

AQUINAS, BONAVENTURE, AND SECOND GRADERS:

The Role of Scholastic Theologians in Modern-Day Sacramental Preparation

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ABSTRACT

For many children, preparation for First Confession and First Holy Communion is their first experience with Catholic religious education, commonly known as CCD. This paper examines the sacramental theology of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure with regards to the Sacrament of Penance, and then discusses the sacrament in the context of preparing early elementary-aged children to receive the Sacrament of Penance. While it is unlikely that the theology of Aquinas and Bonaventure can be directly incorporated into the catechesis of young children, it is important that catechists be well-formed in their understanding of sacramental theology and that both curricula and catechists seek to uphold the fullness of Catholic doctrine by explaining it in an age-appropriate manner, rather than skipping or outright changing parts that make catechists or parents feel uncomfortable.

One of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church is the Sacrament of Penance. Since instruction for the sacrament typically takes place at age seven or eight, preparation often involves children. In this paper, I will lay out the history of the sacrament, the theology of both St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas in relation to the sacrament, what the Catechism says regarding the sacrament, and finally how Bonaventure, Aquinas, and the Catechism can be used to better prepare children for First Confession.

The term “second plank after shipwreck” in reference to confession first appears in the Letters of St. Jerome. In his letter to Demetrius, St. Jerome says, “Howbeit, let us know nothing of penitence, lest the thought of it lead us into sin. It is a plank for those

who have had the misfortune to be shipwrecked.”¹ Jerome does not want Demetrius to consider penance, since it might give him an excuse to sin. Jerome is referencing a model of sacramental penance that dates from around the time of Pope Cornelius and the Decian persecutions, where the penitent presents himself to his bishop, undergoes a “*paenitentia plena*,” and is eventually reconciled to the Church.² This public penance could only be made once, and once undertaken, one could not become a cleric, hold certain public positions, and permanent abstinence was required.³ Documents from the fifth and sixth centuries lay out the amount of penance for various crimes. The First Council of Toledo required “lifelong penance... for re-marriage of the widow of a higher cleric” and the *Capitula* of Martin of Braga mandated “twenty to thirty years for bestiality.”⁴

In A.D. 589, the Third Synod of Toledo denounced private penance.⁵ Auricular confession had already begun to develop, not as a sacrament, but as “a therapeutic measure in the direction of souls” within monastic communities.⁶ As a result of its difficult requirements and inability to be repeated, canonical penance became, in practice, a measure taken to prepare for death, much like baptism was in the time of Augustine.⁷ Meanwhile, in the Celtic Church, private penance developed as “confession... the acceptance of the satisfaction fixed by the priest, and... reconciliation.”⁸ This practice spread to Europe, and by A.D. 800 had almost completely replaced public penance.⁹ The term confession became synonymous with canonical or ecclesiastical penance, and there is evidence from the eighth century that confession was done frequently.¹⁰ In A.D. 760, Chrodegang of Metz required those under his care “to confess twice a year, at the beginning of Lent and in the autumn.”¹¹ Reconciliation, or absolution, was still given separately from confession, but the rite much more closely resembled the one familiar to both scholastic theologians and Catholics today.¹²

About seven centuries after Jerome, when St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure were writing, they still called the Sacrament of Penance a “second plank after shipwreck,” but receiving the sacrament was no longer a one-time option. The Fourth Lateran Council, which took place shortly before the births of Aquinas and Bonaventure, decreed, “All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess

their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest.”¹³ While this is starkly different from the form of public penance used in the time of Jerome and Augustine, it is the result of a clear development from Celtic penitentials to regular, private confession and absolution.

In Part VI, Chapter 10 of his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure discusses the Sacrament of Penance. He explains why penance is “a second plank after shipwreck,” and why penance is not limited to a single reception. He also explains the parts of the sacrament and the role of the priest in the sacrament. Though penance can refer to a virtue, a sacrament, or an assigned set of prayers and deeds given by a priest to a penitent, in this section, Bonaventure uses the word to mean the Sacrament of Penance, which is later commonly referred to as confession, and then reconciliation.

Bonaventure writes, “Concerning the Sacrament of Penance, the following must be held: that it is ‘a second plank after shipwreck,’ to which those who have been wrecked through mortal sin can resort... whenever and as often as they need to implore divine mercy.”¹⁴ Here, “second plank after shipwreck” has a decidedly different tone than that of Jerome’s. To keep the metaphor, there can be a second, third, fourth, fifth, and so on “plank.” For Bonaventure, there is no limit to the number of times one can receive the Sacrament of Penance, which is in keeping with Canon 21 of Lateran IV. An annual requirement to go to confession would be incompatible with a limit to the sacrament. Penance shows “the supreme mercy, prudence, and justice of the Incarnate Word.”¹⁵ Because “this mercy infinitely surpasses any human sin,” absolution can be received “not only once or twice, but as often as they prayerfully beg for God’s mercy.”¹⁶

Bonaventure also lays out the form of the sacrament, saying, “Penance is complete when a sinner has abandoned all the mortal sins he or she has committed, confessed them in word, and detested them in spirit, firmly resolving never to commit them again.”¹⁷ The parts of the sacrament – “contrition in soul, confession in word, and satisfaction in deed,” – come directly from the *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum* of Peter Lombard, an early 12th century theologian.¹⁸ Contrition refers to the interior disposition of the penitent. Bonaventure describes it as “a penitential sorrow,” while the Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoting the Council of Trent, says, “Contrition is ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for

the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.”¹⁹ “Confession in word” refers to the oral confession of sins to a priest. Finally, satisfaction refers to what is commonly called “penance” — assigned prayers or works on the part of the penitent. Though no human is capable of making sufficient satisfaction for his or her sins, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “The confessor proposes the performance of certain acts of ‘satisfaction’ or ‘penance’ to be performed by the penitent in order to repair the harm caused by sin and to re-establish habits befitting a disciple of Christ.”²⁰

Similar to the ideas of Peter of Poitiers, another 12th century theologian, Bonaventure also requires that absolution be given by “one who possesses Orders” in order for the penitent to be “absolved of sin, reunited with the Church, and reconciled to Christ.”²¹ Absolution is an extension of the power to bind and loose, given by Christ to the Apostles, from the pope to the bishops, and then to priests, though “every priest possesses ordination and the [power of] the keys, their use extends only to those subjects who are under his ordinary jurisdiction.”²² This is also in keeping with Canon 21, which requires confession to one’s parish priest, unless given permission to confess to another priest.

When compared, the theology of Aquinas on the Sacrament of Penance does not differ much from Bonaventure’s. In Part III of his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas discusses both the Sacrament of Penance and penance as a virtue. The sacrament is further discussed in the Supplement, which is compiled from his commentary on Book IV of the *Libri Quatuor Sententiarum* by Peter Lombard. In Part III of the *Summa Theologica* and in the Supplement, Aquinas argues that the sacrament is a “second plank after shipwreck,” which may be repeated, is able to forgive all sins, and was instituted by Christ. While there is no material difference between Aquinas’s positions in his *Summa* and Bonaventure’s in his *Breviloquium*, Aquinas discusses both the sacrament and the virtue at greater length.

I will briefly discuss the arguments that both theologians make, before moving on to those discussed only by Aquinas. Aquinas repeats Jerome’s declaration that “Penance is a second plank after shipwreck,” because “unless man were to sin actually, he would not stand in need of Penance.”²³ The Sacrament of Penance may be received multiple times, because “our Lord commanded His

disciples to be merciful by frequently pardoning their brethren.”²⁴ Aquinas specifically mentions the Novatian heresy, which held that “he who sins after the first Penance which is done in Baptism, cannot be restored again through Penance.”²⁵ He also calls heretics those who say “that, after Baptism, Penance is useful...only once,” and attributes the book that describes these heretics, *De vera et falsa Poenitentia*, to St. Augustine, though today the authorship is debated.²⁶ Aquinas attributes these heresies to a false view that “charity once possessed could not be lost,” but does not address the difficulty this causes with the practice of the sacrament in the early Church.²⁷ Aquinas further argues that, for one still alive, all sin can be pardoned “because his will is flexible to good and evil.”²⁸ To deny this would be to deny “free-will...the power of grace...the power of Christ’s Passion” and would be “contrary to Divine mercy.”²⁹

However, Aquinas does differ from Bonaventure in one of his arguments. Bonaventure only holds that there are three parts to the sacrament: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.³⁰ When “absolution [is] given by one who possesses Orders, the key, and jurisdiction” to a person who is contrite, has confessed, and has made satisfaction, he “is absolved of sin, reunited with the Church, and reconciled to Christ.”³¹ While Aquinas reaffirms that contrition, confession, and satisfaction are three parts of the sacrament, he also adds a fourth: absolution. While this distinction may seem unimportant, it comes from his earlier understanding that sins are the matter of the sacrament and “Ego te absolvo” is the form.³² Bonaventure does not discuss the matter and form of the Sacrament of Penance in his *Breviloquium*.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says, “Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him.”³³ Confession is “for all sinful members of [Christ’s] Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin.”³⁴ The *CCC* divides the sacrament into three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction.³⁵

Aquinas’ treatment of the Sacrament of Penance in the *Summa* is significantly more extensive than that of the *Breviloquium*, and it is not feasible to discuss every question here. This brings me to the application of my thesis: how Bonaventure and Aquinas can be used to strengthen and enhance First Confession preparation, which is usually given to seven and eight

year olds in conjunction with First Holy Communion preparation.

In 1910, Pope St. Pius X issued his decree *Quam Singulari*, which moved the minimum age of reception of First Holy Communion (and thus, First Confession) from age twelve to age seven:

The age of discretion, both for Confession and for Holy Communion... is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion... The custom of not admitting children to Confession or of not giving them absolution when they have already attained the use of reason must be entirely abandoned.³⁶

He decried the previous high age requirements in various regions as “proceed[ing] from the errors of the Jansenists who contended that the Most Holy Eucharist is a reward rather than a remedy for human frailty.”³⁷ Thus, today’s children usually prepare for their First Confession in the second grade.

Various accounts, both academic and anecdotal, exist regarding First Confession preparation. Some students receive their primary instruction in parish-based religious education, often called CCD, others in school-based religious education, and still others are prepared entirely at home. A variety of materials and texts are used, from the *Baltimore Catechism No. 1* to Ignatius Press’s *Faith and Life* series. Within parishes, there are a variety of ways to prepare for and celebrate first Confession.

Following Vatican II, some parishes began preparing children for First Confession several years after they had received First Communion.³⁸ This was done because it was thought that seven and eight-year-old children were not able to understand Confession or the moral weight of their actions.³⁹ In 1973, the Sacred Congregations of the Sacraments and for the Clergy issued a letter saying that First Confession is a prerequisite for receiving First Communion.⁴⁰

In 2001, an anthropologist named Susan Ridgely studied First Reconciliation and First Communion classes from two parishes and published her observations in an article called, “Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation and the Nurturing of Post-Vatican II Catholics.”⁴¹ Ridgely’s work is unusual because it functions both as a primary source and as a secondary source. She reports the words and actions of the

children, their parents, catechists, and priests, but she also inserts a fair amount of her own commentary that is indicative of common views about Confession and Church teaching, as well as movements in the Church during and after Vatican II. While the various misconceptions of adults regarding Church teaching are fascinating, they are relevant in this paper only inasmuch as they might affect catechesis.

At one parish, Blessed Sacrament, the children were taught “that Jesus gave his life for us and that he’ll always love you” and “that everybody goes to heaven.”⁴² Their textbook did not teach the difference between mortal and venial sin, and catechists never discussed hell, purgatory, nor how sin separates us from God.⁴³ According to Ridgely, “The children at the parishes I studied learned very little about sin; instead, their reconciliation classes centered on choices.”⁴⁴ In the parable of the prodigal son, emphasis was placed on the father, who resembled “the forgiving father in heaven who threw parties for all his children who had abandoned him upon their return to the fold,” rather than emphasis being placed on the son.⁴⁵ Parents were told by the catechist “not to overstress the kids with the sense of sin,” to “treat the sacrament as a celebration, [so] your children will, too,” and not to “tell [the children] unpleasant stories about [the parents’] confession.”⁴⁶ A good deal of meetings and conversations with the parents seemed to focus on how to be positive about their child’s First Confession. For example, “The sacrament...has changed from confession, when it was a listing of sins, to reconciliation, a meeting together again, more than confession.”⁴⁷ The entirety of the sacramental preparation could be summed up as: “Catechists stressed only the Conciliar understanding of the merciful and forgiving God.”⁴⁸

First Confession at Blessed Sacrament was received on a designated “First Reconciliation Saturday.”⁴⁹ The children had individual “face-to-face conversations with the priest in a reconciliation room,” where “the emphasis was not on disclosure of sins, but on the experience of God’s love and forgiveness.”⁵⁰ One child related her experience as: “It wasn’t scary. You only have to say one bad thing you’ve done and three or four good things.”⁵¹ Parents met “their children after confession with a hug... [to] enhance the children’s experience of the sacrament and illustrate God’s love for them.”⁵² Then the children moved around

stations with their parents, where they received “white stole[s]... [with] symbols of love and forgiveness,” washed their hands, and were given a ring by the director of religious education.⁵³

Much could be said about improving this particular example of catechesis. First and foremost, all statements regarding matters of faith should be evaluated primarily in terms of their compliance with the truth, of which the Catechism is an excellent resource, and only secondarily evaluated along the lines of what is comfortable and easy for the adults involved, be they parents or catechists. To begin with the truth, even a very basic and simple truth, must be the priority in teaching children. To present something that is not entirely true does a disservice to the child, who has trust in his or her catechists; to future catechists, who must unravel mistaken teaching; and to the wider Church, of whom these children are members. Furthermore, it is not respectful of the dignity of the child to be told falsehoods because the adult catechists think that he or she is not able to handle the truth.

The three parts of the Sacrament of Penance put forth by Bonaventure and the Catechism—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—can form a very basic model of instruction. Contrition is sorrow for sin, which naturally leads to a discussion of sin, both mortal and venial, and the consequences thereof. While honesty about mortal and venial sin, hell, and purgatory are important, this is also an opportunity to teach about the good of corporal and spiritual acts of mercy, especially praying for the souls in purgatory. Confession involves teaching not only the practicalities of receiving the sacrament, but also the role of the priest, the graces received from the sacrament, and the good in regular confession. Aquinas’s discussion of the form of the sacrament—absolution—can be used here. Just as a child is taught that at the words of consecration, the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ, they can also be taught that at the words “I absolve you” or “Deinde ego te absolvo,” they are truly forgiven of their sins. Finally, satisfaction offers an opportunity to discuss not only the importance of doing one’s assigned penance, but also the importance of developing a regular life of prayer and recognizing the abundance of Divine mercy. While the simpler explanations and definitions of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *The Baltimore Catechism* are preferable for teaching children, catechists who are knowledgeable

about the more complex theology of Aquinas and Bonaventure will be better equipped to accurately explain the faith to children.

Finally, Aquinas and Bonaventure focus exclusively on God in the sacraments, both immediately—God forgives sins—and more remotely—God gives the priest the ability to absolve and gives grace through the sacrament. No extra human embellishment is needed to make the sacrament good. This theological truth has measureable impact on children’s experiences of the sacrament. Jennifer Beste talked to children who made their First Confession in 2006 and 2007, and found that children who went to confession for reasons relating to the sacrament itself had “very positive” or “positive” feelings about their First Confession, as opposed to children who participated because their parents made them or because they wanted to go to the party afterwards.⁵⁴

The role of scholastic theology in sacramental preparation, at least for young children, should likely be confined to the formation of their catechists. However, the catechists’ ways of presenting the truth and the particular elements they emphasize can be used as a guide for instructing children in such a way that can be built upon in later years, instead of necessitating a complete reorientation in their way of seeing God. Finally, since both Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure are saints, they may serve as examples to children not only as men who sought to know more about God in order to love Him better, but also as humans whose best characteristic was not their intelligence, but rather their virtue.

NOTES

1. Jerome, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W. H. Fremantle, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: WM B. Eerdmans, 1892; Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2012), PDF, 269.
2. Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, trans. Francis Courtney, S.J., *The Herder History of Dogma* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1964), 53-55.
3. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing*, 105.
4. *Ibid.*, 95.
5. *Ibid.*, 86.
6. *Ibid.*, 120.
7. *Ibid.*, 123.
8. *Ibid.*, 125.
9. *Ibid.*, 135-136.
10. *Ibid.*, 138-139.
11. *Ibid.*, 139.
12. *Ibid.*, 143.
13. H. J. Schroder, O.P., *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book, 1937), 259.
14. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, ed. Dominic Monti, *Works of St. Bonaventure*, vol. 9 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), 245.; internal citation omitted.

15. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 246.
16. Ibid., 246-247.
17. Ibid., 245.
18. Ibid.
19. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 200), 1451.
20. Ibid., 1494.
21. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 245-246.
22. Ibid., 249.
23. ST III, Q. 84, Art. 1, s.c.; ST III, Q. 84, Art. 1, co.
24. ST III, Q. 84, Art. 10, s.c.
25. ST III, Q. 84, Art. 10, co.
26. ST III, Q. 84, Art. 10, co.; Thomas Aquinas, *IIa QQ. 74-90, Supplement QQ. 1-99, Chart, Analytical Index*, complete English ed., vol. 5, *Summa Theologica* (New York, NY: Benzinger Brothers, 1948; Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 2530, 2532.
27. ST III, Q. 84, Art. 10, co.
28. ST III. Q. 86, Art. 1, co.
29. ST III. Q. 86, Art. 1, co.
30. Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, 245.
31. Ibid., 245-256.

- 32.** ST III, Q. 90, Art. 2, s.c. & co.
- 33.** CCC 1440.
- 34.** Ibid., 1446.
- 35.** Ibid., 1450.
- 36.** Pius X, *Quam Singulari* (n.p.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1910), accessed December 16, 2015, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDWFIRST.htm>.
- 37.** Pius, *Quam Singulari*.
- 38.** Susan B. Ridgely, "Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation and the Nurturing of Post-Vatican II Catholics," *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (October 2006): 617, doi:10.1086/505896.
- 39.** Ridgely, "Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation," 617-618.
- 40.** "Sacred Congregations of the Sacraments and for the Clergy," *Sanctus Pontifex* (n.p.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1973), accessed December 16, 2015, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CCLSANCT.htm>.
- 41.** The term "reconciliation" fell into use after Vatican II and is used interchangeably with confession to mean the Sacrament of Penance.
- 42.** Ridgely, "Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation," 607.
- 43.** Ibid., 621-625.
- 44.** Ibid., 622.
- 45.** Ibid., 625.
- 46.** Ridgely, "Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation," 620.

47. Ibid., 621.

48. Ibid., 625.

49. Ibid., 611.

50. Ibid., 613.

51. Ibid., 629.; internal brackets omitted.

52. Ibid., 621.

53. Ibid., 606.

54. Jennifer Beste, "Children Speak: Catholic Second Graders' Agency and Experiences in the Sacrament of Reconciliation," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 337-338, <http://proxycu.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/900447866?accountid=9940>. Ibid., 337-388.