

The Sacrament Of Penance and Reconciliation



THE SACRAMENT
OF
PENANCE
AND
RECONCILIATION

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FOREWORD

Following our reflection on the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, we now turn our attention to the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This sacrament which is in crisis at the present time for various reasons is the sacrament of God's mercy – the sacrament which liberates, consoles, forgives, reconciles us with the Lord and with one another.

There is an urgent need to rediscover the ministry of God's mercy in the Church today. The sacrament of Reconciliation is a source of support, guidance, healing and sanctification for us. It is the ordinary means of obtaining pardon and the remission of grave sin committed after Baptism. We must rediscover the 'community' aspect of this sacrament. Based on the demands of the Gospel there is great need for instruction regarding moral conscience and sin.

Once again I wish to thank Brothers Hugo Tumelty, C.K. 12 and Barry C. MacMahon, Supreme Chancellor for their dedicated research and study of this challenging topic. We present to you the fruits of our labour and trust that this booklet will be of service to our Order and beyond as we prepare to mark the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin.

Gerard Dolan
Supreme Chaplain

Feast of the Queenship of Mary

INTRODUCTION

The call to conversion is at the centre of Christ's teaching about the coming kingdom of God. Conversion and penance must be part of every Christian life. Conversion which happens in our hearts requires a fundamental change of direction - a turning away from evil and turning towards God. Before we can turn to him, God must first turn to us in his loving mercy.

The sacraments are Christ's gifts to us. The Church is the sacrament of Christ's presence and of his saving work on earth, through his passion, death and resurrection. Baptism is the sacrament of changed life and of the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38). The sacrament of Penance which was regarded as a second baptism, a second plank of salvation is a sacrament in its own right which complements Baptism.

In the history of the Church various elements of this sacrament have been highlighted. Since Vatican II the ecclesial and communal dimensions of Penance have received prominence. Conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church. This sacrament is the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness of serious post-baptismal sin. It is also a sacrament of spiritual healing and has a close link with the other sacraments. In an age which denies sin and carries the burden of that denial, the power of Christ's forgiveness through the Church is needed more than ever.

A SACRAMENT IN CRISIS

The confession of sins is not an easy topic to write about or talk about today. One has only to mention the topic of ‘sin’ and you find that no one wants to listen. One hears that it is so negative, that there has been too much emphasis on sin in the past, and that today people want to look on the bright side of life. In the last twenty or thirty years we have practically forgotten about the great sacrament of reconciliation. Today confession is disappearing from the lives and practices of so many of our children and this is a worrying crisis the Church is undergoing. Because people are forgetting this sacrament they are losing their sense of sin. One example is that very many come to receive the Eucharist nowadays but if the majority are not frequenting confession and we are a sinful people, surely the question of preparedness for Holy Communion must arise.

So, how do people get rid of their guilt nowadays? Are mental illnesses an indication that there is much guilt, which, instead of being acknowledged and forgiven, is suppressed? Why do Catholics today make so little use of the opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance? Is their fear of acknowledging their guilt stronger than their longing for reconciliation?

Being a Catholic means not only forgiving others but first and foremost allowing oneself to be forgiven. Every time we go to Mass we hear the words *‘for the forgiveness of sins’* and we are conscious of our failings and our guilt. The whole of our Christian life has to be supported by the power of forgiveness and by the courage to acknowledge our failings and our guilt before God and before man so that we can continue to grow as human beings and members of the Christian community. No one is saying that this is easy, indeed, it is often hard but where it happens, it is – as experience teaches, a source of renewal and of setting free. To be absolved from our guilt, to leave the confessional with a clear conscience, to make a fresh beginning and go forward corresponds to our deepest feelings.

This experience is expressed in a special way in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation; it serves for renewal, joy, reconciliation with God and with the

community of the faithful. To go to Confession and confess oneself a sinner can be painful but to experience forgiveness of sins is wonderful and valuable. It contributes especially to renew us and the world for the coming of God's Kingdom.

There are three ways of approaching sin. First there is the escapist way when we look on 'the bright side of things' and run away from the reality of sin by suppressing it; but the reality remains deep down. Secondly, there is the negative way of brooding over it in fear and remorse. Thirdly, there is the positive way to which Our Lord himself invites us by his frequent preaching of repentance and penance.

We see this third way illustrated in the story of the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50. The parable spoken on that occasion shows us how a truly gospel approach to our sins can turn the evil into good. The woman, who was known to have been a sinner wet the feet of Jesus with her tears, dried them with her hair and poured perfume on them. The Pharisee thought that Jesus should have known what sort of a woman this was but Jesus said, ***“Simon, do you see this woman? You gave me no water for my feet when I entered your house, but she washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You didn't welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since she came in. You provided no oil for my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. This is why, I tell you, her sins, her many sins, are forgiven, because she loved much. But the one who forgives little, returns little love. Then Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”(Luke 7:43-50)***

All the sacraments are about transformation. The Eucharist transforms our bread and wine, and the sacrament of Penance can transform our sins and guilt into occasions for loving God all the more. Our sins, said one writer, are the paths down which divine mercy has come to rescue us. To help us to see our sins in that way and to help us to grow in that penitential love of God described in Luke 7:47 should be the aim of the whole liturgy of reconciliation.

The joy of repentance and forgiveness is at the heart of Christian life. It is what Christ has won for us through the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection. The sacrament

of Baptism is the great celebration of this reality in the Church. The newly baptised dies to sin and is born to a new life. Confirmation brings this life to maturity and it is nourished in the Eucharist. But human beings grow weak in mind and body. Where illness threatens their well-being, Christ's healing touch reaches them through the sacrament of Anointing. Where sin threatens spiritual illness and even death, Christ's forgiveness reaches them through the sacrament of Reconciliation.



WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION?

The sacrament of reconciliation (or penance) is the celebration of God's merciful love, which grants us the forgiveness of our sins, through the death and resurrection of Christ, who, through the ministry of the Church, reconciles us to God and to one another. The sacrament is a special encounter with Jesus Christ; it is a fruitful source of grace.

There are actually many names by which this sacrament is called and these names or descriptions help us to see different aspects and graces of this sacrament. It is called the Sacrament of Conversion because it celebrates Jesus' call to conversion. It is called the Sacrament of Penance since it calls the penitent to make amends to others for sins committed. It is called the Sacrament of Confession because the open declaration (which is what the word "confession" means) of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is called the Sacrament of Forgiveness since by this sacrament and through the sacramental absolution of the priest, God grants the penitent pardon and peace. It is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation since it brings together, by God's grace, those whom sin has separated to some degree from God and from the Christian community.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us: "The sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God" (1468). Indeed, the sacrament of Reconciliation is a time for love, mercy and healing, regrettably, some see this sacrament of forgiveness and healing as a cause for anxiety and fear. Jesus intended it to be a time of compassion and mercy and every priest in confession is conscious of being a minister of understanding and forgiveness. When Jesus gave us this sacrament He knew well our human nature and knew the need we have to hear the freeing words: "I absolve you of your sins...."

The joy of repentance and forgiveness is at the heart of Christian life. It is what Christ has won for us through the mysteries of his life, death and resurrection. The sacrament of baptism is the great celebration of this reality in the Church. The newly baptised dies to sin and is born to a new life. Confirmation brings this life to maturity and is nourished in the Eucharist. But human beings grow weak in body and in spirit. Where illness threatens their being, Christ's healing touch reaches them through the sacrament of anointing. Where sin threatens spiritual illness and even death, Christ's forgiveness reaches them through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Although this sacrament has such a great potential for benefits and blessings in our spiritual lives, it is also sadly true that many neglect to celebrate it frequently. Pope Benedict XVI said *that "Sacramental reconciliation is certainly one of the moments in which individual freedom and self-awareness are called to express themselves particularly clearly; it is perhaps for this reason too that, in an age of relativism and of the consequent reduced awareness of self, the practice of this Sacrament should also have diminished. The examination of conscience has an important educational value. It teaches us to look sincerely at our lives, to compare them with the truth of the Gospel and to evaluate them with parameters that are only human but drawn from divine Revelation. Comparison with the Commandments, with the Beatitudes, and above all with the Precept to love, represents the first great school of penance"*.



FORGIVENESS IN THE GOSPELS

Reconciliation is central to the life and work of Jesus, and to the life and work of the Church. In his teachings and ministry Jesus speaks often about the forgiveness of sins. Most striking is his parable of the prodigal son (*Luke 15*) who is welcomed home by a father prodigal in his love. The father is so generous in forgiving that he does not wait for his son to reach him but sees him approaching from afar, rushes out to meet him and welcomes him home before the son even has time to express his remorse in the speech he had prepared. Jesus tells us that God seeks the sinner just as their owners hunt for a lost coin or a wandering sheep (*Luke 15*). In his parables Jesus teaches about the generosity and mercy of the Father. In his actions he shows that generosity and mercy in practice. With the woman who anoints his feet, and is well known as a sinner (*Luke 7*), and with the woman caught in the act of adultery (*John 8*), we see the divine generosity and mercy translated into human words and actions. The forgiveness of sins is at the heart of Jesus' work on behalf of Israel and the world. Everybody recognises that his claim to be able to forgive sins is a claim to divine power, for 'who can forgive sins but God alone' (*Mark 2:7*). And yet he interprets his own death as a sacrifice for human salvation. His body is broken that we might be made one. His blood is poured out so that sins might be forgiven. His death on the cross is for the reconciliation of humanity, to put to death the hostility that separates us (*Ephesians 2:16*). 'Through him', we read elsewhere, 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (*Colossians 1:20*).

Those who seek to follow Christ and to live by his way must be ready to be forgiven and they must be ready to forgive. The prayer he teaches his disciples includes 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' (*Matthew 6:12*). Our reconciliation with God cannot be separated from our reconciliation with our fellow human beings with whom we must first be reconciled before bringing our gifts to the altar (*Matthew 5:23-24*).

Forgiveness is not to be miserly or reluctant but generous and free: seven times perhaps, or even seventy times seven (*Matthew 18*). Those cycles or spirals of injustice and revenge that so afflict humanity are broken only by the death of the innocent one who 'offered his back to those who struck him' (*Isaiah 50:6*), who did not return evil for evil (*Romans 12:17*) but asked the Father to forgive those who did not know what they were doing (*Luke 23:34*).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SACRAMENT

The Church, the community of his disciples, is given authority and power to continue Christ's work of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is seen in the keys given to Peter with the power to 'bind and loose' (*Matthew 16:19; 18:18*). From the earliest times Christians recognised the link between their own experience of forgiveness and their task of bringing others to the same joy. 'It was while we were sinners that Christ died for us' (*Romans 5:8-9*). 'Through Christ we have received reconciliation' (*Romans 5:11*). 'Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven: hence she has shown great love' (*Luke 7:47*)

When people ask what they are supposed to do in response to hearing the gospel proclaimed, the answer is that they are to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ so that their sins might be forgiven and they might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2:37-38*). Shortly after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to the Apostles and said to them, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'. (*John 20:21-23*). This Bible text teaches us some very important things. In the first place we should note that this passage does not make a lot of sense if it was only sufficient merely for us to confess all our sins privately to Jesus in prayer. Why would Jesus give the Apostles the astonishing power to forgive sins unless he expected people to come to them and benefit from this ministry and be submitted to it. Hence, Scripture does not teach us that all we must do is to tell our sins privately to Jesus in prayer. Since Jesus gave the power to forgive or retain sin to the Apostles, it is implicitly clear that he expected people to speak openly of their sins to the Apostles.

There are other passages which also indicate that the practice of the early Church was an open declaration of sin: *Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices* (*Acts 19:18*). Here is another example from the letter of James: *Is anyone among you sick? Let him summon the presbyters of the*

church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. (James 5:14-16)

Thus the general biblical teaching, (while not excluding personal confession of sins to God in prayer) emphasises that we confess our sins one to another. When the Church celebrates reconciliation the Father receives the repentant child who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders to bring it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies the temple of God again and comes to dwell more fully within it. To be reconciled with God means also to be reconciled with the Church, specifically to return to participation in the Eucharist. It may even be that those whom the community has felt obliged to keep at a distance (*1 Corinthians 5:1-5; Corinthians 2:5-11*) are by the power of God's Spirit, restored to full communion. The Church's discipline of penance, although it has taken different forms at different times, has always had this as its goal; the great joy at the banquet of Christ's church over the sinner who returns from afar. In practice, the Church developed a discipline of penance that allowed for the re-admission of baptised Christians who had fallen into grave sin. The sin that excludes a person permanently from the presence of God will be a form of despair that refuses to accept the blessing of God's forgiving presence. This is what we mean by hell: a self-chosen exclusion from the love of God. We pray and hope that no human person will end in that state, but we do not know.

The Church accepted, then from earliest times, that it did indeed have the authority and power to reconcile sinners with God, not only through the sacrament of baptism, but through another sacrament intended for baptised persons who had fallen into serious sin. The really serious sins that broke communion with the Church were murder, adultery and apostasy. The implications and consequences of such actions were as obvious then as they are now. There was also the decision of the 'Council of Jerusalem' that identified these as acts Christians ought not to do (*Acts 15:20; 15:29*).

But even in the event of such sins there was the hope of reconciliation. In the early centuries the process of reconciling sinners with the Church had two striking features: it could be undertaken only once, and it was a process conducted in public. In a famous image Tertullian, a North African writer, speaks of reconciliation as ‘a second plank after shipwreck’. This second plank can however, only be offered once. Hermas, Ephrem and other early Fathers of the Church speak about a ‘second-class salvation’ that is possible for the baptised who have failed to persevere in the commitment they have undertaken. Saint John Climacus, who died in 649, says that repentance is the renewal of Baptism and a contract with God for a second life.

Penance and reconciliation was public in these early centuries and sinners were obliged to identify themselves as such before the community. But this does not mean that they had to confess their sins publicly. In Rome Pope Leo I makes it clear that public confession of sins is not required although there seems to be some confusion about whether he went on to praise it where it was freely chosen as an act of humility or to condemn it as something that should not be done. The important thing is that penance and reconciliation were public even where confession was not. The sacrament of reconciliation referred then to the formal conclusion of the process by which penitents were restored to the communion of the Church by the bishop.

The distinction between penance as a Christian virtue, and the sacrament of penance or reconciliation, is also clear from early times. The call to repentance is extended to all and conversion is not just a once off experience but a daily task for the believer. The liturgical celebration of Lent made this very clear, an annual recalling of the gospel summons to *metanoia*, a change of heart and mind. The virtue of penitence or penance was practised through prayer, almsgiving, other works of service, and various kinds of mortification and self-denial. Fidelity to the gospel required a disciplined life and discipline presupposed some ascetical practices to keep the mind and heart focused on God and on our need for God. This essential aspect of Christian living was celebrated in the liturgies of the Church, in particular in the Eucharist, Baptism and what came to be called the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

7th. Century onwards:

Things began to change around the beginning of the seventh century. The discipline of once in a lifetime penance and reconciliation was replaced by the practice of more frequent and private penance and reconciliation. This change came about as a result of the influence of Irish missionaries inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition. It emerged from their practice of spiritual direction in which they had received a spiritual father and asked advice about any difficulties they were experiencing in their spiritual lives. The monks did this for each other and from this spiritual exercise emerged the sacrament of reconciliation as we know it today. This ‘private’ practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church was brought to Europe by these monks. From that time on, the sacrament has been celebrated in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. It allows the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practised down to our day. (CCC 1447).

Around about the 9th Century private confession began to be called penance and confessors consulted ‘penitential books’ that listed the proper ‘penalty’ for each sin. In the 16th Century the Council of Trent (1551) reaffirmed penance as a sacrament of the Church and annual confession of grave sin was made compulsory. Vatican II in the 20th Century emphasized the reconciliatory and communal aspects of the sacrament rather than the judicial (judgment-centred) aspect of the sacrament. Communal celebrations of the sacrament also became popular around this time.

REQUISITES FOR A GOOD CONFESSION

The five things necessary for a good confession are:

1. An Examination of Conscience.
2. Contrition (or sorrow) for sin.
3. A Firm Purpose of Amendment.
4. The Confession of one's sins to a priest.
5. Acceptance of one's penance (making satisfaction for sin).

1. Examination of Conscience.

From the very earliest times, people have sought to deny their guilt. Our first parents, Adam and Eve denied having sinned when God asked them, “***Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?***” (Genesis 3:11). Adam put the blame on Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Neither was prepared to take responsibility for their actions. Had they confessed, their situation could have been redeemed. It is absolutely essential for spiritual growth that one learns to take responsibility for one's actions and learns to make an honest confession of one's sins. The problem lies in a person's conscience. Even the conscience of many faithful people has been badly formed as a result of the very narrow understanding of sin that is widespread in the Church nowadays. The priest, in order to forgive sins must know the sins that have been committed. The penitent therefore must know his sins. To know his sins, he must search seriously into his life since the time of his last confession, reflecting upon his thoughts, words and omissions. This is called the ***examination of conscience***. It should be performed with care. We should realise that sins are not only failures, they are also our sharing in what is actually evil: unbelief, indifference, selfishness, violence, contempt for the weak, sensuality, racism, neglect of the poor, money seeking, a spirit of superiority. Every sin, even a personal sin, has a community dimension: it affects the entire Church.

A good examination of conscience should bring to the penitent's mind all his sins of thought, word, deed, desire and omissions according to their kind, their number and

their relevant circumstances. There are three faults that have to be avoided in this examination – (a) **Laxity** (b) **Scrupulosity** and (c) **Doubt**.

Examining one's Conscience:

The examination of conscience is a sincere effort to recall not only your sins since your last confession but also your attitudes that lead you to sin. You should not try to ferret out each and every sin. Serious sins will usually come to mind immediately, nor should you waste time in useless regrets. Sin is not merely a series of failures. As mentioned earlier it is also your sharing of what is actually evil:

- Unbelief, indifference, selfishness,
- Violence, contempt of the weak, eroticism,
- Racism, neglect of the poor,
- Money seeking, wastefulness,
- A spirit of pride and superiority

No one does evil for the sake of evil. A person often does wrong because at the moment it seems to him advantageous. Yet what is advantageous to one is harmful to another: the person who steals deprives another of his lawful possession. The one who claims for himself something that belongs to everyone harms the community. One who, to protect his own name, spreads what is untrue about another, does harm to the personal reputation of the other, poisons the atmosphere and stifles confidence.

Sin is not a 'private' affair. It has evil consequences, even if at first no one seems to be harmed. Above all sin makes people careless with regard to evil. Christians, who have set themselves completely against God's commandments and persist in this attitude, jeopardise their place in the community of the faithful. Their guilt calls for conversion and forgiveness. If a person insults another he must not only ask God's forgiveness, he must also ask pardon of the one he has insulted. If one steals another's property, it is not enough to feel sorrow and remorse; he must make good the harm caused. The will to make satisfaction and restitution is a touchstone of conversion.

A Christian must also be able to forgive someone who asks his pardon. A person who has experienced God's forgiveness also pardons his fellow men. This is why Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: ***'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'*** We should never harbour grievances. Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians gives this advice: ***'Let everyone speak the truth to his neighbour for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let your anger last until the end of the day, lest you give the devil a foothold.'*** (Ephesians 4 25-27). Not many words are needed to grant pardon; sometimes a gesture of reconciliation suffices.

So we can see that every sin, one way or another, has a community dimension. It is something that tarnishes the body of Christ, which together, we are. The prodigal son was welcomed home by his father; our Heavenly Father awaits us in the same way. Following the example of the prodigal son, examine your conscience in the light of the Gospel and find out when you have behaved contrary to the teaching of Our Lord Jesus in thoughts, words, deeds, desire and omission.

There are many ways to examine one's conscience. Many churches have leaflets available to help the penitent prepare for Confession. However, one should not leave it to the last minute to examine one's conscience, especially if there has not been recourse to the sacrament for a long time.

In the Old Testament the psalmist begins his prayer with the words: ***'Lord, you search me and you know me'***. He ends with the following request;

O search me, God, and know my heart.

O test me and know my thoughts.

See that I follow not the wrong path

and lead me in the path of life eternal. (Psalm 138(139): 23-24).

2. Contrition

Contrition is the key to God's mercy and pardon. It is the ***most essential condition*** for a worthy reception of the Sacrament of Penance. ***'Among the penitent's acts***

contrition occupies first place. Contrition is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again. (CCC 1451). The chief effect of sin is on the soul. It separates the soul from God, either entirely (in the case of mortal sin), or partially (in the case of venial sin), by loosening the ties of our friendship with God. So to get back into God's favour through the Sacrament of Penance the sinner must sincerely repent of his sins and be truly sorry for them. He must detest his sins with his whole heart and have a firm intention never to commit them again. Without this sorrow or contrition, there can be no pardon for sin. If a sinner does not have true contrition for his sins, the priest has no power to absolve him from his sins. If he did, the absolution would be worthless. God himself cannot and will not forgive someone who is not sorry for his sins and has no intention not to offend again. Contrition is defined by the Council of Trent as ***a sorrow of the soul and a detestation of the sins committed, with the firm determination not to sin again.*** It is important to note that contrition is a ***sorrow of the soul***, not of the body.

Perfect Contrition.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: ***When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called 'perfect' (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.*** (CCC 1452). Perfect contrition is necessary as a means of salvation for dying sinners in the state of mortal sin who can not avail of the sacrament of Penance. Perfect contrition, however, is not necessary for the valid reception of the sacrament of Penance. Here, imperfect contrition or attrition suffices. The reason for this acceptance is because the Church knows that 'perfect contrition' is a gift of God's grace and not something we can generate from within our own resources. We should always strive for this gift, not only when preparing for confession but habitually. One of our frequent prayers could be: ***"O My God, give me the grace of true repentance, a perfect contrition for my sins."***

Imperfect Contrition.

Although it is much better to have perfect contrition when receiving the sacrament of Penance, the second kind of supernatural contrition, which we call 'imperfect contrition', is sufficient for a good confession. In defining 'imperfect contrition' the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: *The contrition called 'imperfect' (or 'attrition') is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.* (CCC 1453). Imperfect contrition means we are turning back, beginning the journey back to reconciliation with God. It was a combination of ordinary deprivation and disillusionment that brought the prodigal son to his senses and made him think of returning home. From Luke we read 'Finally coming to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned before God and against you' (Luke 15:17-18). God continues to use ordinary events and our responses to them to sow the seeds of contrition in our hearts. Even a sense of humiliation, failure or embarrassment is enough to generate imperfect contrition and from that perfect contrition may be born.

Purpose of Amendment.

To confess sins without a purpose of amendment would make nonsense of the sacrament. How can a person be sorry for something they have every intention of doing again? Therefore the third requisite for a good confession is a ***firm purpose of amendment***. This means that the penitent must make a firm resolution to avoid, by the grace of God, not only sin, but also the dangerous occasions of sin. An occasion of sin is any person, place or thing which ordinarily puts a person in danger of committing

sin. If an occasion leads into sin or pressures one into committing sin, therefore, in order to avoid sin, the occasion must be avoided. It is, therefore, important that the sinner must make positive, definite efforts to overcome habitual sins. Prayer ought to accompany our efforts to overcome our faults. Through prayer we obtain grace and through grace we obtain the strength to avoid sin. God himself tells us: ***‘I am the vine and you are the branches. As long as you remain in me and I in you, you bear much fruit; but apart from me you can do nothing.’*** (John 15:5). Even though a person relapses into sin through human weakness, it is not an indication that his purpose of amendment was not sincere. His purpose of amendment depends on his good will and it is an earnest determination to do one’s best to avoid sin in the future. Firm confidence in God’s help when difficulties arise will be of immense value in successfully overcoming temptation.

The Confession of one’s sins to a Priest.

Confession of sins to a priest is the fourth condition required of the penitent for the forgiveness of his sins. The sacrament of Penance is a sacrament of mercy. It has two component parts:

- a. The **Confession** proper, that is, the penitent’s telling of his sins and
- b. **The Absolution** or pardon imparted by the priest

The Confession: Regarding mortal sin the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: ***Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance: ‘All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly. (CCC 1456).*** Concerning venial sins the Catechism states: ***‘Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving***

more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful'. (CCC 1458).

A good confession is humble, sincere and entire. A confession is humble when the penitent accuses himself of his sins with a deep sense of shame and sorrow. It is sincere when the penitent tells his sins honestly, truthfully and simply, as he himself sees them, without exaggeration or excusing them. An entire confession is when the penitent tells all his mortal sins that he can remember after a diligent examination of conscience, together with their number and any circumstances that may change their nature.

It is advisable to confess venial sins as well as mortal sins. The confession of venial sins is not required for the integrity of Confession but it is always good and useful to mention some venial sins as well for to confess them shows a hatred for all sin. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult for the ordinary person to distinguish between mortal and venial sin; therefore, if in doubt, one should mention them as well. The sacrament of Penance remits all the venial sins for which we are truly sorry whether we mention them or not; it also takes away, at least in part, the temporal punishment due to them.

Sometimes one may avail of a general confession. This means a private confession where the penitent (exceptionally) resolves to confess as far as he can all past sins, and not only those since his last confession. The practice is recommended for those who are certain that their past confessions were bad or for those entering into a new state in life, the priesthood, religious life or marriage. It is also useful for all who wish to make a serious preparation for death. It is also required by some religious institutions to be done annually. However, general confession is not recommended for those who have scruples. Such persons should not make a general confession without the express sanction of their confessor as it may increase their malady.

The question is often asked about how often one should go to confession. The answer will vary from individual to individual but once a month would be considered a reasonable standard of frequency. Frequent confession is helpful in many ways;

- a. Practically speaking, one can remember what one has done and become more aware of small faults that continue to be an obstacle to union with God.
- b. Psychologically, confession is good because it helps the person to be honest with himself. By articulating his faults on a frequent basis, he comes to know his failures and thus makes progress in his spiritual life. By confessing his sins, he frees himself from his past and enables a future reconciliation with God and his neighbour.
- c. It is also good to hear the words of forgiveness. While it is true that a fervent act of contrition will bring about forgiveness from the Lord, nevertheless, periodically it is good to hear the words, ‘Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.’
- d. Spiritually, frequent confession is good because the penitent receives from the sacrament both sanctifying grace as well as The sacramental grace of penance not only forgives sins but helps one to keep one from committing those same sins in the future.
- e. Finally, every sacrament is an encounter with the Lord. Reception of the sacrament of Penance provides us with an opportunity to spend time with the Lord in an intimate and personal way.

Absolution.

Having listened to the penitent confess his sins, having offered his words of encouragement and advice, and having assigned an appropriate penance, the priest speaks the words of absolution: ***God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

Through the sacrament the fruits of Christ’s paschal mystery reach the life of a particular believer through the power of the Holy Spirit. Its effects are reconciliation with God and the forgiveness of sins. The pardoned sinner lives again in grace and in peace.

The more deeply we appreciate what sin is, the more we appreciate the gift of this sacrament. If sin means alienation from God then absolution reconciles us with God. If sin means enslavement to our fallen nature then absolution frees us from that enslavement. If sin means the loss of grace then absolution means the restoration of the life of grace in us.

The power of this sacrament is clear when we reflect on what it undoes and on what it makes new. Sacramental absolution refashions us in the image of Christ who is the Word and the Wisdom of God. It renews the gift of the Spirit in us so that we may be courageous workers for Christ's kingdom of love, justice and peace. It strengthens us for the on-going struggle against sin, the constant battle in which we are caught with the powers of this world. Thomas Aquinas says that to stand still on the way of the Lord is to move backwards. We must keep going, gaining freedom from the past and looking to what lies ahead (*Philippians 3:13*).

But the withholding of absolution is very rare and not part of the normal development of the sacramental encounter. What happens in the vast majority of cases is that an honest confession of one's sins, from a contrite heart, culminating in the act of contrition, opens the door to receive absolution from the priest.

After the priest gives absolution, he then dismisses the penitent saying, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good" and the reply is "His mercy endures forever". Many priests mat simply say, "***May God bless you***".

Completing the Penance.

As soon as possible, we must carry out the penance that we were given, while we enjoy the experience of having our sins removed. When God forgives, your sins have disappeared. Because of our human tendency to sin, we must strive for holiness each and every day. It is a good habit to pray daily to avoid sin, particularly those sins that we recently confessed.

Think of those against whom you hold grudges. Consider vengeful feelings you might have, or any petty ways you strike back at or undermine others. Make peace with those you have wronged; forgive those who have wronged you.

Jesus perfectly redeemed us by his death and Resurrection. The application of his infinite merits is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through the Church. Thus in the sacrament of confession the guilt of sin is taken away. In the case of mortal sin, the very real danger of eternal damnation is also removed. However, even after the sacrament of penance has repaired our torn relationship with God, the temporal punishment due to sin may remain. The temporal punishment caused by our sins is not an expression of God's anger, nor does it indicate that God's forgiveness is deficient. Instead it results from the harmful attachments to sin we cling to even after a sin is forgiven. When we confess our sin we may not have a complete repentance because we still adhere to something connected with that sin. As a result temporal punishment remains. Our loving Father allows temporal punishments to cleanse us of our sinful attachments because they harm our relationship with him and may jeopardise eternal life with him in heaven.

Perfect sorrow is the complete repentance of sin that flows from our ardent love of God. When perfect love accompanies sacramental forgiveness, the sinner is so completely healed that no temporal punishment remains. In contrast, when our sorrow is less than perfect, our deformed attachments demand purification before we go to heaven.

SEAL OF CONFESSION

Regarding the sins revealed to him in sacramental confession, the priest is bound to inviolable secrecy. From this obligation he cannot be excused either to save his own life or good name, to save the life of another, to further the ends of human justice, or to avert any public calamity. No law can compel him to divulge the sins confessed to him, or any oath which he takes – e.g. as a witness in court. He cannot reveal them either directly – i.e. by repeating them in so many words – or indirectly – i.e. by any sign or action, or by giving information based on what he knows through confession. The only possible release from the obligation of secrecy is the permission to speak of the sins given freely and formally by the penitent himself outside confession. Without such permission, the violation of the seal of confession would not only be a grievous sin, but also a sacrilege. It would be contrary to the natural law because it would be an abuse of the penitent's confidence and an injury, very serious perhaps, to his reputation. It would also violate the Divine law, which, while imposing the obligation to confess, likewise forbids the revelation of that which is confessed.



THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents.

This is the rite which is most commonly used in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Preparation of the priest and penitent by prayer is needed to celebrate the sacrament as well as the examination of conscience by the penitent. The confessor welcomes the penitent and may read a text of Holy Scripture. The penitent confesses his sins and the priest gives a suitable penance which should correspond to the gravity and nature of the sins. Then the penitent recites the Act of Contrition or Act of Sorrow and resolves to begin a new life. Following the prayer the Confessor pronounces the formal of absolution in which the essential words are 'I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. The penitent continues his conversation and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel.

Rite for Reconciliation of several penitents with individual Confession and Absolution.

The communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The Word of God is proclaimed announcing God's mercy and the call to conversion. The homily taking the theme from the scriptural text should lead the penitents to examine their conscience and to turn away from sin. A communal examination of conscience may replace the homily. All recite the Confiteor and the Lord's Prayer. Then the penitents who desire confess their sins to the priest of their choice. Having received a suitable act of penance they are absolved with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent. The Penitential Service concludes with prayer thanking God for the great love he has shown us.

Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with general Confession and Absolution.

This is an exceptional Rite of Reconciliation. Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excess from this kind of confession.

Particular, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession. Apart from danger of death, general absolution may be given to several of the faithful at the same time after they have made only a general confession and are suitably disposed to repentance. This situation may arise if there is grave need. Situations may arise when in view of the number of penitents sufficient Confessors are not available to hear individual confessions properly within a suitable period of time. General absolution is not lawful, when confessors are available because of the large number of penitents as may be on the occasion of some major feast or pilgrimage.

Saints on the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The understanding of the saints in relation to sin is encouraging, particularly if we are tempted to become depressed at the thought of our sinfulness. St. John Climacus wrote that no one really wants to sin against God and yet we do all sin without being forced to do so. St. Gregory Nazianzen agrees. To do no wrong is supernatural, he says, and belongs to God alone. Not that the saints regarded sinning as something unimportant: on the contrary they are very clear that it means the death of the soul, the loss of grace and alienation from God. St. Paul of the Cross gives the following advice: *Should we fall into sin, let us at once humble ourselves sorrowfully in his presence, and then, with an act of unbounded confidence, let us throw ourselves into the ocean of his goodness, where every failing will be cancelled and anxiety will be turned into love.*

Saint Therese of Lisieux, now a Doctor of the Church, teaches the same: *If my conscience were burdened with all the sins it is possible to commit, I would still go and throw myself into our Lord's arms, my heart all broken up with contrition. I know what tenderness He has for any prodigal child of His that comes back to him.*

It is by comparison with the love of God that we realise the sadness of our sins even though there is never any common measure between our fault and God's mercy. St. Francis de Sales, one of the gentlest of the saints, writes about this as follows: *Who will dare measure, by the greatness of his sins, the immensity of that infinite mercy which casts them all into the depths of the sea of oblivion, when we repent of them with love?*

The saints have always valued the sacrament of reconciliation and made frequent use of it themselves. St. Isidore of Seville writes about the importance of the sacrament which he refers to simply as 'confession': *Confession heals, confession justifies, confession grants pardon of sin. All hope consists in confession. In confession there is a chance for mercy. Believe it firmly. Do not doubt, do not hesitate, never despair of the mercy of God. Hope and have confidence in confession.*

BENEFITS OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

To conclude, the benefits of this sacrament are enormous. It restores us, in a way we can live and experience stage by stage, to God's grace and joins us to him in close friendship – we are reconciled to God. A sincere and modest approach to this sacrament is usually followed by peace, consolation and a serene conscience – a small resurrection from death. In a way which we may not readily recognise, the sacrament revitalises the life of the Church as a whole; it restores and repairs fraternal communion damage by our sins.

Conclusion.

God loves all of us. He delights in us. He never loses faith in us even though we may lose faith in ourselves. He never ceases to love us, even though we may have turned our back on him and tried to reject him and his Church. God's mercy is endless, and it gives him great joy to take away our sins.

Therefore, when you celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, think about God and his mercy and compassion and this will give you heart. Your very wish to celebrate this sacrament and the effort you are making to do so are signs that God's love and grace are already working in you.

Confession is necessary if you wish to develop your spiritual life. Francois Mauriac who won the Nobel Prize in literature and is acknowledged as one of the greatest Roman Catholic writers of the twentieth century writes: *No one can be forgiven without a beginning of love. Through the visible priest, the invisible Christ forgives our sins and opens again his heart to us. That is why those faithful who are eager to make some progress in the spiritual life not only confess but agree that a priest direct them in this difficult path... Later on he continues: Confession, penance, contrition constitute the sacred patrimony shared by all priests and all the faithful.*

We receive three inestimable treasures: the certainty of being forgiven through the words of Jesus to the paralytic, repeated expressly for us, “Your sins are forgiven”; a kiss of peace received in the very depths of our miserable hearts; a blank page upon which the most infamous man, having become once more like a little child, can begin writing his life anew... for it is never too late to become a saint.

Pope John Paul II said that the forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his innermost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church and he is reconciled with all creation.

This sacrament invites us to weep with a profound regret and repentance. Through the power of this sacrament Jesus heals those who are afflicted with the leprosy of sin. Jesus gently and lovingly tells us to sin no more without reproach, just as he did with the unfortunate woman caught in adultery. He also gives us His strength to lean on so we can be faithful to our determination to avoid sin in the future.

Finally, through the authority he gave His Church, Jesus applies his merits to purify us from the attachments of sin. When we leave the confessional it is with absolute certitude that our sins are forgiven. We have Jesus’ word for it. Jesus wants our death to be the happiest day of our life because on that day we can fly into the eternal embrace of His loving arms.



INDULGENCES

The doctrine and practice of indulgences in the Church are closely linked to the effects of the Sacrament of Penance. An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt has already been forgiven. One who is properly disposed can gain an indulgence under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfaction of Christ and the saints (Paul VI Apostolic Constitution on Indulgences).

An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. Indulgences may be applied to the living or the dead.

Sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and makes us incapable of eternal life. Every sin, even venial entails an unhealthy attachment to creation, which must be purified here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the ‘temporal punishment’ of sin. The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains.

In the doctrine of the Communion of Saints our lives as Christians are joined in Christ and through Christ to the life of other Christians in the supernatural unity of the mystical Body of Christ as in a single mystical person.

The treasury of the Church contains the merits of Christ as well as the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the prayers and good wishes of all the saints. We can help to obtain indulgences for the faithful departed so that the temporal punishment due for their sins may be remitted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why are so few people, especially young people, not going to the sacrament of Reconciliation nowadays?
2. Do you think children of Primary school age (around 8 years old) are ready and mature enough to go to confession? Do you think they would be capable of committing a mortal sin?
3. Why do you think we need the sacrament of Penance?
4. How do you think the priest in the confessional could make the sacrament more appealing and acceptable for the penitent?
5. In some parishes, only about one hour per week is set aside for Confession. Is this enough? Does this give the impression to parishioners that the sacrament is not very important?
6. If someone said to you, “I tell my sins directly to God, he will forgive me. I do not need a middle man”. How would you reply?
7. Cross and stern confessors have been the cause of many people being afraid of going to confession. Has this been your experience? Did it influence your attitude to confession?
8. Some people believe that it is impossible to commit a mortal sin. What is your opinion of this statement?
9. Do you think a merciful God who loves you would really send you to hell?

10. What do you understand by ‘temporal punishment’?
11. What harm do venial sins do to us?
12. What prayers of sorrow (acts of contrition) do you know by heart?
13. In the Bible find what words or actions the following people did to show they were sorry for their sins: (a) the brothers of Joseph in Egypt; (b) King David; (c) the citizens of Nineveh; (d) Zaccheus; (e) the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee; (f) the good thief.
14. What did Jesus say when he instituted the sacrament of Penance? Find the passage in the Bible.
15. Do you think it is good practice to keep on confessing to the same priest? Why?
16. Voluntary penances have been mentioned in the booklet. Name some penances which one might undertake of one’s own accord.
17. Can you think of any circumstances where it would be impossible to make restitution? What should one do if this happened?
18. How can you, as a Knight of Saint Columbanus, encourage more people to go to the sacrament of Reconciliation?





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