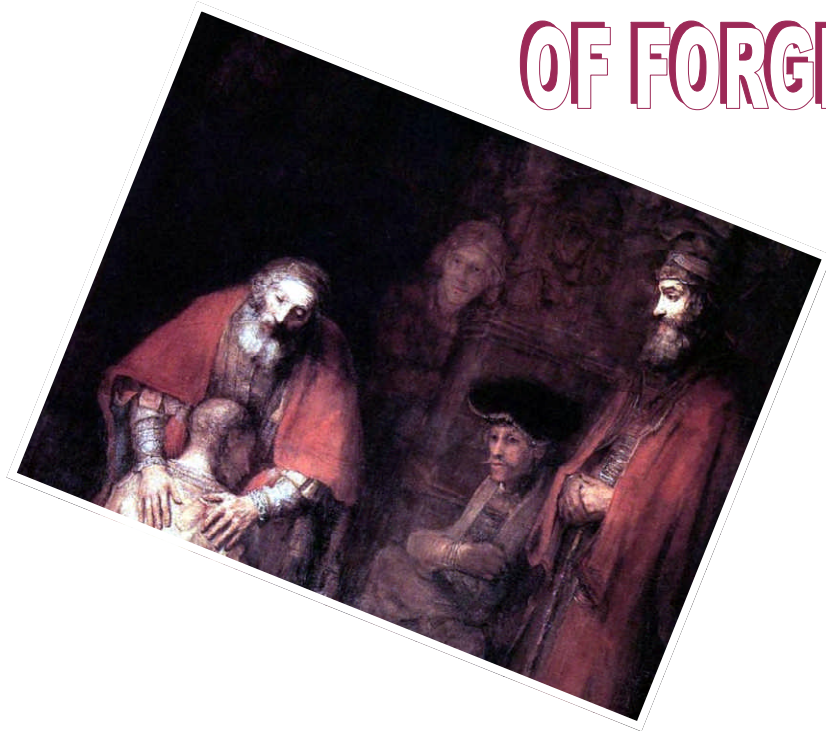


# THE SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS



**UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES**

Written by John Thornhill SM  
Designed and produced by Patrick Lim

**THE EMMAUS SERIES**



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

# THE SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS

## SESSION 1

*NOTE: In order to present the material of this DVD in two parts, Chapter 3, 'A Surprising Historical Development' is divided between the two sessions. Viewing ends 33 minutes and 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading, '7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Confession'. Session 2 starts from that point.*

### Introductory reading

Gospel of Matthew (9:9-13)

As Jesus was walking on he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed him ...

Now while he was at table in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When he heard this he replied, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. Go and learn the meaning of the words: *Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice*. And indeed I came to call not the upright, but sinners'. ◇

### Questions opening up the topic

*Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:*

#### Questions

- ◆ Vatican II provided for a renewal of this sacrament. Has the need for renewal been confirmed in your experience? Did your previous experience of this sacrament leave you dissatisfied?
- ◆ Has this sacrament sometimes been a positive experience? What made the difference?

### Viewing of DVD

*NOTE: Viewing of Session 1 starts from beginning of the presentation and ends 33 minutes 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading, '7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Confession'.*

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Chapter 1:  
Reconciliation in the Plan of God
- ◆ Chapter 2:  
New Testament Beginnings
- ◆ Chapter 3:  
A Surprising Historical Development  
*(ends 33 minutes 28 seconds into DVD)*

## Sharing of reactions to the presentation

*Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:*

### Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

## A reading related to the theme

*Second letter of Paul to the Corinthians (5:17-19)*

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see. It is all God's work; he reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. I mean, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not holding anyone's faults against them, but entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ◇

## Final reflective sharing

*This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.*

*It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:*

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

### Questions

- ◆ Of course, our historical survey is only half completed; however, has what we have seen so far given you a clearer understanding of how the Church lives in history?
- ◆ Does the outlook of the New Testament Church described in the presentation have lessons that are still important for us as we live our Christian lives?

# SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS

## SESSION 2

### Introductory reading

Gospel of Luke (23:39-43)

One of the criminals hanging there abused him: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well'. But the other spoke up and rebuked him, 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said, 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it: we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong'. Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. He answered him, 'In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'. ◇

### Questions opening up the topic

*Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:*

#### Questions

- ◆ In the early Church, as we have seen, the sacramental action unfolded in this order, confession and contrition expressed to the bishop, the performance of penance, absolution through the bishop welcoming the penitent into the community celebration. How does this order differ from that of the sacrament as we have experienced it?
- ◆ Why do you think the frequency with which people avail themselves of this sacrament has fallen off?

### Viewing of Video

*NOTE: Viewing of Session 2 starts 33 minutes and 28 seconds into the DVD, at the heading '7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Confession', and continues to the end of the presentation.*

- ◆ Chapter 3:  
A Surprising Historical Development  
*(starts 33 minutes and 28 seconds into DVD)*
- ◆ Chapter 4:  
The Reform of Vatican II
- ◆ Chapter 5:  
The Debate Continues

### Sharing of reactions to the presentation

*Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:*

#### Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

## A reading related to the theme

Gospel of Luke (7: 36-37, 44-50)

One of the Pharisees invited him to a meal. When he arrived at the Pharisee's house and took his place at table, suddenly a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment ...

(Jesus turned to the woman, and said to his host) 'You see this woman? I came into your house, and you poured no water over my feet, but she has poured out her tears over my feet and wiped them away with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has been covering my feet with kisses ever since I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. For this reason, I tell you her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love. It is someone who is forgiven little who shows little love'. Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven'. Those who were with him at table began to say to themselves, 'Who is this man, that even forgives sins?' But he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace'. ◇

## Final reflective sharing

*This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.*

*It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:*

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

## Questions

- ◆ After what we have seen in two sessions on the sacrament of forgiveness, what place would you think of giving it in your life of faith in the future?
- ◆ How can we foster a greater appreciation of this sacrament in our parish communities?

## SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

The practice of this sacrament (of God's gift of forgiveness and reconciliation) has undergone great changes in the course of the Church's history. In the New Testament Church, those guilty of seriously disruptive sins (such as apostasy, murder and notorious adultery) were excluded from the community for a time, for their 'salvation'. Clearly, the familiar sins of human frailty were present in these communities; and for them the scriptures recognise various ways of forgiveness: the Eucharist, especially, practical charity, mutual acknowledgment of sinfulness and humble prayer.

Name changes in the course of history indicate a change in what was emphasised in different periods; 'penance', 'confession', 'reconciliation'. In the period of persecution (2nd – 3rd cents) the sacrament was called 'penance'. During this period, denial of the faith in times of persecution constituted a large pastoral problem. Absolution was given - only once in a lifetime - through a ritual admission to the Eucharistic community after a period of severe penance, and was only available once in a lifetime. After the end of persecutions, the sacrament was called 'canonical penance' (4th – 6th cents), reflecting the fact that Church councils drew up 'canons' to regularise the practice – it was, for instance, now available a second time: but only on one's death bed! Not surprisingly, many postponed their Baptism, and this sacrament became little more than a preparation for death practiced by good people. During the Dark Ages (7th – 11th cents) Irish monks brought the practice of their Church to the continent. Penance (severe by our standards) were done **after** absolution; and the sacrament was repeated. Thus the practice emerged which is familiar to us. Attacked by the Protestant reformers, this form of the sacrament was defended as a legitimate form of the sacrament by the Council of Trent in the 16th century. In the 20th century, more frequent communion led to more frequent confession which became an important part of Catholic practice. In the 'privatised' ritual it had assumed, the original 'sacramental sign' – reconciliation with the community as a sign of God's gift of reconciliation – was no longer appreciated, even by theologians. Before Vatican II, the current practice of the sacrament was raising pastoral concerns. Vatican II provided for changes in the practice of this sacrament, as part of its liturgical renewal.

In the aftermath of Vatican II, the renewal of this sacrament gave rise to considerable debate and tensions – how was the sacrament to be part of the Church's life, in a way that made it at the same time, a sign of the call to genuine conversion and a sign of God's reconciling love? In the initial stages of implementing Vatican II's call for renewal, three sacramental rituals were envisaged: 1) the familiar form; 2) a communal penitential rite, with individual confession to a number of ministers; 3) a communal penitential service with a communal absolution. When the ritual was published, however, use of 'the third rite' was severely restricted. In places where it was practiced – following an interpretation of Church law given by leading canonists – the experience of committed faithful and their pastors was very positive (a remarkable sense of solidarity within the community in a common experience of reconciliation, and a

heightened sense of solidarity with and concern for humanity at large). Today, the provisions of Church law have excluded any practice of 'the third rite' except in exceptional circumstances, such as imminent disaster or a severe shortage of ministers in a particular region.

Many leaders in today's Church judge that the last word has not been heard on this subject. It seems unfortunate that discussion of the issue has been so inward looking – in a world in great need of genuine reconciliation. ◇

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