

Reconciliation and the Church: A Response to Bruce Morrill

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tsj.sagepub.com**Brian P. Flanagan**

Marymount University, Arlington, VA

Abstract

In conversation with Bruce Morrill's article, the author explores how the fundamental ecclesiologies of Monika Hellwig and John Paul II influence their theologies of the sacrament of penance. John Paul's ahistorical ecclesiology leads to distress around the collapse of confession and to increased clericalism, and his millennial apologies for ecclesial sins raise further questions regarding collective confession of fault. The author concludes by arguing that the absence of forms of individual and communal reconciliation undermines the church's mission.

Keywords

church, confession, conversion, ecclesiology, papal apologies, penance, reconciliation, repentance

Each semester I bring students to our university's chapel to discuss church architecture, the varieties of ecclesial space, and the impact of liturgical setting on theology and practice. As they begin to walk around, the students are always drawn to the two confessionals and photograph themselves in the confessionals, as if they were an artifact, some remnant of a long-extinct tribe. With few exceptions, none of my students, including my Roman Catholic students, has seen these before, let alone used them—and not simply because of architectural trends toward alternative confessional spaces. For many of my Roman Catholic students, this behavior is not due to a lack of awareness of their own need for repentance—they do get exposed to the

Corresponding author:

Brian P. Flanagan

Email: brian.flanagan@marymount.edu

penitential practices of Lent, beginning with the crowded Ash Wednesday service, and other penitential rites. But actively and regularly celebrating the first form of the Rite of Penance (individual auricular confession) is not so much a practice they reject as one that never occurs to them.

Bruce Morrill's article addresses some of the numerous questions that this situation, not unique to my undergraduates, raises for theology, ecclesiology, and pastoral practice. In particular, his close reading of two texts on reconciliation and penance, Monika Hellwig's *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*¹ and John Paul II's 1984 postsynodal letter "Reconciliation and Penance,"² provides a contrast illustrative of the challenge the Catholic Church faces in reconciling two visions of repentance and, more broadly, two visions of Christianity's relation to history. My aim here is to complement Morrill's analysis by highlighting two ways in which understandings of reconciliation and practice relate to ecclesiology. The first section discusses how understandings of the church affect understandings of penance. I draw on Morrill's contrast between Hellwig's and John Paul II's analyses of reconciliation and penance, and discuss that contrast as between not only two theological methodologies and conceptions of ecclesial power but also two fundamental ecclesiologies, two ways of understanding the church in relation to the world and to history. Like Morrill, I find the presupposed ecclesiology of "Reconciliation and Penance" inadequate to the pastoral situation of a community in which the sacrament of penance has ceased to function. I also address a related yet distinct practice of reconciliation and penance within the church, the millennial papal apologies, and the accompanying attempts to interpret these apologies. The apologies raise important questions about the fundamental ecclesiologies that determine how the church, as church, might repent or do penance for the errors of the past.

My second section approaches reconciliation and the church from the opposite direction by asking how practices of reconciliation and penance, or their lack, affect ecclesiology. I look at the danger that the absence of coherent, shared practices of penance and reconciliation poses for the church. The collapse of penance is a far more serious matter than the falling into desuetude of a particular paraliturgical or popular devotion no longer "in fashion" among the laity. Coherent theologies and effective practices of repentance are part of the *esse* and not simply the *bene esse* of a Christian church defined, in part, as God's reconciled and reconciling people in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

History, Methodology, and Fundamental Ecclesiologies

I begin with Morrill's section on "Theological Conclusions, Theoretical and Practical" where he writes: "Crucial to the divide [between theologians and magisterium,

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1. Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982).
 2. John Paul II, "Reconciliation and Penance" (December 2, 1984), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html. All URLs referenced herein were accessed April 14, 2014.

as represented by these two thinkers] is the fundamental difference in theological methodology. . . . The essential methodological difference concerns the reading of history.”³ As Morrill suggests, the significant differences in (1) analysis of the collapse in auricular confession, (2) the readings of the roles of power and of lay agency in relation to practices of penance official and unofficial, and (3) the recommendations for its recovery can be in part traced to the differences in theological methodology, and particularly to the historically conditioned nature of ecclesial existence—what he refers to as an “eschatologically tense” Body of Christ.⁴ I share with Morrill a strong suspicion of positions like that expressed in many magisterial documents rooted in a “classicist world-view” rather than in a “historical-mindedness” regarding the nature of culture, thought, and the Christian gospel.⁵ Hellwig’s treatment, rooted in an awareness of the diversity of penitential practices over the centuries, as well as in critical humility regarding claims of the immediate dominical institution of the sacrament in its current form, seems to me a better starting point for renewing practices of conversion and reconciliation than an ahistorical insistence on the maintenance of supposedly timeless, transhistorical forms.

I would like to move my reflection on the relation of this methodological divergence, and perhaps even its causation, to a deeper question of contrasting fundamental ecclesiologies. By “fundamental ecclesiologies” I mean construals not of church organization and practice but of the rationale of the church’s existence, its relation to God and to the world, that lead to particular understandings of what its structures should look like and how its practices should be carried out. Morrill notes that Hellwig’s study is rooted in

the dual conviction that in the particular twists and turns, unique moments and continuous movements, ongoing developments and short-lived practices, lie: (1) invaluable resources of theological information, wisdom, and creativity for advancing the church’s mission and (2) fundamental belief in the times, places, and peoples of history—with all the ambiguity and conflict entailed—as the very medium of the Holy Spirit’s work in the church and world.⁶

Similarly, Morrill suggests that magisterial documents like “Reconciliation and Penance” conceive of bishops “who teach, sanctify, and govern the laity by means of apodictic assertions only lightly considering history and, when doing so, rehearsing a history that carries out uninterruptedly the tenets of faith and morals provided in the timeless pages of Scripture.”⁷ These differences, I suggest, are rooted not only in the

3. Morrill 604.

4. Morrill 589.

5. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1974) 1–9.

6. Morrill 604.

7. *Ibid.* 605.

idiosyncratic methodologies of individual theologians and pastors but also in assumed, and contrasting, fundamental ecclesiologies: historical consciousness—or the lack thereof—in theology implies not simply methodological considerations but always also fundamental beliefs about the relation of the church to history, and ultimately questions of the relations of nature and grace.⁸ In short, one finds differences in understanding what being “in the world, but not of the world” means for the Christian church.

Hellwig’s text has the advantage—perhaps due to the difference in genre—of making more explicit her ecclesiological presuppositions. According to Morrill, Hellwig reads

history with an eye to variety, contestation, change, and evolution, and all of this not so as to find amid (or worse yet, despite) the details, the red thread of some inerrant constancy of ideology and practice but rather, to the contrary, to flesh out in the eschatologically tense body of Christ the strengths and weaknesses, advances and setbacks in the church’s life that *is* an ongoing conversion.⁹

To read history in this way is to assume an ecclesiology in which the church carries out its mission firmly *in* the world—its hope and homeland may be elsewhere, but the eschatological fullness toward which it is called regularly yet surprisingly transfigures a church very much located within human history and experience, through its acts and people of holiness, and through the sacraments of the “presence-of-the-absence of God.”¹⁰ It is difficult to imagine the possibility of development within radical change—say, the collapse of a major form of penitential practice—as anything other than betrayal, without an ecclesiology that sees the church as fully human and historical in its origins and continuing development as well as divinely guided.¹¹

By contrast, the fundamental ecclesiology guiding the treatment of conversion and reconciliation in John Paul II’s “Reconciliation and Penance” can be appreciated for its classicist attention to the wisdom of past doctrine and practice, but it so emphasizes the distinction of the church from the world and history that it runs the risk of denying the full, historical humanity of the church. While a full study of John Paul’s ecclesiology and that of recent magisterial documents is beyond the scope of this article,¹² I can

8. A point also made, using Roger Haight’s language of “ecclesiology from above” and “ecclesiology from below,” by Gerard Mannion, in *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2007) 32.

9. Morrill 7. By “eschatologically tense” Morrill suggests the church’s complex reality as already participating in the reign of God definitively instituted in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, yet awaiting the fullness of that reign at Christ’s return.

10. See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995) 404–8.

11. For another attempt to address the issue of what Morrill terms “dramatic development” in tradition, see John Thiel, *Senses of Tradition* (New York: Oxford University, 2000) 100–128.

12. For fuller treatments of the thought of John Paul II, see Gerard Mannion, ed., *The Vision of John Paul II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), particularly the chapters by James

make some general observations simply on the basis of Morrill's reading of "Reconciliation and Penance." The document tends to dehistoricize or decontextualize the Christian church, emphasizing continuity sometimes to the point of ignoring the kind of critical historical work with which Hellwig and others began their study of penance within the church. Such a tendency is related to, if not caused by, a view of the church that verges toward a kind of "ecclesiological monophysitism"—in the words of John Beal, "the often subtle tendency . . . to overemphasize the role of the invisible and divine dimension of the church at the expense of the visible and human."¹³ In such a vision, emphasis on the divine foundation and guidance of the church leads to an ecclesiology in which the humanity of the church is subsumed in its divinity, and its historical pilgrimage remains incidental to its reality. The historical reality of the church, including evidence of change, is beyond the horizon of ecclesiological understanding, and there is no imaginative or intellectual space for a "church that can and cannot change."¹⁴ Catholic theology and ecclesiology rightly presume the Holy Spirit's guidance of the church in its handing on of the gospel of Christ in word, deed, and sacrament; nevertheless, an underappreciation of the (sometimes very) human element in that traditioning process can lead to a situation in which there is no room for a distinction between tradition and traditions,¹⁵ or for an understanding of development in doctrine and practice that entails real change or rupture, rather than linear, organic development.¹⁶ Various theologians and authoritative teachers have, correctly, warned against forms of "sociological reductionism" in ecclesiology that would neglect the direct relation of the church to the transcendent mystery of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Fewer warnings have been issued about the dangers of a "mystical reductionism" in which the church is envisioned less as a pilgrim people walking in and through human history than as a group of tourists serenely unaffected by their travels.

Voiss, Gerard Mannion, and Paul Lakeland, on general ecclesiology, magisterium, and collegiality, respectively.

13. John Beal, "It Shall Not Be So among You! Crisis in the Church, Crisis in Church Law," in *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York: Continuum, 2004) 88–102, at 96. There is a longer history to the use of christological categories within ecclesiology, beginning in the modern era with Johann Adam Möhler's use of the concept of "ecclesiological monophysitism." On the limitations of such analogies, see Yves Congar's important "Dogme christologique et ecclésiologique: Vérité et limites d'un parallèle," in *Sainte Église: Études et approches ecclésiologiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1963) 69–104.
14. See John T. Noonan Jr., *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005).
15. Such as that discussed in Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., "Catholic Tradition and Traditions," in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. Lacey and Oakley (New York: Oxford University, 2011) 113–33.
16. See Avery Dulles, S.J., "Should the Church Repent?," *First Things* 88 (December 1998) 36–41.

Ecclesiologies and the Sacrament of Penance

Moving from these broad terms to the particular issues raised by the sacrament of penance, I judge that the ecclesiological assumptions regarding the relation of the church and the world found in John Paul II's "Reconciliation and Penance" lead to two significant theological and practical difficulties. The first is the inability to take seriously the collapse of the sacrament of penance, or to understand the decline in participation in the sacrament as anything other than a falling away of the Christian faithful from a divinely ordained, timeless reality. In the case of the sacrament of penance, this is particularly ironic, given that this is the second time that this collapse has happened.¹⁷ "Reconciliation and Penance" identifies the causes of the more recent collapse as

on the one hand . . . the obscuring of the mortal and religious conscience, the lessening of a sense of sin, the distortion of the concept of repentance and the lack of effort to live an authentically Christian life. And on the other hand, [confession] is being undermined by the sometimes widespread idea that one can obtain forgiveness directly from God, even in a habitual way, without approaching the sacrament of reconciliation.¹⁸

The document warns that "confession"—and, Morrill emphasizes, not the fuller reality of reconciliation—"is in mortal danger."¹⁹ It is, in part, the assumptions of an ecclesiological monophysitism that lead "confession" to be seen not as a particular historical form of the church's mission of reconciliation and penance whose usefulness is coming to an end, but rather as a timeless, ahistorical, and divinely sanctioned practice that is the only legitimate form of reconciliation and penance, and whose demise is therefore not a transition but a crisis.

From such a perspective, any alternate forms of penitential practice, including the carefully circumscribed third form of the Rite of Penance, as well as the unofficial ministries of reconciliation that Hellwig lauded,²⁰ cannot be seen as anything other than pale imitations of the "real thing."

A second theological difficulty arising from such ecclesiological presuppositions regards the connection of the promoted form of the sacrament with a particularly clerical understanding of ministry and authority. More explicitly, the "crisis" in confession is directly related to the "crises" of ministry and authority, and stands as a prime example of a widening gap between official and unofficial theologies of ministry and ordination. Implicitly under attack in the decline of confession is another questionable ecclesiological presupposition, namely, that the historical reality and particularity of an individual ordained minister is incidental to his ministry. While the document presents an expansive vision of the qualities and skills that a confessor ought to possess, it teaches that the sacrament's validity does not depend on the qualifications of the

17. See Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation* 37–43.

18. John Paul II, "Reconciliation and Penance" no. 28.

19. See Morrill 598.

20. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation* 110–15.

confessor. Theologically, this assertion is perfectly correct—we are not Donatists. And yet at another level, such an understanding of ministry is not rooted simply in belief in the sacraments' efficacy *ex opere operato*, but also in a vision of the very particular humanity of the minister as, in a sense, accidental to the dispensation of grace.

The best symbol for this view of ordained ministry is the “fixed grille” of the confessional that Morrill raises up from the regulations of the *motu proprio Misericordia Dei*.²¹ Rather than being simply a mechanism for anonymity, the grille helps reinforce the fact that what matters is not *who* the priest is, but only that he *is* a priest. In previous work on the sacraments of the anointing to the sick, Morrill challenges an understanding of sacramental grace as a “thing” to be dispensed, in favor of a rite that redefines the relation between the individual, the community, and God. Discussing the sacrament of anointing, he states that “the rite must be approached not as an instrumental ministration of some quantifiable thing (the unfortunate, long-regnant view of sacramental grace), as if Christ through his vicars were dispensing something of utilitarian value that can ‘get results’ (in this case, the cure of a disease).” Rather,

sacramental celebration is not so much about *having* something at the conclusion that one did not have before . . . [as it is] about *being* more deeply aware of oneself and others as the very site of the loving faithfulness and gracious mercy of God, in whatever condition we find ourselves.²²

In the case of the sacrament of penance, a monophysite understanding of the church leads to a promotion of individual auricular confession; this is more the dispensation of a prescription through a grille than an invitation to a reconciled relationship between the penitent, God, and the community.

Ecclesiologies and Papal Apologies

A further phenomenon in which ecclesiology helps determine a theology of reconciliation is the practice of ecclesial confession initiated by John Paul II in anticipation of the millennium. His millennial apologies illustrate the tension between the two understandings of the relation of church and history and church and world that Morrill highlights.²³ The apologies and subsequent theological critique and reflection also underscore in their novelty the lack of forms of repentance and conversion in the

21. John Paul II, apostolic letter *Misericordia Dei*, On Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (April 7, 2002) no. 9, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_20020502_misericordia-dei_en.html. See Morrill 603.

22. Bruce Morrill, “Divine Worship: A Theology of the Liturgy,” *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009) 3–24, at 17.

23. On John Paul II's apology, see Francis A. Sullivan, “The Papal Apology,” *America* 182.12 (April 8, 2000) 17–19, 22.

church for the community as a whole. In his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, in a section on the preparation of the church for the celebration of the millennial jubilee, John Paul II wrote, “The Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and . . . indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*.”²⁴ He then called for reflection particularly on sins against Christian unity, on past use of intolerance and the use of violence “in the service of truth,” and on Christian responsibility for “the evils of our day,” delineated as religious indifference, theological uncertainty, violation of human rights, and grave forms of injustice and exclusion.²⁵ In response to this call and in preparation for a service of ecclesial apology led by the pope on the First Sunday of Lent 2000, the International Theological Commission (ITC) produced a text entitled “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past.” The Commission was led by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith served *ex officio* as the commission’s president.

In this text, the commission outlines a theological justification and explanation of what it consistently refers to as ecclesial “requests for forgiveness.” The document is marked by repeated, defensive concerns about the difficulties of such a practice, including the fears that such “requests for forgiveness” could easily be “exploited by the Church’s detractors” and “might cause Catholics to wonder how they can hand on a love for the Church to younger generations if this same Church is imputed with crimes and faults.”²⁶ The Commission understands its task as clarifying what the church is doing and not doing in making such requests for forgiveness. The Commission’s text presents a hermeneutics of the apologies that attempts to keep the symbolic and ecclesial power of those apologies within certain limits: the distinction between the sins committed by sons and daughters of the church and the holiness of the church itself is carefully maintained; any such requests for forgiveness are to be made by an appropriate subject of authority, without implying by doing so that “behavior contrary to the Gospel by one or more persons vested with authority . . . involve[s] *per se* the magisterial charism, which is assured by the Lord to the Church’s Bishops”; the one addressed in such requests is God, and “any human recipients—above all, if these are groups of persons either inside or outside the community of the Church—must be identified with appropriate historical and theological discernment.”²⁷

The millennial papal apologies themselves and the ITC document’s attempts to maintain control over the significance of such apologies raise questions about the

24. John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente* (November 10, 1994), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_10111994_tertio-millennio-adveniente_en.html, no. 33, emphasis original.

25. *Ibid.* nos. 33–36.

26. ITC, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December 1999), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000307_memory-reconc-itc_en.html, no. 1.4.

27. *Ibid.* no. 6.2.

issue of ecclesial holiness and sinfulness that exceed the limits of this essay.²⁸ But in keeping with the questions of reconciliation and ecclesiology raised above, one can find in these questions a similar difficulty of conflicting fundamental ecclesiologies. The anxieties raised by the phenomenon of a papal apology for past ecclesial errors that the ITC document attempts to address and mollify provide decent evidence that in proposing a form of ecclesial repentance, John Paul II may not have clearly realized the ecclesiological fault line he was uncovering. Consonant with ecclesologically monophysite assumptions, one finds in the ITC document a similarly ahistorical understanding of a church whose officeholders might be included among the church's "sinful sons and daughters" but whose structures, like the particular forms of the sacrament of penance promoted in "Reconciliation and Penance," remain unaffected by the vagaries of ecclesial history in the world. In this vision, sinfulness on the part of an officeholder provides no relevant data for evaluating the structure of the office, and any productive assessment of the eschatological tenseness between the church we are and the church we are called to be is lost; this is due in part to a lack of a coherent theory of the relation between its divine and all-too-human realities. The strange phenomenon of a church confessing sins but not claiming them as *her* sins exemplifies the need for further research and constructive theological reflection in this area.

Lack of Repentance as Ecclesial Failure

When discussing the collapse of the sacrament of reconciliation or the difficulties posed by an inadequate theology of ecclesial sinfulness, one can easily get the impression that these matters are relatively obscure and unimportant; both my students and I have grown up in the thoroughly "postconfessional" world to which Hellwig and John Paul II were responding. Both authors, despite their differences, agree that the lack of regular practices of repentance is a major problem for the contemporary church. I would argue as strongly that Christians, individually and in community, who are not responding functionally to the reality of failure and sinfulness, are failing in part of their mission as church. If the church is called to be a community of sinners reconciled with one another and with God, then the absence of a shared form of reconciliation and conversion is a danger to the church's continued fidelity to the gospel.

It is difficult to think of another major sacramental or ecclesial practice that has collapsed as completely and as spectacularly as auricular confession has in the past 50

28. The classic modern texts for such an analysis remain Karl Rahner's essays "The Church of Sinners" and "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in *Theological Investigations* 6 (New York: Seabury, 1976) 253–69, 270–94. For a more recent treatment from an ecumenical perspective, see Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011). For a specific treatment of the papal apologies, see Michael R. Marrus, "Papal Apologies of Pope John Paul II," in *The Age of Apology*, ed. Mark Gibney et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008) 259–70.

years.²⁹ It is important to note carefully, I think, that this is the second time a structure of penance has collapsed. One can find particular historical explanations for some aspects of these collapses: Hellwig identifies the severity of the patristic practice, the sharp distinction between sinners and saints it implied, and the once-in-a-lifetime character of penance as some of the contributing factors to its late-ancient demise.³⁰ To account for the more contemporary demise, numerous theories have been proposed: Roman Catholic teaching on birth control, both in *Casti conubii* and *Humanae vitae*;³¹ a lack of meaning or relevance in contemporary experiences of confession;³² and especially changing notions of sin among both clergy and laity.³³ From a theological perspective, however, one might add to the list the possibility that Christian reluctance to admit to ourselves, our friends, our pastors, and so forth, *that or how* we are sinful, is a continuing aspect of the mystery of ecclesial sinfulness. While the pope's proposals in "Reconciliation and Penance" differ from those of Hellwig and Morrill, all three presuppose, as they ought, the need for some sort of practice for repentance and conversion in the life of the church.

Hellwig and Morrill suggest what could be more fruitful pathways, namely, incorporating into the contemporary practice of penance and reconciliation the communal aspect of penance found in patristic practices. Current practice, which restricts the third form of the Rite of Penance and emphasizes individual auricular confession even in the second form, marginalizes the communal ecclesial dimension of penance. With these restrictions, ecclesial apologies and communal expressions of communal failing become one-off events for millennial jubilees rather than regular aspects of ecclesial life. Ironically, given the intentions expressed in "Reconciliation and Penance," this emphasis on individual auricular confession further privatizes confession within a framework of globalized consumer culture: confession becomes something *I* do to feel better, to express my spirituality, to remove my subjective feelings of guilt, rather than to overcome a "communion of sin" with a restoration of divine and/or ecclesial communion. The emphasis on individual confession is therefore interacting with other forces beyond the church's control to create something very different from what was intended—reconciliation as simply a consumer preference, and a preference fewer and fewer Catholics, including their clergy, are choosing.³⁴

29. See Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "Souls and Bodies: The Birth Control Controversy and the Collapse of Confession," in *Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity* 293–315; and James O'Toole, "Hear No Evil: Perhaps the Most Striking Development in the Practice of Confession in the U.S. Has Been Its Disappearance," *Boston College Magazine* (Fall 2000), http://bcm.bc.edu/issues/fall_2000/features.html.

30. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation* 41–43.

31. See Tentler, "Souls and Bodies" 297–310.

32. See Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation* 105–19; and O'Toole, "Hear No Evil."

33. See O'Toole, "Hear No Evil."

34. A notable lacuna of current research here is the reality of a very small but often vocal minority of Catholics for whom individual auricular confession is a consistent part of their spiritual life. More studies have been done of why Catholics no longer go to confession

The crisis of liturgical expressions of conversion and reconciliation is not simply the collapse of confession and other forms of individual repentance; it is also the continuing vacuum of the recognition of sin as a social reality and of practices for communal reconciliation. This absence of practices of communal repentance is a striking, sadly recurring reality of the sexual abuse crisis, but the need for such forms also exists for internal divisions among Catholics. Greater attention to the importance of mutual confession and forgiveness might better help the church to be church, that is, a gathered community of the reconciled and reconciling. Instead, a method for dealing with the need for mutual confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation has been lacking; this has led to a ritual and practical absence of reconciliation, leading to services of healing and other innovative liturgies that are developed in response to particular experiences, even if these creative rituals are often isolated and not long remembered.³⁵

In these few pages, I have attempted to respond to Morrill's research on reconciliation and penance, and on the thought of Monika Hellwig and John Paul II in particular, with two ecclesiological points of intersection. First, I looked at some of the ways understandings of the church affect understandings of penance, in the cases of the sacrament of reconciliation, as well as in the related case of acts of ecclesial repentance or apology. Next, I looked at how understandings and practices of penance affect, or could affect, ongoing understandings of the church, and at how the lack of functional forms of individual and communal repentance weakens the church and its mission. Hellwig and Morrill have suggested some concrete ways in which new forms of penance can assist the church in more clearly manifesting its need for repentance. If these practices are developed with a continuing awareness of the church as God's pilgrim people, they will help us view the current decline in auricular confession less as a tragedy or a crisis, and more as the starting point for renewed forms and theologies of ecclesial conversion.

Author biography

Brian P. Flanagan received his PhD from Boston College and is currently assistant professor of theology at Marymount University, Arlington, VA. With special interest in ecclesiology, ecumenism, and communion ecclesiology, he has recently published "Communion Ecclesiologies as Contextual Theologies," *Horizons* 40 (2013); and "Jewish-Christian Communion and Its Ecclesiological Implications," *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012). In progress is a work on ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sinfulness and a paper questioning the 1985 synod's judgment that communion is the central idea of Vatican II.

than about why those who do go continue to do so. In 1982, Hellwig had described some of the attitudes and responses of those who continued to use the first rite of penance, including "those who come anyway [but] have concluded that sacramental penance does not make any difference" (Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation* 106). It would be interesting to conduct further research 30 years after that initial period, when pre-Vatican II habits continued to shape many Catholics' post-Vatican II practices, to see how those attitudes have changed and what, if anything, they might tell us about what future practices of repentance and reconciliation might be most successful.

35. For more detail on the use of "healing" liturgies in such contexts, see Morrill, *Divine Worship* 25–30.