

THE SINFUL TALK OF SIN*

Vimal Tirimanna♦

Without the concept of sin, the sacrament of reconciliation has no meaning. If there is no sin, then, there is no need to reconcile! Monica Hellwig expresses this intrinsic link between the concepts of sin and reconciliation within the Christian tradition when she says that the sacrament of reconciliation "can be meaningful only if there is an authentic understanding of the pervasive need to 'turn' from one's sins. In other words, the meaning of the sacrament of penance is dependent upon an understanding of the meaning of sin."¹

Today, there are clear signs not only in the so-called "developed world" but also in the so-called "developing world" to support the affirmation that the sacrament of reconciliation is fast declining in its popularity. Some 25 years ago, Pope John Paul II repeated the phrase used by the Synod of Bishops to refer to this decline: "the Sacrament of Penance is in crisis."² Various reasons are given for this crisis. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* (1984), Pope John Paul II attributed it to what he called "the loss of the sense of sin."³ There are others who hold that the contemporary loss of the sense of

*This article was originally published in Polish language in *Homo Dei* 297.4 (Sept-Oct 2010) 24-36.

♦**Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR**, after having completed his doctoral studies at the Alphonsianum in Rome in 1995, has been teaching moral theology at the National Seminary in Kandy, Sri Lanka, since 1995, and is an invited professor of moral theology at the Alphonsianum since 2005. Since 1997, he has been serving the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC, and since 2002, he has been the Executive Secretary of the same OTC. His theological articles have been published in international theological journals and in some collections of essays. He has edited two books, and written two books. E-mail: vimalred@gmail.com

¹Monica Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times*, (Revised Edition), Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc., 1984, 14.

²Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), no: 28.

³Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), no:18.

sin in the Church is an over-reaction to an over-emphasis on sin in the past. Some others have tried to blame the reforms of the Second Vatican Council as responsible for the decline of the sacrament of reconciliation. Yet others have held poor catechesis on the importance of this sacrament (and the resulting ignorance of the lay faithful) as the main reason for its decline. Then, there are those who blame the non-availability of well-disposed priests in the confessional. The list of reasons is endless. In this article, I wish to point out “the sinful talk of sin” as a serious reason for the current unpopularity of this sacrament of healing. I will first discuss what this concept means. Then, I will highlight a few instances in the Church where such a “sinful talk of sin” takes place.

The Meaning of the Concept

It was the renowned Redemptorist moral theologian Bernard Häring who coined the phrase “sinful talk of sin.”⁴ According to him, when we empty the meaning of what sin really means and when we try to blame others while excusing ourselves for our own sins, we do talk sinfully of the concept of sin. Häring also includes the speaking of sin in a way that increases the guilt complexes in others and in ourselves, speaking more of sins against laws and precepts than of the sin of refusing God’s honour, gratitude and love, speaking of sins by being preoccupied only about our privileges while conveniently forgetting sins against justice and peace, etc. as some examples of this “sinful talk of sin.”⁵ For him, our talk of sin is “most sinful” if and when we talk as if the sin of Adam and Eve were greater than the grace of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.⁶ In this article too, we wish to use the phrase “sinful talk of sin” in the same sense as that of Häring, but with a few more contemporary instances of sinful talk of sin in Church life that have really paved the way for the decline of the sacrament of reconciliation.

A Few Contemporary Examples of the “Sinful Talk of Sin”

1. Sin as a Mere Violation of a Law

To consider the violation of a law as ‘sin’ has been part of the inherited Catholic tradition. Based on a legal interpretation of how the first parents committed sin in Genesis Chapter 3, it has been customary to use this rather simple and neat definition. Even St.

⁴Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, Vol.1, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1978, 378.

⁵Ibid., 378-381.

⁶Ibid., 379.

Augustine defined sin basically as a violation of law. While such a definition is not fully wrong, it can pave the way for an exclusively legalistic interpretation of what sin is, as it really happened in the Catholic tradition, especially in the post-Tridentine period. During this period, morality itself came to be “seen to a large extent as expressible in legal pronouncements, and could therefore be handled and interpreted according to principles of jurisprudence.”⁷ This is described vividly by Hellwig when she writes:

It is also true that salvation is not by the law of Christ but by the loving compassion of Christ, not by the law of the Church but by the welcome and reconciliation mediated in the community, embodying Christ as the compassion of God. The history of the Church and its practices of reconciliation shows a long and complicated struggle in the Christian community to realize this and grow to the full stature of Christ as the true elder brother who understands the compassion of the Father and the dynamics of the wayward brother's return. It has not been easy for the Christian community or its official representatives to understand the Father of the parable and to distinguish reconciliation with God and his creation from juridical criminal proceedings of secular societies in our sinful history. Yet again and again the biblical inspiration breaks through to correct both the practice and the theory.⁸

Sin, as defined in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, is more to do with personal, relational aspects than with legal aspects. It is basically a rupture or a breaking of a personal relationship, especially the relationship with God. This is most evident in the account of the first sin given in Genesis Chapter 3 where the three-fold relationship between God and our first parents, between the first parents themselves, and between the first parents and creation itself, is ruptured. According to Hellwig, sin is “the condition or state of being focused on goals other than God, finding meaning in life without ultimate reference to God.”⁹ Perhaps, the most striking biblical illustration of this is Jesus' parable on the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32). No one advises the prodigal son to return to the Father. He himself realises how his own life is falling apart each passing day. He himself experiences not only hunger and degradation of a Jew employed to look after swine (which were “unclean” according to the Jewish law). It is he himself who realises how meaningless his life is without his loving Father. And finally, it is he himself who feels the

⁷John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, 135.

⁸Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 25.

⁹*Ibid.*, 14.

need to go back to the Father. The story has him “coming to himself,” “coming to his senses,” a Hebrew expression for repentance.¹⁰ In other words, sin in this parable of Jesus, has nothing to do with a particular transgression of a law as such, and that is why here repentance is mainly to do with a re-establishing of a personal relationship.

Therefore, those who tend to limit sin and conversion exclusively only to laws, be they to do with natural law or the Church law, are surely talking of sin in a sinful way. According to them, keeping of laws, proper moral behaviour, etc. are sufficient indications of a true reconciliation. This is precisely what St. Paul condemned vehemently:

Sin is deliberate or unrecognized detachment from God, orientation of human striving away from God. It is the placing of ultimate trust in anything other than God, even the placing of trust in moral behaviour or good conduct according to the Law of God (inasmuch as we are able really to know such a law). This, of course, is why the letters of Paul in the New Testament contain such harsh sayings about the impossibility of salvation by the law.¹¹

2. Emphasis on Individual Sins over and above Social Sins

A few years ago, the American moralist, Bryan Hehir wrote: “Social sin is a situation in which the very organization of some level of society systematically functions to the detriment of groups or individuals in society.”¹²

As Genesis Chapter 3 itself clearly teaches us, sin is not merely to do with an individual person. It affects personal relationships; it has social dimensions. For centuries, however, especially, in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, the stress in the Church was on individual personal sin, almost forgetting the social sins. That is why in the well-known moral manuals of this period, there is almost not much mentioned on social sins as such, in comparison to the space they devoted to individual sins. Thanks to the renewal of Vatican-II, the Latin American liberation theologies of the 1970’s, and the studies of other human sciences such as sociology and anthropology, today, in general, there is a greater awareness of social sins within the Church. Some of the theologians, in their over-enthusiasm began even to speak of sinful social structures. Pope John Paul II, while

¹⁰Ibid., 15.

¹¹Ibid., 21.

¹²As cited in Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, “Peacemaking as a Way of Life,” in John A. Coleman (ed.), *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 307.

acknowledging the many types of social sins, cautions however, not to forget that social structures themselves cannot sin, but it is the persons who sit behind those structures, who create and sustain those structures, and so, it is they who need to bear the responsibility for such social sins.¹³ Thus, those who completely ignore social sins as well as those who simplistically put all the blame for social sins on non-personal structures, are surely engaged in “sinful talk of sin.”

3. Sin as an Act Cut Off from the Sinner

These days, we often hear the Christian rhetoric that we need to separate sin from the sinner. While it is true that there ought to be a clear distinction between the sin and the sinner (especially in the pastoral field), one needs to keep in mind that they are inseparable. This is because no sin is possible without a ‘sinner’, without an agent! Sin is not something that merely hangs in the air without any moral agent, without any sinner. However, in history, such a separation of sin and the sinner was intensified when in many places the sacrament became a superficial formality due mainly to the teaching of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which said that every baptized person must confess at least once a year, preferably for Easter. The preoccupation with sin than with the sinner was further reinforced by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which stipulated that every mortal sin has to be confessed according to the number and species. Consequently, both the confessors and penitents were preoccupied with the acts of sin than the sinner (person/agent) who committed those sins. Although the Second Vatican Council did invite to view the entire sacrament in a holistic way, even today, there are both confessors and penitents who are obsessed with the acts of sin than the person who commits them. This ends up in an act-centred morality which eventually ends up as another form of sinful talk of sin.

As Karl Rahner had correctly pointed out some years ago, what the Fourth Lateran Council taught was that Catholics “are obliged to receive the sacrament of reconciliation if, and only if, they have committed a sin that is subjectively and objectively grave.”¹⁴ The well-known Canon Law expert, Ladislav Orsy corroborates this when he says even in the present Code of Canon Law, there is a “fundamental assumption” that those who are “conscious of being guilty of mortal sins” are obliged to go for individual auricular

¹³Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), no: 16.

¹⁴Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XXIII (Final Writings), translated by Joseph Donceel and Hugh M. Riley, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 206.

confession which is the ordinary means of reconciliation in the Catholic Church.¹⁵ While this Church teaching in no way excludes those who wish to approach the sacrament for other types of sins, including venial sins, in this Lateran Council teaching one notices the prominence given to the personal consciousness of sin and guilt, on the part of the penitent. There is a personal involvement on the part of the penitent (in the sacrament) that avoids mechanical, and even superficial confession of sins that is so common even today. Pope John Paul II himself underlined the importance of personal involvement in the sacrament by the penitent when he reminded us:

Through the centuries, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has developed in different forms, but it has always kept the same basic structure: it necessarily entails not only the action of the minister – only a Bishop or priest, who judges and absolves, tends and heals in the name of Christ – but also the actions of the penitent: contrition, confession and satisfaction.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the stress only on the objective and external aspects of sins, almost completely forgetting the subjective and interior aspects, tends to make confession a superficial thing fully cut off from the penitent, something done mechanically without any deep personal conversion or personal experience. No wonder many complain that they do not feel any difference after making their confession! Thus, the exclusive stress on the acts of sin is also a “sinful talk of sin.”

One must also immediately add that some popular beliefs now prevalent in the Church, such as “we can directly confess to God,” “why confess to a priest who is also a human being, a sinner”, “I receive pardon for all my sins at the penitential rite of the Eucharist, and so, do not need another sacrament of reconciliation,” etc., form the other distorted extreme of the rich concept of Christian forgiveness granted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

4. To Forget that Jesus Came for Sinners

Another sinful talk of sin is the prevalent tendency within some quarters of the Church to exclude sinners from ecclesial life. If there is one single message of Jesus in the gospels regarding the purpose of his earthly mission, it is that he came to call sinners and not the righteous, which was a scandal for those who indulged in human piety of that society. Even today, such exaggerated piety (a piety

¹⁵Ladislav Orsy, “General Absolution: New Law, Old Traditions, Some Questions”, *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 678. See also, Canon 989 of the *Code of Canon Law* (1983).

¹⁶Pope John Paul II, *Misericordia Dei* (2002), 1.

based mainly on laws, and so, identifies sin as a mere breaking of a law) by some, tend to exclude the spiritually vulnerable of our contemporary societies from “the privileged” before God. Commenting on the parable of the Prodigal Son, Hellwig writes:

Human piety tends rather to divide people into two categories, the sinners and the just. It even claims to be able to distinguish between them. All this is radically challenged by Jesus, in the second half of the story which juxtaposes the petty, judgmental meanness of the respectable elder brother with the indiscriminately welcoming compassion of the father.¹⁷

The Catholic tradition has always upheld the belief that it is God who forgives a repentant sinner, and so, the minister of the sacrament is only God’s instrument in this benevolent act of God. The minister is only the mediator (on behalf of the Church) of that forgiveness of God. As such, “the minister of reconciliation should always remember that the sacrament has been instituted for men and women who are sinners. Therefore, barring manifest proof to the contrary, he will receive the penitents who approach the confessional taking for granted their good will to be reconciled with the merciful God.”¹⁸ The utter ignorance (or indifference?) of some Church personnel of God’s strange and generous ways of dispensing his abundant mercy with regard to repentant sinners (as revealed in both the OT and NT) is not only an institutional block to repentance in the Church, but surely a scandal – a sinful talk of sin!

5. Penance as “an Earning” of God’s Forgiveness

Sinful talk of sin can also occur due to erroneous beliefs or misinterpretations of the rich Christian tradition of reconciliation itself. For example, the popular but erroneous belief that the forgiveness of God and the reconciliation of the sinner happen as a consequence of the repentance and conversion. In other words, reconciliation is something the sinner has to earn or something he deserves. But we know that God’s mercy is not something none of us deserve, but it is a generous gift of his out of his benevolence. We know that to repent is to be forgiven. That is to say that according to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, “there is no such thing as meriting

¹⁷Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 16-17.

¹⁸The Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vade Mecum for Confessors Concerning some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, as re-produced in *Origins* 26.38 (March 13, 1997) 621.

or earning forgiveness and reconciliation; one can only accept it as undeserved but unstinting mercy.”¹⁹

Of course, it is true that in the complex history of the practice of Christian reconciliation, the concept of penance has been an essential part of the various rites of forgiveness, down through the ages. Unfortunately, this term “penance” is misleading because it gives the erroneous idea of paying a price for an offence committed. While this is true in secular practice of jurisprudence, there is no literal parallel of it in the forgiving practice of Jesus, as so convincingly manifested in the gospels. If at all, what is evident in the gospels is an act of thanksgiving for the free gift of forgiveness, and never an act of paying back in the form of a penance or an act of earning God’s forgiveness. One of the leading theological controversies of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was in fact, this precise point, i.e., forgiveness can never be earned, but forgiveness is a free gift of God. Therefore the doing of penance, can never be seen as punitive or compensatory. It cannot have any role other than accepting of reconciliation as pure gift.²⁰

6. Sacrament of Reconciliation as a Mere Ritual

Another sinful talk of sin can occur when the sacrament of reconciliation is wrongly perceived as a mere ritual wherein sins are just rattled off, and forgiveness is automatically granted. Anyone who goes through the long and complicated history of this sacrament would know that originally, individual confession was not meant to be a mere confession of sins, but a “manifestation of conscience”. According to Hellwig, such a manifestation of conscience amounted to “a disclosure of one’s thoughts and feelings, fears and hopes, loathing and striving temptations and inspirations.”²¹ It was meant to be a loving, compassionate guidance of a repentant sinner by a minister of the Church. But unfortunately, in the course of history, this very rich concept got badly distorted due to the wrong notion that the confessional was a tribunal and that the confessor was a judge more than the reflection of a loving Father. Some vestiges of this wrong concept is responsible even today for driving some penitents away from the confessional.²² However, today, it is

¹⁹Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*, 25.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 25-26.

²¹*Ibid.*, 47.

²²This happens in spite of the repeated reminders by the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) that the Confessor must always remember that he is both judge and physician, a dispenser of God’s justice and mercy. See Canons 978/1.

precisely this original idea of a minister of the Church accompanying a repentant sinner which is badly needed. That is why the writer firmly believes that the sacrament of reconciliation, if correctly understood, is the best ecclesial locality where consciences of Christians can be properly formed. For this, the formation of priests to hear confessions, as the worthy representative of God and the Christian community, is a must. Or else, they will tend to engage in "sinful talk of sin."

7. When the Confessor Is a Rigorist or a Laxist²³

Consequently, it is extremely important for the confessor today, to follow a middle path between God's generous, compassionate forgiveness on the one side, and the human fragility and the tendency towards sin, on the other side. That is to say, it is very important for the confessor today, to avoid human exaggerations of those two poles of reality: the extremes of Jansenistic rigorism and relativistic laxism. In various eras of Church's history, both Jansenism and Laxism had done enormous damage to the rich Christian heritage of Reconciliation, traces of which are still trying to lift their heads within the Church life, even today.²⁴ The confessor is only the representative of God, and so, can never act as if it is he who grants pardon. Any confessor who erroneously usurps the role of God in forgiving sins, either by his own rigoristic attitudes or by his laxistic attitudes, surely falls into another form of "sinful talk of sin."

8. Sexual Sins as the Worst of All Sins

Those confessors and penitents who are obsessed only with sins against the 6th and the 9th commandments, too, partake in a sort of "sinful talk of sin." Although the over-emphasis on sexual sins has a long history in the Church,²⁵ and was re-enforced thanks to the post-Tridentine concept of *parvity of matter*,²⁶ sexual sins can never be more serious than any other type of sin. Vestiges of this erroneous teaching can be seen today in the popular press which uses the word "sin" to

²³The historical context within which these two extremes thrived is well described by John Mahoney. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 135-143.

²⁴For a substantial discussion of Jansenism and Laxism, see Louis Vereecke, *Da Gulielmo D'Ockham A Sant'Alfonso De Liguori*, Milano: Edizioni Paoline, 1990, 715-757.

²⁵Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 33.

²⁶This is the traditional post-Tridentine concept that held that all sins against the 6th and the 9th commandments are more serious, and they all amount to mortal, if not grave sins. See for example, Gerald Coleman, *Human Sexuality: An All-Embracing Gift*, New York: Alba House, 1992, 33-42.

refer exclusively to “sexual misconduct, but seldom applies it to economic oppression or the abuse of power.”²⁷

It is unfortunate that even in some quarters of the Church today, we often see how even some influential persons are pre-occupied exclusively with sexual sins while at the same time do not bother at all about other more serious sins, especially sins against Christian social obligations. For such people, unfortunately, the true Christian orthodoxy is determined only by the attitudes one has towards sins in the sexual sphere. Moreover, for them, such sins are so serious always that they even dare to refuse absolution.²⁸ Such a warped, non-Christian idea is based mainly on a distorted view of God as described by Fagan:

He was feared as the All-seeing eye examining our behaviour to pounce on every last degree of guilt, with special focus on sexuality. This left us not only with an unhealthy understanding of God’s beautiful gift of sexuality and relationship, but a totally false notion of God, who is essentially infinite love, compassion and forgiveness, not a task-master spying on the intimate lives of his holy people created in his own image and likeness.²⁹

If a confessor does not give the due gravity to all sins, and then, does not show the eventual compassion of God towards a repentant sinner, irrespective of whether they are to do with the sixth or ninth commandment, that confessor is surely involved in a “sinful talk of sin.”³⁰

9. The Heresy That the Healing Grace of Christ Is Not Sufficient for Some Sins

Last but not least those who are obsessed only with human sin even to forget the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus, and the consequent healing grace, are surely engaged in a “sinful talk of sin.” As Häring points out so clearly, there is no sin that is greater than the healing grace of Jesus the Redeemer. It is true, that the sacrament of reconciliation occupied a central place in the evolution of moral theology as a separate theological discipline. Also, the

²⁷Sean Fagan, “Whatever Happened to Sin?” *Reality*, September 2008, 36.

²⁸For a correct magisterial guideline on sexual sins, see Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vade Mecum for Confessors Concerning some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life*, as re-produced in *Origins* 26.38 (March 13, 1997) 618-623.

²⁹Fagan, “Whatever Happened to Sin?” 36.

³⁰A very solidly theological but also very pastoral set of guidelines to Confessors with regard to dealing with sexual sins in the Confessional was issued by the Magisterium in 1997. See Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vade Mecum for Confessors...*, 618-623.

“preoccupation with sin” that was evident in the post-Tridentine period made the study of moral theology an essential in the priestly formation.³¹ As Pope John Paul II pointed out so correctly, one reason for the loss of interest in the sacrament of reconciliation is the loss of sense of sin. However, to continue with a preoccupation with sin (as during the post-Tridentine period) that excludes the saving grace of Christ is surely a “sinful talk of sin.”

Conclusion

Sin has meaning only in the context of faith.³² Reconciliation will have meaning only in the context of a faith in a loving God, the God revealed to us by Jesus of Nazareth. Any distorted talk about God or about the basic teachings of Jesus on forgiveness in the gospels is bound to distort the rich Christian concept of forgiveness, and consequently, to affect negatively the sacrament of reconciliation:

The use of the Sacrament of Penance has declined significantly in many parts of the universal Church. Not that it has completely disappeared: that would be against the divine design. Many continue to receive it and can testify to its healing effect. It does not, however, play the role that it should: its life-giving and refreshing grace is not sufficiently sought. This is a loss, because the Sacrament of Penance is nothing else than the institutional expression of the Christian way of life that by its very nature is an ongoing conversion.³³

Sin and reconciliation are indispensable concepts of Christianity. If we have no sin, then, we have no need of a Redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ. But, as Fagan so correctly points out, we cannot be fully Christian unless we feel a real need for Christ, and it is our sinfulness that brings this home to us.³⁴ This is precisely what we re-echo at every Easter Vigil: “O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!” In contemporary Church life, this need of Christ is best expressed in and through the sacrament of reconciliation, properly understood. But such a proper, healthy understanding of this great sacrament is often unnecessarily hindered by a “sinful talk of sin” in diverse ways, as we endeavoured to show above.

³¹Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, 27-32.

³²Fagan, “Whatever Happened to Sin?” 37.

³³Ladislas Orsy, “Reviving the Sacrament of Penance: a Proposal”, *Doctrine of Life* 54.6 (July-August 2004) 60.

³⁴Fagan, “Whatever Happened to Sin?” 37.