

# Joy in Confession

Reclaiming Sacramental Reconciliation



# Praise for *Joy in Confession*

*Our campus ministry has everyone from devout Roman Catholics and passionate Protestants to cradle Episcopalians and reticent seekers, and Hillary Raining's book has something important to teach each and every one of us. I am grateful for this treatment of an oft-neglected rite that has such profound implications for the ministry of reconciliation given by Christ to the Church. Priests and parishioners, young and old, will find a beautiful resource for deepening Christian spirituality through the restorative practice of joyful confession.*

**The Rev. Chad Sundin, OSBCn**  
Episcopal Campus Ministries  
Arizona State University

*Reading Joy in Confession with a group of parishioners was a rich experience for all of us as we delved into the history and theology of confession and then into our need for confession and reconciliation. A number of those who participated in the group availed themselves of the sacrament during Holy Week. Joy in Confession worked perfectly for a Lenten book study, and I'm sure I will use this book again, both in a book group and as the basis for a retreat. I also plan to keep extra copies on my shelf to hand out to those who come to me with questions about guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This is a great resource for individuals too!*

**The Rev. E. Suzanne Wille**  
The Episcopal Church of All Saints  
Indianapolis, Indiana

*Joy in Confession is an outstanding explanation of reconciliation and the need for it. The book equipped people at our church with a better understanding of confession as a sacrament in the Episcopal spiritual toolbox.*

**The Rev. Anjel Scarborough**  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Brunswick, Maryland

*Hillary Raining has created a resource with pastoral sensitivity, a practical knowledge born of her own parish experience and an abiding love for scripture and tradition. This book quickly opened up a conversation in our parish about confession, a topic long held in the silence of misconceptions and embarrassment. The brevity and clarity of the chapters appealed to a wide audience while the reflections, exercises, and liturgies gave the leader ample tools and flexibility to adapt the resource to the local context. Parishioners continue to mention concepts learned in our study; it is exciting to see the book plant seeds for ongoing conversation and Christian formation. I would consider using the activities and chapters in upcoming confirmation studies with teenagers as well as future conversations with individuals and small groups.*

**The Rev. Jennifer Zogg**

Church of the Epiphany  
Providence, Rhode Island

*This style of study is a bit outside of my box—I don't normally incorporate art projects into Bible study—but I found this style of learning worked really well for parishioners. It made me realize that I should do more of this! Hillary's approach to a sometimes difficult topic was exactly what our congregation needed to explore confession and what it means to be a genuine Christian community.*

**The Rev. Rob Courtney**

St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Reclaiming Sacramental Reconciliation

Hillary D. Raining

FORWARD MOVEMENT  
Cincinnati, Ohio

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# Using this Resource

This workbook can be used by individuals (either alone or in a spiritual direction setting) or by faith communities looking to help members incorporate the principles and practice of the Rite of Reconciliation into their lives. Indeed, this tool was intentionally designed so that it can be used in various settings, so feel free to use it in ways that make sense for your setting. Some suggestions for group use include:

- ❖ An adult book study that meets during educational time on a Sunday or during the week.
- ❖ A weekend retreat
- ❖ A quiet day
- ❖ Confirmation class
- ❖ Teen groups or youth group retreat
- ❖ College chaplaincy groups

Leaders can incorporate the creative exercises as time allows. While the exercises promote a deeper understanding of the concepts contained in the book, feel free to leave out some elements, depending on the context or needs. However, don't omit an exercise simply because you or your group may not be accustomed to creative or artistic expressions and you worry that they (or you!) might not like the activities. Trying something new can promote a willingness to see the world in a different way. And remember that people respond to various learning styles. You should also feel free to supplement these discussions with anything you see fit to add.

Doodle in the margins. Take notes. Dog-ear pages. Make this book a companion on your journey to understanding the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent.

If used in a group setting, all participants in the process should have a copy of the book as it provides space for reflection and an opportunity to revisit particular commentary.

This workbook is also an excellent pastoral tool. Every church should have a few copies on hand to distribute to individuals who are working through shame, guilt, or sin; considering making a confession; looking to grow in their spiritual life; or curious about the theological roots of confession. It is also a helpful tool to take to someone who is in the hospital and might have some hard questions to ask or decisions to make.

The Appendix includes additional resources to help facilitate individual reflection, group discussion, retreats, and worship. Worksheet pages for each chapter are included in the “Resources for Participants” section of the Appendix. The Appendix also includes resources for priests to become more familiar with the sacramental rite and to invite the congregation to experience joy in confession.

# 1

## Reconciliation in the Bible and in *The Book of Common Prayer*

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

—2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21



# Opening Prayer

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

—*THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*, p. 218

## The Biblical Roots of Reconciliation

Now that we have talked about the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent, you might be wondering how it came into practice. After all, we have a personal advocate with God through Jesus. So why do we have a rite that involves another person or the Church? To answer this question, let's start with the scriptural roots of reconciliation. The opening message of the Gospel of Mark, announced by John the Baptist, reiterated by Jesus, and finally proclaimed by the apostles, is "Repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15). In other words, seek reconciliation, turn back to God, and believe in Christ Jesus, the risen Lord. Jesus himself takes up this call to repentance as we see in verses such as Matthew 4:17 where he says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus clearly makes repentance a huge topic in his preaching and through his actions, both in life and in death, but he doesn't stop there. He also makes sure his disciples continue this reconciling work. In Matthew 16:13-19, Jesus discusses with his disciples the nature of his identity.

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that*

*the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Key moments in this passage relate to the Rite of Reconciliation. First, Jesus asks his disciples who they say he is. This is no mere exercise in curiosity on Jesus' part. Remembering who Jesus is—God in human form—is an important first step in the process of reconciliation. In fact, you might even say it is the very nature of humility. When we are being humble, we are not feeling bad about ourselves. To be truly humble means that we are remembering who is God and who is not. And at that same moment, we remember that we are God's children and that we are created in God's image. We are both dust and divine light at the same time, and when we "humble ourselves" before Jesus as he asked the disciples to do, we recall this beautiful reality.

Secondly, Peter makes an actual confession in this story. When he is asked by Jesus squarely, "Who do you say that I am?", Jesus is asking Peter to be very real. He is, in essence, saying, *Put down any pretense; discard others' view of who I am and tell me who you say that I am.* Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah—he declares the truth about life to the face of the One who is with us. When we engage in the Rite of Reconciliation, we are confessing the exact same thing. We are being real and honest with Jesus about who we think he is—he is the one who has promised to be with us and love us even when we have sinned.

Here's an important note about the word confess. I think many of us hear this word and automatically assume that we're talking about an admission of wrongdoing. That is, of course, one definition of confess, and it plays a key role in the Rite of Reconciliation, which is often called confession. But confess has another important meaning: to declare. So when we confess who Jesus is, we are declaring it—an echo of Peter's declaration.

Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that they are to carry out this ministry of forgiveness and declaration of pardon by saying that "whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This verse is a cornerstone for the understanding of reconciliation in the life of the church: It reminds us that the disciples of Jesus are indeed the Body of Christ here and now. The church serves as the face of the love of God for us and as such, is privileged with the great joy of reminding people that they are forgiven.

As Paul seeks to follow Jesus' call to the disciples, he explores reconciliation in his second letter to the Corinthians. Paul expands on the nature of God's love and its implications for the Christian life, using powerful imagery to describe this ministry of reconciliation (5:17-21). Paul notes that those who seek to represent Christ are not merely bearers of good news. Instead he chooses the word "ambassador" to describe the work. In the Greek language in which Paul was writing, the term ambassador referred to someone who was directly representing the emperor. Such a person would be sent into an area to set up a system of government that would fall under the rule of the empire. The ambassadors would fulfill such duties as establishing boundaries, instituting a legal system, and drawing up new laws. So when Paul describes Christ's followers as ambassadors of Christ, he is saying that we are going into the world to set up something new, to create a new reality where people can dwell and live as reconciled people

here and now. It's nothing short of creating a new world in Christ's name.

In the Episcopal Church, the biblical concept of reconciliation is most prominently lived out in baptism and in the liturgical rite, Reconciliation of the Penitent. As we explored in the introduction, at its core, the Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent is about living out the biblical gift of repenting of our sins, confessing them to God, and receiving the grace of absolution—all of which has its grounding in the call of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the other New Testament writers.

Reconciliation is so central to the Episcopal view of Christianity that it is the very core of the calling of each member and leader.

Through this biblical mandate, our rich liturgical tradition stands very much in relationship with the modern world. Indeed churches themselves are called to be centers of reconciliation. In fact, the core ministry of the laity and bishops as stated in *The Book of Common Prayer* "is to represent Christ and his church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and according to the gifts given to them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world" (p. 855). In other words, reconciliation is so central

to the Episcopal view of Christianity that it is the very core of the calling of each member and leader. We are to be Jesus' love to the world that so desperately needs to be brought back in relationship with God. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if churches are not centers where ambassadors of reconciliation can be trained or where people can come to find that renewal, then they are not being the Body of Christ and are not following their biblical mandate.