

Catholic

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THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

CELEBRATING GOD'S FORGIVENESS

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Having been forgiven, we are empowered to forgive ourselves
and to forgive one another.



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The well-known parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps the most strikingly powerful illustration of the human process of reconciliation and of the theology inherent in the rite of reconciliation. But many of us find it difficult to believe the story (see Luke 15:11–32). The father welcomes the son back instantly—doesn’t even wait for him to get to the house. And he isn’t at all interested in the young man’s confession, only in celebrating.

This is not the way we Catholics have viewed the sacrament of reconciliation. Most of us tend to view this sacrament with the attitude of the older son in the story: forgiveness comes only after you recite your list of sins, agree to suffer a bit for them, do something to make up for your offenses, give some guarantee you won’t commit the same sins again, and prove yourself worthy to join the rest of us who haven’t been so foolish!

But God really is like the merciful parent in this parable: not out to catch us in our sin but intent on reaching out and hanging on to us in spite of our sin. Reconciliation is not just a matter of getting rid of sin. The important point is what God does in, with, and through us.

A JOURNEY HOME TO GOD

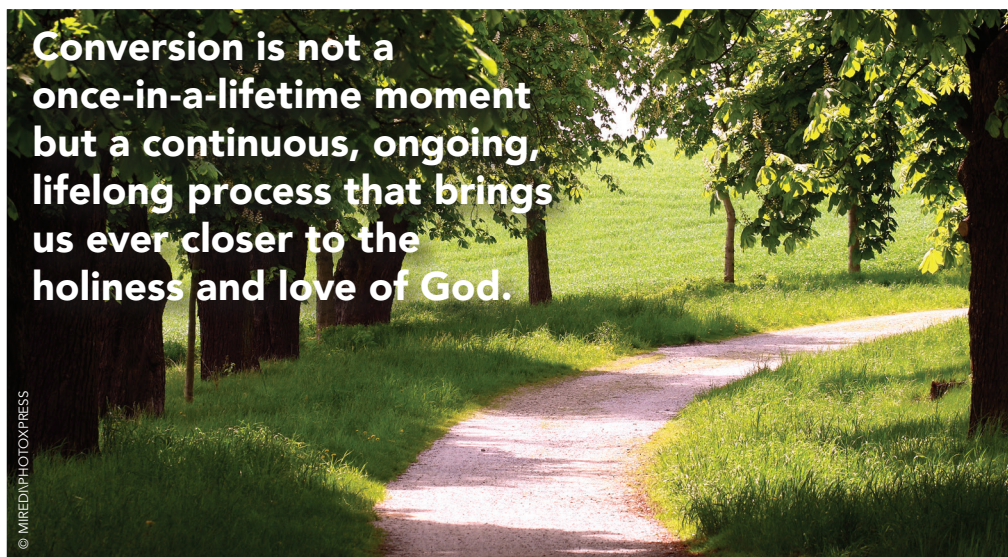
God’s reconciling work in us doesn’t happen in an instant. Reconciliation is often a long, sometimes painful, process. It is a journey not confined to, but completed in, sacramental celebration. It is a round-trip journey away from our home with God and back again that can be summed up in terms of three Cs: *conversion*, *confession*, and *celebration*.

The parable of the Prodigal Son can help us understand the stages in our journey to reconciliation—and the order in which they occur. This helps us see why the theology of the rite of reconciliation suggests a reordering in the pattern that we were familiar with in the past.

The journey for the young man in the parable (and for us) begins with the selfishness of sin. His sin takes him from the home of his parents—as our sin takes us from the shelter of God and the Christian community. None of the relationships he establishes are lasting. When his money runs out, so do his “friends.” Eventually, he discovers himself alone, mired in the mud of a pigpen, just as he is mired in sin. Then comes this significant phrase in the story: “Coming to his senses at last....” This is the beginning of the journey back, the beginning of *conversion*.

Conversion is not a once-in-a-lifetime moment but a continuous, ongoing, lifelong process that brings us ever closer to the holiness and love of God.

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