

"Penitence! Penitence! Penitence! Pray
to God for sinners!"

Confession, Penance, Absolution, and
Forgiveness: A Theological and
Historical Analysis of the Catholic
Sacrament of Reconciliation



Occasional Paper N° 9

Simon Uttley

-Hospitalier- HNDL-

Table of Contents

1. <i>Introduction</i>	3
2. <i>Scriptural foundations</i>	3
3. <i>The Patristic period: Public penance and canonical discipline</i>	4
4. <i>The Irish innovation: Private and repeatable confession</i>	5
5. <i>Scholastic theology: Contrition, confession, and satisfaction</i>	5
6. <i>The Council of Trent: doctrinal definition and Counter-Reformation</i>	6
7. <i>Towards the Second Vatican Council</i>	7
8. <i>The Second Vatican Council and the reform of the Sacrament</i>	8
9. <i>Post-Conciliar developments: Mercy, conscience, and pastoral practice</i>	9
10. <i>Theological themes and continuing questions</i>	9
11. <i>The practice of Confession at Lourdes</i>	10
12. <i>Young people and the Sacrament of Reconciliation</i>	11
13. <i>Lourdes as a pastoral context for youth reconciliation</i>	12
14. <i>Implications for Catholic Education and Youth Ministry</i>	13
15. <i>Signs of renewal?</i>	14
<i>Conclusion</i>	15
<i>References</i>	15

1. Introduction

During the eighth apparition on February 24, 1858, ‘the Lady’ gave Bernadette Soubirous the message: "Penitence! Penitence! Penitence! Pray to God for sinners! Kiss the ground as an act of penance for sinners!". She duly did so in front of some 250 onlookers, marking a shift toward a more serious, penitential tone in the apparitions, urging prayer and reparation for the world. This was the first of several, more sombre, penitential, or "sad" apparitions, in which Bernadette's behaviour (kissing the ground, crawling) seemed unusual to observers. Yet the significance was to establish the core, spiritual message of Lourdes, not as a place of miracles *per se*, but as a focus on prayer for conversion, humbling oneself, and making reparation for sins. For this reason, the ready availability of ‘Confession’, has been a feature of the Lourdes Sanctuary since the earliest times, with a permanent staff of chaplains available ever since the Church recognised the miraculous nature of the Lourdes apparitions in 1862, both at the Chapel of Reconciliation and throughout the sanctuary.

The Sacrament of Penance, referred to variously as Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or simply the Sacrament of Forgiveness, holds a distinctive place within Catholic theology and practice. It constitutes the recognised means by which baptised Catholics who have committed sins after baptism are reconciled with God and the Church. However, the history of this sacrament is characterised by significant alterations in form, discipline, and theological emphasis.

Given the centrality of confession and penance to the story of Lourdes, this chapter offers a theological and historical account of the Catholic understanding of confession, penance, absolution, and forgiveness. We begin with the scriptural foundations upon which the sacrament rests, then assess the impact of the patristic and medieval periods, the decisive interventions of the Council of Trent, and examine the reforms and theological thinking brought about by the Second Vatican Council and subsequent magisterial teaching. As the Church is a pilgrim Church, open to evolution (Uttley, 2026), we will distinguish between what the Church regards as belonging to the substance of the sacrament—and therefore unchangeable—and what belongs to its historical and cultural expression. We conclude with an assessment of the place of the Sacrament of reconciliation for young people, both in Lourdes itself and beyond.

2. Scriptural foundations

Catholic theology identifies the origin of the sacrament in the words and actions of Jesus Christ Himself. Several passages from the New Testament are regarded as foundational. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus confers upon Peter the authority to bind and loose: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, NRSV). This authority is subsequently extended collectively to

the apostles in Matthew 18:18. The account in the Gospel of John concerning the post-resurrection appearance offers perhaps the clearest justification: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22–23, NRSV).

The Letter of St James instructs believers to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16, NRSV). While Protestant exegesis has frequently interpreted this as mutual confession among believers rather than sacramental confession to an ordained minister, Catholic tradition has understood it as part of a broader apostolic practice of reconciliation mediated through the community and its leaders (Rausch, 2003). The letters of St Paul also include references to the exclusion and readmission of sinners within the community (1 Corinthians 5:1–5; 2 Corinthians 2:5–11), which early church fathers and medieval scholars regarded as evidence of an ancient penitential discipline.

It remains noteworthy, however, (and hence problematic in some Protestant theology) that Scripture does not prescribe a detailed sacramental rite. The subsequent theological developments reflect the Church’s development of what was believed to be implicit within the apostolic tradition. As Rahner (1969) observed, the sacrament of penance is best understood not as a dominical institution in the sense of a fully developed liturgical rite, but as a reality rooted in Christ’s redemptive work and entrusted to the Church for its ongoing pastoral realisation.

3. The Patristic period: Public penance and canonical discipline

The earliest post-apostolic evidence for penitential practice is not cohesive and can sometimes appear ambiguous. The Didache, dating perhaps to the late first or early second century, implores Christians to “confess your transgressions in the assembly” (Didache 4:14), though the precise nature of this confession—whether liturgical, communal, or private—remains debated (Dallen, 1986). The Shepherd of Hermas, written in Rome around the mid-second century, affirmed the possibility of post-baptismal forgiveness but insisted that it could be granted only once, a position that shaped penitential discipline for centuries.

By the third century, a more structured system of canonical penance had developed. This was public in character: penitents were enrolled in a distinct *ordo paenitentium*, excluded from the Eucharist, required to undertake demanding acts of penance—fasting, wearing sackcloth, prostrations—and readmitted to communion only after a period that could extend over several years. Reconciliation was typically administered by the bishop, often during Holy Week. Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Ambrose of Milan all attest to this practice, though with varying degrees of rigour (Poschmann, 1964).

This system was austere and, by its very nature, limited. Given that canonical penance could be undertaken only once in a lifetime, many Christians deferred it until their deathbed, a tendency that the clergy alternately deplored and facilitated. Augustine of Hippo made the

distinction between daily sins, for which prayer, fasting, and almsgiving sufficed, and grave offences requiring formal ecclesial penance. His theology of grace and sin laid important groundwork for later sacramental theology, particularly in its insistence that forgiveness is ultimately an act of God mediated through the Church (Fitzgerald, 1999).

4. The Irish innovation: Private and repeatable confession

The transition from public canonical penance to private, repeatable confession represents one of the most significant developments in the history of the sacrament. Its origins are rooted in the monastic traditions of the Celtic churches of Ireland and Britain during the sixth and seventh centuries. Irish monasticism, influenced by the Eastern practice of spiritual direction, formulated a system in which monks confessed their sins privately to an abbot or spiritual father, received a specific penance tailored to the offence, and were absolved upon completion (or, in some instances, prior to completion) of the prescribed penance. The penitential books (*libri paenitentiales*)—collections of penances carrying a specific tariff, designated for particular sins—formalised this practice and facilitated its dissemination (McNeill & Gamer, 1938).

Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries introduced this practice to the European continent during the seventh and eighth centuries, where it gradually replaced the older public system. The transition was neither straightforward nor universally welcomed; Carolingian councils and bishops occasionally endeavoured to reinstate elements of public penance, and theological perspectives on the advantages of the new system were divided. Nonetheless, by the ninth century, private confession had emerged as the predominant form of penitential practice throughout much of Western Christendom (Hamilton, 2001).

The theological implications of this transition were highly significant. Whereas public penance highlighted the communal aspect of sin and reconciliation—the sinner’s dislocation from and reintegration into the eucharistic assembly—private confession emphasised the internal disposition of the penitent and the personal encounter with divine mercy. The role of the priest transitioned from that of a public authority overseeing canonical discipline to that of a spiritual physician, a metaphor that would maintain its significance in Catholic theology, and which, specifically in Lourdes, strengthens the notion of it being a place of healing.

5. Scholastic theology: Contrition, confession, and satisfaction

The medieval period experienced profound theological contemplation regarding the essence and constituents of the sacrament. By the twelfth century, theologians had delineated three key acts performed by the penitent—namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction—along with the priest’s absolution, as forming the fundamental structure of the sacrament. This model was systematized by Peter Lombard in his work, **Sentences** (circa 1150), and established as the prevailing scholastic framework (Lombard, 2007).

A central theological debate concerns the relative significance of the penitent's contrition and the priest's absolution. The so-called 'contritionist' position, associated with Abelard and his followers, holds that genuine sorrow for sin, motivated by love of God, is itself sufficient for forgiveness; the priest's absolution merely serves to declare what God has already accomplished in the penitent's heart. The opposing 'absolutionist' stance (held by, among others, Duns Scotus) maintains that the priest's words of absolution are themselves efficacious, conferring grace *ex opere operato* (by the work performed in the act of absolution).

It would be that great theological master, Thomas Aquinas, who would offer a comprehensive synthesis in his great work, the *Summa Theologiae* (III, qq. 84–90), where he asserts that both contrition and absolution are essential. The penitent's sorrow (serving as the 'matter' of the sacrament) and the priest's absolution (constituting the 'form') collectively form the sacramental sign. Aquinas distinguished between perfect contrition, driven by charity and adequate for the forgiveness of sins even prior to actual confession (albeit with the intention to confess), and imperfect contrition or attrition, driven by fear of punishment, which sufficed for the valid reception of the sacrament but was insufficient for forgiveness independent of it (Aquinas, 1947). This differentiation would become a subject of significant debate in subsequent centuries.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 mandated annual confession for all Christians who had attained the age of reason, commonly referred to as the 'Easter duty' (Canon 21). This regulation not only embodied but also reinforced the normalisation of private auricular (heard) confession as the normative form of the sacrament. Furthermore, it facilitated the development of a more sophisticated pastoral framework—comprising confessors' manuals and moral theology—to support priests in their roles as judges and guides of souls.

6. The Council of Trent: doctrinal definition and Counter-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation presented a significant challenge to Catholic theology and penitential practices. Martin Luther rejected the sacramental nature of penance, denied the necessity of confessing all mortal sins to a priest, questioned the distinction between contrition and attrition, and repudiated the entire system of indulgences and satisfactions that had become integrated with penitential rituals. John Calvin extended this critique by asserting that absolution resides solely with God and that the Catholic confessional system constitutes a form of spiritual tyranny (Calvin, 1960).

The Council of Trent issued a comprehensive doctrinal declaration during its fourteenth session in 1551. The Decree on the Sacrament of Penance characterised penance as a genuine sacrament established by Christ, distinguishable from baptism, and essential for the salvation of individuals who have fallen into mortal sin following baptism. It confirmed the three primary acts of the penitent—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—as the 'quasi-matter'

of the sacrament and identified the priest's absolution as its essential form. The Council asserted that absolution was not merely a declaration of forgiveness but a judicial act whereby the priest, acting in persona Christi, genuinely remits sins. It emphasised the necessity of confessing all mortal sins, specifying their type and number, and supported the practice of imposing appropriate penances (Tanner, 1990).

The Council of Trent further engaged with the contritionist–absolutionist debate by asserting that attrition, when paired with sacramental absolution, is adequate for obtaining forgiveness. Additionally, perfect contrition, coupled with the sincere intention to confess, can attain forgiveness prior to the actual reception of the sacrament. The Council's canons condemned individuals who denied the divine institution of sacramental penance, its necessity, or the obligation to confess mortal sins in detail.

This position significantly influenced Catholic penitential practices for the subsequent four centuries. The confessional box, introduced in the late sixteenth century partly in response to concerns about propriety, became the standard setting for the sacrament. Moral theology and casuistry proliferated, producing detailed classifications of sins and their circumstances. The seal of confession—the absolute prohibition on the confessor revealing anything learned in confession—was codified and rigorously enforced. The sacrament became, for many Catholics, a regular and structured element of their spiritual lives, closely linked to the reception of Holy Communion (O'Donnell, 2020).

7. Towards the Second Vatican Council

By the mid-twentieth century, the practice of confession agreed at Trent faced significant challenges. Sociological and pastoral research indicated a decline in confession rates throughout Western Europe and North America. Within the Church, critics contended that the sacrament had become excessively juridical, concentrated on listing sins and administering formulaic penances, while neglecting the spiritual development and relationship of the penitents with God. It was further argued that the prevailing metaphor of the priest as judge had overshadowed the traditional image of the priest as healer and spiritual guide (Dallen, 1986).

The liturgical movement of the early twentieth century, emphasising the communal and participatory aspects of worship, prompted inquiries into the exclusively private, individual nature of the prevailing approach to confession. Theologians such as Karl Rahner advocated for a renewed theological understanding of penance that would restore the ecclesial dimension of sin and reconciliation—the acknowledgement that sin afflicts not only the sinner's relationship with God but also the communion of the Church, thus rendering reconciliation both a personal and ecclesial occurrence (Rahner, 1969).

The biblical and patristic 're-sourcement', characterised by a return to the sources, that delineated mid-century Catholic theology also played a significant role in the re-evaluation of

penitential theology. Scholars such as Bernhard Poschmann highlighted the diversity of penitential practices in the early Church, illustrating that the Tridentine form (that agreed at the Council of Trent), far from being the sole or original configuration of the sacrament, was itself a product of historical evolution. This awareness of history fostered theological space for reform (Poschmann, 1964).

8. The Second Vatican Council and the reform of the Sacrament

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) did not issue a separate document on the Sacrament of Penance; however, its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963:72), called for revising the rite to more clearly articulate both the nature and the effect of the sacrament. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, placed the sacraments within the broader context of the Church as the People of God and the universal sacrament of salvation. Meanwhile, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* provided a renewed perspective on sin and conscience, emphasising the dignity of the human person and their capacity for moral discernment (Vatican Council II, 1996).

The reformed Rite of Penance (*Ordo Paenitentiae*) was promulgated in 1973 and provided three forms for celebrating the sacrament. The first form, the Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents, retained the familiar structure of private confession but enriched it with a scripture reading, a more dialogical encounter between priest and penitent, and a revised formula of absolution that placed greater emphasis on the mercy of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. The second form, the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution, combined a communal celebration of the word of God with individual confession and absolution, seeking to recover the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament. The third form, the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution, allowed for general absolution in cases of grave necessity, though subsequent legislation significantly restricted its use (International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 1975).

The theological shift articulated in the reformed rite was significant. The very designation of the sacrament was modified: whilst ‘penance’ and ‘confession’ persisted in usage, the preferred term became the ‘Sacrament of Reconciliation’, a designation that emphasised the positive outcome of the sacramental encounter rather than the penitential acts that preceded it. The role of the priest was redefined: no longer primarily regarded as a judge presiding over a tribunal, but rather as a minister of divine mercy and an instrument of healing. The formula of absolution was amended to state: “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and has sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.” This Trinitarian and paschal framing represented a departure from the more juridical Tridentine formula (Coffey, 2001).

9. Post-Conciliar developments: Mercy, conscience, and pastoral practice

The decades following the Council witnessed further theological and pastoral advancements. Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984) reaffirmed the significance of the sacrament while recognising the 'crisis of the sense of sin' present in contemporary culture. John Paul II emphasised the indispensable value of individual, comprehensive confession and absolution as the normative form of the sacrament, while advocating for renewed catechesis and pastoral innovation to enhance its reception (John Paul II, 1984).

The publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) provided a comprehensive synthesis of the Church's teaching, treating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation under five headings: its names, its place in the economy of salvation, the conversion of the baptised, the acts of the penitent, and the ministering and effects of the sacrament. The Catechism affirmed the Tridentine teaching on the necessity of confessing mortal sins according to kind and number, while also emphasising the medicinal character of the sacrament and the primacy of God's merciful initiative (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994: 1422–1498).

Pope Francis prioritised the theme of mercy throughout his pontificate, prominently evidenced by the proclamation of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (2015–2016) and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). His approach to the Sacrament of Reconciliation underscored the confessional as a space for encountering divine mercy, rather than a judicial tribunal. He also advocated for confessors to adopt a pastoral methodology characterised by patience, compassion, and accompaniment. In *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee, Pope Francis articulated that the confessional "must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy" (Francis, 2015: 17). His pastoral theology has been interpreted by some scholars as a continuation and deepening of the trajectory initiated by Vatican II, while others perceive it as a departure from the precision of preceding magisterial teachings.

The COVID-19 pandemic raised urgent pastoral questions regarding access to the sacraments, including reconciliation. In March 2020, the Apostolic Penitentiary issued a note affirming that, in circumstances where individual confession was infeasible, members of the faithful could attain forgiveness through an act of perfect contrition coupled with the intention to confess sacramentally at the earliest possible opportunity. This guidance relied on the Thomistic distinction between perfect contrition and attrition, demonstrating the Church's ability to adapt its pastoral practices to extraordinary circumstances while preserving its doctrinal principles (Apostolic Penitentiary, 2020).

10. Theological themes and continuing questions

Multiple theological themes recur throughout the history of the sacrament and continue to be subjects of scholarly discourse. The relationship between the penitent's internal disposition and the sacramental act itself remains a matter of ongoing debate, particularly within the context of pastoral care for individuals in complex or irregular circumstances. The ongoing tension between the juridical and therapeutic models of the sacrament—viewing the priest as judge versus physician—persists, despite post-conciliar theological efforts to reconcile and integrate these perspectives (Mongillo, 2000).

The ecclesial dimension of penance, as reaffirmed by Vatican II, presents challenges within a culture that often perceives sin solely through private and psychological lenses. Catholic theology asserts that sin is never an isolated matter: it harms the body of Christ and the communion of the faithful. Consequently, reconciliation possesses both communal and individual significance. The question of how to articulate this conviction liturgically and pastorally—particularly in a context where communal penitential celebrations are infrequent and general absolution is severely restricted—remains an ongoing concern (Osborne, 2000).

The theology of forgiveness has been significantly enriched through engagement with philosophical and psychological perspectives. Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida have examined the conditions and boundaries of forgiveness in ways that both resonate with and challenge the Catholic theological tradition. Ricoeur's concept of forgiveness as a 'difficult' act that confronts the irreversibility of the past has been adopted by theologians aiming to articulate the relationship between divine and human forgiveness, as well as the connection between sacramental absolution and the healing of memory (Ricoeur, 2004). Moreover, the expanding body of literature on restorative justice and transitional justice has prompted further theological reflection on the social and political dimensions of forgiveness, broadening the discourse beyond confessional settings to include issues of collective guilt, historical injustice, and societal reconciliation.

11. The practice of Confession at Lourdes

The infrastructure for confessions at Lourdes is extensive and deliberately accessible. The Sanctuary offers multilingual confessors throughout the day, including priests from various national pilgrimages who are available to hear confessions in the pilgrims' languages (Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes, 2023). The Chapel of Reconciliation, inaugurated in 1955, was specifically designed to create an inviting and non-institutional environment for the sacrament, intentionally moving away from the traditional enclosed confessional box associated by many with a more penitential and judicial conception of the sacrament (Bouflet & Boutry, 1997).

Harris (1999) documents how the Lourdes pilgrimage has historically served as a space of spiritual liminality—a threshold experience in which the ordinary conditions of daily life are suspended and heightened receptivity to religious practice becomes possible. Victor Turner's

concept of liminality, developed in his anthropological studies of pilgrimage, is apposite here: Lourdes creates a *communitas* in which social hierarchies are levelled and a shared vulnerability before God is experienced (Turner & Turner, 1978). Within this liminal space, confession takes on particular resonance, as pilgrims—many of whom may not have approached the sacrament for years—find themselves moved to seek reconciliation.

‘This was the first time I had been to Confession in years. I was afraid at first but the fact it is just a normal part of the day in Lourdes made all the difference’ (Helper, age 27).

The central importance of Our Lady at Lourdes holds significant theological implications concerning the sacrament of confession. Catholic tradition aligns Mary with the role of *mediatrix*, someone who guides souls towards her Son and the mercy He bestows (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964:62). The message conveyed by Bernadette's apparitions, emphasising penance and prayer, implicitly functions as a catechetical reminder of the necessity for conversion and reconciliation (Cranston, 1955). Pilgrims visiting Lourdes, immersed in this Marian environment through the torchlight procession, the recitation of the rosary, and prayer at the grotto, often report an increased longing for sacramental reconciliation (Ziegler, 2008).

12. Young people and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The decline in sacramental confession among young Catholics remains an ongoing concern within both ecclesial and academic circles. Hoge et al. (2001), in their seminal research on young adult Catholics in the United States, identified that regular confession was among the least practiced Catholic devotions among individuals under thirty-five years of age, with numerous respondents reporting that they found the sacrament to be anxiety-inducing, irrelevant, or spiritually incomprehensible. Similar trends have been observed in the United Kingdom and across Western Europe (Bullivant, 2019; Hornsby-Smith, 1987).

‘I remember making my confession when I was young. But afterwards, it was not really a thing to think about. No one I knew seemed to go to confession, so I never thought about it’ (Helper, aged 18).

Researchers have identified several interconnected factors that inhibit young people's engagement with confession. These include insufficient catechetical preparation, the absence of regular experience of the sacrament in family or parish contexts, a cultural climate that is sceptical of institutional mediation of forgiveness, and the psychological vulnerability

involved in verbal confession (Rymarz, 2012; Whitehead & Whitehead, 2010). The shift in moral formation patterns—away from an emphasis on sin, guilt, and reparation towards a more therapeutic language of self-fulfilment and wellbeing—has also been identified as contributing to the marginalisation of confession in the spiritual lives of the young (Bellah et al., 1985).

‘For many young adults, when we have ‘an issue’ we probably think of ‘talking therapies’ such as speaking to a counsellor (an ‘expert’) or a trusted friend and the idea of sharing very private matters with a stranger has become alien to us. This is mostly because young people do not understand the practice well enough, but equally importantly, they do not see their parents or adults engaging in the sacrament’ (Helper, aged 37).

In the face of these challenges, specific pastoral environments have consistently demonstrated a persistent capacity to attract young individuals to the sacraments. Gatherings such as World Youth Day, diocesan youth retreats, and pilgrimage expeditions are repeatedly recognised as moments of renewed engagement with the sacraments (Mannion, 2000; Rymarz & Graham, 2004). The pilgrimage setting, in particular, shares numerous liminal and communal features that Turner and Turner (1978) identified as conducive to fostering profound religious experiences. Young pilgrims, removed from their customary environments and immersed within a community of faith, often exhibit increased receptivity to sacramental invitations compared to the conditions of ordinary parish life.

‘When I went home from Lourdes and told my mum I had been to confession, she was a bit amazed. It was not something we had ever discussed, despite my family being Catholic. I think she was pleased at the same time’ (Helper, aged 19).

13. Lourdes as a pastoral context for youth reconciliation

The Lourdes pilgrimage has become a regular feature of youth ministry programs for numerous dioceses and Catholic educational institutions in England, Ireland, and across continental Europe. The Lourdes Youth Service, various diocesan youth pilgrimages, and the international *Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, with which it is my privilege to serve, collectively offer organised opportunities for young volunteers and pilgrims to serve the sick and actively engage in the full sacramental and liturgical life of the sanctuary (*Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, 2023). Qualitative studies involving young pilgrims consistently

document Lourdes as a transformative experience, with many participants indicating that they approached the sacrament of reconciliation for the first time in several years or that their confession at Lourdes constituted a significantly distinct experience from previous encounters in parish contexts (Ziegler, 2008).

Multiple features within the Lourdes environment appear to significantly contribute to this heightened receptivity. The testimony of suffering—the presence of the infirm and the moribund at the sanctuary—confronts young pilgrims with the fundamental realities of human vulnerability, mortality, and the necessity for divine intervention, thereby establishing conditions that Lonergan (1972) might characterise as an intellectual and moral conversion. The experience of serving others, which is central to the *Hospitalité* model, engenders a kenotic self-sacrifice that is inherently preparatory for the humility requisite for sacramental confession. The beauty and silence of the grotto prayer, the communal catharsis of the torchlight procession, and the intimacy of the reconciliation chapels collectively foster a pastoral environment markedly distinct from the hurried anonymity of Saturday morning confessions in the parish (Harris, 1999).

Furthermore, the multilingual and multicultural character of Lourdes— the experience of praying and confessing alongside pilgrims from every continent— reinforces the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament. Young people encounter, perhaps for the first time with full affective force, that the Church is genuinely catholic: universal, diverse, and united in its dependence on the mercy of God. This Catholic identity formation is identified in the literature as a significant factor in sustained sacramental engagement (Rymarz & Graham, 2004).

14. Implications for Catholic Education and Youth Ministry

There have been many times when I have heard young people say they wished Lourdes reflected their experience of the Church when they returned home, often contrasting Lourdes as fun, engaging, and characterised by beautiful liturgies, in contrast to their rather different experience in their home parish. While it is always important to challenge the idea of Lourdes as some sort of panacea and instead remind young people that Lourdes is not the destination, but rather, the motivation towards holiness, their accounts do nevertheless suggest several implications for those engaged in Catholic education and youth ministry. First, the sacrament of reconciliation is most effectively renewed in young people not primarily through catechetical instruction in the classroom—though this remains essential—but through immersive pastoral experiences that engage the whole person: mind, will, emotion, and body. Pilgrimage to Lourdes, understood theologically as a participation in the penitential and intercessory spirituality of the sanctuary, constitutes precisely such an experience.

Secondly, the pastoral approach at Lourdes—characterised by its accessibility, multilingualism, non-coerciveness, and integration within a wider context of prayer, service,

and communal worship—provides instructive principles applicable to sacramental practice more broadly. The responsibility of Catholic educators and parish ministers is to incorporate elements of the Lourdes spirit into conventional ecclesial settings: to cultivate environments where the sacrament of reconciliation is perceived as an invitation to mercy, rather than as an obligation driven by fear (Francis, 2015).

Finally, the integration of service and reconciliation at Lourde, where young individuals serve the sick while actively participating in the complete sacramental life of the sanctuary, implies that the rejuvenation of sacramental practice among the youth may be closely linked to the revitalisation of a culture of service and self-giving. Catholic schools and youth organisations that incorporate experiences of service alongside sacramental engagement may discover that these two aspects mutually reinforce each other (Groome, 1998).

15. Signs of renewal?

Several converging factors seem to account for this renewal. Initially, there exists what may be termed a craving for the tactile experience. Generation Z has matured in a digital environment where much of human interaction has become intangible and mediated through technology. The sacraments—comprising water, oil, bread, wine, and the laying on of hands—provide what no application or algorithm can offer: a genuine, embodied encounter with the sacred. As theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet (1995) contended, the sacraments are not merely symbolic; they are the very site of the Church's encounter with the Risen Christ, effecting that which they signify.

Secondly, there is the countercultural appeal of tradition. In a culture of relentless novelty, the ancient rites of the Church — some unchanged for two millennia — carry a gravitas and rootedness that many young people find compelling. The rise of interest in the Traditional Latin Mass, whilst not universally shared, is symptomatic of a broader attraction to liturgical beauty, reverence, and depth (Kaufmann, 2022). Even among those who prefer the Ordinary Form, there is evidence of a desire for more reverent, aesthetically serious worship.

Thirdly, the sacrament of Reconciliation appears to be experiencing a particular resurgence. In an age of cancel culture and performative public confession on social media, the Catholic sacrament of Confession — private, absolved, and genuinely transformative — speaks powerfully to a generation acutely aware of moral failure and the need for forgiveness. Bishop Robert Barron (2023) has noted the queues for Confession at World Youth Day events as evidence of this deep sacramental thirst among young adults.

Conclusion

Catholic theology concerning confession, penance, absolution, and forgiveness has undergone significant development over two millennia. Evolving from the public canonical penance of the patristic era, through the emergence of private auricular confession rooted in Celtic monastic traditions, to the doctrinally articulated and liturgically reformed sacrament as it is understood today. Throughout this historical progression, certain core convictions have remained unchanged: that sin is a reality that necessitates repentance, that God’s mercy is abundantly accessible to the contrite, and that the Church has been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Nevertheless, the manner in which these convictions have been articulated—whether through rites, discipline, theological language, or pastoral practice—has varied considerably.

The Second Vatican Council and its aftermath represent the most recent and, in many respects, the most far-reaching reform of the sacrament. By recovering the scriptural and patristic sources, by reframing the sacrament in terms of reconciliation and mercy rather than juridical process, and by attending to the ecclesial and communal dimensions of sin and forgiveness, the Council opened new possibilities for the theology and pastoral practice of penance. Whether these possibilities have been fully realised remains a matter of debate.

Finally, the decline in religious practice globally has been felt particularly in the decline in numbers accessing the Sacrament of Reconciliation, particularly among the young, notwithstanding recent evidence of a return to the sacraments and an interest among the so-called ‘Gen Z’. While it may be easy to blame social media, relativism and the many distractions facing the young, the lack of role modelling on the part of adults cannot be ignored. Religious ‘practice’ is called ‘practice’ for a reason – it has to be practised, and its repetition and rhythm is an essential part of its efficacy in helping the individual to attain holiness and to live authentically.

References

- Apostolic Penitentiary. (2020). Note on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic. Vatican Press.
- Aquinas, T. (1947). *Summa Theologiae* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Benziger Brothers. (Original work published c. 1265–1274)
- Barron, R. (2023). *Seeds of the Word: Finding God in the culture*. Word on Fire.

- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. University of California Press.
- Boufflet, J., & Boutry, P. (1997). *Un signe dans le ciel: Les apparitions de la Vierge*. Grasset
- Bullivant, S. (2019). *Europe's young adults and religion: Findings from the European Social Survey to inform the Synod of Bishops*. Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, St Mary's University.
- Calvin, J. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (F. L. Battles, Trans.; J. T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster Press. (Original work published 1559)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1994). Geoffrey Chapman.
- Chauvet, L.-M. (1995). *Symbol and sacrament: A sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence* (P. Madigan & M. Beaumont, Trans.). Liturgical Press.
- Claude.ai for information sorting and sifting
- Coffey, D. (2001). *The sacrament of reconciliation*. Liturgical Press.
- Cranston, R. (1955). *The miracle of Lourdes*. McGraw-Hill.
- Dallen, J. (1986). *The reconciling community: The rite of penance*. Liturgical Press.
- Faggioli, M. (2019). *Pope Francis: Tradition in transition*. Paulist Press.
- Fitzgerald, A. D. (Ed.). (1999). *Augustine through the ages: An encyclopedia*. Eerdmans.
- Francis. (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium [Apostolic exhortation]*. Vatican Press.
- Francis. (2015). *Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*. Vatican Press.
- Groome, T. H. (1998). *Educating for life: A spiritual vision for every teacher and parent*. Thomas More Press.
- Hamilton, S. (2001). *The practice of penance, 900–1050*. Royal Historical Society.
- Harris, R. (1999). *Lourdes: Body and spirit in the secular age*. Viking.
- Hoge, D. R., Johnson, W., & Luidens, D. A. (2001). *Vanishing boundaries: The religion of mainline Protestant baby boomers*. Westminster/John Knox.
- Hornsby-Smith, M. P. (1987). *Roman Catholics in England: Studies in social structure since the Second World War*. Cambridge University Press.
- International Commission on English in the Liturgy. (1975). *Rite of penance*. Catholic Book Publishing.

- John Paul II. (1984). *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* [Post-synodal apostolic exhortation]. Vatican Press.
- Kaufmann, E. (2022). *Born again: The return of the traditional in a secular age*. Polity Press.
- Lombard, P. (2007). *The sentences, Book 4: On the doctrine of signs* (G. Silano, Trans.). Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. (Original work published c. 1150)
- Loneragan, B. J. F. (1972). *Method in theology*. Herder and Herder.
- Mannion, G. (2000). *Ecclesiology and postmodernity: Questions for the Church in our time*. Liturgical Press.
- McNeill, J. T., & Gamer, H. M. (1938). *Medieval handbooks of penance: A translation of the principal libri poenitentiales*. Columbia University Press.
- Mongillo, D. (2000). The sacrament of penance in the teaching of the Council of Trent. In P. Phan (Ed.), *The theology of the sacraments* (pp. 143–168). Liturgical Press.
- O'Donnell, C. (2020). *Ecclesia de Eucharistia and the sacrament of penance*. *Theological Studies*, 81(2), 301–319.
- Osborne, K. B. (2000). *Reconciliation and justification: The sacrament and its theology*. Paulist Press.
- Poschmann, B. (1964). *Penance and the anointing of the sick* (F. Courtney, Trans.). Herder and Herder.
- Rahner, K. (1969). *Theological investigations, Vol. XV: Penance in the early Church*. Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Rausch, T. P. (2003). *Reconciling faith and reason: Apologists, evangelists, and theologians in a divided Church*. Liturgical Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting* (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Rymarz, R., & Graham, J. (2004). Going to World Youth Day: The views and attitudes of Australian young adult pilgrims. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 9(3), 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436042000294697>
- Rymarz, R. (2012). Secularisation and its discontents: Young adult Catholics and religious practice. *Journal of Religious Education*, 60(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004723951206000102>
- Sanctuaire Notre-Dame de Lourdes. (2024). Pastoral and pilgrim information. <https://www.lourdes-france.org>
- Tanner, N. P. (Ed.). (1990). *Decrees of the ecumenical councils (Vol. 2)*. Sheed and Ward.

- Turner, V., & Turner, E. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: Anthropological perspectives*. Columbia University Press.
- Uttley, S.R. (2026). 'Pilgrimage as *Aletheia*: the experiential unfolding of truth in a sacred journey.' London: Koinonia Educational <https://www.koinonia-educational.com/2026/02/15/pilgrimage-as-aletheia-the-experiential-unfolding-of-truth-in-a-sacred-journey/>
- Vatican Council II. (1996). *The conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (A. Flannery, Ed., rev. ed.). Dominican Publications.
- Whitehead, E. E., & Whitehead, J. D. (2010). *Transforming our painful emotions: Spiritual resources in anger, shame, grief, fear, and loneliness*. Orbis Books.
- Ziegler, J. J. (2008). *Sacramental theology: Means of grace, ways of life* (2nd ed.). Liturgical Press.