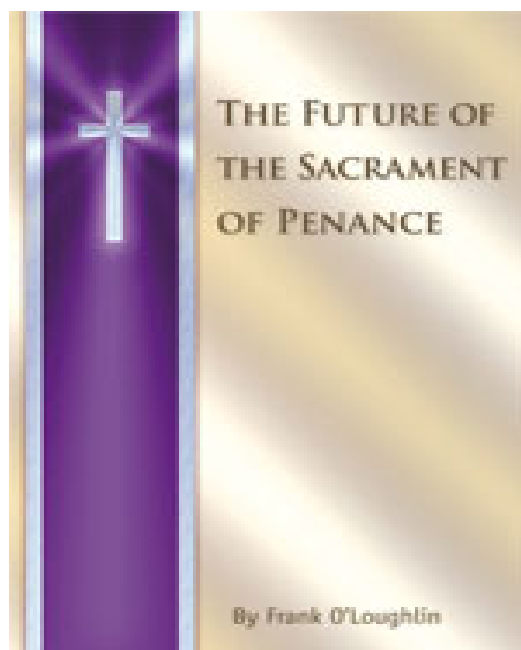


The Future of the Sacrament of Penance

Frank O'Loughlin, Strathfield NSW: St Paul's, 2007

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In Canberra at the beginning of the year the new Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, said 'sorry' to the countless men and women from the stolen generations who had been forcibly removed from their families over the last hundred years. In Washington at the beginning of this month during his first tour of America the new Pope, Benedict XVI publically apologised for the failure of the Roman Church to deal with the scandal of clerical sexual abuse that has rocked the American Church over the last decades. In these two seemingly unrelated events we have a testament to both the need for and the power of reconciliation in our contemporary world. And it is precisely this issue that a new book by Frank O'Loughlin, *The Future of the Sacrament of Penance*, seeks to explore.

The Future of the Sacrament of Penance is divided into two sections. Section One (9-105) deals with the socio-historical development of the sacrament and Section Two (107-208) goes on to explore the contemporary biblical, theological and ecclesial appreciation of this sacrament through the insights of the Second Vatican Council.

In order to look for rich and diverse ways to celebrate this sacrament into the future, O'Loughlin sensibly explores its past. He offers a concise examination of the central debates and controversies concerning reconciliation so the different developments of the historical and ecclesial practices that have formed this sacrament are easily accessible. In examining the

sacrament of penance in and through the diversity of its practice, O'Loughlin avoids the trap other historical explorations of this sacrament often fall prey to: the reduction of the complex practices of the Church into one seamless development as an "attempt to show that they are just modifications of each other" (14). His emphasis on the social contextualisation and historical consciousness of the different celebrations serves to give a richer appreciation of what those practices say about the mission of the Church and identity of the ecclesial community. Accordingly, O'Loughlin manages to weave together the sociological and ecclesial dimensions and character of the Church in a way that clearly grounds the theology of this sacrament without 'canonising' either the context or the consciousness of any historical time. An important skill in a time when the ritual/liturgical practices of many communities seem to no longer effectively reflect their own lived experiences or historical identity.

O'Loughlin then draws from the rich history of the theology and liturgical practice covered in section one to emphasise the very paschal underpinnings of this sacrament. He speaks of the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance as that which commemorates the paschal mystery so clearly that it "stands at the heart of the entire Christian Mystery and at the heart of the practical life of the Church" (109). The use of the "memorial dynamic" in this section serves to link the sections on scripture, conversion and sin into the paschal mystery in a way that really offers a number of directions within which to discuss and understanding the sacrament of penance in the contemporary context. This is all developed with reference to the biblical tradition and the human condition so the very solid grounding of Vatican II is clearly present. Again, O'Loughlin's appreciation of the role this sacrament plays in the practical human life of the Church offers a broad horizon from within which to contemplate the future.

I was particularly taken with O'Loughlin's use of the framework of conversion or *metanoia* for his book – and this works well on many levels. He notes that the "particular dimensions relevant to the sacrament of penance are those of sin, conversion and forgiveness but its even more specific concern is conversion. The sacrament of penance is the sacrament of conversion" (137). Conversion is not only a necessary movement in the sacramental process of reconciliation, but it also belongs to the internal foundation of the Church itself. As such, it is a reflection of the dynamic and ongoing journey of Christian faith, begun in baptism and constantly affirmed in Eucharist. This ties very neatly into the radical sacramental nature of the Church itself and so can be understood as an expression of who Christians are, and who they are called to be. O'Loughlin clearly maintains that the sacrament of penance belongs "specifically and primarily to the sacramental dimension of the church's life rather than to the moral dimension of that life" (110).

This book is an excellent theological introduction to the contemporary debate on the sacrament of penance. It offers a good historical overview of the changing Church practices of reconciliation and so has much to offer the needs and the experiences of the communities struggling with the current practices of the sacrament. O'Loughlin captures the spirit of this sacrament as an essentially Christian sacrament that is central to the ecclesial identity and mission of the Church. He notes that as the disciples had to "return to the heart of their own tradition . . . in order to see Jesus rightly" so too did they have to "learn to read that tradition in a new way" (122f.). With this book O'Loughlin offers contemporary Christians a similar opportunity: a return to the history of the biblical and ecclesial tradition of the Church in all its diversity and complexity as a way of forging a "fruitful renewal" of the sacrament of penance for the future (8).
