

GROUP
READING
GUIDE

RECONCILIATION

JOHN MICHAEL REYES



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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

— SMALL GROUP SESSIONS —

Gather. Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed.

As your class or group session gets underway, begin with the Sign of the Cross. Offer an appropriate psalm or other prayer together. Ask God to bless your time together and send the Spirit to guide you.

Read. Moving around the circle in your group, read aloud the material for the particular session. Rotate readers with each paragraph. Pause for quiet reflection before entering into discussion and prayer.

Discuss and Pray. When you come to the group process notes, continue around the circle, discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use the guide's suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

Finish. As you come to the end of your process, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas that they will take away from your time together. Each participant may hear the material differently; there are no "correct" answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality. Remind participants of the time and date of the next gathering.

SESSIONS

SESSION ONE Our Need for Reconciliation

SESSION TWO A Closer Look at Sin

SESSION THREE Conversion and Conscience

SESSION FOUR Coming Home

SESSION FIVE History and Celebration

SESSION SIX Go in Peace

SESSION ONE

Our Need for Reconciliation

*How would you describe a need for reconciliation?
What areas of our life and experience need reconciling—
with others, with ourselves, and with God?*

In the sacrament of penance the faithful “obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins against him; at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer.”

RITE OF PENANCE, INTRODUCTION, 4

The sacrament of reconciliation does not seem very popular these days. Perhaps this is because it requires a person to be vulnerable to oneself and to others. Perhaps we don't want to forgive someone. Maybe we are scared to reveal our wounds to God, who knows us intimately. In any case, many people do not take advantage of the sacrament's power to heal and restore right relationship with God and with

one another. The sacrament of reconciliation, however, manifests God's mercy for the people of God, and it is needed as much today as it ever was.

The importance of reconciliation

During my theology and ministry studies, I served as a hospital chaplain. It was a difficult experience of accompanying people—patients and staff—at their most vulnerable states, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Day after day, encounter after encounter, I noticed a theme—the theme of reconciliation. When illness leaves people in positions of weakness and limitation, time in the hospital often leads them to want to reconcile somehow. One patient regrets a damaged relationship; another recognizes the foolishness of holding grudges. Some want forgiveness and companionship from family.

These people, and you and me as well, have an ongoing desire for reconciliation; yet we tend to cling to our ego/old selves and keep God at a distance. We have essentially disordered our relationship with God. Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, said, “The only thing that separates you from God is the thought that you are separate from God.” This is where the power of the sacrament of reconciliation lies. Reconciliation is primarily a healing sacrament. It has a restorative effect upon all who receive and experience it. It strengthens our relationship with God and one another.

Maybe this is why one of the first phrases that humans learn, alongside “thank you” and “please,” is “I’m sorry.” Throughout human history, this phrase has served as a symbol of seeking forgiveness and undergoing a change of heart. To say “I’m sorry,” and to mean it, can put us back in right relationship with God and others. It serves as a catalyst for personal conversion and the conversion of relationships. Although we cannot prove that people mean what they say, we surrender ourselves to the mystery of Christ, to what Pope Francis described as “the mystery of forgiveness,” and rely on the feeling of being forgiven.

REFLECT: *What “change of heart” is needed in order to reconcile? Name an obstacle to reconciling with someone else.*

Alienation

Human beings, at their core, are created to be in community. Yet, at one point or another in our lives, we may become disconnected. We alienate ourselves. We may do this because we think we are so strong that we do not need the help of others. We disorder our sense of community in the hope that by being autonomous we are doing ourselves a favor. We can get very hardheaded, particularly if rejected by loved ones, society, and even ourselves. And sometimes this alienation can have the opposite effect of what we hoped for—instead of feeling strong and autonomous, we can end up feeling helpless, unsafe, and lonely.

The story of humanity's alienation from God is told creatively in the Book of Genesis when Adam and Eve disobey and break their relationship with God. Essentially, it is the story of how we stray from our

“true selves.” Our true selves are who we are as a people formed by our moral decision making, which is influenced by our relationship with God and others.

God gave human beings the gift of free will. God never forces us to obey his commandments. God gives us this gift to allow us to make our own choices. But when we choose not to love and respect God, others, and ourselves, we sin. And our true and most authentic selves are affected by sin.

Sin, to keep things simple, is any freely chosen thought, word, or action that alienates us from God, from community, and from ourselves. First, sin affects our

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

COLOSSIANS 3:12–14

relationship with God. “The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). God and humanity (represented by Adam and Eve) shared a trust and love. Yet when Adam and Eve sinned, that trust was transformed into an insecurity, and thus they felt they needed to hide.

God gifts us with grace, which is never-ending, but our sins redirect us away from our intimate relationship with God. Saint Ignatius spoke about this in the “First Principle and Foundation” from his *Spiritual Exercises*. Many things are gifts of God, and God gives us these things to enjoy as long as they give God glory and bring us closer to him. Yet many things hold the possibility of moving us away from divine love; when we choose to let them, they weaken our relationship with God.

Second, sin affects our relationship with the community. Consider what Adam told God: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Genesis 3:12). Adam tried to blame Eve, and this created distrust, another form of alienation. When we blame others, it may feel good to quickly get that weight of possible trouble and anxiety off our shoulders, but we create an alienation that is unhealthy and jarring. It is sometimes easier to pass blame on to others than to own up to what we have done, especially if there are negative repercussions. But when we do this, we negate an opportunity for personal conversion, and we damage the relationship with the person we are blaming. “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people,” God says. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18). Our relationships with others are gifts from God that should be treasured. We want to be in community with people in an environment of trust and security. We want to count on one another and live in the radical love that God shares. Life is not about “getting even” or “getting ahead” but about giving God glory in relationship with people.

Third, sin keeps us from being our truest selves. Even the simplest of things, such as lying and petty theft, can build up, and we begin to lose ourselves in our actions. As Christians, we are asked to take the way of Christ, and this sometimes comes at a price. What might seem like the easiest route in life can actually be leading us away from whom we are called to be.

Sin is a reality that people cannot deny, one that develops out of free will. And

sin can never be considered a purely individual undertaking in the Christian tradition. When one sins against oneself or the community—the body of Christ—the sinner must make reparation to both.

REFLECT: *When have you experienced love and concern from others and not accepted it (i.e., you alienated yourself)? Has there been a time where you felt far from God?*

ACT: *Name a relationship that needs attention through forgiveness and reconciliation. What “first steps” can you take to restore the relationship?*