God's Gift of Reconciliation

I
The word 'reconciliation' is used in many contexts today – in our homes, in the media, by organizations and governments. Sometimes the need for reconciliation is very close to ourselves: when family relationships are strained or broken, when our workplace is marked by discrimination or bullying. Other times we refer to reconciliation in big picture issues: between nations or ethnic groups, between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, between Christian denominations, between human beings and the environment. Even in the big picture issues, to seek reconciliation always has a personal dimension because it touches real people in their everyday lives.

Even to talk about reconciliation, in whatever context, implies that we can hope for a future time when things will be better between us than they are now, and that we can take steps towards that future.

II
For Christians, this hope for a better future between us springs from our trustful claim that God is committed to humanity in a covenant of faithful love. Our Scriptures tell the story of this claim lived out over many centuries.

The Hebrew Scriptures relate the covenant relationship between God and humanity through three historical 'shapes':

- CREATION - God creates all things out of nothingness and calls them to be and to flourish in God's own image and likeness;
- EXODUS - God rescues the people from slavery into freedom, releasing them from powers of evil and re-creating them as daughters and sons of God;
- EXILE - God leads the people back from distant places of abandonment and strangeness to a restored relationship with each other, the land, and God.

The Christian Scriptures give witness to the fulfilment of these three 'shapes' in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. He is the one who helps all created things to flourish, who releases people from the powers of evil that shape our relations, and who leads us into new
relationships shaped by God’s faithful love for us. In the historical context of first century Palestine, struggling under the foreign authority of the Roman empire, Jesus proclaims and enacts the ‘reign’ or ‘empire’ of God: a world of relations (personal, communal and political) based on God’s way of relating. Jesus claims that this world of right relationships is happening in his own life and work: his ministry of healing, the table fellowship he initiates, and the parables he tells.

III
In raising up the crucified Jesus, God creates, rescues and leads him into the fullness of the reign of God, the new creation. Jesus Christ relates to us now in utterly the same way that God relates to us. In the same act of raising him up God sends the Spirit of the dead-and-risen Jesus into the lives of believers, that we might be able to follow the way of Jesus towards that new creation. For those of us who come to him in faith, Christ is both the hope of a future in which reconciliation becomes real, in which we can relate differently to each other, our environment, and God; and he is the way towards that future, the one from whom we learn how to relate as God does.

Christian communities, then, know that they are called to participate in God’s work of creating, rescuing and restoring. When we are truly following Jesus’ way, we recognise that the Spirit is active among us, moving our hearts, shaping our attitudes and behaviours towards each other, making us look at each other and the world differently. The work of Christian communities is to bring that activity of God among us to public expression. We are to live it, to celebrate it, and to offer it to others. God pours out the Spirit wherever God wills, but we must give the Body in which that Spirit takes human and historical shape.

IV
In Catholic communities, this reconciling work of God is brought to expression in different ways in different sacraments:

BAPTISM - is the primary sacrament of reconciliation, whereby through washing with water and the action of the Holy Spirit, a person is once-for-all claimed by Jesus Christ and grafted into his life, death and resurrection through relationship to the Christian community. Baptism, for the forgiveness of sins, sets a human person in a particular relationship to Christ, our hope and our way of reconciliation.

EUCHARIST - can be described as the regular sacrament of reconciliation. Hearing the Scriptures proclaimed and celebrating the
Eucharistic meal are the means by which a baptised Christian consciously embraces the life-long journey of conversion. As Christ proclaims the reign of God to us in the Scripture readings, we come to see our lives through his eyes, realising where we have ‘messed up’ and in what ways Jesus is challenging us to ‘turn around’ and offer ourselves more deeply to his mission.

RECONCILIATION (or PENANCE) - can be described as the particular sacrament of reconciliation. In the Catholic tradition, this sacrament has worked in two main ways. It restores to the Eucharistic assembly those whose deliberate and consciously sinful acts are of such a serious nature (grave or mortal sin) that they disrupt that person’s participation in the grace of God experienced through life in the Christian community. Secondly, this sacrament marks those more profound phases of ‘turning around’ to the way of Jesus that occur throughout our life. It has often found its place in the process of spiritual direction or a retreat experience; it expresses awareness and decision-making on the part of a Christian person about attitudes and behaviours that, while not gravely sinful, prevent or resist our witnessing to Christ.

ANOINTING OF THE SICK – can be described as the experience of reconciliation that relates to the threat of illness and death. The experience of sickness and dying can seriously alienate a person from their family and community, from their own body and identity, even from God. We are most consciously individual and alone in the face of death. Yet even in this experience of exile, God works to re-create and restore us to our self, our community and to our true home, God.

V

In the Diocese of Ballarat, Catholic children are introduced to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in two stages:

a. an initial time of brief preparation prior to the first reception of the sacrament, usually before first reception of Eucharist

b. through a formal parish program before the end of primary school.

In keeping with diocesan policy on the Sacraments of Initiation with Children, formation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is family-based, co-ordinated by the parish and supported by the Catholic school. The catechetical resources in this kit are offered to parish sacramental teams to support stage b of this formation process. They are designed for upper primary aged children.
Using this Resource Kit

This kit comprises four sessions.

Session One, Right Relationships, introduces children to Jesus’ ministry of proclaiming and enacting the ‘reign’ (or ‘empire’ or ‘kingdom’) of God. This session looks at Jesus’ table fellowship, his ministry of healing, and his use of parables.

Session Two, Messed Up, helps children to understand how sin interrupts and resists the kind of right relationships God calls forth in creation.

Session Three, Turning Around, describes how we can respond to Jesus’ call to turn our lives around and embrace God’s way of relating, a lifelong process of conversion.

Session Four, Celebrating Reconciliation, helps children to reflect on the role of rituals in human communities, and leads them into deeper understanding of the Rite of Reconciliation (Penance).

Parish sacramental teams can implement these resources in various ways, depending on the circumstances of local communities: eg. cluster groups of families working together; at home between parent and child; a catechist working with a group of children and parents.

These sessions could be used

- as a program of four weekly gatherings. Each session contains more activities than would normally be needed in a catechetical session of 45-50 minutes. Leaders could choose some activities for the gathering, and set others for use at home between parent and child.
- in association with the Sunday Mass gathering. Since the children have already celebrated the Sacraments of Initiation, catechetical sessions should normally take place before or after Mass, so the children can participate in the Sunday Eucharist.
- during a reflection or retreat day. Some parishes use the practice of inviting children and their families to participate in a retreat day. Activities from these sessions could be used throughout the day, combined with games, sharing food and prayer time.

Children with disabilities are to be welcomed into this catechetical process, as for the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. Adaptations to the activities should be made, and personal support offered, to meet the particular needs of each child and their family.
A suggested approach

Since children of upper primary age have already celebrated the Sacraments of Confirmation and first Eucharist, they are fully initiated members of the Catholic community. So, their catechetical formation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation should follow closely the regular Catholic practices of ongoing conversion and reconciliation. The liturgical season of Lent, and the celebration of Easter, provides the best opportunity for children to experience themselves as part of a community which is constantly trying to live more faithfully to Jesus and his gospel. Many parishes already prepare children for the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the Season of Lent. The process could take the following shape.

END OF PREVIOUS YEAR: The parish invites eligible children and their families to participate in the Turning Around program during Lent.

ASH WEDNESDAY: Children formally begin the process by receiving the ashes on or around Ash Wednesday.

DURING LENT: Children participate with their families in the Turning Around program, in one of the formats outlined above. The children are kept in prayer by the Sunday gathering during this time.

TOWARDS THE END OF LENT: The opportunity is provided for children to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, preferably in a setting where other members of the community are also celebrating the sacrament.

AT EASTER OR DURING THE EASTER SEASON: Having completed the program, the children renew their Baptismal Promises during the Sunday gathering.

Local communities will need to adjust the timing of this process depending on when it is possible to have the sacramental ministry of a priest.