“FAITHFUL TO YOUR SACRAMENTS AND LOYAL IN YOUR SERVICE”:
THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION AS A SOURCE OF SPIRITUALITY AND
COLLABORATION IN MINISTRY

Thesis
Submitted to
The College of Arts and Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of
Master of Arts in Theological Studies

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August, 2012
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the sacrament of reconciliation as a source of priestly spirituality, which informs ministerial identity. The significance and purpose of this thesis is to propose a sacramental model of spirituality that promotes respectful collaboration between priests and lay ecclesial ministers, which is called for by the United States’ Bishops in Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium.

This thesis outlines basic foundations of ministerial identity as understood in the Roman Catholic priesthood. It then examines spirituality as the component of ministerial identity where belief and practice converge. Finally, it provides a detailed analysis of two forms of the sacrament of penance, during which the rites are examined for spiritual dispositions and virtues that promote effective collaboration and mutual respect between priests and lay ecclesial ministers.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Bill Johnston, whose tireless lucubration has helped this thesis grow from a discarded idea into its fullness herein. His eye for detail and thoroughness has been a welcome challenge, and he has taught me the value of academic discipline as spiritual practice.

I also wish to thank my husband, Dan, who has listened to many hours of verbal processing and given me the time, space, and support to do whatever my heart desires. My parents, Brad and Therese Reed, have been a source of strength and encouragement throughout my life, and I would not be who and where I am today without them.

I would also like to express my appreciation to all those who have helped along the way: Caitlin Cipolla-McCulloch and Brad Reed for their proofreading; Jeremy Helmes and all my readers for their hours of critical reading; the countless personal and professional acquaintances who have greeted this topic with enthusiasm and encouraged it; and my extended family for their support and love of intellectual pursuits.
The Lord is merciful. He makes us clean of heart and leads us out of darkness into his freedom when we acknowledge our guilt. Let us ask him to forgive us and bind up the wounds inflicted by our sins.

Give us the grace of true repentance.

Pardon your servants and release them from the debt of sin.

Forgive your children who confess their sins, and restore them to full communion with your Church.

Renew the glory of baptism in those who have lost it by sin.

Welcome them to your altar, and renew their spirit with the hope of eternal glory.

Keep them faithful to your sacraments and loyal in your service.

Renew your love in their hearts, and make them bear witness to it in their daily lives.

Keep them always obedient to your commandments and protect within them your gift of eternal life.

The Rite of Penance
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<tr>
<td>AA</td>
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<td>CCC</td>
<td>Catechism of the Catholic Church</td>
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<td>CCL</td>
<td>Code of Canon Law (1983)</td>
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<td>CGTM</td>
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<td>MND</td>
<td>Mane Nobiscum Domine</td>
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<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<td>NCCB</td>
<td>National Council of Catholic Bishops</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>PDV</td>
<td>Pastores Dabo Vobis</td>
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<td>PO</td>
<td>Presbyterorum Ordinis</td>
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<td>PPF</td>
<td>Program of Priestly Formation</td>
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<td>RP</td>
<td>Rite of Penance (1973)</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>Sacrosanctum Concilium</td>
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<td>USCCB</td>
<td>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops</td>
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INTRODUCTION

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, a reorientation of the relationship between the laity and the ordained has been articulated. Whereas previously the laity were understood as passive recipients of the grace that came from the priest’s exercise of the sacraments, the laity have since been encouraged to exercise their own participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council write in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium: “The faithful indeed, by the virtue of their royal priesthood, share in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise the priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, self-denial, and active charity.”

In the Introduction to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Apostolicam Actuositatem the council fathers address the church’s desire to “intensify the apostolic activity of God’s People.” The faithful, by virtue of their baptism, are called to live a life of Christian charity that exemplifies the life and sacrifice of Christ. Most often, the lay faithful animate Christian virtues within the secular sphere, where most do their work and have interaction with the world.

1 Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 10. All Documents from Vatican II are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996). The concept of two participations in the one priesthood can be found in an earlier form in Pius XI’s encyclical, Mediator Dei.
One of the realms in which lay people have relationships and activity (and therefore responsibility to the Christian life) is within the church. In *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the bishops affirm:

Sharing in the function of Christ, priest, prophet, and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the church. Their activity within the church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect... According to their abilities the laity ought to cooperate in all the apostolic and missionary enterprises of their ecclesial family.²

This statement emphasizes the necessity of the activity of laity in the church, for without them the church community will not reach its full potential. The laity offer their time, talent, and treasure to the church in a number of ways—from helping to clean the pews to serving on parish committees and teaching in religious education.

The leadership of the church is to encourage this cooperation and participation among the lay faithful. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* continues,

Bishops, parish priests, and other priests of the secular and religious clergy will remember that the right and duty of exercising the apostolate are common to all the faithful, whether clerics or lay; and that in the building up of the church the laity too have parts of their own to play. For this reason, they will work as brothers with the laity in the church and for the church, and will have a special concern for the laity in their apostolic activities.³

This statement does not suggest that the church hierarchy is to merely tolerate the presence of an active lay apostolate, including those who are active within the life of the church; church leadership is to cooperate fraternally and have special concern for those who serve the church in various ways.

While most lay people have taken up the call to Christian action by working in the secular world, a certain portion of the laity have come to find their life's

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² *Apostolicam Actuositatem: Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, no. 10.
³ AA, no. 25.
fulfillment working for the church in a non-ordained ministerial role. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes Pope Paul VI, saying “The laity can also feel called, or be in fact called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life. This can be done through the exercise of different kinds of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them.”

As members of the faithful discern the ways in which they are called to use their gifts in life, they are able to discover that this call can be casual—as in to serve on a parish committee relevant to one’s work skills—or can take on a more permanent form.

Those who use their gifts regularly in more consistent sacrifice and service to the church have a unique place amongst the other members of the church. Once again, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* states, “Deserving of special respect and praise in the church are the laity, single or married, who, permanently or for a time, put their person and their professional competence at the service of institutions and their activities.” This particular group of the laity who work professionally within the church has yielded an even more exclusive group—the lay ecclesial minister.

These are but a few of the conciliar and doctrinal foundations for the explosion of professional lay ministers working for the church in the last 50 years, Thomas O’Meara writes, “The present ‘expansion,’ ‘alteration,’ or ‘explosion’ in ministry is a worldwide movement begun by conciliar suggestions, sustained by

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5 Ibid., no. 22.
biblical and theological perspectives, and realized and confirmed by praxis."⁶ The service of the lay ecclesial minister is categorized by four hallmarks, as set forth by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): the authorization of the hierarchy to serve in ministry, leadership in a particular area of ministry, close mutual collaboration with the hierarchy, and appropriate education and formation relative to their level of responsibility.⁷

The inclusion of lay ecclesial ministers in the life of the church has, for various reasons, had a mixed reception. While the council fathers clearly recommend cooperation, in 1995 the USCCB acknowledged some lingering resistance in their statement Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium. Their position is that there is a challenge that undergirds all others in the progress of lay ecclesial ministry in the life of the church: “It is the need to foster respectful collaboration, leading to mutual support in ministry, between clergy and laity for the sake of Christ’s Church and its mission to the world.”⁸ This is a practical ministerial problem, as the Bishops themselves acknowledged when they described the challenge of respectful collaboration and mutual support as "a huge task requiring changes in patterns of reflection, behavior, and expectation among laity and clergy alike."⁹

Many reasons exist for the enduring tension between lay ecclesial and ordained ministers. This thesis does not attempt to categorize, diagnose, or defend

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⁹ Ibid.
the problem. Instead, this thesis seeks to suggest a change in “patterns of reflection” so as to improve the instances of disrespectful relationships that may exist between lay ecclesial and ordained ministers. I will attempt to show that through theological exploration and reflection on the sacrament of reconciliation, especially as a component of priestly spirituality, the ministerial identity and relationships of ordained and lay ecclesial ministers might be re-oriented so as to promote the respectful collaboration and mutual support suggested by *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*.

I first intend to explore ministerial identity. It is important to understand what factors contribute to the self-identity and understanding of a minister in order to ascertain how one then engages with the community—the mission, or ministry, of the lay ecclesial or ordained minister. In the priesthood, the identity of the priest is inextricably bound to Christ, to whom the priest is re-oriented during his ordination. The Christological emphasis of this identity may fall in a number of different ways: the three-fold office of priest, prophet, and king; the image of Christ the Good Shepherd; Christ as the head of his body, the church, etc. Each of these images evokes a different reflection of Christ, with a correspondingly distinct identity for the ministerial priest. I choose to study the ministry, identity, and participation of priests for several reasons: 1) the priest is the more permanent representative of the hierarchy in the ministerial relationship and as such bears the position of “power” in the relationship; 2) the priest is the animator of the community as well as the ministerial workplace; 3) the priest has more canonical obligations for
spiritual practice than the lay minister, and 4) the priest is able to participate in both roles, albeit at different times, in several of the sacraments.

Having established the foundations of ministerial identity, I then wish to look specifically at one factor that contributes to the lived experience of the identity of the priest—spirituality. In his apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II affirms, “a Christian life is a ‘spiritual life,’ that is, a life enlivened and led by the Spirit toward holiness or the perfection of charity.”10 This perfection of charity, of which *Lumen Gentium* 40 speaks, takes a particular form in the lives of priests. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* states, “They [priests] are called not only because they have been baptized, but also and specifically because they are priests, that is, under a new title and in new and different ways deriving from the sacrament of holy orders.”11 The pursuit of a spiritual life infiltrates the lived experience, both professionally and personally, of the Christian. John Paul II asserts, “An intimate bond exists between the priest’s spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry.”12 The spiritual life of the ordained minister, then, is where his encounter with the Holy Spirit in prayer and discipline meets his lived action within his ecclesial community, ministerial workplace, and the world.

One locus for spirituality is the sacramental life of the church. Next, I wish to examine the sacrament of penance. In addition to its value as the sacrament that seeks to repair and reestablish right relationships, the sacrament of reconciliation

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., no. 24.
also offers a sacramental model for two necessary, yet complementary roles—the priest and penitent. Neither can participate in the Sacrament without the other. It is my belief that further reflection on these aspects of the theology and practice of the sacrament of reconciliation can suggest a model of engagement in the ministerial workplace that respects the way each can be an occasion of grace for the other.

I am studying the ministerial identity and spirituality of the priest, as informed by the sacrament of penance, because I want to examine what a spirituality based in part on a sacrament that requires respectful collaboration and mutual appreciation of roles, might suggest for the relationships between priests and lay ecclesial ministers. This is in order to understand how lay ecclesial and ordained ministers might shift their understanding of each other’s roles and change their patterns of reflection and subsequent behavior so as to promote the respectful collaboration and mutual support between ministers called for in the US Bishops' document *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*. 
CHAPTER ONE

THE MINISTERIAL IDENTITY OF THE PRIEST

The need for collaboration between the laity and the hierarchy, where before there was none, has been a challenge to the identity of the priesthood. Since the Council speaks of the common and ministerial priesthoods being ordered to one another, as the role of the laity shifts and develops, the role of the priest must likewise be examined. With the new and expanding definitions of ministry, priests “experience a need to reflect upon their own priestly ministry, their relationship to the new ministries, and the concomitant call to collaboration.”

This chapter seeks to explore ministerial identity within the context of the ordained priesthood. It will do so by first exploring two major theological trajectories for orienting the ministerial priesthood. Then it shall examine a third path that has recently been proposed by contemporary theologians.

Initial Remarks on the Priest Emerging from Vatican II

For nearly 400 years following the Council of Trent, the priest was understood as the one able to confect the Eucharist and absolve sins.2 Prior to

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Vatican II, confecting the Eucharist stood as the highest privilege and responsibility of Holy Orders. In the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Spirit known as ‘sacred power’ (sacra potestas)—which enables the priest to confect the Eucharist and forgive sins and is conferred at ordination—the fullness of the priesthood came in the presbyteral order. Likewise, the identity of the priest was bound up in his power to consecrate, absolve, anoint, and bless.

The priest’s identity may still be understood in light of his sacra potestas. Achieved solely by the laying on of hands in the rite of ordination, the bishop consecrates the man with a new orientation towards the mission of Christ. But whereas the full participation in the mission used to be found in ordination to the priesthood, the documents of Vatican II shift its fullness to the order of bishops. Lumen Gentium asserts that “the fullness of the sacrament of orders is conferred by episcopal consecration, and both in the liturgical tradition of the church and in the language of the Fathers of the church it is called the high priesthood, the summit of the sacred ministry.” While this might uphold the liturgical tradition of the church, it seems to be quite different from the popular perception of the faithful and priesthood alike as held prior to this council.

This reorientation has left priests with some questions about how they fit into the “order” of the church. Presbyterorum Ordinis clarifies, again, this shift: “The function of the bishops’ ministry was handed over in a subordinate degree to priests so that they might be appointed in the order of the priesthood and be co-workers of

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3 Bleichner, View from the Altar, 133.
4 Cozzens, “Tenders of the Word,” 51.
5 Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 21.
the episcopal order for the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission that had been entrusted to it by Christ.⁶ Now the priest is understood not to be the first and indispensable agent of the Eucharist, but is instead ordered to be the co-worker of the bishop. A challenge has arisen in trying to understand the priest as both a co-worker and a subordinate in the ministry of the bishop.

This same dynamic is seen in the relationships between priests and lay ecclesial ministers. The United States Bishops titled their resource guide on lay ecclesial ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. At the same time that the bishops call for collaboration in ministry, there is no denying that the church is hierarchical and the common and ministerial priesthoods are ordered to one another. In the dynamics of the parish work environment, the priest will always be the supervisor, the one in a position of power. “Subordinate degree” and “co-workers” are often mutually exclusive.

Within the documents of Vatican II, the priest is newly and more largely defined by his participation in the threefold office of Christ and by his relationship to his parish as a shepherd of souls.⁷ Contemporary theologians argue that the priesthood could be reduced to two images: the priest as a minister of the sacraments, and a view whereby the priest is understood through his role in relation to his ministry with the community.⁸

Arguments that focus on the sacramental ministry of the priest proceed largely along the lines of ontology. Ontology is a branch of philosophy that studies

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⁶ *Presbyterorum Ordinis: Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, no. 2.
⁷ PO, no. 6.
the nature of existence, or being. Ontological approaches reside largely in the unobservable, interior realm of existence. Those arguments that focus on the other ministerial roles of the community are largely functional. Functional approaches to ministry, as opposed to ontological discussions, are easily perceptible and seek to describe the external actions and relationships of ministry.

*The Priestly Character*

Talking about “priestly character” is one way to engage the discussion of priestly identity. Although in its most common usage “character” refers to observable mental and moral qualities (e.g. a “character” reference), in theological parlance “priestly character” is frequently used to describe the indelible mark imparted during ordination. In either usage, it is an approach towards describing the identity of the priest.

Recognizing that there are both “ontological” and “functional” ways of understanding ordained ministry, one way to begin is with the ontological. The Council affirms that all Christians are consecrated in the one priesthood of Christ through baptism and confirmation.9 *Lumen Gentium* states:

> The baptized, by regeneration and anointing of the holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all their Christian activities they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the marvels of him who has called them our of darkness into his wonderful light (see 1 Pet 2:3-10)...Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less interrelated; each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.10

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10 LG, no. 10.
By virtue of holy orders, priests are configured into a new, deeper participation in the life of Christ. They are called to be a real presence of Christ in their communities, and their beings are formed to this mission more fully at ordination.

The Council of Trent affirmed the existence of a sacramental character or “mark” that comes from baptism, confirmation, and holy orders. In baptism, the faithful “put on Christ” and are prepared to participate in the three-fold office of Christ. In confirmation, the Holy Spirit bestows gifts that allow for a more particular manifestation of the priesthood of the faithful in the life of the one who is confirmed. Fr. Thomas McGovern explains the consecration of holy orders in this way: “With the rite of sacramental ordination priests are initiated and consecrated to a new kind of life which in a particular way separates them from everything (cf. Heb 5:1) and unites them to Christ ‘with an original, ineffable, and irreversible bond.’”

*Presbyterorum Ordinis* explains thusly: “the priesthood of presbyters, while presupposing the sacraments of initiation, is conferred by a special sacrament which, by anointing of the holy Spirit, puts a special stamp on them and so conforms them in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head.”

McGovern, drawing heavily on the theology of Fr. Jean Galot, elaborates that priestly character is not added on to the gifts of the other two sacraments, but instead makes deeper and more perfect the work of the Spirit that has already commenced in baptism. Of note, it is more than just a change in function or duty; it is a new and more profound relationship with Christ “by which Christ takes

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13 PO, no. 2.
possession of the being of the priest to imprint his own reflection on him.”\textsuperscript{14} It would seem that in this view, the mark on the soul in baptism is deepened and formed into a specific manifestation.

Galot cautions that arguments proceeding along the lines of priestly character must maintain a careful balance so as not to “demystify” the priesthood. When priestly character is ‘demystified’, this reduces the priesthood to mere function and neglects the real change of being that occurs.\textsuperscript{15} Galot claims, “we should not look upon [sacramental character] as nothing more than the extrinsic designation effected by the sacramental rite, or as the mere aptitude to perform a function, or as merely a juridical empowerment conferred by an authority to select persons for the sake of tasks to be attended to. We are dealing with a real mark which perdures in the soul.”\textsuperscript{16} Here is a hint that priestly character is both ontological and functional. It first affects the being of the person, which then re-orient the way in which the priest interacts with the world.

Rather than understanding priestly character by defining the priest solely in terms of his functions, Galot suggests that “we should seek to discover the mystical significance it embodies, at least to the extent to which the term ‘mystical’ refers to the presence of mystery understood as God’s plan of salvation taking hold of a man’s

\textsuperscript{14}McGovern, \textit{Priestly Identity}, 73. See also Galot, \textit{Theology of the Priesthood}, 201. Ratzinger offers this reflection on character: “In the language of late antiquity, ‘character’ referred to the seal or stamp of possession with which a thing, an animal, or even a person was marked and which could then no longer be erased. Thus someone’s property is irrevocably characterized as such and ‘calls after its master.’ We could say that ‘character’ means a belonging that is a part of the person’s very existence.” “The Ministry and Life of Priests,” 162.

\textsuperscript{15}Galot, \textit{Theology of the Priesthood}, 196.

\textsuperscript{16}Galot, \textit{Theology of the Priesthood}, 197. He offers a detailed account of the development of this theology in the Fathers of the church.
life.”17 Galot continues, “If the priest is to be capable of doing God’s work, he must belong to God with his whole self.... Grasped by God in his whole being, he can radiate and communicate God by everything that he is.”18 Like the Incarnation of Christ, the priest—in his being, which influences every action and word—becomes an instrument of God’s self-communication. When the being of the man is consecrated in ordination, the way in which he approaches his life and ministry is changed. After he is ordained, the priest and his actions are surrendered to God, enabling God to use every part of him in bringing forth the kingdom.19

There is little question that Christ is present in the person of the priest. Christ and his ministry were multifaceted. As Howard Bleichner explains, priests are “human prisms, whose function at any one time does not capture or exhaust a hundredth part of what they symbolize.20 The priest is not the only presence of Christ in the Church, but he reflects the person and ministry of Christ in a particular way. A telling way to explore this prism of Christ is to very simply ask “Who is Christ?” The breadth of answers—the Redeemer, the Healer, the Good Shepherd, the Great High Priest and so on—reflect the myriad ways in which Christ (and Christ present in the priest) is understood in the life of the church.

As the priest is consecrated to Christ and reflects the ministry of Christ, it is natural to explore those ministerial functions. McGovern orients being and function in one way as he writes: “The Christological dimension of the priest’s identity

17 Ibid., 201.
18 Ibid., 202.
19 Ibid., 202.
20 Bleichner, View from the Altar, 154. The “other forms of presence” to which he refers can be found in Sacrosanctum Concilium 7: in the person of the priest, the Eucharistic species, the Word of God, and the gathered assembly.
springs directly from the sacrament of Order which configures him ontologically with Christ the Priest, Teacher, Sanctifier, and Pastor of his people.”

The words “priest, teacher, sanctifier and pastor” describe ministerial functions of Christ. Christ, though divine, was also human and lived a life of ministry to others. As they pertain to priest, these actions become functional aspects of his ministry.

Historically, it occurs from time to time that the priesthood is examined only in light of the sacramental ministry of the priest—his ability to confect the Eucharist and absolve sins. The danger in this approach is that it narrows the priesthood to a singular ministerial function that is entirely reliant on the consecration of the priest. Galot states, “Only the most comprehensive theology of the priesthood can do justice to the breadth of priestly character. It is therefore imperative that the doctrine of the priestly character be rescued from the constraints that arise when the sacred is reduced to the ritual.”

There must be an interaction between the functional and the ontological in the ministerial identity of the priest in order to promote this comprehensive theology of priestly identity suggested by Galot, and it is imperative that the functional considerations extend beyond the priest’s ability to confect the Eucharist and absolve sins by virtue of his sacred power.

One way this narrowing can be avoided is by considering the three-fold office (also called the three-fold munera) of priest, prophet and king. While fitting into these parameters—priest, prophet, king—theologians have used other supplemental words to further designate these functions. The Code of Canon Law states that the parish priest is the responsible pastor of his parish, and in this

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21 McGovern, Priestly Identity, 78. See also LG nos.18, 28.
22 Galot, Theology of the Priesthood, 209.
community he carries out the offices of “teaching, sanctifying, and ruling with the cooperation of other priests or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of Christ’s faithful.” Presbyterorum Ordinis categorizes the ministerial functions of priests as “ministers of God’s Word, ministers of the sacrament and the Eucharist, and rulers of God’s people.” Relying on PO, David Bohr calls these functions “prophet-teacher, sanctifier, and shepherd-king.” Bleichner refers to them as “prophet, priest, and shepherd.” Blessed John Paul II marks it “his threefold ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral charity.”

It is important to note these differences. Depending on the words chosen, a distinction may be made between a juridical or pastoral orientation of the priest. For example, when “king” is interpreted as “ruler,” “shepherd,” or “minister of pastoral charity,” different images are evoked. Likewise, the same can be said of the different images suggested in “priest,” because a “leader of worship” is very different than one who sanctifies. Likewise, a king and his kingdom share very different interactions than a shepherd and his sheep.

These ministerial responsibilities, regardless of how they are defined, all find their source in the configuration of the priest to Christ, but should not be

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24 Section headings in PO, Chapter II, Part I. Functions of Priests.  
25 Bohr, The Diocesan Priest, x.  
26 Bleichner, View from the Altar, 165.  
27 PDV, no. 26. John Paul II, Ratzinger, and Bohr and others prioritize the ministry of the word. Evangelization is primarily accomplished through these means and this was the primary task of the apostles, whom Christ consecrated and sent. In PDV 15, the three-fold munera is referred to as “the ministry of reconciliation, of shepherding the flock of God, and of teaching.”  
28 Galot writes, “Governing and leading the sheep are unmistakably different things. Between the one and the other there is the difference we notice between the way authority is usually conceived in civil society and the way in which Christ conceives it in the gospels.” Theology of the Priesthood, 138.
mistrue as an overly functional view of the priesthood.\textsuperscript{29} How then, should one appreciate the ontological change that occurs at ordination without becoming too focused on the capacity to act \textit{in persona Christi}. How does one recognize the three-fold \textit{munera} of the priesthood of Christ without reducing the role of the Priest to his function?

Bleichner suggests that the theological dialogue, regardless of whether it is ontologically or functionally based, must always return to Christ.\textsuperscript{30} John Paul II makes this return by focusing on scripture. He writes, “[Christ] is the ‘head’ in the new and unique sense of being a ‘servant,’ according to his own words: ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk. 10:45). Jesus’ service attains its fullest expression in his death on the cross, that is, in his total gift of self in humility and love.”\textsuperscript{31} In other words, one might say that the priest is ontologically conformed to Christ, and functionally speaking, the servanthood of Christ makes him the ultimate model of servant leadership.

Galot supports this idea of servant leadership. He believes that the \textit{sacra potestas} is conferred in ordination for the purpose of “humble service” to others in the church and throughout the world.\textsuperscript{32} His theology of the priesthood (in its entirety, but particularly in its sense of identity) centers on another image of service: Christ’s self-identification as the Good Shepherd.\textsuperscript{33} Galot offers a unique perspective on clarifying both the difference between the common and ministerial

\textsuperscript{29} McGovern, \textit{Priestly Identity}, 91.
\textsuperscript{30} Bleichner, \textit{View from the Altar}, 148.
\textsuperscript{31} PDV, no. 21.
\textsuperscript{32} Galot, \textit{Theology of the Priesthood}, 27.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 41. See also Jn 10:11.
priesthoods and how to explain ontological change and sacred power. He summarizes, “What distinguishes the priestly character from the character impressed by baptism and confirmation is that man’s being is conformed to Christ the Shepherd. The image of the good shepherd is impressed on the soul of the ordained person as a principle and basic blueprint of the ministry to be carried out.”

For Galot, the Shepherd is the most precise configuration of the priest’s soul to Christ, and the priest’s ontological configuration forms him for his ministerial (functional) role.

It has been said that the priesthood can only be understood within the context of the priest’s mission in service to the church. Part of this mission is to, as Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep.” Christ is the image *par excellence* of the Good Shepherd.

Christ the shepherd leads the flock by the word he speaks and guarantees the truth of his teaching by the supreme testimony which is the gift of his own self. He offers himself in sacrifice in order to impart to his sheep a bountiful life, especially through the Eucharist. By leading the flock, he makes it one. The three functions—preaching, worship, and leadership—become the expression of the shepherd’s love, and from that love they draw their inspiration.

The identity of the shepherd can influence every aspect of priestly ministry. The love of the shepherd is a love that puts the sheep before himself—this is *pastoral charity*. But the shepherd has a responsibility to others, as well. He is responsible for the well-being of the sheep, and he is entrusted with their care by another. These two dimensions suggest that ministry is relational.

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34 Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 207.
36 Jn 21:17.
**The Blessed Trinity**

All of the discussion of the priesthood so far—both ontological and functional—has centered on Christ. As the Shepherd has a responsibility to both his sheep and his master, the priest, like Christ, ministers among and with others. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II writes, “The nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood cannot be defined except through this multiple and rich interconnection of relationships which arise from the Blessed Trinity”. 38

The relationship of the Trinity can be a fruitful avenue for an exploration of ministry. A trinitarian approach to ministry has some significant strengths. First, it can help overcome the distortions that occur when there is too strong of a focus on either the Christological (a narrow focus on the priest acting *in persona Christi*) or the pneumatological dimensions of ministry (such as an approach that considers first the minister’s being called from within a community, as in many protestant theologies of the priesthood.) Secondarily, it overcomes the functional and ontological dichotomies of ministry. Lastly, it contextualizes the priest and ministry within the realm of relationships. 39

Cappadocian theologians in the late fourth century helped to develop the theology of the Trinity. In the Trinity, God exists simultaneously as one and three. The three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) are equal in *ousia* (typically defined as substance), participating equally in time and salvation. The Council of

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38 PDV, no. 12.
Alexandria (362 CE) asserted that in the Trinity there is one being or substance (*ousia*) but three “personalities” or persons (*hypostases*).

Because the Son and Spirit are of the same substance, so might the same be said of the Christological and pneumatological dimensions of priestly identity. While they maintain different iterations or personalities, they remain indivisibly united. Denis Edwards writes,

Ministry is the work of the Holy Spirit and of the Risen Christ ... To see the presbyter as representing Christ standing over the community is to distort ordained ministry. To see the presbyter simply as the arbitrary creation of the community is also to distort ordained ministry. What is needed is a Trinitarian view of ordained ministry as both springing from the community which is inspired by the Spirit of God, and as commissioned to the community by the risen Jesus.40

The agency of Christ and the Holy Spirit in ministry do not need to be in an adversarial relationship. In fact, it is most harmonious when the two are considered as a unified whole. While Christ and Spirit have different personalities, they are of the same substance. Perhaps one could say they are different means to the same end.

When the being of the priest and his action in the community are viewed together, then the divide between the ontological and functional presentations of ministry is also overcome. Traditional trinitarian theology has been concerned with two articulations: the immanent and the economic. As Kathleen Cahalan summarizes, the immanent Trinity is concerned with who God is—God in God’s self—and the economic Trinity is how God participates in salvation history, that is,

40 Ibid.
what God does.\textsuperscript{41} Modern trinitarian theology, however, is beginning to understand the economic and the immanent as one. This has implications for the “doing” and “being” of the theology of ministry. Cahalan writes, “If God is one in terms of being and doing, and human persons are created \textit{imago Dei}, contemporary trinitarian theology offers a theological way of understanding human practice as the integration of being and doing before God.”\textsuperscript{42}

The divine “persons” of Father, Son, and Spirit exist in their relationship with one another. The classical term used to describe this relationship is \textit{perichoresis}. Understood as the all-encompassing divine dance of these personalities, Edwards shares, “The word describes the mutual and reciprocal relations of intimate communion between the Trinitarian Persons—a communion which is so radical there is only one divine nature.”\textsuperscript{43} John Paul II illustrates the “divine dance” of relationships in the church in his exhortation \textit{Pastores Gregis}. While originally used in reference to the bishop, the same “interplay” of relationships between the ministerial and common priesthoods exists in the ministry and life of the priest.\textsuperscript{44}

Edward Hahnenberg understands the theology of ministry in light of this trinitarian indwelling. He writes,

Early Trinitarian doctrine teaches that divine substance, the very nature of God, is not prior to relationships; \textit{ousia} is not prior to the divine persons ... In an analogous way, I would like to suggest that ministers are not primarily isolated individuals whose relationships of service are secondary or nonessential to their exercise as ministers. Instead, one becomes a minister

\textsuperscript{41} Kathleen A. Cahalan, \textit{Introducing the Practice of Ministry} (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 150.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Edwards, “Personal Symbol of Communion,” 77.
by entering into and being established in relationships of service. In a theology of ministry, relationship—qualified as a relationship of service—is the ultimate category.45

A christomonistic theology of ministry, one exclusively focused on the work of Christ that neglects the action of the Spirit, is reductionistic.46 Only when ministry is understood in light of the Triune God—and the indivisible work of Father, Son, and Spirit—will it be fully realized.

In the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, which can be understood as one complete entity, be-ing meets do-ing. It is natural, then, to look for places in the ministry and life of the priest where there is a similar occurrence. The Spirit animates the Christian life, and it is the Spirit that configures all Christians to Christ. This is true for both the ordained and the common priesthoods. This configuration is a dialogue between one’s soul, the Spirit, and the world. John Paul II writes, “‘If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:25). In these words the apostle Paul reminds us that a Christian life is a ‘spiritual life,’ that is, a life enlivened and led by the Spirit toward holiness or the perfection of charity.”47 As the priesthood is further explored and interpreted, one way to engage the conversation further is through the spiritual life of the priest. This is where his self-understanding and faith (the interior) engages with the world as he experiences it (the exterior).

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46 Ibid., 77.
47 PDV, no. 19.
An interesting way to understand identity is by asking the question “Who is so-and-so?” For example, my mother (how she relates to me) is a nurse (what she does). But she may also be described based on her virtues or behaviors. She is a compassionate listener who appreciates the dignity of all people and tries to live the values of her faith each day. Each of these definitions influences the other. Because she is a compassionate person, it is reasonable to say she is a compassionate mother. It is also reasonable to say that in her work as a nurse, she recognizes the dignity of her patients.

The same parallels may be drawn in the ministry and life of the priest. In the previous chapter, the ministerial priesthood was explored in terms of his being and his function. In this chapter, the interior life of the priest will be examined. In the life of the church, the arena where internal belief meets external action is called spirituality.

There are a number of fruitful definitions of spirituality. The United States Bishops offers this lengthy description:

Christian spirituality consists in the living out in experience, throughout the whole course of our lives, of the death-resurrection of Christ that we have been caught up in by baptism. It consists in living out in our day and in our lives the passage from sin and darkness to the light and warmth of God’s
gracious love. It is a process, whereby one rejects the tempting but illusory destructive forces that isolate and alienate man from his environment, his brothers, his God, and himself in favor of accepting the free gift of God's life and love that allow him to stand erect, to rise above the pettiness of egoism and the threat of the demonic and to live in freedom, in strength, in gentleness, and in love as a man of God. That is what the spiritual life means for every Christian.¹

This definition suggests that there is a connection between belief and experience. It describes how a person physically embodies the belief that the paschal mystery of Christ is present in life today. Spirituality is not simply a life of prayer or interior reflection. The spiritual life is one lived in interaction with the world. This definition also implies that spirituality is a process of choosing to live in the light of God and shunning the darkness of evil, not a one-time event or attainment of perfection.

The discipline required to make spirituality a life-long and life-giving process requires more than quiet, interior prayer. As Kenneth Untener reflects,

Spirituality is more than prayer. Spirituality is a vision of reality, a worldview, a way of looking at things. It includes my way of viewing God, but also the world, others, and myself. It includes my beliefs and my ideas, but also my behavior, not only toward God but the world, others, and myself. Spirituality is never simply in the head. It is also my behavior. Finally, it includes my openness to transcendence, a willingness to let people, the world, God, transform me.²

The spiritual life is more than a statement of one's devotional practices; it is a commitment to a particular way of interacting and engaging with creation. This explanation conveys that the practice of spirituality is a matter of engagement with God, not only in the practice of prayer but also in the whole of life. It requires

mature freedom on the part of the person to let the Spirit lead one's life. *Spirituality is never simply in the head.*

The Christian life is an ongoing conversion to a life of holiness. The fathers of the Second Vatican council write that this continual pursuit of the life of perfection is proper to all members of the Christian faithful—this is the Universal Call to Holiness.³ *Lumen Gentium* suggests that in order to pursue this life, the faithful should use the strength and grace offered to them through Christ and the Spirit.⁴ *Lumen Gentium* continues: “the forms and tasks of life are many, but there is one holiness, which is cultivated by all who are led by God’s Spirit... All, however, according to their own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith”.⁵ Just as there are many parts, but one Body, there is more than one proper path to holiness. The way in which one lives life and conducts his or her interactions with the world, in both work and leisure, contributes significantly to the fulfillment of the holy life.

*Presbyterorum Ordinis: Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* from the Second Vatican Council (written after *Lumen Gentium*) contends that the priest is especially called to the pursuit of a holy life. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* acknowledges that priests, like all Christians, are charged with living a holy life in the consecration of baptism. But priests are “especially bound to attain perfection.... Since every priest in his own way assumes the person of Christ, he is endowed with a special

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³ *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 40.
⁴ LG, no. 40.
⁵ LG, no. 41.
grace. By this grace the priest... is the better able to pursue the perfection of Christ.”

Thus, the configuration of the priest to Christ gives the priest the special grace needed to pursue the spiritual life in a more intense way.

Pope John Paul II has claimed that this does not mean that the ministerial priesthood signifies a greater degree of holiness. There is still only one call to holiness: the universal call present in baptism. Note the difference between the 1917 and 1983 Codes of Canon Law. The 1917 Code offers the following:

Clerics must live interiorly and exteriorly a holier life than lay persons and must be superior to them in giving an example of virtue and good deeds.

The 1983 Code reformulates to say:

In leading their lives clerics are especially bound to pursue holiness because they are consecrated to God by a new title in the reception of orders as dispensers of God’s mysteries in the service of His people.

It is important to note that chronologically between the 1917 and 1983 Codes comes the Second Vatican Council and its statement of the Universal Call to Holiness. By 1983, the notion of clerical superiority and triumphalism is gone, replaced with the priest’s responsibility of the stewardship of God’s mysteries.

The spiritual practices of the ministerial priesthood are distinct, yet not necessarily different, from the spiritual practices of the laity. There are certain aspects of the spiritual life that belong, to a greater or lesser degree, to the ministry and life of the priest. This different path but same call that priests have, “... is so

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7 PDV, no. 17.
8 LG, no. 40.
because it is public, because it is nurtured in the awesome privilege and responsibility of presidency in the Eucharistic community, because it focuses, enables and gives a model for whatever else goes on in the community and because it confronts the specific experiences and temptations of the ordained priesthood.”

**Components of the Spiritual Lives of Priests**

Spirituality is not a prescription; there is no magic concoction or formula that will enable any priest or layperson to immediately live the holy, spiritual life. Instead, as mentioned earlier, it is a process—a reflection, discernment, conversation, and ongoing participation in the paschal mystery. Anglican priest Eleanor McLaughlin offers, “Spirituality now might be defined more generally as the desire for or experience of God, and the disciplines, methods, predispositions, which enable and make conscious that encounter with the Transcendent.” McLaughlin’s definition is perhaps the broadest by means of scope, but her specificity of terms helps to name a few “genres” of spiritual practice, indicating that there are various components to the spiritual life.

The United States Bishops include the following characteristics and practices as components of priestly spirituality in their *Program of Priestly Formation*: Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance, Liturgy of the Hours, spiritual direction, the Bible, retreats and days of recollection, personal meditation, devotions, apostolic

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12 Ibid., 53.
dimensions (seeking Christ is one’s neighbor), asceticism and penance, obedience, celibacy, simplicity of life, reconciliation, solidarity (with the poor), solitude, and ongoing formation. From this list, it can be seen that there are both private and public disciplines (personal meditation and solidarity with the poor) to the spiritual life. There are also formal structures for spirituality—such as the practice of the sacraments—as well as more informal practices, like days of reflection.

The Code of Canon law suggests a list that has some similarities with the Program of Priestly Formation. The Code suggests that in first place comes the fulfillment of the duties of pastoral ministry. Then comes the two-fold table of Scripture and the Eucharist, followed by the Liturgy of the Hours, retreats, individual prayer, the sacrament of penance, and popular devotions. In these two lists, it is easy to see that there are multiple ways in which one may pursue to spiritual life.

For the purposes of this essay, two of the aforementioned components will be used as case studies for the possible disciplines, challenges, and fruits of the priestly spiritual life. These two individual sources of spirituality are the Eucharist and the exercise of pastoral ministry. The primary reasons for choosing these two components shall follow.

Eucharist is central to the spiritual life because the Eucharistic liturgy is the source and summit of activity in the church. It is the sacrament (and in many cases the spiritual discipline) most frequently practiced in the life of the priest. Kevin

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15 Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 10.
Irwin writes, "Liturgy, prayer, and spirituality are intrinsically connected and integrated. For the priest, liturgy is a (the?) central act of praying that he engages in each day. And as such it cannot be but intrinsically related to his deepening spirituality."16 Additionally, an exploration of this sacrament as source of spiritual dispositions may provide a model for other sacraments and their fruitfulness.

A discussion of the exercise of pastoral ministry is important for several reasons. Pastoral ministry is driven by pastoral charity, which is an animating force in the spiritual life of the priest. Ministry also has an interpersonal dimension, which especially demands relationship outside oneself and God. It is also an example of the lived spirituality described by Presbyterorum Ordinis, Untener and the US Bishops.17 For these reasons, and even more to be explored, Eucharist and the exercise of ministry as two components of priestly spirituality are the topics of the next sections.

The Eucharist

Although many theologians had done so before him, Pope John Paul II challenged the faithful to consider a Eucharistic spirituality. This is a careful consideration of the Eucharist and how it is made manifest in the way one encounters the world. He writes, “the Eucharist is a mode of being, which passes from Jesus into each Christian, through whose testimony it is meant to spread throughout society and culture. For this to happen, each member of the faithful must

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16 Kevin W. Irwin, "Presiding, Preaching, and Priestly Spirituality." Liturgical Ministry 14 (Fall 2005), 204.
17 PO, no. 18.
assimilate, through personal and communal meditation, the values which the Eucharist expresses, the attitudes it inspires, the resolutions to which it gives rise.”

When the faithful receive the Eucharist, they are essentially receiving a commission. A Eucharistic spirituality takes root in the soul and shapes the way one lives his or her life.

The Eucharist augments union with Christ. As the priest is especially united with Christ, Eucharistic spirituality is found in a particular way within the ministry and life of the priest. Priestly spirituality is “intrinsically Eucharistic.” By his daily celebration of the Eucharist, the priest is strengthened in his vocation and configuration to Christ. The Eucharist offers a source of meditation on dispositions that enable him to become a more perfect Christian and steward of God’s mysteries.

Father Larry Tensi says that from ritual moments, one may draw ritual attitudes. The celebration of the Eucharist disposes priest and faithful alike in a number of ways. First, it is in itself a thanksgiving, a reminder to the faithful to live a life of gratitude for grace and redemption. Second, the Eucharist suggests an attitude of self-offering, which is imperative to the life of ministry. Third, the Eucharist is the source and summit of all apostolic activity in the church, including ministry.

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19 CCC, no. 1391.
22 SC, no. 10.
Finally, the Eucharist is a sign of unity, a communion of communions. The liturgy unites those who celebrate it with believers throughout the world and through all time. The Eucharistic table knows no divisions, and requires a commitment to the poor. The Eucharist also demands humility and a spirit of adoration, calling all to be reverent in the (omni)presence of God found particularly in the Eucharistic species.²³

To encompass a “Eucharistic attitude,” one must live in a spirit of thanksgiving. Certainly one may offer gratitude for the abundance of grace in life, but John Paul II suggests that the faithful should especially offer thanksgiving for the sacrifice of the Redeemer by the witness of one’s life.²⁴ Interiorly, thanksgiving is prayer offered to God for graces received. As an alternate, thanksgiving is a public acknowledgement of divine goodness. An attitude of thanksgiving never looks inward, but outward. Thanking demands public acclamation of the goodness of God.

The Christian faithful offer thanksgiving to God through sacrifice. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* suggests that in the Eucharist, the “entire spiritual wealth of the church” can be found. This is “namely Christ himself our Pasch and our living bread, who gives life to people through his flesh—that flesh which is given life and gives life by the Holy Spirit. Thus people are invited and led to offer themselves, their works and all creation in union with Christ.”²⁵ In the mass, the humble gifts of bread and wine are offered as a sacrifice. Christians are called to consider how they

²³ PDV, no. 48.
²⁴ MND, no. 26.
²⁵ PO, no. 5.
might offer sacrifice in their daily interactions with the world.

For the priest, part of this interaction with the world is in his daily celebration of the Eucharist, during which he unites himself to the action of Christ and offers himself completely to God.\textsuperscript{26} Where is God found in this Eucharist? God is present in the \textit{kenosis} of the willing servant, Christ. God is found in the Incarnation of the God-Man. God exists in the \textit{anamnesis} of the Paschal Sacrifice. From God, the priest derives the strength he needs to be the servant of God and his community. He finds the model for an incarnational spirituality that recognizes Christ present in life and ministry, and he understands the suffering, death, and ultimate resurrection of Christ as a necessary component to his growth as a minister and person of faith. Eucharistic spirituality will enable the priest to more intensely know the love of God. The priest, like Christ, must come to empty himself and trust in the Lord. Then he will be possessed by the Love of God, which will be his source of strength, even in the most difficult of times.\textsuperscript{27}

The Eucharist calls priests and lay faithful alike to embody what they receive at Mass. “Live the mystery that has been placed in your hands!” is the exhortation proclaimed during the Rite of Ordination when the offering for the Eucharist is placed in the hands of the priest.\textsuperscript{28} Kevin Irwin offers an additional perspective on the Eucharistic liturgy, one that considers particularly \textit{lex orandi, lex credendi}. He is known to add \textit{lex vivendi} to this common maxim. He writes, “What the liturgy should lead us to is a way of looking at life, of experiencing God in life, of growing in

\textsuperscript{26} PO, no. 13.
\textsuperscript{27} Sacramentum Caritatis, no. 80.
\textsuperscript{28} PDV, no. 24.
personal and communal holiness, of becoming more and more fully who we are as God’s chosen people.”

How one experiences the Eucharist influences the way one looks at the obligation to bring Christ to the world.

The Eucharistic liturgy calls for full, conscious, and active participation, which is neither merely external nor internal. Pope Benedict XVI writes, “The worship of God in our lives cannot be relegated to something private and individual, but tends by its nature to permeate every aspect of our existence. Worship pleasing to God thus becomes a new way of living our whole life, each particular moment of which is lifted up, since it is lived as part of a relationship with Christ and as an offering to God.” If liturgical participation is private, then the Christian life will be understood in an isolated way as well. If the experience of worship is communal and participation is evident in external ways, then a public witness to the Christian life will follow.

The Eucharist is communal, encompassing a multitude of relationships. Every celebration of the Eucharist is a participation in the communion of communions, which encompasses union with the church throughout the world and through all eternity by virtue of the communion of saints. Pope Benedict XVI writes, “Communion always and inseparably has both a vertical and a horizontal sense: it is communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters. Both dimensions mysteriously converge in the gift of the Eucharist.” This helps lay and ordained alike to understand the imperative of relationships in ministry and public

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29 Irwin, “Presiding, Preaching and Priestly Spirituality,” 201.
30 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 71.
31 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 76.
life. The responsibilities of witness are not only to the ecclesial community, but also to the world at large. It is at the same time a multi-faceted personal encounter with God, present in the Eucharistic species and in the faces of all humanity. This encounter in the name of God that occurs between the priest and the world—the people of his ecclesial community and those outside of it—is ministry.

**Pastoral Ministry**

With the spiritual fruit he has derived from the Eucharist, a priest will be better enabled to embrace another source of spirituality: the exercise of his ministry. *Lumen Gentium* suggests that priests “should carry out their ministry with holiness and zeal, with humility and courage; thus fulfilled, this ministry will also be for them an outstanding means of sanctification.”³²

When priests exercise their ministry with sincerity, they are given a special opportunity to acquire holiness.³³ This procurement of holiness is found in a number of ways: through the exercise of the three-fold ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king; as they imitate the work of Christ the Good Shepherd; and in their relationships with their ecclesial community. The priest comes to know God through the community he serves, just as the presence of God is made known in the words and deeds of the priest.³⁴

Ministerial perfection begins with pastoral charity. John Paul II writes, “The internal principle, the force which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest

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³² LG, no. 41.
³³ PO, no. 13.
inasmuch as he is configured to Christ the head and shepherd, is pastoral charity, as a participation in Jesus Christ’s own pastoral charity, a gift freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit and likewise a task and a call which demand a free and committed response on the part of the priest.”

If pastoral charity becomes the guiding principle that orients all aspects of his ministry and life, then the priest will be all the more effective in his ministry.

_Presbyterorum Ordinis_ continues that pastoral charity is derived primarily from the Eucharist, which is to be the center of the priest’s spiritual life. The _Program of Priestly Formation_ adds, “The Eucharistic sacrifice is both spiritual sustenance, the Bread of Life, and the transformation of our lives by the power of the self-giving and redeeming love of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.” Pastoral charity, derived from the Eucharist, animates all priestly ministry and activity. There is an inherent connection between ministry and Eucharist.

The cultic office of the priest, particularly made manifest in the liturgy, shapes spirituality. The priest is transformed, with the people, into the image of the servant Christ; he is inserted into the Paschal Mystery. Therefore, he is called to derive the same spiritual fruits from his exercise in the cultic ministry that his people are called to do. As when he looks at the Eucharist for a model of spirituality, his participation in the Eucharist calls him to be a living example for all to see.

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35 PDV, no. 23.
36 PDV, nos. 14, 24.
37 PO, no. 14.
38 _Program for Priestly Formation_, no. 110.
39 Irwin, “Presiding, Preaching and Priestly Spirituality,” 204.
Liturgy is also ordinary—it sets time and pace to the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{41} In both the rhythm of the liturgical year and in the ordering of time each day through the Liturgy of the Hours, the priest comes to appreciate all times as holy. The Program for Priestly Formation states that in the liturgy of the hours, seminarians (and priests) “unite themselves with the Body of Christ in unceasing praise and petition.”\textsuperscript{42} The Liturgy of the Hours unites the priest, through his canonically obligated participation, to the public prayer of the whole church.\textsuperscript{43} It offers a chance to intercede on behalf of his people and all those throughout the world, offering prayers for grace, relief from suffering, hope, and salvation.”\textsuperscript{44}

However, as the number of parish priests dwindle and priests are called to be sacramental ministers to multiple communities, the challenges of being attentive to the public prayer of the church becomes greater. Three or four masses in a weekend and additional administrative responsibilities can make the recitation of the Hours obligatory at best and non-existent at worst; therefore making the exercise of the cultic ministry as much of a challenge as it is a grace.

Through the exercise of his prophetic ministry, the priest may find that daily study and preparation for proclamation of the word feeds his Spirit. Certainly regular meditation on Sacred Scripture, or \textit{lectio divina}, can lead to an enrichment of the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{45} But personal study is not the only way in which the priest’s prophetic ministry yields fruit. Schwartz writes “The priest is ordained to be much

\textsuperscript{41} Bleichner, \textit{View From the Altar}, 74.
\textsuperscript{42} PPF, no. 110.
\textsuperscript{43} CCL, no 276 §2.
\textsuperscript{44} PPF, no. 110.
\textsuperscript{45} PO, no. 13.
more than a student of the Scriptures—the priest is empowered to be a prophetic person sent to insert the living word of God into the daily life of the church.”46 The prophetic ministry is both contemplative and active; preparation for the ministry requires private reflection on the mysteries of God and meditation over the scripture, while the animation of the Word in the community requires deliberate word and action. Schwartz says simply, “A homily is the fruit of prayer.”47 The homily provides a moment for the priest to combine his study of scripture with his prophetic voice.

The US Bishops suggest that authentic prophecy includes living the message one proclaims.48 This physical embodiment of the Gospel can be extremely challenging, as prophetic statements or ideals typically begin as a minority view.49 The rich heritage of Catholic Social Teaching requires a nearly constant battle with the modern world, demanding both advocacy and example from the priest.50 The priest comes to know suffering because it becomes his own, as Christ takes on the suffering of the world. The priest must die to self and rise to new life in the Spirit, and this becomes prophetic ministry.51

To know the suffering of the world and be able to speak against it requires pastoral charity, or love. 1 Corinthians 13 serves as an important reminder of the need for pastoral charity in the prophetic ministry. It says,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and

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48 NCCB, Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood, 18.
49 Ibid., 35.
50 Philibert, Blanchette, and Danielson, Stewards of God’s Mysteries, 43.
51 NCCB, Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood, 21.
understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to
remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my
possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have
love, I gain nothing.\(^{52}\)

Thus, standing against the foe, unlocking the mysteries of scripture in homilies, and
proclaiming the word of God are all empty acts without genuine pastoral charity to
support them.

The priest looks after his people in both spirit and body. Thus, the
shepherding ministry of the priest is not only pastoral, but also incarnational.\(^{53}\)

*Lumen Gentium* reminds priests that this is another source of spirituality. It says,
“Far from being held back by their apostolic labors, perils, and hardships, they
should rise through them to greater holiness, nourishing and fostering their action
with an overflowing contemplation, for the encouragement of the entire church of
God”\(^{54}\)

The shepherding ministry of the priest offers a unique opportunity for him to
meet Christ. The mission conferred in ordination demands an extraordinary amount
of personal commitment on the part of the priest. In order to carry out the various
aspects of his shepherding ministry he must rely on the grace of God found in prayer
and the sacraments to provide sustenance for his soul. To be a true shepherd, he
must stand with and for Christ as he guides the community.\(^{55}\) As he does this, the
priest grows in his own holiness through compassionate listening, gentle nurturing,
and careful challenging. The more authentic these interactions, the more the priest

\(^{52}\) 1 Cor 13:1-3, NRSV.

\(^{53}\) Irwin, “Presiding, Preaching and Priestly Spirituality,” 203.

\(^{54}\) LG, no. 41.

\(^{55}\) PPF, no. 238.
and the community come to know the presence of the Good Shepherd. Pastoral ministry is where the Good Shepherd comes to know his sheep, and the Good Shepherd must be willing to give his life for his sheep. Often this statement is metaphorical, but a priest must be willing to offer himself literally, too. The daily burdens and sacrifices required for authentic empathy can be a challenge to any spirituality.

The governing, or kingly, function also implies the necessary administration of parish life. If priest and bishop are not careful, the ministry of government can quickly turn the parish office into a boardroom. Budgets, personnel issues, superintendence over parochial schools, and the seemingly unending schedule of meetings can be a physical drain for pastors. But if one approaches these tasks with a sense of pastoral charity, they might become spiritually fruitful endeavors themselves. Pastors have a responsibility to call forth the gifts and talents of their people, and are to be good stewards of these resources. They become discerners and animators of the community, coming into contact with the creative power of the Spirit. A priest should also be a good steward of himself and his own time; personal humility for one’s own limitations can reduce both internal and external anxiety.

A final consideration of the shepherding ministry of the priest is that this ministry is communal. Pastoral care is primarily about relationships. While the

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57 PO, no. 13.
58 Philibert, Blanchette, and Danielson, Stewards of God’s Mysteries, 39.
59 NCCB, Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood, 16.
60 Philibert, Blanchette, and Danielson, Stewards of God’s Mysteries, 40. See also PO, no. 15.
priest sacrifices the intimate bonds of matrimony, he can find spiritual fruit in his interactions with community. “Human relationships are by no means a mere negative influence in the spiritual life. Every genuine human relationship is itself an encounter with Christ. Whatever the interaction—joy or sorrow, work or play, ministry or fellowship—life together, for the Christian, is Christ speaking to Christ, Christ ministering to Christ, Christ rejoicing with Christ.” Christ is present in each person and community through the mystery of the resurrection and by the action of the Holy Spirit. This incarnational spirituality is not immune from human weakness, and all shortcomings of humanity are challenges for priests as well. Effectiveness in these, and all, relationships requires a desire for mutual respect, trust, and love.

A wide variety of ministerial relationships exist in the ministry of the priest. They may be relationships of counsel, as in the case of a family seeking the priest’s advice; fraternal, as amongst men in the priesthood; familial, as a priest giving direction to his parish family; spousal, as the priest’s dedication to his congregation; or professional, as in a priest working with a staff member. This list is not exhaustive, but is meant to display the breadth of relationships (and their respective potential complications) present in the life of a priest.

What happens when relationships are not working? Both the Eucharist and pastoral charity suggest that communion—both spiritual and physical—is to be held in priority. Pope Benedict writes, "Wherever communion with God, which is communion with the Father, with the Son and with the Holy Spirit, is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another is destroyed. And wherever we

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do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Triune God is not alive and true either."  

Thus, when relationship with either God or community is broken, the other dimension suffers as well. When relationships in the church are broken, the faithful turn to a particular source of grace: the Sacrament of Penance.

The Sacrament of Penance has potential as a source of spiritual fruit for a number of reasons. First, it is a sacrament and sacraments are an excellent foundation for spirituality as evidenced in the previous discussion on Eucharist. It is also a ministerial opportunity for the priest, which is also a fruitful source of spirituality. Second, Reconciliation is a unique sacrament because it has a prescribed ritual that is directly influenced by the personality and ministerial style of the priest, which will be explored in the next chapter. Third, it is the sacrament of the church that heals relationships, and collaborative, respectful relationships are desirable, as evidenced in *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*.

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62 *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 76.
CHAPTER THREE
AN EXAMINATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF Penance

As discussed in the previous chapter, the spiritual life of the priest is where his belief and his interaction with the world meet. Two sources in particular for the spirituality of the priest are the exercise of his ministry and his participation in the sacraments. In the sacrament of reconciliation, these two paths converge, leading to an abundance of opportunities for reflection on spiritual dispositions and attitudes.

This chapter is an extended form of theological reflection. Also called contextual theology, experiential theology, or praxis theology, it is a form of theologizing that has gained popularity since the Second Vatican Council. Robert Kinast says, “Theological reflection works out of specific contexts rather than working with generic truths. It draws upon lived experience as much as classic texts. It aims at practical action, not theoretical ideas.”¹ Nearly all forms of theological reflection, regardless of the specific method or context employed, have three things in common. "It begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection; it correlates this experience with the sources of the Christian tradition; and it draws out practical implications for Christian living."²

² Ibid.
In the introduction to this thesis, the lived experience of priests, lay ecclesial ministers, and their interactions have been outlined. An examination of the rituals in the sacrament of reconciliation can be a useful resource for fostering the "changes in patterns of reflection, behavior, and expectation" among clergy that can help bring about the "respectful collaboration, leading to mutual support in ministry" between priests and lay ecclesial ministers.³ The ideal experience of the priest as envisioned in the 1973 Revised Rite of Penance and an exploration of the Catholic tradition of the sacrament—particularly its Post-Vatican II iterations—combine in this chapter and the next to ultimately suggest implications for the spirituality of the priest, and his subsequent interactions with the laity in general and lay ecclesial ministers in particular.

In this chapter, the sacrament of penance will be explored in depth. After an initial discussion of the principles of liturgical and sacramental theology, two forms of the rite of reconciliation will be analyzed. During this analysis, the "ritual attitudes" suggested by the "ritual moments" will be drawn out. These will be explored in greater depth and with specificity for the relationships between priests and lay ecclesial ministers in the next chapter. This chapter and the one that follows it work in tandem. Their division is organizational rather than content-based.

Principles of Liturgy

The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church bears an “abundance of spiritual graces.”\(^4\) It is often easy to lose sight of the fact that the rite of reconciliation, while easily enough a ritual, is a public prayer of the church. When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council laid forth their norms for the revitalization of the sacred liturgy, they gave attention to the interactions that should occur between clergy and laity in liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* declares:

> Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the Church, which is the “sacrament of unity,” namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops.

> Therefore, liturgical services involve the whole body of the church; they manifest it and have effects upon it; but they also concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their different orders, offices, and actual participation.\(^5\)

It may be said that the sacraments, then, are not individual encounters with God but ecclesial celebrations of ritualized public prayer. Liturgical services, sacramental celebrations included, involve the entire church, and every member therein has a specific role in which they should participate.

The sacraments concern different members of the church in different ways. The various roles must function together in this community of reconciliation. The laity is invited to participate differently in reconciliation than the official representative of the ecclesial community, namely, the priest. Each operates in his or her own way in the realization of the sacrament. In the sacrament of

\(^4\) *Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 21.
reconciliation, the sacrament cannot be completed without the full and active participation of both the priest and the penitent.

_Sacrosanctum Concilium_ extols the public celebration of the sacraments. The priest retains the ability to say mass privately, but the council documents say:

Whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, it is to be stressed that this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private.

This applies with special force to the celebration of Mass and the administration of the sacraments, even though every Mass has of itself a public and social character.6

What is important for the sake of this argument is that liturgical rites are not intended to be private encounters with God. There is something to be gained when sacraments are celebrated not only _in the presence_ of others, but _with_ others. Liturgy and sacraments are given publicly to the church, and because they are ecclesial, they should be understood as a participation in a relationship.

In _Sacrosanctum Concilium_, it can be seen that liturgy and sacraments include relationships. These relationships are not necessarily egalitarian, but they do imply interaction. The minister, others who exercise liturgical offices or function, and the laity each have distinct roles. While all are called to participate in the liturgy and sacraments, each person is to do so according to his or her office.7 When this occurs, the richness of the rites is more readily experienced. Participation in the liturgical

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6 SC, no. 27.
7 Ibid., nos. 28-30.
life of the church (in each person’s respective role, of course) was the aim to be considered before all else in the post-conciliar reform of the rites.⁸

What is most important to take from these passages in the liturgy constitution is the critical importance of participatory relationships in the sacraments. Liturgy and the sacraments take place within a community of faith, and for their fullest expression, they require the interaction of various members of the church.

**Other Theological Sources**

As previously mentioned, this chapter is a theological reflection. R. Scott Appelby does his own contextual theology of reconciliation as experienced in the social and political world. As he does this, he outlines a few important theological foundations for a theology and praxis of reconciliation. First, he states that Catholics experience grace through the created world—this is the nature of a sacrament. The threefold Scholastic distinctions of *res sacramenti, sacramentum tantum, and res et sacramentum* help to further distinguish these created and divine elements.

These three categories have been central to sacramental theology since the age of Scholasticism. As described by Herbert Vorgrimler, the *sacramentum tantum* is the “sign perceptible to the senses” and consists of such things as matter (the describable instrument used in the sacrament such as water, bread, or oil), and form (the prescriptive words of the Church). This is what is observable. The content or effect of the sacrament, the grace imparted by the sacrament, is the *res sacramenti.*

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The middle ground, the *res et sacramentum*, (understood by those who see with eyes of faith) “is brought into the visible realm by the first, external sign and it immediately produces the second, grace.” ⁹ In other words, God communicates through the created world. Humanity is part of that creation. In the case of this sacrament, God is communicated through the ministry, actions, and words that take place in the sacrament.

Appleby also considers the Communion of Saints and communion ecclesiology to be foundational in a theology of reconciliation, particularly in its social/ecclesial dimensions. Largely drawn out in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, communion ecclesiology is a way of looking at and understanding the church that emphasizes the rich interconnectedness of relationships in the church. The Communion of Saints, or the “saints in heaven and on earth who share in God’s reconciling love and life constitute a specific society....that society itself is a vehicle of redemption.” ¹⁰ This supports rather than contradicts the church as a sacrament of salvation as suggested in *Lumen Gentium*. Appleby writes, “Communion ecclesiology and ‘communio theology’ give expression to this sacramental-relational-communal orientation.” ¹¹ This tri-partite alignment of sacraments, relationships, and communion within the church is precisely the orientation for which the priest and lay ecclesial minister should strive.

Another source for reconciliation that Appleby suggests is a trinitarian ontology. Appleby understands this in a slightly different way than Hahnenberg, but

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for this essay it is not too far to say that the interrelations of the Trinity guide all relationships within the church. As was discussed in chapter one, the imagery of the “divine dance” of the Trinity shows the inseparability of relationships in the church. God, Son, and Spirit exist in relationship to one another.

Beyond these theological bases as suggested by Appleby, there is one more locus worth considering here. This is the rite itself. Called *theologia prima* by David Fagerberg, the ritual (with its introduction, prescribed words, and actions) is the primary source for the Church’s understanding of each sacrament. Fagerberg wishes to recover the meaning of “liturgical theology.” He writes,

> Although the phrase ‘liturgical theology’ contains two words, only one thing is being named. The two words together reference an organically singular phenomenon, and both words are necessary for a full understanding. The task is not to glue together two heterogeneous realities, resulting in either a theological appraisal of liturgy or a doxological appraisal of theology; the task is to name the ritualized response of the Body of Christ to the activity of the Trinity. This response is, in its ritual form, theological.”

Fagerberg’s definition recognizes that the liturgical community does genuine theology, and that the church’s law of prayer establishes its law of belief (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Like the marriage of being and doing, liturgical theology seeks to integrate the action and theology of liturgy. Fagerberg understands them as indivisible.

As theological reflection on the rites of reconciliation and the experiences of priests and lay ecclesial ministers commences, the following foundations should be kept in mind as normative and formative for a theology and praxis of reconciliation:

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13 Ibid., ix.
the sacraments of the church are an interaction between the created world and divine grace; communion ecclesiology and communio theology help to bear in mind the relationships in and through which the church operates; the Trinity is an ontological foundation of relationships in the church; and the liturgical rites are themselves a primary source for liturgical theology, which is itself a genuine and organic form of theology.

*General Notes on the Rite of Reconciliation*

Scott P. Detisch suggests that the Sacrament of Penance is stuck in its first naiveté, to use the language of Paul Ricoeur. Detisch writes, “that naiveté reduces ‘reconciliation’ to ‘confession’ and expects the embodiment of God’s forgiveness to be exclusively in a private ritual encounter with a confessor, who hopefully exhibits the pastoral features of Christ.”¹⁴ Detisch suggests that the sacrament must move beyond the private experience into a more robust, public manifestation that he understands to be more like the experiences of the reconciling Christ in the early church.¹⁵ For Detisch, this is done through an experience of community.

As mentioned before, this thesis does not seek to extol communal penance services over individual confession. However, moving from the first naiveté (a private ritual encounter) through a critical examination of the sacrament that details all of the potential for spiritual benefit, can lead to a renewed understanding of the sacrament that appreciates more fully the myriad ways in which relationships

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¹⁵ Ibid., 196.
can be healed and spirits restored in the sacrament of penance. Detisch says, “The second naivété recognizes that ritual, as symbol, unfolds deeper and deeper layers of meaning and experience as one’s culturally-conditioned subjectivity opens it up more and more.” While the treatment of this thesis is different than the original critical reflection that Detisch suggests, a re-awakening of the sacrament of reconciliation allows the believer to experience more than what is understood or experienced on the surface. This requires the believer to reflect on the sacrament.

In the sacrament of penance, the faithful are afforded their opportunity to recreate themselves in that trust through reconciliation with God, the Church, and others. John Paul II writes, “It must be emphasized that nothing is more personal and intimate than this sacrament, in which the sinner stands alone before God with his sin, repentance and trust.” Like Adam before Eve in the Garden, when he realizes that his naked body causes him shame, this sacrament forces self-consciousness upon the penitent. In the reconciling action of Christ’s death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit, the World and God have been reunited in trust.

16 Detisch suggests that the Sacrament of Reconciliation must pass through critical examination, “demythologization” and a hermeneutic of suspicion into a new awakening. Detisch writes, “As is evident for [Paul] Ricoeur, modern hermeneutics is not a foe of sacramental experience; instead, it is a necessary stage in recapturing the presence of the sacred in the ritual embodiment of one’s present cultural context.” What occurs in this interaction of experience, criticism, and re-awakening is not unlike the movement from an infantile to an adult understanding of Santa Claus. If Santa is understood in the first naivete of childhood to be an actual, jolly, white-bearded man who travels the world in a single night leaving presents under each and every child’s Christmas tree, then after the demythologization of middle childhood (when one realizes “there is no Santa”), the second naivete allows the adult to embrace the underlying meaning of “Santa” to awaken in children a sense of trust and wonder at the fundamental goodness and bounty of life.

Following the Second Vatican Council, the sacrament of penance has been revised to include three forms. Form A is the “Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents.” Form B is the “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.” Form C is the “Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution.” Form A and Form B are most commonly used, and so this essay will work with these two forms.

The *Program of Priestly Formation* states, “The Sacrament of Penance fosters the mature recognition of sin, continuous conversion of heart, growth in the virtues, and conformity to the mind of Christ. It is a school of compassion that teaches penitents how to live out God’s compassionate mercy in the world.”²⁰ The priest, in the exercise of this ministry, is given the opportunity to shape the faithful in a virtuous life. Penitents who take this sacrament seriously and faithfully will come to know the mercy of God and will desire to practice that compassion in their daily lives.

As he prepares the Rites, the priest is given a certain amount of flexibility in preparing the celebration. He is encouraged to adapt the rite to the circumstances of the penitents. To do this, he may omit or expand certain parts of the rite, choose readings and prayers from a number of different options, and may even elect to celebrate the sacrament in a location other than a church, oratory, or confessional in

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accordance with the regulations of the bishops, so as to promote an “enriching and effective” celebration (RP 40a).\textsuperscript{21}

Additionally, it is stated that others may assist the priest in certain circumstances. In the execution of the Rite, particularly in Forms B and C, the liturgical functions of reader, cantor, musician, and other regular liturgical offices are to be observed. In planning, “priests may be assisted by others, including the laity” to adapt the celebration best to the community which it serves (RP 40b). In these adaptable rites, one finds the beginnings of an interactive and collaborative sacrament.

Having established these practical considerations, as well as the theological foundations outlined earlier, a detailed examination of the sacrament may commence.

\textit{Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents}

The Rite of Reconciliation begins, as all liturgies should, with personal preparation and prayer. The \textit{Introduction} to the sacrament of reconciliation states:

Priest and penitents should prepare themselves above all by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity; the penitents should compare their own life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of sins (RP 15).

This call to prayer is not new, and it serves as a reminder for priest and penitent alike that this sacrament is to be approached with careful discernment.\textsuperscript{22}

\footnotesize{Richard}

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Rite of Penance} 40a. All references to the \textit{Rite of Penance} have been taken from \textit{Rites of the Catholic Church, Volume One}, (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1990). Because of the large number of citations for the \textit{Rite of Penance}, they will be done parenthetically (RP _) with the number referencing an article, not a page. This is consistent with the publishing guide for Liturgical Press.
Gula comments, “entering the sacramental celebration as a praying and prayerful person is a prerequisite not only for a genuine discernment, but also for making the sacramental moment a true experience of worship and a genuine expression of liturgical prayer.” When the priest and the penitent are both properly disposed for the celebration of the sacrament, grace may operate more freely.

During his period of prayer, the priest prays specifically for enlightenment and charity. Ralph Keifer writes, “… enlightenment and charity, which the priest should seek from the Holy Spirit, develop over long periods of preparation, direct and indirect.” Pastoral charity is a disposition that is honed over many years of attentive spiritual formation. In essence, the priest prays that his consecration to the life of Christ in his ordination may take deeper root. He offers himself as an instrument of God’s grace.

I. Reception of the Penitent

After the priest and penitent have prepared themselves by their personal prayer, the sacramental celebration begins. According to the United States Bishops’ commentary, “Perhaps the most striking aspect of the new rite for the reconciliation is the atmosphere and context within which it is to be celebrated. For the tone of the celebration is to be one of warmth, healing, communication, and dialogue between confessor and penitent.” The rite calls for the following:

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41. When the penitent comes to confess his sins, the priest welcomes him warmly and greets him in kindness.

42. Then the penitent makes the sign of the cross which the priest may make, also.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The priest invites the penitent to have trust in God, in these or similar words:

May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy.

The penitent answers: Amen.

Immediately, it can be seen that this is not meant to be an impersonal exchange. The former customary beginning phrase by the penitent, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned” all to easily became formulaic, and is no longer a prescribed part of the ritual. Instead, the priest is called to reach out in pastoral charity to the one who has come forth to confess sins.

The United States’ Bishops comment that “the consideration, interest, and respect which the confessor shows right from the beginning will set the tone for the whole celebration, enabling the penitent to better experience the mercy of God in the kindness of the priest.”26 At this point in the sacrament, the priest is the welcoming host who, like the maître d welcoming the patron and showing the way to the table, leads the penitent into reconciliation with God and the community.27 The priest is given the position of initiative to embrace the sinner like the father who welcomed the prodigal son.

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26 Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, The Rite of Penance, 28.
27 Gula, To Walk Together Again, 230
Although there is flexibility in these opening moments of the rite, this pastoral approach is not opposed to ritual. Making the penitent feel welcome is part of the ritual.28 Many experiences of the sacrament have been cold and impersonal. The US Bishops comment, “This rite is concerned with such human signs as greeting, welcoming, kindness, and generally putting penitents at their ease, so that fruitful dialogue may take place in a spirit of Christian charity.”29 The priest is charged with creating an environment that is conducive to dialogue. Gula suggests that friendly conversation, appropriate social gestures—such as eye contact, handshakes, etc.—and interpersonal interaction, if done well, can promote a personal, relaxed and prayerful mood that fosters an experience of the saving power of Christ in and through the church.30

The official beginning gesture of the rite is the Sign of the Cross, which is “the most explicit way of beginning a liturgical celebration.”31 This offers a sense of continuity with the rest of the traditional rites of the church, as well as a reminder of the Church's participation in the cross of Christ, that is, the Paschal mystery. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is the integral event for the forgiveness of sins in salvation history. By making the sign of the cross, the shape of the cross is traced over the body; as Jeremy Driscoll writes, “the body that was crucified on the cross touches my body and shapes it for what is about to happen.”32

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29 Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, The Rite of Penance, 16.
30 Gula, To Walk Together Again, 250-251.
31 Ibid., 250.
The Catholic Christian is first initiated into the salvific victory of Christ in baptism. This is “where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God” (RP 2). As they are baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” all who belong to the priesthood of the faithful come to participate in the creedal statement, “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Jeremy Driscoll writes of the cross and baptism, “as in the gesture itself, we have again the cross and the Trinitarian name of God. The rest of the Christian life is a living out of the consequences of the baptismal plunge”.33 We approach the sacrament of reconciliation by first entering through baptism.

After the sign of the cross, the priest invites the penitent to trust in the mercy of God. Gula writes, “we cannot engage in reconciliation, or experience it, if we do not believe in God’s love for us as a constant, undefeatable love—that is to say, unless we believe in ‘amazing grace.’ To accept God’s unconditional love for us is fundamental to the process of reconciliation in life and in sacrament.” 34 Reconciliation begins and ends with the merciful love of God. This state of grace, of being-in-love with God, is where the perfectly contrite heart desires to return, and is the state towards which all reconciling action is concentrated.

II. The Reading of the Word of God

After the reception of the penitent, the priest and penitent may choose to spend some time with Sacred Scripture (RP 43). In the stories of Scripture, the call

33 Driscoll, What Happens at Mass, 22.
34 Gula, To Walk Together Again, 17.
to conversion and the mercy of God is abundantly evident. Reflecting on one’s sins in light of salvation history serves to connect the individual sinner to the historical events of God’s mercy. The Introduction indicates:

Next, the occasion may be taken for the priest, or even the penitent, to read a text of Holy Scripture, or this may be done as part of the preparation for the actual celebration of the sacrament. For through the word of God Christians receive light to recognize their sins and are called to conversion and to confidence in God’s mercy (RP 17).

While the priest certainly has the discretion to omit this part of the rite, it should not be done without great pastoral consideration (see RP 40a).35

The US Bishops suggest, “The scriptures are not simply ‘used’ to give the sacrament a more ‘biblical look.’ Rather, reconciliation is seen as a call and challenge directly flowing from the Gospel.”36 The Introduction of the rite begins with many scriptural references, which highlights the integration of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the history of salvation (RP 1). Thus, Christ, the apostles, and the ancestors of faith serve as models for continuing repentance and forgiveness of sins. The Bishops’ commentary continues that the foundations of forgiveness, penance, and reconciliation found in the Gospel cannot be separated from—and indeed should be present in—the continuing ministry and mission of the Church and of the Church’s minister of this sacrament, the bishop and the priest.37

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36 Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *The Rite of Penance*, 16.
37 Ibid., 18.
III. Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction

For the confession of sins, no specific formula is required. Where it is custom (and the Bishops' commentary offers no more than the rite in terms of direction), the penitent may use a general formula such as the Confiteor. Then the rite continues:

If necessary, the priest helps the penitent to make an integral confession and gives him suitable counsel. He urges him to be sorry for his faults, reminding him that through the sacrament of penance the Christian dies and rises with Christ and is thus renewed in the paschal mystery. The priest proposes an act of penance which the penitent accepts to make satisfaction for sin and to amend his life.

The priest should make sure that he adapts his counsel to the penitent's circumstances (RP 44).

Two topics are striking in this excerpt. One is the suggestion that each priest/penitent experience should be different. The second is that the priest, as the Good Shepherd, is to help the penitent along the path of contrition and conversion.

The *Introduction* offers a comment on this process. It reads:

If necessary, the confessor assists the penitent to make a complete confession; he also encourages the penitent to repent sincerely for offenses against God; finally he offers practical advice for beginning a new life, and where necessary, gives instruction on the duties of the Christian life (RP 18).

Look at the verbs used in this statement: assists, encourages, offers, gives. These are not harsh action words, and they do not command either the penitent or the priest. Instead, these actions are the actions of a pastoral minister. The Good Shepherd guides his sheep towards the right path.

At this moment in the rite, the priest, for his part, functions as an intermediary. John Celichowski offers an interesting perspective on the priest's participation in the sacrament. He argues that the theories of Alternative Dispute
Resolution (ADR) can suggest a role that remains consistent with Vatican II theology: the priest as a mediator. “In the sacrament of penance, he acts as an evaluative mediator between penitent and God, the church and the wider community.” The priest attempts to enable reconciliation between the penitent and his or her life, the moral discourse of the church, and the traditions and examples found in scripture. Celichowski suggests, “the priest is also challenged to adjust his own disposition toward greater mutuality and collaboration.” He describes this attitude as “participatory.”

The traditional model of priest-penitent relationship is based, like most professional services (doctor-patient, lawyer-client), on the subordinate person’s reliance on the dominant knowledge or skill of the expert. A participatory attitude is sensitive to dominance and attempts to nurture a more even exchange. The priest, in addition to being the “professional” in this and most circumstances in the life of the church, is also an equal by virtue of his baptism. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states,

> Even though the priests of the new law by reason of the sacrament of order fulfill the preeminent and essential function of father and teacher among the people of God and on their behalf, still they are disciples of the Lord along with all the faithful and have been made partakers of his kingdom by God, who has called them by his grace. Priests, in common with all who have been reborn in the font of Baptism, are brothers among brothers and sisters as members of the same body of Christ which all are commanded to build.

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40 Ibid., 257. David Coffey supports this analogy, but qualifies it. He writes, “The respect that a penitent has for their confessor is in one way like that of a client for their lawyer or doctor, that is beyond regard for their personal qualities, it is respect for, and deference to, their professional competence and prudence. But it goes beyond this also. It is first and foremost a recognition that the confessor has been entrusted with a divine ministry. It is not as though he is confused with God, but rather that he is respected as the representative of Christ and the Church. This is a respect stemming from faith and transcending all purely human honor.” See David Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 97.

41 PO, no. 9.
Just as he is to recognize the dignity of the laity by virtue of their baptism, the priest is to remember that whatever he challenges the laity to do in the sacrament of reconciliation, he must also be willing to do as a member of the same Body of Christ. The same may be said of his demands of lay ecclesial ministers, as all are working together to build up the Body of Christ.

This is not to say that there can be no confrontation between the priest and penitent. Gula looks to Henri Nouwen for a description of confrontation as the other side of hospitality. For its importance in relationships between priest and penitent, later transferred to priest and lay ecclesial minister, its full citation is merited:

Real receptivity asks for confrontation because space can only be a welcoming space when there are clear boundaries, and boundaries are limits between which we define our own position. Flexible limits, but limits nonetheless. Confrontation results from the articulate presence, the presence within boundaries, of the host to the guest by which he offers himself as a point of orientation and a frame of reference. We are not hospitable when we leave our house to strangers and let them use it in any way they want. An empty house is not a hospitable house. In fact, it quickly becomes a ghost house, making the stranger feel uncomfortable. Instead of losing fears, the guest becomes anxious, suspicious of any noise coming from the attic and cellar. When we want to be really hospitable we not only have to receive strangers but also confront them by an unambiguous presence, not hiding ourselves behind neutrality but showing our ideas, opinions, and life style clearly and distinctly. No real dialogue is possible between somebody and a nobody. We can enter into communication with the other only when our own life choices, attitudes and viewpoints offer the boundaries that challenge strangers to become aware of their own position and to explore it critically.42

What this implies is that the priest and penitent do not approach this sacrament ambiguously. Priest and penitent participate in the same encounter, but each has a role and should maintain that role. The priest is a representative of Christ and his Church, and the priest is supposed to engage and judge the penitent through the

moral principles set forth in scripture and tradition in the Church. The penitent is to likewise examine his or her life in light of those principles and acknowledge where there is room for re-orientation towards the “right path.”

The paragraph also suggests that hospitable confrontation is gentle confrontation. In dialogue with the penitent, the priest should not condemn or wrongfully accuse. Instead, the priest is a witness to Christ and conversion through love, which happens when he listens to his heart—formed in the likeness of Christ through spiritual practice—and the heart of the penitent.43 Gula states, “Words that come from the heart attuned to God can be words of confrontation without being words of harshness. If they are words born out of love, they can reveal to the penitent the Lord’s call which he or she may not be recognizing, or which he or she has been resisting for so long because of the change which listening to the Lord might entail.”44 This has many implications for ministry and life, which will be explored at greater length in the next chapter.

**IV. Prayer of the Penitent and Absolution**

For this part of the ritual, the priest acts as a “wise judge” (RP 10a). Since the normal rule within the community is that one should refrain from judgment, this can be challenging for the modern mind. David Coffey writes, “a tremendous responsibility is thus placed on the bearer of judgment to exercise it wisely and well in the name of God.”45

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44 Ibid., 243-244.
45 Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, 95.
Delegated with the power of binding and loosing, the priest, "should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who accomplished the saving work of human redemption by mercy and by his power present in the sacraments" (RP 10c). As such, he makes a spiritual judgment of whether to forgive or retain sins on behalf of Christ and the Church (RP 6b). John Paul II writes, “according to the most ancient traditional idea, the Sacrament is a kind of judicial action; but this takes place before a tribunal of mercy rather than of strict and rigorous justice, which is comparable only by analogy”. Coffey adds, “this places the issue of judgment in its proper perspective: it is a decision of charity, one either of merciful forgiveness from God, or of its deferral until such time as God’s grace has brought the penitent to the repentance without which there is no forgiveness of sins.” It is not a decision of guilt, but one of mercy. Rather than determining whether or not the penitent is guilty of sin, the priest judges whether or not the penitent has properly prepared him or herself for right reception of that mercy.

Gula argues that the priest, who grants pardon and peace, is more than just an individual in this sacrament. He is both the instrument of God and the representative of the community. Thus the sinner, who has simultaneously harmed their relationship with God and the Church, seeks the priest who acts in

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46 John Paul II writes, “To the hands and lips of the Apostles, his messengers, the Father has mercifully entrusted a ministry of reconciliation, which they carry out in a singular way, by virtue of the power to act ‘in persona Christi’. But the message of reconciliation has also been entrusted to the whole community of believers, to the whole fabric of the Church, that is to say, the task of doing everything possible to witness to reconciliation and to bring it about in the world.” Reconciliatio et Paenitentia no. 8. See also RP, no. 10.c; CCC, nos. 1444-1445
47 Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, no. 31. II.
48 Coffey, The Sacrament of Reconciliation, 98.
49 Gula, To Walk Together Again, 230.
persona Christi and in persona Ecclesiae.\textsuperscript{50} In the sign of confession, the penitent encounters the person of the minister as a mediator of the Church and of God.\textsuperscript{51} The priest should be reminded of his trinitarian ontology—here he is in the person of Christ and the representative of the church and because of this, he is able to absolve sins.

The priest does not make judgments of his own accord. He represents Christ and his Church. John Paul II writes,

\begin{quote}
Just as at the altar where he celebrates the Eucharist and just as in each one of the Sacraments, so the priest, as the minister of Penance, acts ’in persona Christi.’ The Christ whom he makes present and who accomplishes the mystery of the forgiveness of sins is the Christ who appears as the brother of man, the merciful High Priest, faithful and compassionate, the Shepherd intent of finding the lost sheep, the Physician who heals and comforts, the one Master who teaches the truth and reveals the ways of God, the Judge of the living and the dead, who judges according to the truth and not according to appearances.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

By virtue of his ordination, the priest is able to make present the merciful and compassionate Good Shepherd. However, in order to embody the virtues of pastoral charity, he must take some initiative in his human formation. Knowledge of human behavior and interaction, listening skills, patience, and respect are all needed and these skills should be honed during his priestly formation.\textsuperscript{53} Then the priest will be better able to lead the sheep that have strayed back to the fold (RP 4d).\textsuperscript{54}

The priest grants absolution to those who manifest their change of heart (RP 6d). After the prayer of the penitent, the priest extends his hands over the penitent's

\textsuperscript{50} See RP 5.
\textsuperscript{51} Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, no. 31. III. See also Celichowski, “Mediation and Metanoia,” 256.
\textsuperscript{52} Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, no. 29.
\textsuperscript{53} CCC no. 1466.
\textsuperscript{54} See Luke 15:3-7
head and prays the prayer of absolution, which is the sacramental sign of God’s pardon to sinners (RP 6d). The prayer is:

God, the Father of Mercies, 
through the death and resurrection of his Son 
has reconciled the world to himself 
and sent the Holy Spirit among us 
for the forgiveness of sins; 
through the ministry of the Church 
may God give you pardon and peace, 
and I absolve you from your sins 
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, 
and of the Holy Spirit (RP 46).

The prayer invokes the God of Mercy, and includes Father, Son, and Spirit in the context of salvation history. The Bishops’ commentary says, “reconciliation comes to us on the initiative of the Father. The Father’s love and mercy is concretized in the saving death and resurrection of the Son who sent the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins.” The prayer emphasizes the paschal mystery and the role of Holy Spirit (RP 19). It also emphasizes the ecclesial aspects of forgiveness of sins. “Through the ministry of the Church” God is asked to give pardon and peace. It is through the church that reconciliation with God is sought and granted (RP 19). Thus, as articulated in the first chapter, the priest and the community must not stand against one another, but instead should be understood as an interrelated whole.

V. Proclamation of Praise of God and Dismissal

After the prayer of absolution, the priest and penitent offer a short proclamation of praise for the mercy of God, and then the priest dismisses the

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55 Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, The Rite of Penance, 31.
penitent in peace. There are five options for the dismissal. The second option in Form A highlights the fullness of the rite just celebrated. It says:

May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life. Go in peace.

This prayer summarizes so many themes found in the rite. It is through Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection that Christians are reconciled to the Father and freed from sin (RP 1). The intercession of Mary and all the saints highlights the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament—people help each other in doing penance and become living examples of justice and peace in the world (RP 5). Good works and suffering help to perfect the continual process of repentance, and in doing so become signs and means of conversion to God (RP 4). The suggestions of healing and growing in holiness highlight that conversion is a process that extends beyond the moment of absolution (RP 6). The “spiritual resurrection” that comes from the Sacrament of Reconciliation restores grace and prepares the human for the future heavenly liturgy.56

The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution

Form B, which celebrates the mercy of God communally while confession and absolution are done individually, was developed “for the sake of bringing out the

56 CCC, no. 1468.
ecclesial dimension of the individual form in more evident fashion.” The whole Church is involved in the work of reconciliation. The church calls sinners to repentance through preaching the Word, and she intercedes for them and guides them as they acknowledge their sins and return to communion with the church (RP 8). The church gathers together for this rite so that as one, all might confess their sins and pray for the healing of one another (RP 54).

This version of the Rite takes place in four stages, which are nearly identical to the celebration of the Eucharist: introductory rites, Liturgy of the Word, the sacrament, and conclusion. This connection is not accidental, as “daily conversion and penance find their source and nourishment in the Eucharist, for in it is made present the sacrifice of Christ which has reconciled us with God.” The Introduction affirms, “in the Eucharist Christ is present and is offered as ‘the sacrifice which has made our peace’ with God in order that ‘we may be brought together in unity’ by his Holy Spirit” (RP 2). The two quotations within the Introduction come from Eucharistic Prayer III and Eucharistic Prayer II, respectively.

I. Introductory Rites

The first parts are the Introductory Rites, which include a song, greeting, and an opening prayer. The priest greets the people with words that encourage reflection on grace, mercy, and peace that comes through Christ (RP 49). He may then offer words of explanation that familiarize the people with what is about to
occurs.\textsuperscript{59} This portion ends with the \textit{collect}, which is essentially a prayer of petition for pardon and peace.\textsuperscript{60} One possible text for the collect is as follows:

\begin{quote}
Lord,
\textit{send your Spirit among us}
to cleanse us in the waters of repentance.
May he make of us a living sacrifice
so that in every place,
by his life-giving power,
we may praise your glory
and proclaim your loving compassion.
We ask this through Christ our Lord (RP 50).
\end{quote}

As mentioned earlier, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the rite of reconciliation is a liturgy. The liturgical nature of the sacrament becomes more obvious in this second form.

Catholic liturgy has a twofold purpose: glorification and sanctification. \textit{Sacro-sanctum Concilium} states, “the liturgy is the source for achieving in the most effective way possible human sanctification and God’s glorification.”\textsuperscript{61} In essence, the Church praises the glory of God, and asks God to divinize all that is human. This Collect emphasizes this dual purpose. Sanctification and glorification are achieved, in part, by means of \textit{epiclesis} and \textit{anamnesis}. \textit{Epiclesis} is the invocation of the Holy Spirit so that human symbols might be transformed and the faithful may themselves become “a living offering to God.”\textsuperscript{62} This prayer wonderfully recounts this in two ways: it first calls down the Holy Spirit to stir true repentance within the gathered assembly, and then it asks the Spirit to make their lives a living sacrifice.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{59} Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, \textit{The Rite of Penance}, 33.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. See also RP 50.
\textsuperscript{61} SC, no. 10
\textsuperscript{62} CCC, no. 1104
\textsuperscript{63} See Rom 12:1.
\end{footnotesize}
While no other scripture passage has been explicitly discussed thus far, the “living sacrifice” which is mentioned in the Collect and comes from Romans 12:1 and following is worth a momentary digression. Liturgical prayers contain scriptural references for explicit reasons. The passage from Romans reads, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” This is remarkable because it joins sanctification and glorification. In offering oneself in body and life to God, all activity becomes an opportunity for worship of God: glorification.

When one’s life and all its activity becomes worship, and the life of the priest is a life of ministry and service, then his ministry and service becomes an act of glorification. How he conducts himself in life and ministry should be considered a constant reflection of his offering of praise to God. The Collect supports this: “in every place, by his life giving power, we may praise your glory and proclaim your loving compassion” (RP 50). Note that like all prayers in the Collect form, this prayer is in first person plural—the priest does not pray this for the assembly, but with them.

The power that is proclaimed in the Collect is not a power of domination. “It is a power (in the way beauty has power, and love has power) to draw and attract one towards itself—that is, toward God who is love and is loving—which (or

64 It should be noted that Rom 12:1-2, 9-19 is a suggested reading for the Liturgy of the Word in this ritual. As the reading itself belongs to the Liturgy of the Word, the rest of the passage will be discussed there.
65 Rom 12:1 NAB. Here, the NAB is used because it is consistent with the current Lectionary publication.
66 For additional theologia prima, the revised dismissals of the Roman Missal, third edition, make this very same suggestion. One of the options for dismissal reads, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life.”
Whom), when seen, really seen, is powerfully compelling and attractive.\textsuperscript{67} To embrace that power of love in ministry and life, to proclaim the loving compassion of God, is transformative. It demands \textit{metanoia}: the “profound change of the whole person by which we begin to consider, judge, and arrange our life according to the holiness and love of God” (RP 6a). This is the conversion demanded by the rite of reconciliation.

When a priest “arranges” his life and ministry in such a way that both proclaim the goodness of God, a rude, inconsiderate, unforgiving, and merciless priest seems like an absurdity. The rite of reconciliation very nearly demands that the priest conduct himself in a way that is consistently full of goodness, mercy, and love. As the Good Shepherd, who gathers the lost sheep again and again with a tender heart, the priest must arrange his own life and ministry according to the love of God.

\textbf{II. Celebration of the Word of God}

The second part of the rite centers on the reading of Scripture, “because through his word God calls his people to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart” (RP 24). Many options are given for both number and themes of the readings. The \textit{Introduction} suggests:

Readings should be chosen that will:

a) let God’s voice be heard, calling his people back to conversion and ever closer conformity with Christ;

\footnote{67 Commentary from William H. Johnston, May 2012.}
b) call to mind the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit;

c) bring to bear on people’s lives God’s judgment of good and evil as a light for the examination of conscience (RP 24).

The readings invite the listener into deeper reflection on the paschal mystery. Hearing God calling his people to conversion through the events of salvation history, his judgment becomes a lens through which the faithful may examine their own life. The “essential kerygma of forgiveness, penance, and reconciliation of the Gospel” found particularly in the sermons of Peter and Paul, calls the church to conversion and peace with God.⁶⁸ Thus, scripture inspires conversion, which is attained through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

One possible reading among many is the aforementioned reading from Romans 12. Having already examined verse 1 in the context of the Collect, verse 2 continues, “Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and pleasing and perfect.”⁶⁹ Aside from the challenge of the penitent to avoid the temptations of the world, it is not too far of a stretch to link this with the *Introduction* that describes the priest’s pastoral exercise of the ministry of reconciliation with the following: “the discernment of spirits is indeed a deep knowledge of God’s working in the human heart, a gift of the Spirit, and an effect of charity” (RP 10a). The priest must let the will of God, pastoral charity, and the movements of the Spirit, not his own will or the influences of the world, guide his ministry.

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⁶⁸ Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *The Rite of Penance*,18.
⁶⁹ Rom 12:2, NAB.
There is so much on which one could elaborate in scripture, which is the purpose of the homily. As he prepares for his homily through study and prayer, the homily also provides the priest with an opportunity to meditate on his own shortcomings in life and ministry. The homily should use the readings to lead the penitents into reflection of their conscience and actions (RP 52). “It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one’s neighbors, and against the person of the sinner” (RP 25).

There are many themes present within the readings, but the Introduction highlights several in a particular way. Among these is the need for interior repentance, without which one is not properly disposed for the forgiveness of sins. Additionally, the priest is called to remind those present of the social dimensions of sin because the sins of one can be felt throughout the entire community. Finally, the priest is also advised to call attention to the duty of penance, which “requires especially, in addition to works of repentance, the exercise of charity toward God and neighbor” (RP 25b-d).

**III. Rite of Reconciliation**

The third part of Form B is the rite of reconciliation. This begins with all kneeling or bowing, often at the explicit urging of the minister, and making a general act of contrition (RP 27). This may be followed by a song or litany that emphasizes contrition, confession of sins, forgiveness, and/or trust in the mercy of God.
After the Lord’s Prayer is sung or said and individual confessions are made, the final component of the rite of reconciliation in Form B is the concluding prayer of thanksgiving. There are seven options for the concluding prayer. One such is:

All-holy Father,
you have shown us your mercy
and made us a new creation
in the likeness of your Son.
Make us living signs of your love
for the whole world to see.
We ask this through Christ our Lord (RP 57).

The first part of this prayer is an allusion to Baptism. In the Rite of Baptism, when the newly baptized are clothed in a white garment, the celebrant says “you have become a new creation and have clothed yourselves in Christ”.70 The second part is congruent with the living sacrifice suggested in the Collect and elsewhere. That these themes are reiterated only magnifies their importance in the Church’s understanding of reconciliation.

IV. Concluding Rite

Before all take their leave, the priest gives a tripartite blessing. While three other prayers are given as options, the prayer embedded within the rite is particularly appropriate for reflection on ministry. It reads:

May the Lord guide your hearts in the way of his love
and fill you with Christ-like patience.
R. Amen

May he give you strength
to walk in newness of life
and to please him in all things.
R. Amen.

70 RCIA 229. See also RBC 63
**May almighty God bless you,**
**the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**
R. Amen (RP 58).

While the priest prays this blessing over the people, here he moves from an active role to a passive or receptive one. What the priest may find himself doing is marveling at God's work in the lives of these people, and at their faith and conversion in response to the grace of God. This is one way that the priest's own faith or spirituality can be strengthened through his ministry. He is privileged to be made part of this "return" journey of conversion as it is walked by these people – seeing the wonder of grace and faith actually happening can give every minister a sign of hope and a renewal of "pastoral charity."\(^{71}\)

In both the celebration of the sacrament, and the privilege of exercising this ministry within the church, the priest is afforded a number of opportunities to develop his spiritual dispositions, practices, and life. In all aspects of the rite—from the rubrics to the formulas, from the *Introduction* to the last word of prayer—the sacrament of reconciliation is ripe with ritual attitudes that will enable priests to live their lives in an ever-holier way. The interaction of the individual personality of the priest, the grace of the sacrament, and the character of the priest by virtue of his ordination all combine to create an experience that is formative for both the priest and those to whom he ministers.

How, might this spirituality shape the relationships of priests and lay ecclesial ministers? It is this question that shall be explored in the next chapter.

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\(^{71}\) See McGovern, citing John Paul II, in *Priestly Identity*, 77-78.
CHAPTER FOUR
A SPIRITUALITY OF RECONCILIATION FOR PRIESTS

In this chapter, the ritual attitudes found in the rite of reconciliation will be applied explicitly to the situation of priests and lay ecclesial ministers. By referencing the two Forms of the sacrament of reconciliation examined in the last chapter, this chapter seeks to provide concrete examples for new attitudes and “patterns of reflection” as suggested by Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium.

Ritual Attitudes from Ritual Moments

Throughout the Rite of Penance, there are ritual attitudes suggested by the ritual moments. By drawing from the texts, prayers, and rubrics of the rites of reconciliation, one may draw conclusions for how to live a life rooted in a spirituality of reconciliation. This will prove especially fruitful for the strained relationships that can exist between priests and lay ecclesial ministers. This essay shall focus on seven principle attitudes that can be drawn from the sacrament: prayerful preparation, hospitality, the use of scripture, dialogue, leading by example, acknowledging the social dimensions of sin, and forgiveness.
I. Prayerful Preparation

The priest is called to begin his preparation for the rite with prayer (RP 15). A life of ministry cannot be accomplished alone. The minister does ministry with the help and guidance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not of his own accord. An infusion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord) helps to strengthen the pursuit of the spiritual life.¹ Each of these helps the priest to be a better minister, wise judge, and shepherd of God's people.

As he interacts with lay ecclesial ministers, this same process of deliberate prayer is fruitful. In approaching difficult circumstances, especially challenging conversations and emotionally charged situations, the priest should be attentive to his prayer life and prepare himself by inviting the Holy Spirit to be active in him and his ministry. Moments of prayer force one to stop and take a step back, opening one's heart and mind to God.

II. Hospitality

In a word, the introductory rites demand hospitality. The hospitable host says “Make yourself at home.” When Form A states that the priest “welcomes” the penitent “warmly and greets him with kindness,” it is not a suggestion, but a liturgical rubric (RP 41). It is the responsibility of the priest to make the environment one of comfort and welcome.

¹ See Isaiah 11:2-3.
Richard Gula has proposed a spirituality of reconciliation, and one of the components of this is hospitality. He writes, “Acts of hospitality heal, restore a sense of worth, bring reconciliation, communion, peace. The reconciling power of hospitality lies in its ‘powerlessness.’” Hospitality acknowledges the dignity of others, and does so through simple acts of sharing. When a priest is inviting—either by his words or his inviting attitude towards ministry—he acknowledges the dignity of the ministers with which he works. The powerlessness of which Gula speaks does not deny the importance of authority, but instead suggests a more respectful sharing, as if among equals in dignity.

For the priest and his lay ecclesial ministers, a hospitable approach to parish life and ministry has two dimensions that the priest may find particularly fruitful. Gula calls them power and presence. A hospitable priest does not lord his power in ministry over the parish. By inviting the lay ecclesial minister to share in the ministry of the parish (through hiring, personal invitation, etc.), the priest offers to share limited aspects of his responsibility with the lay ecclesial minister. A hospitable presence in ministry is one that does not abandon. One does not invite a guest into one’s home and then disappear; the good and welcoming host remains with the guest ensuring the guest is comfortable with his or her surroundings. The priest and lay ecclesial minister participate in this type of interaction as they support each other through difficult ministerial circumstances.

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3 Gula, *To Walk Together Again*, 37.
III. Scripture

John Paul II writes in Pastores Dabo Vobis that the study of scripture is an essential element of the priest’s spiritual formation.\(^4\) While pastoral considerations (dim lighting, time constraints) may make an elaborate use of scripture in Form A impractical, the priest can and should take it upon himself—perhaps even in the lulls between penitents during regularly scheduled confession—to meditate on the scriptures suggested in the Rite. John Paul II writes that Sacred Scripture provides a code against which one may consider the order of their life. Knowing scripture makes conversion to the Christian life easier.\(^5\)

Scripture study is an indispensable component of the spiritual life. Through an encounter with the mercy and love of God in scripture, the priest becomes aware of the infinite compassion of God. The priest, like God, is called to this same patience when frustrated with those around him. In working with lay ecclesial ministers, this aspect of the priest’s spirituality translates into a relentlessly understanding relationship of guidance, patience, and nurturing.

The use of scripture is an essential element of Form B. While there is flexibility about how many readings may be used and what the overall message might be based on the readings chosen, all of the readings can offer points for consideration as one seeks a life of reconciliation. One possible reading is Romans 12:1-2, 9-19. Since the first line of the reading is suggested by one of the Opening Collects in Form B (offering oneself as a living sacrifice), it is not inappropriate to consider the reading singularly. It suggests a philosophy for life lived in the Spirit:

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\(^4\) Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis, no. 47.  
\(^5\) PDV, no. 47.
Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all.  

As the priest and lay ecclesial minister consider these challenges for their own ministry, they might recognize that while this passage addresses all the faithful, it applies with particular intensity to their exercise of ministry. Both lay and ordained ministers should see their exercises of charity—particularly as outlined in the above passage—as a pursuit of the holy life. 

There is certainly no shortage of guiding attitudes for ministry that can be taken from this passage. It is interesting to note that several of the action words in this scripture are used in the description of priestly ministry found in *Lumen Gentium* 41: zeal, humility, holiness, and courage. A ministry that is characterized by these and the other virtues found in scripture would be an excellent ministry indeed. If the priest were to embody these attitudes as he engages with his lay ecclesial ministers, the parish would certainly feel its effects. When one considers the opposite attitudes (deceit, intolerance, disrespect, apathy, unwelcoming, haughtiness, etc.) it is easy to see how relationships built upon these negative foundations would fail to thrive.

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6 Rom 12:9-18 NAB.
7 See LG, nos. 41, 42.
IV. Dialogue

As the priest hears the confession of sins in the Rites, there is great potential for dialogue between himself and the penitent. When dialogue is working well, its effects are easily felt. Agreeable dialogue is generally not a challenge for priests and lay ecclesial ministers. But conflicts do arise in ministry. If the priest were to use the positive attitudes suggested in the scripture above, dialogue—even confrontation—would be productive.

The hospitable confrontation suggested by Henri Nouwen as indicated in the previous chapter envisions that challenging words spoken with a spirit of pastoral charity could be interpreted as an invitation rather than as a confrontation. These words of love are an invitation to growth. In the confessional, it is growth in the spiritual life; in the workplace, it is growth in ministry. A pastoral approach to conflict desires something better, rather than to assert that one person or another is “right” or “wrong.”

The hospitable confrontation does not desire to assert one’s moral superiority, but instead seeks to guide and accompany the sinner towards restoration with God and the community. John Paul II writes,

In order to overcome conflicts and to ensure that normal tensions do not prove harmful to the unity of the Church, we must all apply ourselves to the word of God; we must relinquish our own subjective views and seek the truth where it is to be found, namely in the divine word itself and in the authentic interpretation of that word provided by the magisterium of the Church. In this light, listening to one another, respect, refraining from all hasty judgments, patience, the ability to avoid subordinating the faith which unites to the opinions, fashions and ideological choices which divide—these are all qualities of a dialogue within the Church which must be persevering and sincere.8

8 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenentia, no. 25.
This is a challenging list of qualities, but the good to be gained from their use is
great. It is a dialogue, even if one of conflict, that is filled with love.9

If the priest and lay ecclesial minister were to take the challenge of Pope John
Paul II seriously, they would be well on the way towards the changes suggested by
Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium. This passage is not easy for anyone, but is
certainly a worthwhile challenge for those who desire a ministerial workplace ethic
that is respectful and collaborative. It asks each person to put his or her own self
aside and truly strive for greater unity in the Church. Often, priests and lay ecclesial
ministers talk but do not listen. The faith should be the guide for action in the
church, not popular opinion.

Pope Paul VI made some theological suggestions towards principles of
effective dialogue in his encyclical Ecclesiam Suam. The encyclical was originally
intended to engage the problem of dialogue between the Vatican II-era church and
the modern world. The third section of the document focuses exclusively on
dialogue. It contains many principles that are useful for successful dialogue, no
matter the context.

Ecclesiam Suam suggests that dialogue is a method recognized by the church
for making "spiritual contact."10 It has four key principles: clarity, meekness,
confidence, and prudence.11 As an aside, it is interesting to note that one could draw
parallels between these hallmarks and the gifts of the Holy Spirit—clarity: wisdom,

9 See 1 Cor 13: 1, 4-7.
10 Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, no. 81. Available at
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-
11 ES, nos. 81a-d.
understanding, and knowledge; meekness: fear of the Lord and piety; confidence: fortitude; and prudence: counsel. These analogous principles beg for deeper explanation.

The principle of clarity suggests that dialogue should be intelligible, easy to understand, and take place within an appropriate idiom. Wisdom, knowledge, and understanding—particularly in matters of the faith—will make this possible. The priest and minister who clearly communicate expectations are freed from the constraint of assumptions and misconceptions. Likewise, those who are knowledgeable about the area in which they work are often better able to effectively communicate needs, wishes, and suggestions. As they work together in collaboration for the sake of the kingdom, each should strive to articulate their points in a clear and humble manner.

Dialogue that is meek is absent of arrogance or superiority. “What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth, shares with others the gift of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids preemptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction, and inclines towards generosity.” In an Angelus address from May of 1989, Pope John Paul II says that piety is the gift of the Spirit that facilitates tenderness, “an authentically fraternal openness to one’s neighbor,” and is manifest in meekness.

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12 ES, no. 81a.
13 Ibid., 81b.
humble request between priest and lay ecclesial minister would be made with appropriate reasoning rather than a “Because I said so!”

Confidence in dialogue requires fortitude. John Paul II again comments, “The gift of Fortitude is a supernatural impulse which gives strength to the soul, not only on exceptional occasions such as that of martyrdom, but also in normal difficulties; in the struggle to remain consistent with one’s principles: in putting up with insults and unjust attacks; in courageous perseverance on the path of truth and uprightness, in spite of lack of understanding and hostility.”

Particularly in the dialogue of the confessional, the priest needs fortitude to stand strong in the convictions of the faith, while at the same time avoiding arrogance. Ministerial tasks issued by the priest that are unclear in their direction or are constantly changing (unconfident) are frustrating at best and damaging at worst.

Finally, a prudent dialogue is one that is sensitive to the situation of those who take part in it. Priests and lay ecclesial ministers are humans, and are susceptible to the stresses of the workplace like other workers. It is prudent for the pastor to be sensitive to the already-existing demands of the minister. As a concrete example, it would be imprudent to ask the liturgist to plan a special music program at the last minute during the Christmas season, when they are likely already working at their maximum ability.

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16 ES, no. 81d.
V. Leading by Example

The dialogue that takes place in the confessional between the priest and penitent is a sort of spiritual direction. This spiritual direction can and should ideally focus on seeing the paschal mystery at work in one's life. It is in the resurrection of Christ that one rises to new life, that is, forgiven of sins and begins again the pursuit of holiness—a return to grace. A certain “dying to self” is implied in the paschal mystery, and likewise in the sacrament of reconciliation. Priest and penitent alike must allow the Spirit to work in and through them, putting their own wills aside and allowing for the movement of grace.

For the priest to reflect on the paschal mystery in his relationship with the lay ecclesial minister, he is called to this similar allowance of Spirit to work through himself and the minister. This is done, first of all, by prayer and requires a careful discernment of what is best for oneself, the community, and the church as a whole. While determining parish programming, preparing budgets, sitting through pastoral council meetings, working in regional collaborations, or any of a host of other ministerial responsibilities, the priest must always be attentive to his own will and his perception of the will of God.

As he offers “practical advice” and “instruction on the duties of the Christian life,” it is essential that the priest simultaneously reflect on his own pursuits of spirituality (RP 18). In order to be a credible source for how to live according to the

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17 Gula writes, “Pastoral counseling and spiritual direction can easily come into conflict with the task of facilitating reconciliation. But they should not be mixed up. The objectives are different: Reconciliation is for forgiveness, counseling is for therapy, direction is for cultivating one’s personal relationship with God. This is not to say that a good host of reconciliation would not make use of some elements and skills common to pastoral counseling and spiritual direction.” *To Walk Together Again*, 233.
life of faith, the priest must himself be living that life of faith—and it must be a visible manifestation as such. Christ embodied every demand he makes of his believers.

The priest must also consider his actions and his words as he works with lay ecclesial ministers. A priest who demands charity, but who is not charitable himself, has little integrity. However, a priest that attempts to be all he asks of his staff—a self-giving, hardworking, compassionate minister—will likely find that his example speaks louder than his words.

Throughout the Rites, there are prescriptions for looking within one’s life and seeing where change is needed. One such example is the second litany for the general confession of sins provided within the Form B (RP 54). Occurring midway through the Rite, before the individual confession of sins, it is a moment for reflection. It offers many points of consideration for both the presiding minister and the penitents.

The prayer begins in first person plural, which indicates that both the minister and penitents are asking for the intercession of Christ. The litany reads:

**Christ our Savior is our advocate with the Father:**
with humble hearts let us ask him to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from every sin.

You were sent with good news for the poor and healing for the contrite.  
R: **Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.** Or: **Lord, have mercy.**

You came to call sinners, not the just.  
R: **Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.** Or: **Lord, have mercy.**

You forgave the many sins of the woman who showed great love.  
R: **Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.** Or: **Lord, have mercy.**

You did not shun the company of outcasts and sinners.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You carried back to the fold the sheep that had strayed.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You did not condemn the woman taken in adultery, but sent her away in peace.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You called Zacchaeus to repentance and a new life.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You promised Paradise to the repentant thief.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy.

You are always interceding for us at the right hand of the Father.
R: Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Or: Lord, have mercy (RP 54).

The deacon, minister, or priest begins by humbly asking for mercy. A humble heart sets up an appropriately modest disposition necessary for contrition. After this preparation, the minister and penitent embark on a journey through the forgiving and healing actions of Christ in the Gospels. For the penitent, this is an opportunity to reflect on the infinite mercy of God and to identify with the sins of ancestors in faith. For the priest, this litany may offer an opportunity to additionally reflect on his ministry.

As the priest is consecrated in a particular way to Christ, the actions of Christ present in the litany offer explicit moments of reflection for the priest. Does the priest live a prophetic life in word and deed, calling sinners, not only the just? Does the priest freely forgive the sins of those who are contrite, both sacramentally and for those who have wronged him personally? Does he exercise hospitality to the outcasts, opening his heart, home and parish to those who are most in need? Does he not condemn those who sin and encourage them to repentance and conversion?
Additionally, the priest should carry the sheep back to the fold and intercede on behalf of the sinner. Working towards each of these can positively influence the ministry and life of the priest, encouraging him to be an open and compassionate minister.

In the same way, does the priest translate these Christ-like actions to the workplace? Is he forgiving when his staff makes mistakes in their work, or does he greet them with hostility and resentment? Does the priest play favorites amongst his parish and staff, or does he make an effort to include those who are often overlooked? These are but a few explicit examples of ways in which the priest may consider his life and ministry and seek to reorient them within a spirituality of reconciliation.

VI. Social Dimensions of Sin

In the homily, it is suggested that the priest may reflect on “the social dimension of grace and sin whose effect is that in some way the actions of individuals affect the whole Body of the Church” (RP 25c). This last statement is significant for the interactions of the priest, lay ecclesial ministers, and the Body of the Church. When there is discord between the priest and the lay ecclesial minister, or the priest and the assembly, it is felt by the other members of the staff and parish.

The form of absolution “indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of
the sacrament, because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church” (RP 19). These points show the interconnectedness of relationships in the church, and because absolution is granted “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” returns the focus to the Trinity.

The interconnectedness of relationships in the church is vital for priests and lay ecclesial ministers. Not unlike Son and Spirit, they work together in complementary ways to bring the Good News to manifestation within the world. However, when this relationship suffers because of sin or other unhealthy practices, its effects are felt far beyond the ruptured relationship. In the ministerial workplace, others may be able to perceive the tension, and this can lead to lower productivity or effectiveness in ministry. Thus, it is important to tend to both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of discord in the workplace.

VII. Forgiveness

The prayer of absolution is about forgiveness, which may be the most challenging of spiritual dispositions found in the sacrament of penance. At a very basic level, humans desire not to be hurt; when they are, they have learned not to do whatever caused them harm again. It is challenging that the Gospel asks believers to “turn the other cheek” or forgive “seventy times seven.” This is not the desire of a sadistic Christ, but a return to the virtues of hope and trust.

For the priest and the lay ecclesial minister, the forgiveness of wrongs can be especially challenging. It requires great spiritual depth to regain, and give, trust in
the way suggested by forgiveness in the Gospels. This is only achieved through prayer and knowing the relentlessly merciful forgiveness of God.

**An Alternate Perspective for the Priest**

As the priest welcomes the sinner to the meeting of human soul and Holy Spirit in reconciliation, he is given the chance to facilitate a relationship of trust. In order to perform this sacred task to the best of his human ability, certain disciplines and knowledge are required of the priest. John Paul II writes in his exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*,

The confessor must necessarily have the human qualities of prudence, discretion, discernment, and a firmness tempered by gentleness and kindness. He must likewise have a serious and careful preparation, not fragmentary but complete and harmonious, in the different branches of psychology, in the methodology of dialogue, and above all in a living and communicable knowledge of the word of God.19

Thus, it is not only the contribution of the Holy Spirit that facilitates the sacrament, but the genuine contribution of the priest. His contribution is not only as a body for the agency of the sacrament, but his personality. He must take his role seriously, and do all that he can to prepare himself to be a good minister of the sacrament. It should be evident to him—through the verbal and non-verbal language of those who come into the confessional—in which areas he must continue to grow.

The *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* agrees that there is an interaction of priestly experience and personality in his exercise of the sacrament. It states: “It is necessary, therefore, that he know how to identify himself, in a certain sense, with this sacrament, and assuming the disposition of Christ, reach out with

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19 *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 29.
mercy, like the good Samaritan, to a wounded humanity, and thus make known the Christian novelty of the redemptive dimension of Penance, with its healing pardon.” 20 In assuming the dispositions of Christ—the healing, merciful God Incarnate—the priest rightly conforms himself more and more to the life of Christ. But how does the priest come to know Christ and practice Christ-like patience in his own life and ministry? It is in the practice of the spiritual life.

John Paul II makes an exceptional point for reconciliation and the spirituality of the priest. He continues in Reconciliatio et Penitentia:

...it is even more necessary that he should live an intense and genuine spiritual life. In order to lead others along the path of Christian perfection the minister of Penance himself must first travel this path. More by actions than by long speeches he must give proof of real experience of lived prayer, the practice of the theological and moral virtues of the Gospel, faithful obedience to the will of God, love of the Church and docility to her Magesterium.21

The spiritual life of the priest has a direct effect on how he conducts himself in ministry, and also has an immediate influence on the effective performance of that ministry. His spiritual life—the life of prayer, virtue, and Gospel embodiment that the priest lives—is evident in the witness of his own personal faithfulness to the sacrament.

In order to lead others along the path of Christian perfection the minister of Penance himself must first travel this path. In the exercise of this sacrament, as in no other, the priest must regularly practice both roles. The priest, being human, does not escape the temptation of sin that afflicts all humanity. For the priest to receive forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, he must rely on his brother priests

21 Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, no. 29. Emphasis mine.
and their compassionate ministry. The priest experiences both sides of the screen, so to speak.

Frequent celebration of the sacrament schools the priest in the mercy and grace of God, enabling him to be a more caring and compassionate shepherd. In an oft-reiterated statement first used in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, Pope John Paul II says,

The priest’s celebration of the Eucharist and administration of the other Sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful, his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his Bishops, his life of prayer—in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some other reason he fails to receive the Sacrament of Penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his *priestly being* and his *priestly action* would feel its effects very soon, and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor.  

In short, there is no aspect of the priest’s existence—from his being to his ministry—that remains unscathed if the priest does not receive this sacrament regularly. Moreso, the community will feel these effects as well. This makes sense given the social and communal nature of sin, and because of the influence of the priest on the community, his spiritual unhealthiness would be manifested in particularly obvious ways.

If the priest is not regularly practicing the sacrament, his being-out-of-love with God will also result in his being-out-of-love with the faith community and all with whom he has relationships. This can especially manifest itself in the workplace and amongst the pastoral staff. The health of his relationships—collaborative, friendly, paternal, or fraternal—will suffer if his relationship with God is not set

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22 *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 31.6.
right. Through the practice of confession, keeping his being-in-love, will enable those relationships to be remedied.

To be an effective minister of the sacrament, the priest must experience it first. By knowing the healing remedy it offers, the priest is all the more able to communicate that mercy effectively. The priest who regularly receives the sacrament, and does his best to do so with an appropriately disposed heart, is all the better able to shepherd others as they make their way back to God. 23 It is reasonable to assume that the relationship that the priest has with his priest-confessor will shape the way in which he engages with his own penitents. The priest’s experiences of grace become the experiences he desires to share with others. The power of the sacrament—its ability to draw one into love with God—is compelling.

Fr. Dermot Power believes that this renewed enthusiasm for the sacrament is welcome in the ministry and life of priests. He writes, “Diocesan priests who so often meet the brokenness of sin in the lives of others, need to know where to go with their own burden and to find the Lord as truly their brother and friend. Learning the art of communicating the mercy of God to others is first a matter of learning the depths of God’s mercy for oneself.” 24 How could one ever proclaim the humbling grandeur of a mountain—and all the beauty and life-changing experience that comes with it—if one has not experienced it? Likewise, one is certainly better able

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23 Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, no. 31.6.
to empathize, moving beyond sympathy, when one knows the struggles and challenges of the unrestricted openness required of confession.

The Directory for Priests writes, “Like any good faithful, the priest also needs to confess his own sins and weakness. He is the first to realize that the practice of this sacrament reinforces his faith and charity toward God and his brothers. In order to effectively reveal the beauty of Penance, it is essential that the minister of the sacrament offer a personal testimony preceding the other faithful in living the experience of pardon.”

Thus, all of the fruits that come from the priest’s participation as priest in the sacrament—forgiveness, leading by example, dialogue, etc.—are intensified when the priest experiences the sacrament as a penitent as well. When he is able to acknowledge his own weakness and turn to God in need, he is much more able to help others come to know the mercy of God.

If the priest were to reflect again on the sacrament, this time putting himself in the position of the penitent, he might be aware of some spiritual fruits that are not as obvious in the first examination of the sacrament. According to the Introduction, “the most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is ‘heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more’” (RP 6a). First, the penitents are to ask themselves whether or not their motives for seeking the sacrament are pure. Jesus calls sinners to interior conversion, that is, “conversion of the heart.”

How often are the sacraments approached out of obligation instead of an earnest desire to receive and be changed by grace? When resolution is sought from

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25 Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 53.
26 CCC, no. 1430.
conflict in life—particularly in staff relations—what might be the motivation? A “perfect” resolution might be one where a genuine desire of love wishes to repair and improve the relationship. An “imperfect” resolution might instead seek an immediate reprieve from the negative circumstances, but does not carry with it the desire for the conflict to not happen again. Alternately, an “imperfect” resolution might be one where the priest would rather maneuver the outcome in favor of his own view rather than truly and openly consider alternate points.

In rediscovering the awesome mercy of God, hearts are stirred and begin to fear the loss of God’s friendship that arises from sin (RP 14, 32). The Introduction states: “Since every sin is an offense against God that disrupts our friendship with him, ‘the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him’” (RP 5). By the grace of the Holy Spirit, sin is brought to light in the heart of the penitent.27

The change of heart experienced by the sinner in reconciliation is called metanoia. This is “a profound change of the whole person by which we begin to consider, judge, and arrange our life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his son in the last days and given to us in abundance” (RP 6a). At its beginning, metanoia is often accompanied by pain and sadness, which the Catechism refers to as animi cruciatus (affliction of spirit) and compunctio cordis (repentance of heart).28 Perhaps considered as “growing pains of the soul,” these can mark the challenging beginnings of separation from the ways of the past, but ultimately lead to joy as the penitent becomes closer to God.

27 CCC, no. 1433.
28 CCC, no. 1431.
True conversion affects the person from within and moves them towards “progressively deeper enlightenment and an ever-closer likeness to Christ” (RP 6a). David Fagerberg writes that the entire Christian life “is an unending metanoia, postbaptismal sin is an interruption of that metanoia, and penance is being called back to conversion.” Reconciliation re-orient the Christian when they stumble on the path from baptismal font to table of the Lord.

Like the spiritual life itself, metanoia is more process than moment; it requires a continual re-commitment to pursue a persistently better version of life in Christ. Through the actions of penance, the sinner (if given an appropriate penance) is given the opportunity to live his life in accordance with the love of God. Penance, and metanoia, are actions that often require a re-assessment of the status quo and a firm commitment to change one’s ways.

The challenge of collaboration described by the US Bishops in Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium calls for metanoia. Recall that the mutual collaboration and respect desired by the bishops will happen when there are “changes in patterns of reflection, behavior, and expectation among laity and clergy alike.” When lives, professional practices, and interpersonal relationships are arranged “according to the holiness and love of God” as described in the Introduction to the rite of penance, a new realm of possibilities is opened. The Christian life, and the life of the priest in particular, should be infused with pastoral charity which ideally guides the Christian’s encounter with the world.

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31 Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium, 7.
CONCLUSION

A SPIRITUALITY OF RECONCILIATION FOR PRIESTS AND LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

In *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, the United States’ Bishops articulate that ministry cannot be understood outside of relationships, and relationships find their source in the triune God. By virtue of baptism, ministerial relationships are rooted in the universal call to holiness. Through confirmation, and for some men, holy orders, each person is established within an ever-changing dance of relationships.¹

Priests and lay ecclesial ministers share one of these ministerial relationships, but it has been noted that this relationship does not always work well. For various reasons, priests and lay ecclesial ministers find challenges in their cooperation and collaboration within the church. This can be damaging to interpersonal relationships and the entire ecclesial community. When relationships with God and with others are damaged, in the Catholic faith, one turns to the sacrament of reconciliation.

The sacrament of reconciliation was instituted in order to correct relationships that are focused on self before God and all else. In the sacrament, reconciliation is first sought with God, which initiates a return to a life of being-in-­—

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love. However, this is not the only reconciling action the sacrament offers: reconciliation with God leads to reconciliation with the church, with other people, and with all creation. It restores relationships, enabling once again the divine interplay of a Trinitarian ontology.

In addition to being the minister of the sacrament, the priest should also regularly receive it. Like the Trinity, the priest’s ministerial identity is based on his relationship to God, other people, and the church. Keeping these relationships right should be a priority. The priest is better able to control his dispositions and actions through his spiritual practices.

The spiritual life is but one component of the identity of a minister. It is where faith meets practice. One’s beliefs are evident in the way one lives, and one lives according to one’s beliefs. The way that a priest interacts with lay ecclesial ministers says something about the way in which he understands God, and vice versa. If these relationships are not characterized by respect, pastoral charity, and cooperation in the spirit, then many of the foundations of the Trinitarian faith are not being practiced.

The sacrament of reconciliation can be a rich source of spirituality, helping to foster recognition of wrongs, continual re-appraisal of motive and actions, and growth in virtues, especially love.\(^2\) The sacrament of penance requires a complete conversion of the self, which is manifested through changes in motive, thought, and action. The celebration of the sacrament promotes attitudes that are open,

\(^2\) *[Program for Priestly Formation, no. 110.]*
hospitable, merciful, loving, forgiving, and trusting. These dispositions are necessary for collaborative relationships in ministry.

When one strays from the path of love and trust, one returns to it through a process of *metanoia*. To change one’s behaviors, expectations, and patterns of reflection to live in accordance with the love of God is *metanoia*, and to extend this conversion to the exercise of ministry is precisely what the Bishops call for in *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*. Priests and lay ecclesial ministers are called to examine their patterns of behavior, reflection and expectation in order to promote mutual respect and collaboration amongst priests and lay ecclesial ministers.3

In the ritual moments of the church’s liturgies, the attitudes and practices of the Christian life are found. The church has held this as truth: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. One possible collect for Form B reads:

Father, our source of life,  
you know our weakness.  
May we reach out with joy to grasp your hand  
and walk more readily in your ways.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

This is a prayer that applies both to the penitent who hears it and the priest who speaks it. Everyone, together, admits their weaknesses. The beautiful imagery of touching God and walking together on the path of righteousness guides the priest and penitent together into the period of individual confession and absolution. For the priest and the lay ecclesial minister, this imagery is a reminder of their need to work together, hand in hand, so as to walk readily as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

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3 CGTM, 7.
Apostolicam Actuositatem: Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People


John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis: I Will Give You Shepherds*  

John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*,  


*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*


Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, Available at  


*Presbyterorum Ordinis: Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*


Rite of Penance, in *Rites of the Catholic Church, Volume One*, Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1990)

*Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*


