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BOOK REVIEW

Dominic Vechoor, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Learning from the East and the West*, OIRSI No. 394, Vadavathoor, Kottayam: OIRSI Publications, 2014, ISBN: 978-93-82762-19-5; pp. xxx + 255

This book by Father Dr Dominic Vechoor, professor at *Paurastha Vidyapeetham*, Vadavathoor, Kerala, is a revised version of the Doctoral Dissertation written under the guidance of Prof. Basilio Petrà and defended in *Alfonsianum*, Rome. This book is divided into six chapters apart from the General Introduction and General Conclusion and it has got three appendices and a good bibliography. The General Introduction entitled "Pastoral Context and Theological Orientations" presents the milieu in which this study was undertaken and the basic moral, theological and pastoral principles that play an important role in the context of this very useful but much ignored sacrament. It is interesting to see that in this section the author tries to develop an Eastern approach to Catholic Moral Theology. According to Vechoor, "being faithful to the common Catholic teachings on faith and morals, each individual Church develops her own ways and expressions to explain the same faith and morals of the Church" and that "the same faith and morals of the Church must be studied, explained and interpreted in the light of her different and legitimate cultural backgrounds and ecclesial traditions" (p. 11). However, the author cautions at the very outset that what he intends to propose is not a new moral theology, but "only a new understanding of the Catholic moral theology from an Eastern perspective" (p. 12).

The first chapter entitled "Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Easter Gift of the Risen Lord," the author, based on Jn 20:19-23, presents this sacrament as a gift of the risen Lord to the Church (p. 15). Thereafter, Vechoor continues to present the manifold usefulness of this sacrament based on papal documents. This chapter also has a section entitled "Key notions to appreciate the Sacrament of Reconciliation," which summarizes under different subtitles many positive elements

this sacrament offers. The author highlights the shift of emphasis which took place in this sacrament as a sacrament of mercy and healing from the medieval concept of judgement (p. 20). He concludes this chapter by stating that "the extent to which the validity of the administration of this sacrament exists cannot be determined on the Western conception alone nor according to the decisions made by the council of Trent alone" (p. 21).

In the second chapter, having the title "Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Present Scenario," the author analyses the reasons why the practice of sacramental confession is dying and among the reasons highlights "the eclipse of the sense of sin" and "the changes in the understanding of sin," "crisis around the sense of God and the crisis around the sense of man," growing materialism and ethical relativism, and deficiencies in the practice and administration of the sacrament down through the centuries, etc. as the major reasons. According to the author, in the traditional administration, this sacrament has not been felt as a healing event and was mostly characterized by "high degree of routine ritualism" and "has lost much of its ecclesial character and has become the most individualized of all sacraments." Vechoor observes that "the early Church had the firm conviction that the sin and holiness of each Christian affected the Church as a whole," and laments that "the medieval penitential practices reduced confession to a merely private act, a priest-penitent encounter with its concomitant judicial aspects" (p. 31). This chapter reminds the reader that the Second Vatican Council, in LG 11, rediscovered and "emphasized both the personal and ecclesial aspects of sin and conversion" (p. 32) and is concluded by reminding everyone, using the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, "faith is the soul of penance and love is the form," that "the way and manner of" administering this sacrament by the priest has a significant role in the functional efficacy of it.

Third chapter, which is the longest too, under the title "Sacrament of Reconciliation down through the Centuries," gives the reader an excellent historical survey of this sacrament (pp. 33-90). This chapter contains a beautiful exposition of the Biblical and Patristic concepts of the forgiveness of sins and the development of this sacrament through the centuries in the West, which is followed by a subsection entitled "Some Characteristic Features of the Eastern Understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation" (pp. 49-55). This is followed by an informative exposition of the East Syriac Tradition in this regard. Here the author gets a vivid picture of the rite of reconciliation used

in the East Syriac tradition know as the rite of absolution (*taksâ d' husâya*) as well as the writing of East Syriac Fathers like Aphrahat, Ephrem and Narsai. This section also contains some very valuable information about the penitential practices of the St Thomas Christians of India and the later development of this sacrament after the coming of Western missionaries.

Regarding the public penance system practised in the pre-Portuguese period among the St Thomas Christians, the author seems to agree with what the missionary Paulinus of St Bartholomeus narrated. According to this narrative, the public penance practised among the Thomas Christians was excommunication by the parish priest and elders and its remittance was also done by the same group and the excommunicated could attend the Eucharistic celebration (pp. 78-79). What is striking in this context is the involvement of laity in such cases.

Regarding private confession, the author asserts: "It was customary among the St Thomas Christians of the pre-Diamper period to make 'confession of sins' before they received Holy Communion. However it is difficult to specify what kind of confession had been in use among them, that is to say, whether it was general or individual" (p. 80). The book also cites the testimony of Joseph the Indian from the book of F. Raulin, according to which 'among the Malabarians, the sacrament of penance and confession exists as we (the Latins) have' (p. 81, n. 109). The author also seems to agree with the findings of Placid J. Podipara that "[T]he private confession in Malabar Church was generally known as 'pizhamoolal'" (p. 82), namely, answering affirmatively or negatively to the questions that the priest would ask regarding the violation of commandments that the penitent might have committed. From all these descriptions and citations, the reader gets perhaps confused at the end regarding the conclusion that can be drawn from this section. It seems that the narratives of Joseph the Indian cannot be taken at face value. And again, the reports of the missionaries are to be evaluated case by case, because there is the possibility that some missionaries were reporting about the situation where the customs changed after the arrival of missionaries. In other words, missionaries themselves might have introduced the western practices and another missionary who happened to be in the place thereafter may report that everything is taking place as in the West. Though the author cites hitherto conducted researches in this field by Podipara, Pathikulangara, Anikuzhikattil, and others on this interesting topic, this subject needs further study and research.

Chapter IV, entitled "Sacrament of Reconciliation as a Sacrament of Mercy and Healing," gives a synthesis of the magisterial teachings and theological exposition of this much needed sacrament and it is concluded by a summary presentation of the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in this regard (pp. 91-128). Though Syriac Fathers Aphrahat and Ephrem are studied again in this chapter (pp. 106-108), the reader may not be happy at the end from the amount of knowledge that section offers. In the chapter V entitled "The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Canonical Praxes," Vechoor gives a bird's eye view of the norms, regarding the Sacrament of Penance, that are present in CIC and CCEO. Some of the CCEO canons are also explained in this section and it would surely help those who are not initiated in Canon Law to understand and appreciate the law of the Church regarding this sacrament. Chapter six entitled "Effective Administration and Reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation" (pp. 143-166), deals with pertinent issues in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation like reserved sins, sacramental seal, formula of absolution, repentance, etc. This chapter is followed by a general conclusion (pp. 167-176) having the title, "Theological Insights, Pastoral Implications and Future Possibilities," in which the author, influenced by the East Syrian Tradition, highlights the medical imagery for this sacrament and insists on a healthy blending of the healing and judging dimensions as the antidote for the diminishing interest in this sacrament. This section of general conclusion is followed by Appendix I which contains the "Formulae of Absolution" in the Latin, Syro-Malankara and Syro-Malabar Churches, Appendix II (Motu Proprio *Misericordia Dei* by Pope John Paul II) and Appendix III entitled "Instruction from the Apostolic See Regarding the Delicts Against the Sanctity of the Sacrament of Penance that contains *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*. This book is also endowed with a much useful Bibliography (pp. 220-255).

This book is much useful and informative to everyone interested in Catholic Theology, especially in the sacramental discipline, and it is an essential reading for the students of Theology and I wish and pray that this book gets wider readership and may be even adopted as a text book in Catholic seminaries and faculties.

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