engage in Confession and ready for Reconciliation, prepared to acknowledge their "lack" and repent. We are afforded the opportunity in Confession to recognize the true freedom of grace. Wolfhart Pannenberg writes,

In spite of sin and its ramifications, then, we may again and again know the original joy in life, joy in the richness, breadth, and beauty of creation and in each new day, joy in the illuminations of the life of the spirit, power for action within the order of community life, and a turning to others and participation in their joys and sorrows.<sup>33</sup>

Repentance, however, cannot simply be the work of the individual believer or, as is the case with mission, even the single faith community or denomination. For example, most of the major denominations have issued some statement of regret for their past complicity in slavery or racism. Yet, too often, these statements and resolutions posit the question "What can *we* do?" out of Christian obligation or duty for the other. This is an incomplete conversation, rather like attempting to fix one side of a broken window.

The questions must be asked and answered in the context of a conversation with those who have been historically (or contemporarily) wronged. Is there any less paternalism in the question "What can *we* do?" With this questions formed in the

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<sup>32</sup> Luke 5.20; cf. Matthew 9.2 and Mark 2.5

<sup>33</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematic Theology Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 275.

absence of exchange with the other, the question becomes a function of pity or charity rather than progress toward true reconciliation. This form of inquiry, according to De La Torre “places all hope the disenfranchised might have for justice on the actions of those who are most likely to suffer a loss of power and privilege if real and substantive progress toward reconciliation is made.”<sup>34</sup>

Mission and reconciliation must take place in the context of an ongoing discipline of understanding. This discipline takes the form of listening to hard and sometimes stern assessments made by those who believe themselves to be wronged by us. Those who are at the margins can “define and forge a reconciliation that can lead to their own liberation and salvation, as well as the salvation and liberation of those who benefit from the present structures of domination.”<sup>35</sup> The modern understanding of the Church Catholic is that there exists a preferential option for the marginalized of societies. The discipline of understanding and the repair of the “lack” within us require that the entirety of our exchange with the other be approached looking with patient grace through the eyes of God. This is, of course, no mean feat. The Sacrament of Confession demands that we take seriously our union with God and one another, and that we seek to understand the other fully and intimately in Christian fraternity and fidelity. By approaching this act of Penance and Reconciliation with the other first in mind, we “may catch some vision of the eternal purpose, and may rise above our naturally self-centered conception of this Sacrament.”<sup>36</sup> The restored unity of the people of Christ is the goal of this Sacrament, that turning back toward the community.

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<sup>34</sup> De La Torre, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> C.J.S. Stuart, The Sacrament of Absolution, (London: The Faith Press, 1936). p. 11.

It is a Sacrament of Love for it seeks a deeper relationship, a full expression of mutual understanding and forgiveness that echoes the Divine Love, a Divine Love expressed in both Creation and the Cross. Confession is a cruciform endeavor. It requires that we hang our own faults, histories, prejudices, and pride on the cross to be washed clean. The Church is called to a consecrated mission of self-emptying. This is expressed in the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church as follows:

In the Church, which is like the sacrament- the sign and instrument - of God's own life, the consecrated life is seen as a special sign of the mystery of redemption. To follow and imitate Christ more nearly and to manifest more clearly his self- emptying is to be more deeply present to one's contemporaries, in the heart of Christ. For those who are on this 'narrower' path encourage their brethren by their example, and bear striking witness 'that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.'<sup>37</sup>

In a missional church that desires to show forth the example of Christ, who is both the revelation of God in human form and the revelation of humankind to itself, Confession is an act by which we manifest that "self-emptying" spirit of Christ. Confession aids in helping us to achieve that "spirit of the beatitudes" which bears such "striking witness." It is in the confessional, given the chance to unburden ourselves, that we come to be meek and that we learn to be merciful. That same spirit of the beatitudes allows us to strive to be pure of heart as well as honest peacemakers. Animated by Christ, our ultimate anthropology, Confession allows us, as a forgiven people of the beatitudes, to offer up to God both pride and guilt as emotional *adiaphora*, that which is at best indifferent to and distracting from the saving and reconciling mission of Christ's Love in the Church Catholic.

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<sup>37</sup> "Part One, Section Two, Chapter Three, Article Nine, Paragraph Four," The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, The Roman Catholic Church, 17 May 2008 <<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p123a9p4.htm>>.

It is Divine Love that calls us to Confession and to mission. The parable of the Prodigal Son provides us with a vocabulary of repentance. The son, coming to his senses and, tired of his unfulfilling path, says words the church may need to offer as well, “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”<sup>38</sup> One of the chief impediments to honest Confession is the pride that tells us that we have not truly erred or that we have made adequate penance. We are sometimes “inclined to regard them leniently, to treat them as unimportant lapses” as opposed to “serious offenses against God.”<sup>39</sup> The Holy Ghost, however, moves within our community, speaking in voices that are more easily ignored, calling us to the confessional.

The call to Confession is one that too often has a tin ring to it that, for many, sounds too alike to heavy-handed moralism. However, Peter Lockhart notes that “not only has there been decay in the use of the word 'sin', there has also been a corresponding growth in rigid moralism. In this setting, the Bible has too often been treated, particularly in Protestantism, as a manual of ethics, of moral values, of religious ideas, or even sound doctrine.”<sup>40</sup> The unfortunate effect is that sin and sinful acts have fallen to definitions and descriptions rooted in near-Pharisaic concepts of legality and violation. The concomitant elevation of individual actions as defining Christian life has come at the expense of understanding original sin for its broader implications.<sup>41</sup> Sin, as a shared and corporate reality, is a communal and social act. Its burdens and ramifications are not meant to be shouldered only by the individual. Sin is as much the effect of systems as individuals and part of Confession is the recognition of our complicity in those systems and looking

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<sup>38</sup> Luke 15:18-19.

<sup>39</sup> Stuart, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Lockhart, 179.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

toward the Holy Spirit and the grace of God to help as we seek to glorify God by holy living and compassionate mission.

God, through the Holy Ghost, allows his love to flow forth into the world. This comes in Sacramental forms. That same Holy Spirit “speaks to our souls, urging us to repent, and to use the means of grace for our restoration to the way of life...”<sup>42</sup> The Holy Spirit moves in our conversation with the other and in our commitment to hear stories of pain, neglect, abuse, and shame. Those voices, calling us home to the Church, must be understood not only as the voices of individuals and communities, but as the voice of the Holy Spirit calling us home. Robert Kimball writes, “Sin is universal, tragic estrangement, based on freedom and destiny in all human beings, and should never be used in the plural. Sin is separation, estrangement from one's essential being. This is what it means.”<sup>43</sup> Confession and pardon are the whisper of forgiveness, the promise of rescue when we stray and find ourselves estranged from self, one another, and God..

This promise of rescue is not simply from a particular sin or group of sins, but from walking a path that distances us from God. The goal of Confession is not the juridical absolution of sin, but a more complex and complete amendment of life and return to self and God. Perhaps the most basic articulation of this is found in Anselm Grun's work on the Seven Sacraments. He writes,

Do I use God for my own purposes or present myself to God exactly as I am? Is God really the goal of my life and the source from which I live? None of these questions is primarily concerned with the question of guilt, but with the quality of my relationship. Talking about them will enable me to sense in what respects I am closed to God. This kind of closure has a lot to do with guilt, even if it involves no offence against any of the commandments. It's a matter of where my heart is directed and who or what determines it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Stuart, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Kimball, *Theology of Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) p. 123.

<sup>44</sup>Anselm Grun, *The Seven Sacraments*, (London: Continuum, 2003). p. 146.

At issue is the church's relationship with God, the other, itself, and its shared histories. The goal is not simply to discern guilt, but to reestablish the Christocentric fundamentals of our relationships and priorities.

The church must take the opportunity to renew its life and witness through reconciliation. A missed opportunity for Reconciliation must be a sorrow to God for it is a neglect of him and his will. It is the promise of pardon and the joy of forgiveness that should move us to set aside the shame of the Confession and to endure the mortification of pride and self-love. Mission should proceed out of the eschatological understanding that the work of the Spirit is, in part, the “synaxis of the people of God in his Kingdom.”<sup>45</sup> We must move with eager alacrity to the joyful reunion with God and the other that awaits us. It is Love that demands the response of love.

The Love of God commands us to respond in love to God, compels us to act in love toward the other, and assures us that we are able to love our soul only so far as we can love the other. Love is not simply the fond expressions of the heart; it is obedience, service, reciprocity, and humility. There is a measure of sacrifice that is required in true Love. That sacrifice is a joyful one, for it simultaneously brings us closer to another and to God. The Sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation has been described as one that “does not cast down the heart, rather raising it by prayer and hope, bringing forth fresh springs of devotion.”<sup>46</sup> Those fresh springs of devotion may bring restoration, healing, and purification and further the valuing of patience. This sense of patience “may in fact

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<sup>45</sup> Vassiliadis Petros, "Reconciliation as a Pneumatological Mission Paradigm: Some Preliminary Reflections by an Orthodox," *International Review of Mission* (2005).

<sup>46</sup> Abbe Gaume, *Advice for Those Who Exercise the Ministry of Reconciliation Through Confession and Absolution: Being the Abbe Gaume's Manual for Confessors with Extracts From the Works of S. Francis De Sales, S. Charles Borromeo, S. Philip De Neri, S. Francis Xavier, and Other Spiritual Writers*, London: Society of the Holy Trinity, 1878. p. 193-194.

provide one of the tools necessary to overcome crises that threaten the life of the Christian community.”<sup>47</sup>

Those who have earnestly engaged in the work of reconciliation stand to gain “the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”<sup>48</sup> These traits are the marks of a joyful church, a solid marriage or a true companionship. These are the fruits that our Church, marked anew by the spirit of the beatitudes, stands to gain as a body and to join into with our mission partners around the world, offering together the gift of unity and forgiveness to God. This gift of unity cannot be offered to God without an honest degree of self-examination and appraisal. Matthew 5:23-24 (used as an offertory sentence in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer) calls out to us, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

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<sup>47</sup>Cornelia B. Horn, *Penitence in Early Christianity in Its Historical and Theological Setting: Trajectories from Eastern and Western Sources*, in Boda, p. 185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4. Reconciliation, *Metanoia*, and Mission

Undoubtedly, there is a degree of seeming shame involved in the act of Confession. However, in the *Counsels of S. Francis Xavier* to his missionaries, he encouraged them to assure the one making Confession that there have been “holy men, in whom though sin once abounded, grace did much more abound; and bidding him reflect, that he too may be in that number.”<sup>49</sup> This grace, S. Francis Xavier exhorted, may be had if the one making Confession “can attain to an equal confidence and sincerity in confessing his sins, an equal courage in shunning them henceforth.”<sup>50</sup>

In closing his counsels, S. Francis Xavier taught his missionaries that “You may be sure that one morning, spent in the confessional, will do more for your own advantage than a year spent in other good works.”<sup>51</sup> While this may seem a rather extreme statement, S. Francis Xavier understood that a soul, burdened by sin or guilt, could not joyfully and fully serve the other. Three of the benefits of Confession, all marks of the spirit of the beatitudes, include sympathy, self-knowledge, and humility in addition to the unburdening of the soul.<sup>52</sup>

What mission can be successful without sympathy? One of the marks of the Incarnation is that we feel sympathy with the embodied Christ. Our first line of defense, when our pride is under assault, is to become unsympathetic, for sympathy threatens the ego, and the illusion of self-sufficiency. Sympathy is required for successful mission for it gives us the delicate sense of hurts and boundaries that make us sensitive to the needs of others. Moreover, sympathy is the virtue by which we connect an understanding of

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<sup>49</sup> S. Francis Xavier as cited in Gaume, 422.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> S. Francis Xavier as cited in Gaume, 426.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred G. Mortimer, *Confession and Absolution: an Investigation of the Teaching of the Bible and Prayer Book*, (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1906). p. 69.

struggle and pain with the desire to redeem the past with action (mission) in the world. Sympathy is more than action to relieve suffering; it is being in the midst of suffering and dwelling in the vale of tears, in exile with another. Confession returns us to a place of sympathy within ourselves, recalibrates our awareness, deescalates our stress responses, and refocuses us on the crucifying experiences of others.

After sympathy, Confession gives us a greater degree of self-knowledge. A minister, faith community, or missionary must have self-knowledge to effectively serve and witness in the world. The self-examination of Confession allows us to “see ourselves in a clearer light, more as God sees us.”<sup>53</sup> Confession is, in some ways, a part of the action-reflection system of growth. The danger of engaging in mission or pastoral work without self-awareness is that we risk doing damage to ourselves and to the other. Until we understand the “devices and desires” that motivate us, we are left unprotected against those forces, impulses, and dangers that trigger self-destruction, imperiling those around us and fracturing our relationships.

Thomas Merton counseled, “The first step toward finding God, Who is Truth, is to discover the truth about myself: and if I have been in error, this first step to truth is the discovery of my error.” This applies not only to the individual minister but to the whole church as well. For example, if the tendency of a church is to fall into an easy pattern of paternalism, the self-awareness that honest appraisal of our past can bring could help guard against such a failure in the future. In Confession, “the excuses and extenuations, which so often prevent us from realizing our sins, have no place.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Mortimer, 70.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Humility is another product of Confession. Luke encourages us, saying, “He that humbles himself shall be exalted.”<sup>55</sup> The key part to this is “that humbles himself.” It is not the act of being humbled by another that is necessary; it is the willingness to humble oneself. We must have the courage to admit we may have been, or may be wrong. Merton encourages us, “Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.” Our engagement with individuals and other churches requires that we be real, that we be rooted in a sense of our shared personhood, in our joined mission. Perhaps, humility is the chief virtue of Christianity for it allows us to be fully ourselves, grounded in the reality of the Incarnation. Humility is, “the foundation of all Christian virtues; and if we are too proud to make our Confession there must be something very wrong in the fundamental principal of our spiritual life.”<sup>56</sup> Reconciliation both requires and engenders humility.

Sympathy, self-knowledge, and humility, after honest repentance, may lead us to a place of sorrow as a church. In Confession, “Many whose hearts were cold, and who had little feeling of sorrow, when they came to make their Confession found the flood-gates unlocked, and tears of true sorrow flowing freely.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, this sorrow may be transformed from a vague sense of unease to a sense of self and other that equip us to serve God in the future in ways that our former sense of disquietude and guilt did not allow. Confession may “transform the imperfect sorrow into true Contrition.” This contrition must take the form of recognizing where we have wronged ourselves, God, and the other.

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<sup>55</sup> Luke 14:11

<sup>56</sup> Mortimer, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

A contrite heart is not one that is heavy with the guilt of violating a specific law or precept; it is the heart that is sorely wounded because it recognizes the wounding of the other as a violation of the self and God. Thus, the most beneficial form of contrition is that which baptizes guilt and redeems it, making guilt a source of new grace. True Contrition transcends and transforms guilt and sorrow. The joy of forgiveness is made manifest when we are relieved of the need to carry our own sins. It is in community that we find this forgiveness expressed and made manifest for “penance bespeaks both the holiness of the church and the relational and even social nature of sin.”<sup>58</sup> The Church as a relational and social body expressing Christ must be a body of atonement living in the complexities of grace.

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<sup>58</sup>*The Rites of the Catholic Church as revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI*, English translation prepared by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy (New York: Pueblo, 1976). 342.

## 5. A National Anglican Church's Living Confession

John Milbank writes, "The bishop and those gathered around him must especially sustain the *concordantia* with the past and preserve the resources of the past for the future against the likely ravages of the present."<sup>59</sup> The Body of Christ is bound to defend that which is holy and right in our corporate life as they come under strain due to the manifold challenges of modernity and post-modernity. How does the Church act, however, when the ravages are past-tense and when the Church itself has been a source of the very contagions we are called to inoculate against?

In August of 1993, the Most Rev'd Michael Peers, Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) issued the following apology, which is worth reprinting portions of here in, to the First Nations people of Canada for the abuses of the residential school system:

My Brothers and Sisters:

Together here with you I have listened as you have told your stories of the residential schools.

I have heard the voices that have spoken of pain and hurt experienced in the schools, and of the scars which endure to this day.

I have felt shame and humiliation as I have heard of suffering inflicted by my people, and as I think of the part our church played in that suffering.

I am deeply conscious of the sacredness of the stories that you have told and I hold in the highest honour those who have told them.

I have heard with admiration the stories of people and communities who have worked at healing, and I am aware of how much healing is needed.

I also know that I am in need of healing, and my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. Without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past.

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<sup>59</sup>Milbank, 129.

I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God.

On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology.

I do this at the desire of those in the Church like the National Executive Council, who know some of your stories and have asked me to apologize.

I do this in the name of many who do not know these stories.

And I do this even though there are those in the church who cannot accept the fact that these things were done in our name...<sup>60</sup>

In response to this apology, the following acceptance was issued by Vi Smith at the National Native Convocation the following day:

On behalf of this gathering, we acknowledge and accept the apology that the Primate has offered on behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada.

It was offered from his heart with sincerity, sensitivity, compassion and humility. We receive it in the same manner. We offer praise and thanks to our Creator for his courage.

We know it wasn't easy. Let us keep him in our hearts and prayers, that God will continue to give him the strength and courage to continue with his tasks.<sup>61</sup>

This Confession, apology, and acceptance were parts of ongoing reconciliation between the ACC and the First Nations peoples of Canada. After Archbishop Peers made his statement, he was received and blessed by representatives of the Native Convocation as part of a broader liturgy. The ACC's website links to the apology, stories, testimonies, reports, agreements, and dialogues surrounding the abuses of the residential school system.<sup>62</sup> There is a national Aboriginal Day of Prayer, an Indigenous Sacred Circle Prayer Calendar, and an Anglican Healing Fund all established as part of the

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<sup>60</sup> Peers

<sup>61</sup> Vi Smith, *Response to the Primate*, The National Native Convocation, 07 Aug. 1993, The Anglican Church of Canada, 05 May 2008 <<http://www.anglican.ca/Residential-Schools/resources/apology.htm>>.

<sup>62</sup> "Links, Resources, and Information," *Residential Schools: Legacy and Response*, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www.anglican.ca/Residential-Schools/resources/index.htm>>.

reconciliation effort. All of these elements are intentional parts of the process of reflection, listening, sharing, Confessing, and healing.

One of the most poignant resources made available by the ACC is a website which details the stories of abuse and neglect in the words of survivors and tells the history of the schools.<sup>63</sup> These powerful stories and audio recordings convey specific and human costs inflicted by the church in the past. The stories are offered to the whole church as part of a process of discernment and dialogue. This is an incarnational approach to discernment in which we are called to see the holiness of another who has been wronged in our name.

The Faith, Worship, and Ministry department of the ACC produced a prayer and reflection guide for parishes regarding the agreement between the church and the government.<sup>64</sup> Finally there is a link to the Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples website which details the work and witness of the Indigenous Peoples and lays out not only their history, but their plan for the future, in partnership with the ACC.<sup>65</sup> One of the impressive aspects of the ACC's work of reconciliation in partnership with Indigenous Peoples is the honest repairing of the breach that seems to be occurring, sometimes more and sometimes less smoothly, over the course of time. For example, the Indigenous Council's website includes the following quote, from Ms Donna Bomberry of the Cayuga Nation:

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<sup>63</sup> "Shared Stories," <http://www.wherearethekids.ca/en/stories.html>, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www.wherearethekids.ca/en/stories.html>>. and "Residential Schools--Legacy and Response," *Home*, 28 Mar. 2007, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www.anglican.ca/Residential-Schools/index.htm>>.

<sup>64</sup> "Prayer and Reflection Resource for the Residential Schools Agreement," *Faith and Worship Resources*, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www2.anglican.ca/faith/worship/rs-resources.htm>>.

<sup>65</sup> "Our Recent History," *Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples*, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www2.anglican.ca/about/committees/acip/history.htm>>.

From now on, when we look at where we fit in the structure, we see ourselves as a partner in this church and as a self-determining body. We now need to use our own spirituality to describe our faith and our own way. All things have to be developed, stated, and understood so we feel we are truly part of the church ... we are not on the outside anymore.<sup>66</sup>

This quote demonstrates the profound and real sense of rapprochement that appears to be taking hold in the Church, despite challenges that arise. This is the powerful work of reconciliation and honest Confession. The process the ACC undertook was neither an easy nor a short one. It has been the work of decades of introspection, painful listening, and humble contrition. Yet the benefits have been vast. This is becoming a church of the beatitudes. The fruits of honest Confession have all been borne in the ACC. Sympathy, self-knowledge, and humility have enabled the church to carry its witness in deep faith to the wider nation. Moreover, these gifts of humility and sympathy have enabled the church to work toward repairing a breach that had scarred the church and the nation, psychologically separating Indigenous Peoples from the government and the church.

The process of reconciliation has not been without its challenges and uncertainties. Even in difficulty, however, the church has committed itself to the Confessing spirit. For example, tensions which arose in 2003 prompted the issuance of a pastoral letter on the difficulties of the process which read, in part:

Our gathering was marked by expressions of alienation. Some indigenous members told again the stories of the residential schools; others told tragic stories of their own lives and of the lives of their communities, deepened by a sense of rejection by the dominant society and the church. Some non-indigenous members spoke of incomprehension among church members who felt that the Agreement, which to them represented significant sacrifice in the name of justice for victims, had been rejected for reasons they did not understand. Some were anxious about

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<sup>66</sup> "A Covenant," Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, The Anglican Church of Canada, 25 May 2008 <<http://www2.anglican.ca/about/committees/acip/covenant.htm>>.

the prospect of increasing isolation in which indigenous people would be tempted to remain in their woundedness, proclaiming it but declining healing, while non-indigenous people would remain in their incomprehension, refusing the knowledge which can only come from meeting with and listening to their aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Acknowledging our mutual responsibility for this shared reality, we confess our part in the pain we all feel. With our senses, feelings, thoughts, choices, actions and racism we have disowned, alienated, hurt and wounded our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have read with our eyes unloving words of others. We have allowed our love to be overpowered by our pain. We have invited hateful thoughts into our choices. We have acted in retaliation. We have not acted as Jesus would.<sup>67</sup>

We have a powerful witness and Confession being offered to the people of the church. In honesty, participants in the conference stated that love was, at times, overpowered by pain. In addition, there is an open recognition of some of the causes of the ongoing pain. This type of reappraisal, conversation, and engagement represents the ongoing and perpetual work of Confession. It is not the product of a burdened instant or a contrite moment; it is the work of a lifetime in Christ. The ACC is reflecting an ongoing spirit of Confession through the cycles of action and reflection. They are working through all of the stages of Confession as a community of faith and gaining the fruits of the Sacrament.

Confession is the periodic reflection on how we are missing the mark as members of the Body of Christ. It is our opportunity to move beyond ourselves and re-engage with the holy and the other. In the above cited pastoral letter, we see members of the church struggling to remain in the sometimes painful dialogue that being Church demands. They confess where they have fallen into selfish patterns and behaviors and how that impedes the ongoing work of reconciliation. That dialogue is, in some ways, a form of mission

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<sup>67</sup> "Pastoral Letter--October 10th, 2003," Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples, 10 Oct. 2003, The Anglican Church of Canada, 18 May 2008 <<http://www2.anglican.ca/about/committees/acip/pastoral-letter.htm>>.

that, within the ACC, has been paired with the spirit of Confession to become a sacrament, an outward sign of the *metanoia* of a church and her people.

## 6. Missional Confession and *Poesis*

There are manifold challenges when one considers historical wrongs and reconciliation. Among these are who forgives. When in time is forgiveness acceptable? Are we negotiating between forgiveness and forgetfulness? What is traded in forgiveness? Where is the finality of forgiveness? Yet all of these questions, valid and important as they are, neglect the forward looking nature of the Sacrament of Confession. They are negotiated and answered in the process of Confession and repentance even as the ultimate answer to all of them lies with the Creator and the forgiveness of the cross.

The forward-looking Church may begin its work of penance by undertaking God's mission in the world and becoming agents of reconciliation and grace-filled living. The Catechism of the Catholic Church phrases this as follows, "God moves one so that one in grace is able to move oneself to justice—by grace preceding, accompanying, and following one's actions...[Confession] establishes the rectitude of divine love in the heart of the believer, imparting faith, hope, and love and in so doing grants obedience to the divine will."<sup>68</sup> As the Church is convicted by the Spirit, it is called to the work of justice and to make its labor an expression of Holy *poesis* or essential, beautiful creation..

Mission is one aspect of the Church's work of *poesis* in the world. It is an expression of the repair of the present and past looking forward to the future. When it is undertaken appropriately, the Church and the Holy Spirit can baptize the mistakes of the past making them tools of learning and reconciliation. The efforts of the Church to be reborn in the Spirit are expressed in vigorous mission efforts that blend the voices of past and present, self and other, into "the final court of appeal" that "sings with one true voice

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<sup>68</sup>CCC, 1991.

of praise.”<sup>69</sup> This final court of appeal is a body of the faithful that comes to a place of reconciliation and growth through self-examination and looking to a future under the cross.

For missionary churches in the post-colonial era, there is a degree of guilt present in the collective consciences of those sensitive to the evolving awareness of our collective guilt for the abuses of the past. This awareness is, in some part, a healthy regard for the other and a movement toward accepting the legitimacy of a variety of worldviews and histories without seeing them as invalidating one’s own. However, this awareness has also resulted in, what some would argue, is a potentially crippling reluctance to engage with the other in an open and honest way for fear of reenacting historical abuses or reinforcing past prejudices.

In the *Christian Century*, Yale professor Lamin Sanneh wrote, “It seems that for my Western Christian friends, if missionaries did not justify by their field labors the guilt the West carries about the mischief of the white race in the rest of the world, then other missionaries would have to be invented to justify that guilt.”<sup>70</sup> The vague uneasiness of the contemporary Christian has, in some ways, been shifted onto the mission enterprise and become an excuse to devalue or redefine mission. Sanneh argued, “Much of the standard Western scholarship on Christian missions proceeds by looking at the motives of individual missionaries and concludes by faulting the entire missionary enterprise as being part of the machinery of Western cultural imperialism.”<sup>71</sup>

Yet, in the rush to deemphasize mission, or worse, to implicate it as emblematic of the predations of imperialism, the church may have set aside its most potent and

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<sup>69</sup>Milbank, 129.

<sup>70</sup> Lamin Sanneh, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex," *Christian Century* 08 Apr. 1987: 331-334.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

powerful tool in the work of reconciliation. A church that seeks to make amends for historical wrongs must engage with those it believes it has wronged and who believe they have been wronged by it. We saw this, to a great extent, in the work that the Anglican Church of Canada did in its consultations with First Nations peoples.

What arm of the church is more adequately poised to engage with other cultures and peoples, those outside of one's geographic boundaries and immediate experience, than the missionaries of the church? Sanneh points out the intensive work of translating the Bible into local vernacular as a critical example of the missionary endeavor bringing the riches of local cultures into focus for the sending church. Sanneh wrote, "The importance of vernacular translation was that it brought the missionary into contact with the most intimate and intricate aspects of culture, yielding wide-ranging consequences for both missionary and native alike."<sup>72</sup>

An open and humble missionary can gain an understanding of his or her host culture that is unmatched within the sending church. Moreover, a missionary's work at the level of the individual believer and the individual host imbues the relationship with an incarnated holiness that is at once a reflection of and reflected in the wider Body of Christ. Combined with translation efforts, we can see the real potential for profound respect and love that may develop between individuals and churches committed to mission. This openness and humility can be found in the spirit of Confession which makes us more fully real and human while preparing us to receive and to be received in grace and forgiving love.

Historically, it was, in part, the increased awareness of local particularities and virtues that enabled societies to cast off manifold forms of oppression and manifest

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

reinvigorated cultural pride. For example, “the vernacular Scriptures and the wider cultural and linguistic enterprise on which translation rested provided the means and occasion for arousing a sense of national pride, yet it was the missionaries—foreign agents—who were the creators of that entire process.”<sup>73</sup> Of course, this does not discount the stories of abuse or neglect that our brothers and sisters of the faith tell. It does suggest, however, that the mission enterprise is uniquely equipped and called to dialogue with victims.

It is in the meeting of the other that stories of abuse may be brought to light, dealt with, or simply heard, depending on the needs. Moreover, in those very human interactions, the missionary and the hosts begin that Incarnational dialogue that repairs the breaches of time. Missionaries are, in many ways, the modern Confession of the Church. They are an offering from one Church to another in the hope that true Communion might take place and, like any offering, the fruits are manifested in such a way as to blur the line between giver and receiver.

Reflecting on the steps of Confession, it is possible to understand mission as Confession. After the wrong, the recognition of the wrong must follow. Our missionaries are on the ground, engaging in individual dialogue with those who may have been wronged in the past, hearing those voices and stories through which we come to understand the lasting legacies of past injustices and, moreover, hearing the needs of the contemporary societies.

Indeed, for much of the past century, missionaries have been engaged in this very process of recognizing the wrongs of the past. Titus Presler states, “While expansion was the keynote of the nineteenth century, self-criticism was the mission movement’s central

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

theme during the twentieth century.”<sup>74</sup> In 1958, C. Murray Rogers wrote, “The modern missionary movement was bound up with the expansion of western imperial power, economic influence, and technical ‘know-how.’”<sup>75</sup> Throughout the century, as Presler notes, there was a growing awareness that mission required reappraisal and renewal. Self-criticism must be rooted in dialogue with the other coupled with honest appraisals of our shared histories.

It is in those discussions that we come to truly be martyrs in the ancient sense of the word, witnesses. This martyrdom, like Confession, erases our pride and self-importance and brings us into an honest, sharing, mutually enriching relationship with others. Rogers wrote, “A real meeting between a Christian and a non-Christian in Asia or Africa presupposes a willingness to be open on the part of the Christian to all that the non-Christian has to share and has to give.”<sup>76</sup> This engagement with the other begins to fill that “lack” which is sin, begins to create understanding. Mission and Confession call us out of our perpetual enchantment with the self while refocusing our energy on understanding God and the other.

That understanding brings us to the second step of Confession, regret. One cannot regret something without understanding the toll or cost of the wrong. This can only be engendered through patient dialogue and honest listening to the pain of others with whom we have formed a bond. It must be a bond through which pain and joy are commingled and tasted reciprocally. In Confession, we are reconnected with others and we feel the emptiness of sin and the joy of forgiveness. In the same way, the missionary is afforded the opportunity to create new bonds of affection and friendship with those

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<sup>74</sup> Titus L. Presler, *Horizons of Mission*, (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2001). p. 102.

<sup>75</sup> C. M. Rogers, *Essays in Anglican Self-Criticism*, (London: SCM P, Ltd., 1958). p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> Rogers, 81.

whose joys and sorrows become their own. There, we find the regret that is required for and part of Confession. Moved by regret, we repent.

For the Church to repent, we must have an active engagement with others. Some of the most meaningful acts of repentance are those that truly reconcile us to another and bring us back to the table together. The Anglican Church of Canada modeled this work of repentance in their commitment to dialogue and movement toward a truly independent and autonomous Indigenous Church in Canada. Their work of repentance was offered and received in the spirit of openness and mutual sharing. Mission provides us with the most direct opportunity to challenge those systems of oppression which still exist and to hear about legacies that are ongoing and systemic injustices that persist. Part of our repentance is the honest recognition that we continue to benefit, in some way, from the same systems that degrade others.

Mission is the point at which we can provide timely and human repentance that is steeped with deeper meaning than a declaration or announcement by a church body. That meaning is provided, in part, by the embodied reality of the missionary in the context of a lived relationship. Moreover, like Biblical translation, mission “asserts that the sacred message may legitimately be entrusted to the forms of everyday life.”<sup>77</sup> One of these forms of everyday life is the simple act of conversation and sharing. In the missionary, through the relationships he or she has developed, our work of repentance gains greater currency and import, for they make repentance real. They are the embodied hope and the translated contrition of the church yearning for deeper relations with the other in an honest spirit of humility. Just as sin, a lack, makes itself known in our interactions with

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<sup>77</sup> Sanneh, 343.

the other, so too is reconciliation and grace made manifest in and through the other. After repentance, comes the natural movement toward the amendment of life.

Amending one's life is a fearful endeavor at times. It can mean apparent condemnation, abandonment, or rejection. Yet opening ourselves is the key to Confession and mission. The cruciform life is a life of walking, arms linked, through trials, sharing burdens, struggles, and painful endings. The missionary, as our Church's Confession, carries those burdens as well as the myriad joys of new friendships in faith. Missionaries are a nexus which links a transforming vision with an untransformed world.<sup>78</sup> In a similar way, Confession links a transforming spirit to an as yet untransformed self. The notion of the missionary as Sacrament is not a new one. Indeed, Titus Presler has articulated this idea as follows, "A Christian on mission, then, is a Sacrament of God's mission to reconcile all people with one another and with God in Christ."<sup>79</sup> That reconciliation is part of our ritual of communal celebration of our shared life in forgiveness for "penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are harmed by our sins. It is fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all men and women of good will for justice and peace in the world."<sup>80</sup> It is in shared vulnerability (modeled by Christ) that we are able to truly become Church.

In the willingness to be open and the daring to be vulnerable, the missionary becomes the conduit by which the Church makes some part of its reparation to the world and receives the blessing of new Communion. Ian Douglas writes that some manifestations of modern racism are "dysfunctional rescuing, avoiding contact, and

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<sup>78</sup> Clark Hyde, *To Declare God's Forgiveness*, (Wilton: Morehouse Barlow, 1984). p. 88.

<sup>79</sup> Presler, 158.

<sup>80</sup>Dennis C. Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries: Sacramental Principles and Liturgical Practice*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994). p. 88.

denial of cultural differences.”<sup>81</sup> The church has been complicit in this racism. By neglecting fulsome, on-the-ground missionary efforts in favor of grant-giving, the church has engaged in these behaviors of dysfunctional rescuing, avoiding contact, and denying differences. Mission is our church’s Confession that we still have much to learn from the world around us, that we are willing to be vulnerable to the work of the Spirit, and to admit that our blindness, fear, or even laziness have habituated our institutions to simultaneously old and new forms of racism. Missionaries are one way for the church to rectify and avoid these manifestations of racism.

The missionary enterprise, rooted in the open and confessing spirit, expressly engages the other, recognizes differences, and seeks reciprocal friendship rather than the false hope of “rescue.” Our amendment of life takes place in moments when we act in love, partnership, and openness with others. This joyful amendment of life, in the constant reflection and refraction of the confessing spirit, reverberates through the web of individual relationships the missionary is blessed to be a part of, including both the wider sending church and the host culture. This mutuality is also expressed in the sharing of the Eucharist.

Traditionally, Confession was necessary for the Christian to share in the sacrament of Communion. William Cavanaugh states, “Christ’s restoration of the *imago dei* in humanity is consummated in individuals in the Eucharist, in which our separateness is overcome precisely by participation in Christ’s Body.”<sup>82</sup> Both the Eucharist and Mission are local expressions of the Church Catholic. To participate in either requires the humble spirit of Confession and the joy of forgiveness. The

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<sup>81</sup> Ian T. Douglas, Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis, (New York: Church, 2002). p. 56.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas, 47.

missionary shares their faith because they have experienced, in some way, the healing and forgiving touch of God in the Body which they yearn to share.

The joy of our faith in a God of Creation is that this God is the Lord over all the Earth in its manifold splendors and resplendent diversity. There has never been a time when any person, village, or people have been forgotten by God. Thus, we enter each village as a sister and brother sharing a Father. That divine parentage is the very ground upon which we humbly walk into a village, share our story, and receive the blessing of companionship. We must Confess those times and places in which, as individuals and a church, we have forgotten that one God is Love and Father of all and will call saints “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”<sup>83</sup> Both mission and Confession are not acts of willpower or the strength to assert our will, but of willingness and the faith to surrender to the Holy Spirit.

Without individual, human, and incarnated relationships grounded in the Spirit, the Church cannot be the Body. Indeed, it has been noted that “God’s nature is to form relationships and build community, and the church’s mission must reflect that priority.”<sup>84</sup> Our Confession as the Church, our willingness to open ourselves fully in humility, enables us to both receive wisdom and offer service. This service and wisdom are part of the transaction of Confession. However, the absolution declared by a priest after Confession is not declared as a judge, but “as a pastoral response to the believer over his or her sins.”<sup>85</sup>

The pastoral response of absolution frees the sinner to go forth in joy knowing that they are washed in the sacrifice of Christ. Mission and Confession are not to be

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<sup>83</sup> Rev. v. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Presler, 159.

<sup>85</sup> Hyde, 23.

engaged in because they are demanded by God, but because as an already forgiven people, we understand our lives to be ones of honest Confession and holy work. We do not confess to be forgiven, we confess because we are forgiven. Martin L. Smith poses the question, “How does it feel to be defended, protected, and sent on with the open declaration that you are forgiven, in the clear, saved?”<sup>86</sup> It is that light spirit, a spirit that is protected, forgiven, and saved that must undergird our mission efforts. That joyful optimism that is tempered by humility may become the license by which we allow ourselves and our church to make mistakes, to take risks, to dare to be the Body of Christ.

We do not seek to amend our life as the Church in the hope of forgiveness; we do so because that amendment is animated by our forgiveness. Smith states that the forgiveness we are offered is “part of a comprehensive change of heart—repentance—and that of a transformed life resulting from the new-found reconciliation with God.”<sup>87</sup> Mission and Confession are our expression that our flawed past has not precluded a holy future. Martin Smith articulates this as follows:

In the restored relationship of trust and closeness that is God’s gift to us in reconciliation, it is one thing to keep a healthy sense of our fallibility and remember what God’s forgiveness has covered in our life. It is something else again to consume in obsession over past sins energy which ought to be available for staying with God and for responsible action in the world.<sup>88</sup>

Missionaries are our palpable link to the other; they enable us to make the amendment of life tangible and real on the ground. In their sending, they evince the transformed spirit of the beatitudes to the world. The joyful realization of Confession is that the sins of the past are Christ’s on the cross to bear. We move forward in loving service to a God of the future, a Lord of hope.

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<sup>86</sup> Smith, 7.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, 53.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, 55.

## 7. Conclusion

We, as a forgiven people do not bear our sin, but are charged to carry the burden of learning from sin and transforming our behavior so as to live in accord with Christ's precepts. The joy of forgiveness can empower churches to fully reengage in mission and to recognize that the missionary endeavor itself, rather than being an impediment to reconciliation, may be our most sure way of realizing it. That reconciliation requires churches and missionaries to be marked by sympathy, self-awareness, and humility.

This spirit of the beatitudes is a product of the confessing spirit and a mark of our solidarity as the Church Catholic. Solidarity is our goal in so many of the Sacraments. Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, Confession, Ordination, Last Rites, and Marriage are all Sacraments that bind us in solidarity more deeply to one another and to Christ in those moments of joy and pain when the curtain between Heaven and Earth seems most translucent. Confession and mission both serve to bring our lives into accord with Christ's will, draw us closer to one another, commit us to transcending the self, call us to recognize our impact on others, and concomitantly proceed from and engender humility.

Confession and mission patch rents in the human conscience by recalling those places in which we or the human family have failed or can do more to honor Creation and the other. Working out of a theology of Confession, mission efforts may provide a way forward that does not simply transcend or deny the errors of the past, but baptizes them, making them a point of mutual sharing, growth, and understanding for all parties. Both the Sacrament of Confession and mission, when humbly undertaken in love, serve to promote the solidarity of all people. Indeed, the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church in the United States defines mission as the restoration of "all people to

unity with God and one another in Christ.”<sup>89</sup> In the same way that God expressed His sacrificial solidarity with humanity in Christ, we must go forth into the world in the spirit of Confession, doing God’s mission and pursuing ever deeper solidarity, faith, and love. The spirit of Confession is one that seeks not only to know the depths of our hearts and change our behavior, “but to re-tune the psychological mechanisms that constantly produce the same mistakes.”<sup>90</sup> This re-tuning refocuses our energy, deepens our devotion, and strengthens us in obedience and service to the will of God.

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<sup>89</sup> The Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Church Publishing, 1979). p. 855.

<sup>90</sup>Grun, 132.

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