



The Custom of Reconciliation in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania

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It is said that the key to the faith and life of a Christian community is its worship. If so, it behooves also the systematic theologian to pay special attention to worship while pondering the faith and life of the community. This is a matter that concerns the future as well as the present. For worship is a kind of seismograph for all spiritual and theological events within the church. The subject of worship provides a starting point for our inquiry as to what the church is or ought to be, for we—members of the Lutheran Church in Romania—are of the conviction that divine service (*Gottesdienst*) is and remains the heart of the church's life. A church is thus understood as it is reflected in its ways of worship and in its spiritual life. Let me therefore follow a respected academic custom and tell something about my own church.

The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania presents us with a rather strange phenomenon. It is the "custom of reconciliation." While most of the old, indigenous, diversified, and rich liturgy was given up in the course of the nineteenth century, this custom of reconciliation has been retained to the present day. This raises an important question. Visitors to our country, when they get to know us, notice our strong community life. They are likely to ask whether this kind of common life may somehow be connected with the custom of reconciliation. To find an answer we must explore the theological background of this custom and see how it may provide impulses for a fuller grasp of the meaning of Holy Communion.

The custom of reconciliation unfolds according to its own type of service or ceremony some time before the regular service of confession and celebration of Holy Communion. The Ceremony of Reconciliation, as it still takes place today in many of our parishes, proceeds as follows: On the day before a service of confession, or of Holy Communion, the members of the village meet. In some villages this may involve only the men, in some only the youth, and in others the youth separately. In any case the villagers are divided into groups of neighbors. They meet in the house of the "Senior Neighbor" (*Altnachbar*). They have

come in order to ask each other forgiveness, doing so by certain fixed phrases. These phrases have been passed on word for word over many generations down to the present time. In some parishes the observance is stricter than in others. But the meaning is the same.

If anyone has a quarrel with another and has something to say, then it is to be said and cleared up. Forgiveness among the members of the group is declared by the consensus of those present. In many places this involves a traditional ceremony. Everybody shakes hands with

everyone else, saying the words: “Forgive me, if I have offended you.” And the set response: “It is forgiven.”

Thereafter the several Senior Neighbors, representing the groups of neighbors, go to the pastor and tell him that all are reconciled.

In some cases it is customary for these representative Senior Neighbors to carry out a reconciliation on behalf of the entire community, including the pastor and his family. The pastor may then ask these representatives for their forgiveness. Should it happen that someone is not reconciled, then the pastor is obliged to intervene. Only those reconciled are allowed to go to the service of confession.

There is a similar ceremony among the youth. The “Senior Youth” says something like this: “Dear brothers, you know that the pastor has extended the invitation to the service of confession. Therefore I have called you together in order that we may be reconciled with one another in a fraternal and Christian way. To begin, I ask your forgiveness for myself and also for my companions, if we have offended you in any way.” Then the others present reply: “It is forgiven.” “I ask you a second time.” Answer: “It is forgiven.” “I ask you a third time.” Answer: “It is forgiven.”

Then the Senior Youth continues: “If two of you have quarreled, then the younger goes to the older, and the older to the younger, and the offender to the offended, and asks forgiveness.” It is forgiven. After that one of the members of the brotherhood asks the Senior Youth: “Forgive us, too, if we have in any way offended you.” To which the Senior replies: “You are forgiven with all my heart. Go in the Name of God.”

In some places this reconciliation may include the pastor among the participants. In others it may include the parish elders—the presbytery—as well as the pastor and the youth. In still others the ceremony of reconciliation involves only the presbyters, meeting in the home of the Senior Elder, who is called the “Curator.” Furthermore, in many communities this ceremony is concluded by all parties (youth and/or presbyters, or others) joining in a common service of reconciliation. This precedes the usual service of public confession and celebration of Holy Communion. It involves entire families, with confirmands asking the forgiveness of their parents, God-parents, and relatives. Something similar may be arranged in various communities on penitential days, like Ash Wednesday or Shrove Tuesday.

If, now, we try to find out whether this custom of reconciliation—indeed, it is more than a custom!—has any theological or liturgical standing, we are embarrassed. This custom does not seem to have been accorded the significance of a liturgical ceremony or celebration anywhere else. Neither from the books at my disposal nor from my own inquiries have I found another Lutheran church—

anywhere else in the world—with a similar service or ceremony of reconciliation. Nothing like it has existed in the churches in Germany since the time of the Reformation, as the extensive study of Paul Graff on the dissolution of old religious ceremonies in the German churches since the Reformation makes clear; or as the long standard and newly edited work of Georg Rietschel corroborates. What has survived with us in the Transylvanian part of Romania thus seems to be a unique phenomenon not only in the field of liturgics but also of doctrinal theology.

The origin of this custom goes back to the sixteenth century Reformation (when the

Germans who had come eastward and settled in Transylvania already in the twelfth century, became Lutheran). The Reformer of the Transylvanian church was John Honterus (1498-1549), the chief pastor in the thriving city of Kronstadt (today Brasov). In his Reformation booklet of 1543, outlining a reform of the church in this city and its environs, he included an article on absolution. “Sin cannot be forgiven,” he wrote, “if a wrong is not repaired. For injustice cannot be forgiven by anyone else than the one who has suffered it. Therefore Christ teaches: ‘If...your brother has something against you,...first be reconciled to your brother...’ [Matt 5:23-24]. When this is done, it is no longer necessary to obtain absolution for that particular wrong. Or again he says: ‘If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven’ [18:19].”¹

In the second work on church reformation, appearing four years later, Article 7 deals with the power and authority of absolution as follows: “How can injustice be forgiven by anyone else but by him who has suffered it? Therefore Christ says, ‘Be reconciled to your brother who has a grievance against you. If you have made peace with him, then you may bring your gift to the altar. For if two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by your heavenly Father.’...It is not necessary after such peacemaking to ask anybody else for absolution and thereby to deny the word of Christ.”²

The custom can of course be criticized on various grounds. It can become a rigid and routinized habit. Moreover, it can stress the “horizontal” relationship between persons in matters of reconciliation and eclipse the reconciling work of Christ “from above.” The “vertical” dimension and relationship can be forgotten.

Reconciliation is certainly in the first place Christ’s work. But the “horizontal” dimension is also no doubt very significant. Not only both texts mentioned (Matt 5:23-24; and 18:19), but also the fifth petition of the Our Father and Matt 18:31-35 (the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant), exhort us to that aspect of reconciliation.

But more can be said, which has to do with the Eucharist itself. Research on the Eucharist in the early church and its conception demonstrates that this sacrament contains elements of a “horizontal” dimension. It even contains an ethical dimension, which is to be visible in new life, new obedience, love for God and neighbor, and common service. Just as Luther claimed that service to

¹*Reformatio ecclesiae Coronensis ac totius Barcencis provinciae* (1543).

²*Reformatio ecclesiarum Saxonicarum in Transylvania* (1547).

the neighbor is divine service, so the Eucharist cannot be divorced from the context of service rendered to the neighbor.

In very early times eucharistic worship embraced two kinds of activity. The *agape* feast—with its social accent—accompanied the more purely “cultic” aspect—having to do with the divine and human relationship. The custom of reconciliation in our church corresponds (in function) more with the social relationship, while the celebration of Holy Communion retains the “cultic” character of the Eucharist. When both are held together (the one preceding the other), and when both are seen as a whole, the social and the cultic are joined into a unity in which the work of Christ and the fellowship of community are one. The result is that worship points toward and reaches into everyday life and ethics. Conversely, everyday life points to worship.

Forms of community life and worship are meaningful only as they are rooted and grow in the particularities and histories of a people. They cannot be readily transferred elsewhere. This brief essay is meant only to illustrate one example of how a significant and meaningful dimension of the sacrament has become realized in one church—the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania.