




## Determining the Good and Human Culpability: Catholic Catechesis on Overcoming the Anxiety of Sin

Daniel J. Goodey 

---

### Abstract

This article focuses on the implications of modernity for human culpability and moral responsibility. Although the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is most often approached theologically and pastorally, this article is intended as an answer to Pope Benedict XVI's call to explore catechesis through new lenses by adopting a psychological therapeutic approach. As such, this article will examine how the rejection of religious ascription to God for defining and determining the good and re-ascribing it to humanity leads to a rupture and the psychological conditions of anxiety, depression, and melancholia. The article will go on to argue for a Lacanian reading of Thomas Aquinas' definition of the good and how the Thomistic understanding provides a more comprehensive approach to determining culpability and overcoming the associated fear which leads to anxiety, depression, and melancholia.

### Keywords

Aquinas, Lacan, psychoanalysis, sin, anxiety, sacrament, reconciliation

*Because we believe, we dare to hope  
because we believe and hope, we can love.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI, writing in 1994 (as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger), argued that for a catechism to be relevant for a contemporary sense of faith, it must 'relax its negative posture ... and engage the *Catechism*

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), p. 20.

positively ... bringing to it more than the lenses of the schoolmaster'.<sup>2</sup> He goes on to explain how through communal experience, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides an outline for being 'in communion with God and responsible to him' clarifying that, 'in this sense, morality is a doctrine about the nature of happiness and the means to attain it'.<sup>3</sup> An all too frequent perception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to view it with trepidation as purely having to account for sins and to restore oneself into communion with God and the Church. It is often spoken of adopting various postures from shame and embarrassment to fear and panic.<sup>4</sup> The Sacrament is most often approached theologically and pastorally, but in answer to Pope Benedict XVI's call to explore catechesis through new lenses this article aims to adopt a psychological therapeutic approach. By recognising and engaging with the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation positively, this article will examine how the rejection of religious ascription to God for defining and determining the good and re-ascribing it to humanity leads to a rupture in the individual – morally, spiritually, and psychologically – and the psychological conditions of anxiety, depression and melancholia. The article goes on to argue for a Lacanian reading of Thomas Aquinas' definition of the good and how the Thomistic understanding provides a more comprehensive approach to determining culpability and overcoming the associated fear which leads to anxiety, depression, and melancholia.

Section one will articulate the philosophical and psychological *context and approach* for engaging with the debate on the importance of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for healing psychological distress associated with anxiety, depression, and melancholia. In this section, the context of a reduction in people engaging with the Sacrament will be discussed by considering the potential complementarity of Lacan's psychoanalytic observations and a Thomistic philosophical and metaphysical assessment of the problem of sin and resultingly engendered feelings of guilt leading to anxiety. It is hoped that the understanding developed through this analysis will promote a heightened interest in the Sacrament and provide a meaningful teaching point for a catechism on the Sacraments, human culpability, sin, and renewing or restoring personal and communal communion with God and the Church.

Section two will employ the insights of Søren Kierkegaard, the next section will explore the idea of *sin as a rupture of the psychological moral order*. An effort will then be made to highlight the importance of looking at the works of Thomas Aquinas on the notions of freewill

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>4</sup> S. Zalewski, 'The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an Encounter with God and Experience of His Mercy', *Roczniki Teologiczne*, 63(05), pp.71-89, 2016.

and sin through the lens of Jacques Lacan in approaching the issues of agency and responsibility.

Section three will provide a brief discussion on seeing *sin as a rupture of the symbolic moral order* by way of Lacan's use of Sophocles' character of Antigone in the story of *Oedipus at Colonus*. Seeing Antigone through the lens of psychoanalysis will highlight the way in which duty and transgression provide important themes for returning to a Thomistic understanding of the psychological and moral chasm created between God and humanity.

Section four will take up the themes of duty and transgression through an examination of the *Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a philosophy of healing of the ruptures* in relationship with God, with others, and with the self.

Section five of the article will conclude with a discussion of developing an appropriate catechetical response to teaching on *catechesis and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a healing of estrangement and alienation that leads to guilt resulting in anxiety, depression, and melancholia*. This final section will first, a) define and distinguish types of sin and b) outline the idea of anxiety as a consequence of unresolved and unbounded guilt, before concluding with c) an outline for a catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an approach to overcoming and healing psychological distress.

## 2. Context and Approach

The key focus is on ideas of Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Lacan on the subjects of anxiety, depression, and melancholia. These will be explored in relation to sin and human responsibility. It will also be explored how these can inform a substantial catechetical approach to understanding the psychologically therapeutic benefits of regular engagement with the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This will be supported and enhanced by an analysis of secondary literature on these topics. The article will draw together a substantiated evaluation of inherent connections between the works and insights of Aquinas and Lacan, and the prospects for overcoming the conditions of anxiety, depression, and melancholia through a recognition of the value of understanding the psychoanalytic benefits of the Sacrament as a means for overcoming and releasing guilt.

Initial premises include a recognised reduction in people engaging with the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation,<sup>5</sup> along with an

<sup>5</sup> J. Allen, I. Martín, E. Harris, C. Giangravè, C. White, J. Kirby, T. Lynn, S. Levitt, C. Collins, & N. Carvalho, 'Church Scrambles to Save "Endangered Sacrament" of Confession', *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse* (Denver: Crux Catholic Media, 2016).

increase in diagnosed cases of anxiety, depression, and melancholia.<sup>6</sup> I suggest an anticipated effect of the reduction in the use of confession as a means for relieving feelings of guilt will be repression and sublimation of these feelings directly contributing to the rise in these pathologies. I further suggest that through an examination of Freudian notions of human drives and desires, the conditions and conflicts that result in their repression and sublimation – and the proposed remedies and treatments for correcting these behaviours – parallels can be identified between the psychoanalytic approach and that of Christian sacramentology. These parallels are particularly to be found in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. I argue that the key insights of Lacan most succinctly illustrate and clarify the philosophical problematic of the repression and sublimation of feelings of guilt, while a return to the foundational sources of Christianity as elucidated by Aquinas provide clear ways of philosophically understanding the metaphysical nature of the problem (i.e., alienation from God, community, and self through sin), its phenomenological mistake, and the existential means of addressing the problem of psychological distress. Through Aquinas and Lacan, the ethics of being human – and the repression of being such – are fundamental to recognising what it means to be human and our inherent teleology. I contend that by bringing these two together a more comprehensive understanding of human psycho-social development will be established and lead to a better clinical and pastoral approach to addressing issues of anxiety, depression, and melancholia.

Although this work does examine the pathologies of anxiety, depression, and melancholia, and specifically in relation to ideas of sin and confession as a means for overcoming the pathologies, no direct examination will be made of individuals suffering from these conditions. However, some examples from specific client work will be referenced to illustrate how the benefits of the Sacrament can be used in therapy and as a teaching point for developing a catechesis on the Sacrament.

A significant aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding of one aspect of the development of the pathological conditions of anxiety, depression, and melancholia. In recognising the origin of these conditions as associated with feelings of guilt and perceptions of sin, I argue that approaches to addressing these conditions may be further developed, particularly in identifying the therapeutic contribution made by the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation in revealing and overcoming repressed and sublimated feelings of culpability.<sup>7</sup> Religiously,

<sup>6</sup> Scott Stanley, 'Young and Clueless: Thinking about the Big Rise in Anxiety', *Psychology Today* (2017). <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sliding-vs-deciding/201711/young-and-clueless-thinking-about-the-big-rise-in-anxiety>. Last accessed 23/07/2021.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Saliga and Carlos Quijano issue a similar call with regards to physical healing – rather than psychological healing – when they say, 'if more clinicians, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, understood that in Catholic thought, sacraments such as ... reconcili-

it could clarify the way in which the Sacrament works on the existential level and lead to a renewal of faith through greater participation in the Sacrament. Psychologically, it could inform and guide psychological treatment of particular instances of these pathologies. Theologically, far from being a *nouvelle théologie*,<sup>8</sup> it may illuminate the way in which grace contributes not only to healing the human soul but the human mind as well. Philosophically, it will reveal the continuing significance and contribution of Thomistic thought to understanding human psychology and the impact that the Lacanian notion of the imaginary and symbolic aspects of the human mind have on experiences of trying to make sense of the real.

### 3. Sin as a Rupture of the Psychological Moral Order

Søren Kierkegaard makes the point that although sin is a concept that falls outside of the categories treated by ethics and psychology it can nevertheless provide an understanding of human conduct that can contribute to the scientific orientation of these two disciplines. Kierkegaard argued that the origin of sin cannot be understood but must be accepted as a presupposition of the fallenness of humanity, yet this raises the question which is common to ‘original sin’ (or what Kierkegaard refers to as ‘heritable sin’<sup>9</sup>) as to human culpability for sin. If sin is a presupposition, as Kierkegaard insists, then to what degree can people be held responsible? Does such an inevitability not necessarily lead to anxiety? I argue that Aquinas did accept such an inevitability but not as an inevitability of humanity rather as an inevitability of ignorance. Thus, my contention is that where Kierkegaard saw religious understanding of sin as a basis upon which one must embark towards a psychological understanding of existential existence (and perhaps nothing more), a Thomistic understanding of the different causes of sin, i.e., ignorance, weakness, and malice, and the question of human culpability<sup>10</sup> can lead

ation ... are far more than placebos, the clinicians might more efficiently and consistently help patients avail themselves of sacramental interventions earlier in their overall course of treatment’. C. M. Saliga and C. Quijano, ‘Spiritual Care in Hospital Policies: Incorporating Sacramental Interventions’, *Ethics and Medics*, 32:2, 3-4 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, ‘Where is the new theology leading us?’ (‘La Nouvelle Théologie où va-t-elle?’) Rome, *Angelicum*, 23, 1946; Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, ‘The Structure of the Encyclical *Humani Generis*’ (‘La Sintesi Tomistica’), trans. A. Aversa, Brescia, *Queriniana*, 1953; and Aidan Nichols, ‘Thomism and the Nouvelle Théologie’, *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 64:1 (2000).

<sup>9</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety - A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation* (London: W.W. Norton, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil [Quaestiones disputatae De malo]*, translation by Richard Regan, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 158-181 [q. III, art. 6-12].

to a greater understanding for the treatment of anxiety. Additionally, this is what could be referred to as the passive and active character of sin, that is to say through vice (habitual behaviours<sup>11</sup>) or dismissal or rejection of grace (gifts of the Holy Spirit<sup>12</sup>).<sup>13</sup> By combining the epistemological concepts of ‘the good’, the ethical response to this knowledge, and the religious recognition of love and grace through reconciliation in the form of psychoanalysis combined with sacraments, a holistic approach to overcoming anxiety, depression and melancholia may be developed. Yet, to understand and confront these conditions, it is of critical importance to consider to what degree humans can be considered culpable given the nature of sin, especially in the face of such notions as original or heritable sin. In other words, to what extent are we morally responsible for our thoughts and actions - consciously, subconsciously, and unconsciously?

A close study of the works of Thomas Aquinas, with particular interest in his ideas on free-will and the concept of sin, I believe is fundamental in examining how anxiety, depression, and melancholia can be understood in terms of the Christian notion of sin and the importance of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Through an exploration of the experience of guilt and duty as considered by Jacques Lacan and considering them alongside Aquinas’ ideas of agency and responsibility, the question arises as to what extent we are responsible for disciplining our minds to avoid transgressive thoughts, reflexive responses, and dreams. Are we responsible for developing a disciplined mind as some sort of Aristotelian style virtue? Must these subconscious thoughts and unconscious dreams be confessed?<sup>14</sup> What role might such a sense of absolute responsibility have in experiences of anxiety, depression and melancholia? The sense of absolute responsibility for things that we may feel are beyond our control can lead to a pervading sense of culpability. Yet, culpability is not singularly a state of being, rather it is the state of being.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mt. 15:19.

<sup>12</sup> 1Th. 4:8.

<sup>13</sup> Bonnie Kent & Ashley Dressel, ‘Weakness and wilful wrongdoing in Aquinas’s De Malo’, in ed. M. V. Dougherty *Aquinas’s Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 48-53.

<sup>14</sup> This question is building from the idea in Matthew’s gospel (12:35), where it says that ‘Good people draw good things from their store of goodness; bad people draw bad things from their store of badness’. So, the question arises if what occurs in a dream is drawn from a ‘store of badness’ and therefore ought to be confessed because of what lies hidden in the heart (Mt. 5:28). It is also reflective of the idea of human depravity seated in the individual mind as highlighted in the book of *Jeremiah* (17:9-10), where it says, ‘The heart is more devious than any other thing, and is depraved; who can pierce its secrets? I, Yahweh, search the heart, test the motives, to give each person what his contact and actions deserve’.

<sup>15</sup> Mk. 7:21-23.

Psychoanalytically, however, a variety of existential conditions - psychological, social, cultural, and political - conspire to sublimate culpability of the individual, as well as the collective of humanity. Lacan raised a major philosophical issue concerning human agency and responsibility with regards to the Euthyphro Dilemma in his examination of Sophocles' *Antigone* and showed how a psychoanalytic approach to the sublimation of culpability provides an existential realist approach to moral responsibility and the fulness of being human.<sup>16</sup> Hence, I would argue, the challenges for agency, free-will, and human responsibility to realising culpability are sublime and require a psychological and spiritual reading. Subsequently, I suggest, such an awareness of culpability can lead to a sense of anxiety. According to Lacan, anxiety is brought on by the feeling of the immanence of something.<sup>17</sup>

Anxiety is the feeling that one is culpable for the future, which can lead to attempts to avoid evil by controlling the present in efforts to determine the future. Such responses as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are ways some people attempt to assert control and ensure the good.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that from a Christian viewpoint, this is characteristic of a loss of faith in God and His benevolence, and an impending fear and sense of dread for the future. This is what Aquinas refers to as 'sins against the Holy Spirit'.<sup>19</sup> My point is that the fear can lead to a depression that no matter what is done it will never be enough, and the dread can ultimately lead to melancholia. The question is what causes this loss of faith and fear for the future. Both Aquinas and Lacan ascribe it to the ambiguity in determining the good. For Aquinas, all people seek the good, but the problem arises in mistaking a temporal and subjective good for a universal and objective good. For Lacan, the problem occurs in the ambiguity of *jouissance*, where the difference between pleasure and pain becomes blurred and transgression is subtle yet profound.

Various forms of response to this anxiety are indicated for efficacy and attempts to heal the rift between what we feel and believe ought to be done and the desires and compulsions that drive us in other directions. I contend that this raises questions with regards to religious practices such as the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the sacramental of exorcism - where transgression in the form of a manifest evil is personified and actualised. What are the philosophical implications of attributing temptation, vexation and possession to an outside source as an explanation for transgression? This is an important

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Antigone between Two Deaths', *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 241-287.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X* (London: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Robert St. Hilaire, 'The Cosmic Side of OCD', *Church Health Reader*, Winter (2012). <http://chreader.org/cosmic-side-ocd>. Last accessed 23/07/2021.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, pp. 184-189 [q. 3, art. 14], 2003; Kent & Dressel (2016), pp. 49-53.

question in terms of the basis of the anxiety of sin and looking to Aquinas' notions on love in relation to works by Lacan as providing a vision for overcoming the anxiety of sin and fully accepting human culpability.

#### 4. Sin as a Rupture of the Symbolic Moral Order

The story of Sophocles' *Antigone*<sup>20</sup> provides the open space in which Jacques Lacan examines the question of ethics, free-will, desire and human culpability. The space is delineated by questions of duty and transgression, between feeling compelled to act and prohibitions against doing so, between the divine and the profane. Various characters in the story illustrate human experiences of anxiety, depression, and melancholia, and provide a means for considering the root cause of these experiences in the conflict of transgression brought on by psychological drives and desire. Thomas Aquinas also examines these topics and seeks to show how they arise and how they ought to be understood. Both Lacan and Aquinas aim to alleviate individual anxiety, depression and melancholia by working through their causes, clarifying their meaning and thereby illustrating a means for overcoming them. Yet, in bringing these two together I have no intent to reclaim what some critics have referred to as a 'New Theology' (known specifically by the French term 'nouvelle théologie') in the pejorative modernist sense,<sup>21</sup> but rather examine how the insights of the modern age can illuminate new ways of understanding foundational insights by returning to the sources (referred to as 'ressourcement'<sup>22</sup>) on these topics.

Tina Beattie argues that Lacan 'offers a path of purgation and purification of theological desire ... in order to seek a renewal of theological method and language'.<sup>23</sup> She goes on to say,

<sup>20</sup> Sophocles, 'Antigone', *The Oedipus Plays of Sophocles: Complete Texts of Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone* (London: Mentor Books, New English Library Ltd., 1963) pp. 165-210.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, 'Where is the new theology leading us?' ('La Nouvelle Théologie où va-t-elle?') Rome, *Angelicum*, 23 (1946); Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, 'The Structure of the Encyclical *Humani Generis*' ('La Sintesi Tomistica'), trans. A. Aversa, Brescia, *Queriniana*, 1953; and Aidan Nichols, 'Thomism and the Nouvelle Théologie', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 64: 1 (2000).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Gabrielle Flynn & Paul Murray, *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God: Ressourcement – Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996); M. D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); and John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology* (2nd ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Tina Beattie, 'Deforming God: Why Nothing Really Matters: A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas', in *The Dominican Council* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 220.



Thomas [Aquinas] is a rich resource for this, if we interpret desire widely in the Lacanian sense to encompass the passions, the appetites, the desiring and the willing, which, according to Thomas, motivate us to know and to love God through the desirable things of creation, and to act in such a way as to express that love in our relationships and ways of being.<sup>24</sup>

Beattie identifies the benefit of reading Lacan and Aquinas together in overcoming the nihilistic malaise that has come to characterise some aspects of contemporary thought. She says that ‘Lacan argues that the God of modernity is not dead but unconscious’.<sup>25</sup> And she goes on to confront the hubris of people like Richard Dawkins by saying that ‘The man of science no longer seeks an infinite God but an infinite knowledge that will overcome forever the darkness of the soul’.<sup>26</sup> Yet, my point is that the idea of achieving ‘infinite knowledge’ implies absolute culpability, since no one can be understood to act in ignorance.<sup>27</sup> As Charles Taylor says, ‘Naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike’.<sup>28</sup> Beattie goes on to illustrate how Lacan highlights the way that modernity’s disregard of a creating God shapes the way Western thought understands the world. The supplanting of God as the origin of all things through creation *ex nihilo* into human creativity and imagination as form imposed on a simply existing material world reduces any notion of inherent teleology to mere relativistic desire.<sup>29</sup> Although Beattie examines this in terms of the gendering of thought in Western society, I argue that it reveals the underlying sublimation of an established moral order into a relativisation of the good - whereby the universal will of God is replaced by the particularised desire of the individual.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Beattie argues that ‘A Lacanian reading of Thomas invites us to discover in the relational Trinity and creation *ex nihilo* a non-dualistic vision of the goodness and desirability of creation, as a manifestation of the goodness and desirability of God and as a participation in the divine Trinitarian relationships’.<sup>31</sup> Further, the supplanting of God in modernity, according to Lacan, focuses on the

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Rm.* 3:20.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 21. (As quoted by Beattie, *ibid.*, p. 223.)

<sup>29</sup> Beattie, *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>30</sup> This would be the inverse of what Jesus directed, *Mt.* 5:23; The Church states, ‘As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of *choosing between good and evil*, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning’. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Bloomsbury), §1732, 2017; also, cf. §2792. Hereafter simply referenced as *CCC* along with the relevant section.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

quantity of God - in His Oneness - rather than the quality of God - in His completeness, which leads to a resentment based on lack, the recognition of human incompleteness.<sup>32</sup>

My position is that our biological drive towards the good is based on a lack driven by eros – a love based on desire and seeking fulfilment. Our spiritual drive towards the good is based on a plenitude driven by agape – a love based on an overflow of care and compassion seeking only to relate. In this way, I argue that sin is not acting towards bad desires but acting towards desires that can never fulfil the natural order or drive towards completion. This is the point of ‘Lacan’s Thomas’, insists Beattie, ‘for it suggests that the primordial other that God brings into being in the act of creation is not matter and form but desire itself’.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Aquinas points out that God is completely present in all people and all things,<sup>34</sup> so I contend that it is not that the sinner is deficient in God, rather the sinful act is ordered towards a lack instead of completion or fulfilment. For this reason, Beattie argues,

psychoanalytic Thomism can reawaken theology to the significance and complexity of desire in its destructive as well as its creative aspects. This might lead us to a renewed sense of belonging within creation, while inviting a reclamation of the doctrine of original sin as that which alienates us from one another and from the natural world, so that the virtuous life is a disciplining of desire.<sup>35</sup>

Summarising thus far, by focusing on the original works of Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Lacan in an attempt to clarify and understand the complimentary insights of each with regards to the idea of sin, I believe it becomes apparent how the perception of sin leads to the psychological manifestation of anxiety, depression, and melancholia. A foundational premise to be proven is that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation provides a means for confronting and addressing these pathologies, leading to a greater sense of individual wholeness and openness to otherness – both as an absolute and a particular.

## 5. Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a Philosophy of Healing of the Ruptures

There is a common perception that society has come to be more and more characterised by psychologically athologized anxiety, depression,

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.; also cf. Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void - A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 232)

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas (2003), pp. 141-146 [q. III, art. 1].

<sup>35</sup> Beattie, *ibid.*, p. 221.

and melancholia.<sup>36</sup> However, Jan Schürmann and Jürgen Margraf identify a difference between USA and European experiences of these conditions.<sup>37</sup> Although an actual increase is debated, what is certain is that it also comes at a time when the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation has been on a steady decline among the faithful of the Catholic Church. In 2012, Cardinal Timothy Dolan made the point ‘What an irony that despite the call of the Second Vatican Council for a renewal of the sacrament of penance, what we got instead was its near disappearance’.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the question arises as to what extent can these two perceived societal changes be connected. Harold Koenig notes,

Sigmund Freud argued that religion focuses on punishment for wrong or sinful thoughts or deeds, leading to excessive guilt and thus increased anxiety (see *Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices*, 1907, and *Future of an Illusion*, 1927). Other mental health professionals in the latter half of the twentieth century believed that religious beliefs and practices could help relieve stress and anxiety by enabling people to cope better with life’s stressors [sic].<sup>39</sup>

As such, my aim now is to answer the question: To what extent is the fear of sin and evil responsible for anxiety, depression, and melancholia; and can a Thomistic philosophy of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation form the basis for an appropriate psychoanalytic response?

My initial premise is that anxiety serves as a self-defence mechanism by which the individual remains on a heightened state of alert to avoid a perceived yet unspecified threat. A certain level of anxiety is beneficial as a means of being prepared for challenging situations. Yet, excessive anxiety combined with feelings of absolute culpability can lead to pathological obsessions, psychological disorders, and physical maladies.<sup>40</sup> The Christian narratives of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth centre on a recognition of these ideas of

<sup>36</sup> A. J. Baxter, K. M. Scott, A. J. Ferrari, R. E. Norman, T. Vos, & H. A. Whiteford, ‘Challenging the myth of an “epidemic” of common mental disorders: trends in the global prevalence of anxiety and depression between 1990 and 2010’, *Depression and anxiety*, 31:6 (2014), pp. 506-516.

<sup>37</sup> J. Schürmann & J. Margraf, J., ‘Age of anxiety and depression revisited: A meta-analysis of two European community samples (1964-2015)’, *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 18:2 (2018), pp.102-112. This article provides a very good literature review on the question of an increase in these pathological conditions.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Pattison, ‘Cardinal challenges bishops to undergo their own conversion, renewal’, *Catholic News Service* (2012). <https://www.usccb.org/offices/general-secretariat/usccb-general-assembly-2012-november-cns-stories#presidential>. Last accessed, 23/07/2021.

<sup>39</sup> Harold G. Koenig, ‘Religion and Anxiety’, *Catholic Exchange*, 2012. <https://catholicexchange.com/religion-and-anxiety>. Last accessed, 23/07/2021; also cf. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> For more on the mediating factor of religion on anxiety, cf. B. Zarzycka, & P. Zietek, ‘Spiritual Growth or Decline and Meaning-Making as Mediators of Anxiety and Satisfaction

anxiety and culpability. Repeatedly throughout the gospels, Jesus is reported to have engaged with individuals who are anxious about their wellbeing: physical, mental, and spiritual.<sup>41</sup> Some identify themselves as culpable for wrongdoing but there are also others who identify with having obeyed all laws and yet are still anxious.<sup>42</sup> For those who acknowledge culpability relief is immediate through that recognition and confession, and then being reassured by Jesus that their sins are forgiven. This is the common understanding of the pattern for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. However, for those who cannot see a fault, identify as obedient to the law, and yet still remain anxious, relief is much more difficult to obtain. For Christians, this could be seen as a recognition of the conflict between two moral laws, one finite and secular and another infinite and divine. This is the problem faced by Antigone in the play of the same name by Sophocles. Antigone is torn between the temporal law of the land and the eternal law of moral rectitude, which at times seems to ask too much. Where these two laws conflict, the moral agent will be in a continual state of anxiety. I contend that it is here that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can provide a Christian with the means to overcome the chasm, but perhaps it can also provide a therapeutic means for non-Christians as well. My position is that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation provides a way for the individual to analyse thoughts, feelings, and actions in relation with others and not solely within themselves, which is where anxiety resides. Thus, anxiety is intimately connected to the idea of lack; for Aquinas it is a lack of completion that can only be fulfilled by God; for Lacan it is a lack that can never be overcome by the very nature of the symbolic character of language by which all imagination is formalised. Nevertheless, I argue, it is in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation that the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real are brought together in a therapeutic act of healing.

Pope Francis said that ‘the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a sacrament of healing. When I go to confession, it is in order to be healed ... of some wrongdoing’.<sup>43</sup> He went on to say that ‘the forgiveness of our sins is not something we can give ourselves’,<sup>44</sup> nor is it enough to ask within our own mind, rather because the feelings of having committed a wrong is not solely against the self but also against an other – whether it be a single person, community, or God – it must

with Life During Religious Struggle’, *Journal of Religion and Health*, 58:4 (2019), pp.1072-1086.

<sup>41</sup> *Mk.* 2:5-12.

<sup>42</sup> *Mk.* 10:20-26.

<sup>43</sup> Pope Francis, *General Audience*, §1, 19 Feb. (2014). [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140219\\_udienza-generale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140219_udienza-generale.html). Last accessed 23/07/2021.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

be asked of another. He goes on to say that ‘In the celebration of this Sacrament, the priest represents not only God but also the whole community, who sees itself in the weakness of each of its members, who listens and is moved by his repentance, and who is reconciled with him’.<sup>45</sup> He says,

from a human point of view, in order to unburden oneself, it is good to talk with a brother and tell the priest these things which are weighing so much on my heart. And one feels that one is unburdening oneself before God, with the Church, with his brother. ... This is the beauty of Confession!<sup>46</sup>

The idea of unburdening oneself by talking with another, I suggest, highlights the way in which the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can be understood therapeutically for overcoming anxiety, escaping depression, and avoiding melancholia. Hence, I contend that my objective in this article accords with Aquinas’s own intention in understanding how to approach the issue of sin and human responsibility. As Brian Davies points out, Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologiae* as a preparatory manual ‘for preaching and pastoral care, especially the hearing of confessions’.<sup>47</sup> And, I suggest, it is this pastoral aspect that we must continue to explore.

The ultimate question to be addressed is: To what extent is the fear of sin and evil responsible for anxiety, depression and melancholia; and can the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation form the basis for an appropriate psychoanalytic response? In answering this question, several formative questions are important to take these ideas further. 1) To what extent are we morally responsible for our thoughts and actions - consciously, subconsciously, and unconsciously? 2) Are we responsible for developing a disciplined mind as some sort of Aristotelian style virtue? 3) Must subconscious and unconscious thoughts and dreams be confessed? 4) What role might such a sense of absolute responsibility have in experiences of anxiety, depression, and melancholia? 5) What are the philosophical implications of attributing temptation, vexation and possession to an outside source? 6) Can acknowledging the foundations of subconscious and unconscious thoughts and dreams through psychoanalysis alone relieve the anxiety of guilt or must it be accompanied by confession as a means for psychologically fully accepting responsibility? 7) Does the Christian command to love provide a vision for overcoming the anxiety of sin and fully accepting human culpability?

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, §2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 12. For further development on this point, cf. Leonard Boyle, ‘The setting of the *Summa Theologiae*’, in Brian Davies (ed.), *Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays* (London: Roman and Littlefield, 2006).

## 6. Catechesis and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a Healing of Estrangement and Alienation that Leads to Guilt Resulting in Anxiety, Depression, and Melancholia

My position is that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is singularly about relationships: between God and humanity, amongst humanity as the body of the Church, and in addition to the relationship between God and the individual is the relationship between the individual and themselves. I argue that it is a Sacrament of healing the estrangement and alienation resultant of the breakdown in relationship, which is characterised by a lack of faith in the other (including self-as-other), mistrust, and abandonment. I argue that this is the source of sin and within the human person this breakdown in relationship is experienced as emotional distress, recrimination, and guilt. As the Church states, ‘only in this relationship is the evil of sin unmasked in its true identity as humanity’s rejection of God and opposition to him, even as it continues to weigh heavy on human life and history’.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the Church goes on to clarify that through divine revelation God has distinguished sin from ‘merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure’, rather, ‘sin is an abuse of the freedom that God gives to created persons so that they are capable of loving him and loving one another’.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, I suggest that a comprehensive catechesis of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a Sacrament of healing necessarily must begin by a) defining and distinguishing what is meant by ‘sin’ and the various types of sin. Then, b) specifically expanding the Sacrament from solely a spiritual grace of restoration and healing of the relationship between God and humanity to include a developed understanding of a grace of healing of the psychological wellbeing of the individual; thus, it is important to ensure the catechumen also recognises how anxiety – and, subsequently, depression, and melancholia – are inevitable consequences of unresolved and unbounded guilt. Finally, c) to set out the various ways of understanding the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation through the healing acts of conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

### *A. Defining and Distinguishing Types of Sin*

It is important at this point to distinguish between ‘original sin’ and ‘personal sin’. In terms of personal responsibility and guilt, original sin is a state of being which is a separation from holiness, it is not a per-

<sup>48</sup> CCC, §386.

<sup>49</sup> CCC, §387.

sonal act by which the individual is impugned.<sup>50</sup> This is not something that we are personally responsible for and therefore bear no guilt.<sup>51</sup> We are born into a ‘sinful’ world that is characterised by separation from others and this affects us. It is simply part of human nature to be separate from holiness in our limited capacity to always recognise the good. Baptism cleanses us of original sin because Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection restored the relationship between God and humanity, reconnecting us to holiness.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, personal sin is an act that separates us from others – both God and other people.<sup>53</sup> It is a ‘wilful’ act in violation of the moral order, either doing an evil act (commission) or by refraining from doing good (omission).<sup>54</sup> This can be further divided into mortal sin and venial sin.<sup>55</sup> Mortal sin is an act that destroys faith and is done in full knowledge and volition in a rejection of God and a relationship with holiness.<sup>56</sup> This for Lacan is a rejection of the moral order.<sup>57</sup> Venial sin is an act that does not destroy faith; it is not a rejection of God but is damaging to the relationship with God.<sup>58</sup> According to the Catholic faith, the individual is responsible for both mortal sin and venial sin, which is experienced as guilt. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is an act of mercy aimed at healing the guilt and eternal punishment. It helps the person to recognise their freedom from the personal guilt that accompanies sin, it brings about healing. It does not ‘abolish the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin’,<sup>59</sup> but it does provide an understanding and acceptance of self that allows a person to appropriately ascribe and establish boundaries for that which they are truly culpable. It provides an opportunity to reconcile not only with God but also the whole body of the Church, i.e., with others from whom we have become alienated, and with ourselves as well. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation employs an embodied other (i.e., priest) through which the relationship is reconciled – both spiritually (with God) and socially (with others as embodied by the Church). Hence, making the healing experience something tangible and not solely a concept.

<sup>50</sup> CCC, §405.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Complete & Unabridged (Kindle Edition) (Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), I-II, q. 81, art. 1.

<sup>52</sup> CCC, §1213.

<sup>53</sup> CCC, §1849.

<sup>54</sup> CCC, §1853.

<sup>55</sup> CCC, §1855.

<sup>56</sup> CCC, §1856.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, ‘Antigone between Two Deaths’, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London. Routledge, 1992), pp. 270-283.

<sup>58</sup> CCC, §1862.

<sup>59</sup> CCC, §1426.

### B. Anxiety as Consequence of Unresolved and Unbounded Guilt

Lacan states that for Freud, anxiety refers to that which lies beyond/behind/below (meta-) the initial presentations of the desires of the self (which is the foundation of the individual psyche) to what Lacan calls ‘das Ding’,<sup>60</sup> what Schopenhauer referred to as the ‘Wille’,<sup>61</sup> and what Christians refer to as God.<sup>62</sup> ‘It is the essence of life whose support it is’ and it is the ambiguous basis of the involuntary will, which is characterised by ambivalence.<sup>63</sup> I argue that it is this ambivalence which is the source of anxiety and leads to a hopeless despairing experienced as depression and can be ultimately manifested as melancholia.<sup>64</sup> It is here that the paradox of going beyond the pleasure principle can lead to a preference for its opposite, i.e., a preference for that which is not itself pleasure but death. This for Lacan is the basis of evil.<sup>65</sup> However, I argue it is important to recognise that in Lacan’s distancing of God – through Schopenhauer and, subsequently, the works of Freud from being the individual’s object of desire to the individual’s mere source of desire he has severed the possibility of the individual reconciling the very source of alienation for the individual, which is separation from the source of life and willing, i.e., God.<sup>66</sup> My point is that this anxiety arising from unresolved and unbounded guilt inevitably leads to depression and melancholia.<sup>67</sup> For Aquinas, the conflict within the individual is due to the dissonance between the virtuousness of the individual and their sensitive appetite.<sup>68</sup>

### C. Catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation: Overcoming and Healing

Catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation must include a delineation of the various ways of understanding the Sacra-

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Lacan, ‘Das Ding’, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 57-70.

<sup>61</sup> Robert A. Gonzales, ‘The Ambiguity of the Sacred in the Philosophy of Schopenhauer’, *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 19:2 (1993), pp. 143-166.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Campbell Roberts & Mark R. Talbot, eds., *Limning the psyche: Explorations in Christian psychology* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Lacan, ‘The Object of the Thing’, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 104.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, *Future of an Illusion* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 74.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X* (London: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 37, art. 2.

<sup>68</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 59, art. 3.



ment of Penance and Reconciliation. It is a Sacrament of: conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>69</sup> Each of these are fundamentally important aspects to consider in terms of the therapeutic significance each understanding contributes to the psychological healing of the individual penitent. It highlights the process of restoring relationships with others and with the self.

### *Sacrament of Conversion*

As with any psychological therapeutic approach, the individual must bring themselves forward in a recognition of dissonance and a desire for healing. Reconciliation is not possible if a separation is not recognised and acknowledged. Spiritually, the penitent must accept as an initial step that ‘If we say, “We have no sin”, we are deceiving ourselves, and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, [God] is trustworthy and upright, so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil’.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, anxiety, depression, and melancholia may be individual existential experiences, but they are always within a broader social and cultural context that must be addressed to establish the boundaries of personal culpability.

In my experiences as a psychotherapist, working specifically within a Christian informed approach, I have found that the issue of boundaries of personal culpability have been of fundamental importance. For some clients, it is empowering to gain recognition that choice is possible, that social and cultural contexts are foundationally significant but need not be determinative of their sense of self and identity. ‘Conditions of worth’ imposed on people from others can often inhibit a person’s organismic valuing process and deter their actualising tendency.<sup>71</sup> The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation provides an opportunity for the penitent to examine their own conscience and accept God’s love as the source of their organismic valuing process and the basis of their actualising tendency. With these ideas in mind, I have found that in providing a space in which the client’s relationship with God can be safely explored in a congruent and non-judgemental way, the client finds the peace and security to hear and accept God’s call to His healing grace.<sup>72</sup> The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation reinforces this conversion of self and provides the space in which the conversion of self is extended beyond the self to enter into communion with God, the Church and community. Catechesis on the Sacrament necessarily must

<sup>69</sup> CCC, §1423-1424.

<sup>70</sup> *1Jn.* 1:9.

<sup>71</sup> D. Mearns & B. Thorne, *Person-Centred counselling in action* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (London: Sage Publications, 2013), p. 10.

<sup>72</sup> For more on providing the core conditions of therapy cf. D. Mearns & M. Cooper, *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London: Sage Publications, 2018).

emphasise the importance of personal conversion and recognise the opportunity it provides for achieving healing through accepting personal responsibility.

### *Sacrament of Penance*

Religious conversion requires the penitent to go beyond mere acknowledgement to an action that externally demonstrates an internal change, i.e., an act of contrition. It is not enough to solely accept that a sin has been committed, the penitent must also turn away from the sinful behaviour and take steps to restore trust in the relationship between them and God. So too, psychologically, the person must seek to relinquish patterns of thought and objects of desire that inherently lead them to become isolated and see themselves as purely self-sufficient and in need of no other. The difficulty in completing an internal change – both spiritually and psychologically – is in understanding the boundaries of acts of contrition. Too little does not fully activate the necessary change to realise forgiveness within the self and too much means that no act of contrition will ever be enough. The former indicates a lack of commitment and responsibility on the part of the penitent, and the former indicates a lack of faith the grace of God. Therefore, a catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation must consider personal commitment in seeking to restore relationship with God but also must endeavour to help the catechumen come to understand, appreciate and accept the fulness of all that God's grace entails.

### *Sacrament of Confession*

The penitent in recognising the need for conversion and substantiating the change must come to a point whereby they can accept their inability to administer grace to themselves. Sin, alienation and isolation cannot be remitted alone, it necessarily implies the need for another. The penitent in confessing to a priest opens themselves to the salving grace of the divine. As the Psalmist cries out, 'Cure me for I have sinned against you',<sup>73</sup> so too does the psychologically distressed need to recognise that healing is only possible through the open acknowledgement of the concerning issues. However, it is important to distinguish between feeling guilty and actual guilt. Morally, actual guilt is a realisation through the internalisation of a moral order to which one feels responsible that a transgression has been made and the person must account for their own culpability. Psychoanalytically, 'guilty feelings' arise from conditions of worth imposed externally to be responsible for events outside of the individual's control.<sup>74</sup> Although the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation does provide

<sup>73</sup> Ps. 41:4.

<sup>74</sup> Hans W. Cohn, *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice: An Introduction to Existential Psychotherapy* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p. 72.

a means whereby one can be absolved of moral wrongdoing, it also allows for the opportunity for the individual to address and overcome their guilty feelings by circumscribing the limits of culpability without which the transgression becomes all consuming.

An example of this can be seen in a psychotherapy client I worked with who had betrayed the trust of their family. Although the client had eventually admitted their transgression, endeavoured to make amends and had been forgiven by the family. The client was nevertheless unable to forgive themselves, eventually leading to experiences of melancholia and feeling that it would be better if they were dead. By discussing with the client what actually occurred within the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and how the grace of God is provided without reservation or limit, and in examining the client's faith in the love and steadfastness of God, the client was able to come to a point of accepting God's grace, and experience true forgiveness of themselves. Thus, a catechism on the Sacrament must include an exploration of forgiveness and recognise the three parties involved: God, the community/significant others, and the self.

### *Sacrament of Forgiveness*

Since sin is premised on the understanding of an abandonment and violation of the relationship between God and humanity, only God can forgive sins.<sup>75</sup> Yet, it is through the Holy Spirit that the grace of forgiveness is accessible through the Sacrament.<sup>76</sup> However, it is through personal faith that forgiveness is made complete because it is an acceptance of personal culpability and a recognition of the grace of the other.<sup>77</sup> Analogously, anxiety, depression, and melancholia arise out of a fear and sense of hopelessness of loss and abandonment and requires faith that forgiveness and healing are possible.

Working with a client struggling with experiences of anxiety and depression brought on by feelings of guilt due to being a victim of historical sexual abuse, it was important to help the client recognise who was responsible for the act. The difficulty for the client was that the abuser was a Catholic priest (curate) and the client was made to believe that they bore some guilt for sin in relation to the abuse. When the client sought guidance and support from the priest's manager (parish priest), the idea of the client's culpability was reinforced and the client was encouraged to confess the abuse as their own sin. Psychologically, this was a problem of boundaries because the client did not bear responsibility for the abuse, but the curate did. However, the curate exploited the broader social and cultural context to take advantage of the spiritual and moral authority of his position to further isolate the client from

<sup>75</sup> *Mk.* 2:7; *CCC*, §1441.

<sup>76</sup> *Jn.* 20:22-23.

<sup>77</sup> *Mk.* 2:5-10.

their relationship with God and induce them to feel morally culpable and spiritually alienated. For this client, it became important for them to see the Sacrament as one of healing and forgiveness; healing from the hurt of being betrayed by a minister of God, forgiveness for the Church in not protecting them, and forgiveness of self in not trusting their own sense of morality and God's faithfulness. Thus, for this client, catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation entailed seeing it more than simply atoning for sins committed and instead seeing it as an opportunity for healing and opening up to a reconciliation with the Church. In this way, it provides an important teaching point for the Church and her ministers as well to recognise the Sacrament as a multidimensional opportunity for grace not only for the penitent but the Church and her community as well.

### *Sacrament of Reconciliation*

Finally, the goal of the faithful and the goal of the emotionally distressed are the same; both seek to reconcile with that which has been lost. The faithful seek to restore their relationship with God and the Church. The emotionally distressed seek to restore their relationship with themselves and with others. As the Church notes, 'Sin is ... a rupture of communion with [God]. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation'.<sup>78</sup> And, this is where the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a means for overcoming psychological distress comes to fruition and the opportunity for the individual to regain a sense of wholeness and communion – with themselves and with others.

A catechism which seeks to overcome the anxiety of sin must first build from a clear determination of the good and a grounded recognition of human culpability. It arises out of an awareness of how sin creates a rupture not only in a religious context in what it signifies in terms of a relationship with God, but in the psychological and symbolic moral orders as well. This requires seeing the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as more than solely an ecclesiastical practice of faith but also as a philosophy of healing of the ruptures within the individual themselves. A fundamental aspect of the Sacrament is prayer. Prayer connects the person with God and provides a point of inter-relationship through prayers for others.<sup>79</sup> In this way, the Sacrament can be seen therapeutically as opening an opportunity for individual congruence and social contextualization, which together provides a basis for overcoming anxiety, depression, and melancholia. As a Christian-based

<sup>78</sup> CCC, §1440.

<sup>79</sup> *Jm.* 5:16.

therapist, my role is quite similar to that of a catechist: to prepare the person to openly, honestly, and fully bring themselves before God and to experience full reconciliation with God, the Church, and themselves through the Sacrament. As such, catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation could readily be followed by further education in the faith exploring the extension of *healing* from a focus on the self to attentiveness to others in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to outline an approach for developing a catechesis on overcoming the anxiety of sin by closely examining a way of determining the good and human culpability through the lens of integrating the works of Jacques Lacan and Thomas Aquinas. This is intended as a response to Pope Benedict XVI's call for a more positive approach to catechesis. It has been focused on a response to the ongoing question of the relevance and importance of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as a catechetical debate of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century and explored the implications of modernity for human culpability and moral responsibility. As previously noted, Pope Benedict XVI argued that 'morality is a doctrine about the nature of happiness and the means to attain it',<sup>80</sup> and it is with this in mind that this article has sought to make the connection between healing of the psychological distresses of anxiety, depression, and melancholia and the overcoming of feelings of boundless guilt for sin through the sacramental healing experienced in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. As such, it has been argued that a catechism on the Sacrament taking into account the various fundamental aspects of the Sacrament can provide not only an introduction and familiarity with the foundations of belief in the Catholic faith but also provide an insight into the potential therapeutic benefits of such a catechetical approach. To paraphrase Pope Benedict's statement used as an epigraph at the beginning of this journey:

*Because we believe in our Catholic faith,  
we dare to hope that along with spiritual healing  
that psychological healing is possible  
through the Sacraments,  
because we believe and hope,  
we can love God, others and ourselves.*

<sup>80</sup> Ratzinger (1997), p.16.

## References

## 1. Scripture

Wansbrough, H. (Ed.). *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company. 1985.

## 2. Magisterial Documents

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. London: Bloomsbury. 2017.  
Francis, Pope. *General Audience*, 19 Feb. 2014. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140219\\_udienza-generale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140219_udienza-generale.html). Last accessed 23/07/2021.

## 3. Books and Articles

- Allen, J., Martín, I, Harris, E., Giangravè, C., White, C., Kirby, J., Lynn, T., Levitt, S., Collins, C., & Carvalho, N. 'Church scrambles to save 'endangered sacrament' of confession'. *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse*. Denver. Crux Catholic Media. 2016.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *On Evil [Quaestiones disputatae De malo]*. Translation by Richard Regan. Ed. Brian Davies. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2003.
- . *The Summa Theologica*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Complete & Unabridged. Kindle Edition. Coyote Canyon Press. 2010.
- Baxter, A. J., Scott, K. M., Ferrari, A. J., Norman, R. E., Vos, T., & Whiteford, H. A. Challenging the Myth of an 'Epidemic' of Common Mental Disorders: Trends in the Global Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Between 1990 and 2010. *Depression and Anxiety*, 31(6), 506–516. 2014.
- Beattie, Tina. *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void - A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013.
- . 'Deforming God: Why Nothing Really Matters: A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas'. *The Dominican Council*. 2014.
- Boyle, Leonard. 'The setting of the Summa Theologiae'. *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*. Ed. Brian Davies. London: Roman and Littlefield, 2006. [Boyle's essay originally in *Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies*, Toronto, 1982.]
- Chenu, M. D. *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1997.
- Cohn, Hans W. *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice: An Introduction to Existential Psychotherapy*. London. Sage Publications. 1997.
- Davies, Brian. Ed. *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*, London: Roman and Littlefield. 2006.
- . *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011.
- Freud, Sigmund. 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' (1907). In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)*. Trans. R. C. McWatters. 1924.
- . *Future of an Illusion*. London. Penguin Books. 2008.
- Flynn, Gabrielle & Murray, Paul. *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2012.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald. 'Where is the new theology leading us?' ('La Nouvelle Théologie où va-t-elle?') Rome. *Angelicum*. 23. 1946.
- . 'The Structure of the Encyclical *Humani Generis*'. ('La Sintesi Tomistica') Trans. A. Aversa. Brescia. *Queriniiana*. 1953.
- Gonzales, Robert A. 'The Ambiguity of the Sacred in the Philosophy of Schopenhauer'. *Auslegung: A Journal of Philosophy* 19.2: 143–166. 1993.
- Kent, Bonnie and Dressel, Ashley. 'Weakness and wilful wrongdoing in Aquinas's *De Malo*'. *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*. Ed. M. V. Dougherty. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 48–53. 2016.

- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Anxiety - A Simple Psychologically Oriented Deliberation*. Trans. Alastair Hannay. London: W.W. Norton. 2015.
- Koenig, Harold G. 'Religion and Anxiety'. *Catholic Exchange*. 2012. <https://catholicexchange.com/religion-and-anxiety>. Last accessed, 23/07/2021.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Trans. Dennis Porter. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. London: Routledge. 1992.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book X*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. London: Polity Press. 2016.
- Lubac, Henri de. *The Discovery of God: Ressourcement – Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing. 1996.
- Mearns, D. & Thorne, B. *Person-Centred counselling in action* (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications. 2013.
- Mearns, D. & Cooper, M. *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications. 2018.
- Milbank, John. *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Renewed Split in Modern Catholic Theology*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing. 2014.
- Nichols, Aidan. 'Thomism and the Nouvelle Théologie'. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*. 64. 1. 2000.
- Pattison, Mark. 'Cardinal challenges bishops to undergo their own conversion, renewal'. *Catholic News Service*. 2012. <https://www.usccb.org/offices/general-secretariat/usccb-general-assembly-2012-november-cns-stories#presidential>. Last accessed, 23/07/2021.
- Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal. *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1997.
- Roberts, Robert Campbell, & Mark R. Talbot. Eds. *Limning the Psyche: Explorations in Christian Psychology*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. 1997.
- Saliga, C. M. and Quijano, C. 'Spiritual Care in Hospital Policies: Incorporating Sacramental Interventions'. *Ethics and Medics*, 32:2, 3–4. 2007.
- Schürmann, J. & Margraf, J. 'Age of Anxiety and Depression Revisited: A Meta-Analysis of Two European Community Samples (1964-2015)'. *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 18(2), pp.102-112. 2018.
- Sophocles. 'Antigone'. *The Oedipus Plays of Sophocles: Complete Texts of Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*. London: Mentor Books, New English Library Ltd. Pp. 165–210, 1963.
- St. Hilaire, Robert. 'The Cosmic Side of OCD'. *Church Health Reader*. Winter 2012, <http://chreader.org/cosmic-side-ocd>. Last accessed 21/12/17.
- Stanley, Scott. 'Young and Clueless: Thinking about the Big Rise in Anxiety'. *Psychology Today*. New York. Sussex Publishers. 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sliding-vs-deciding/201711/young-and-clueless-thinking-about-the-big-rise-in-anxiety>. Last accessed 23/07/2021.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Harvard. Harvard University Press. 2007.
- Zalewski, S. 'The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an Encounter with God and Experience of His Mercy'. *Roczniki Teologiczne*, 63(05), pp.71-89. 2016.
- Zarzycka, B. & Zietek, P. 'Spiritual Growth or Decline and Meaning-Making as Mediators of Anxiety and Satisfaction with Life During Religious Struggle'. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 58(4), pp.1072-1086. 2019.

Daniel J. Goodey

The Open University Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Psychology and Counselling

Perthshire, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

[daniel.goodey@d.securedetails.co.uk](mailto:daniel.goodey@d.securedetails.co.uk)