

LITURGICAL HISTORY: RECONCILIATION

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"A sacrament is defined by theologians as a sign and instrument of grace."¹ They are the channels of DivineLife that Jesus gives for our sanctification. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly explains, "By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify....The sacraments act *ex opera operato* (literally: 'by the very fact of the action's being performed')."² In other words, the sacraments do not depend on the holiness of the person administering them nor the person receiving them, "but the power of God."³ Therefore, when celebrated worthily, with faith, the recipient truly receives the sacramental grace proper to each particular sacrament. Furthermore, "the seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life."⁴ As our Holy Father, Pope Francis points out, "The sacraments communicate an incarnate memory, linked to the times and places of our lives, linked to all our senses; in them the whole person is engaged as a member of a living subject and part of a network of communitarian relationships."⁵ St. Augustine described the sacraments as: "the signs of divine things are, it is true, things visible, but ... invisible things themselves are also honored in them."⁶ Mankind, who can only receive information and knowledge through the senses, needs a visible sign to slightly grasp what God does in each soul invisibly. God in His infinite wisdom provides this through the sacraments.



Jesus says, "those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."⁷ While on earth, Jesus, performed many miraculous healings physically and spiritually. Jesus declared to His apostles, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."⁸ He grants them the power to heal body and soul, the power to forgive sins. "The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God; because they are signs they also instruct." They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it; that is why they are called "sacraments of faith."⁹ Among the seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, there are two Sacraments of Healing: The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Both bring healing to the penitent through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The Sacrament of Penance has interestingly developed throughout the years. "The beginnings of the sacrament of penance, as with most facets of early Church life, are less clear than we would wish."¹⁰ Documents and evidence are not readily available; however "the Church has traditionally seen the scriptural basis for this sacrament in the resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples."¹¹ The few early documents that are found depict a sense of tension, the Church looks to reflect God's love and mercy to sinners, but would prefer to encourage a life of holiness that does not accept sin for fear that Christians might mistakenly feel they can commit a sin at will and then go to confession. Hence, even today - especially today, "there is a need for a true conversion of life before reconciliation is celebrated, lest the whole process become shallow and the ritual meaningless."¹²

In the early Church penance was understood as a second baptism, "the first baptism was one of water, the early writers say, and the second one a baptism of tears."¹³ Therefore, penance, other than simply being another sacrament, is often related to the sacrament of Baptism. It "flows from baptism as the way the Church deals with post-baptismal sin."¹⁴ One can recall, John the Baptist who said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."¹⁵ He preached the coming of the Messiah, telling the people to prepare themselves by being cleansed with water, to repent of their sins. "It is clear that repentance and the forgiveness of sins are at the center of the preaching of Jesus. Conversion is the central call of the gospel, and both baptism and penance celebrate that conversion process in different circumstances."¹⁶

Historically, penance was received once in a lifetime in public setting; that is, many people receiving the sacrament at the same time. If a person fell into sin afterwards then it was up to God. This, as was explained previously, was an effort to show the Church's disapproval of sin and to protect the sacrament from the faithful taking sin lightly. "The Church did not say that such a person would not be forgiven, but that the

Church community could not do any more about the situation except to commend the sinner to God's mercy."¹⁷ Public penance was obliged of those who committed grave sins: murder, adultery and apostasy. This was "required when people had so seriously violated the community's standards that they were seen as rejecting their baptism radically, refusing to live the gospel way of life,"¹⁸ hence requiring a second process of conversion. Lesser sins were pardoned by personal penances, almsgiving, prayer, etc...

As time changed severe and extended disciplines often lasting for years became the norm giving way to exceptions for receiving the sacrament more than once in a life time. Due to the severity and length of the actual act of penance many "put off entering the order of penitents until later in life."¹⁹ Many were advised to wait until they aged and experienced, having had commit a number of sins, then becoming a penitent which lead to the sacrament to be perceived as a deathbed experience. Others waited to convert later in life so that after having had their times of pleasure they could be baptized and forgiven of all sins without having to be subjected to the demands of the order of penitents.

By the sixth or seventh century, Irish monks developed a private form of penance most likely from their practice of divulging their faults to the abbots and/or spiritual directors. As missionaries, they brought this practice with them when in Europe they began to Christianize pagan tribes. With them they also brought a "penitential books, which listed penances appropriate for various sins."²⁰ As this increasingly became more popular eventually leading to change. "Thus the order became confession, absolution and then the doing of the penance."²¹ Regarding the changes throughout the centuries, it can said,

"Beneath the changes in discipline and celebration that this sacrament has undergone over the centuries, the same fundamental structure is to be discerned. It comprises two equally essential elements: on the one hand, the acts of...contrition, confession, and satisfaction [penance]; on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church."²²

Blessed John Paul II taught that, " Through the centuries, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has developed in different forms, but it has always kept the same basic structure: it necessarily entails not only the action of the minister - only a Bishop or priest, who judges and absolves, tends and heals in the name of Christ - but also the actions of the penitent."²³ The Code of Canon Law also clearly states, "Absolution cannot be imparted in a general manner to many penitents at once without previous individual confession."²⁴

In the twentieth-century, "the reign of Pope Pius XII, in the 1940s and 1950s, saw the most frequent use of this sacrament in the whole history of the Church."²⁵ In the decades that followed the number of Catholics receiving the sacrament of penance significantly declined and it became a negative experience. Catholics related the sacrament to punishment rather than God's merciful love, "the sacrament of penance ceased to make sense to many of those who had been regular penitents before the Second Vatican Council,"²⁶ which called for many revisions of the rites that were issued in 1969.

December 4th, 1963, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was promulgated. Among several liturgical instructions, it states "the rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament."²⁷ Simply, the people of God should be educated on the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance so as to prepare their hearts to fully participate in the fullness of the sacraments and in the life of Christ. "Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion."²⁸ This sacrament is a fundamental part of the Christian life. This sacrament "is a whole consisting in three actions of the penitent and the priest's absolution,"²⁹ which is the prayer of forgiveness within the Sacrament. The three acts of the penitent are contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction or penance. Each must be present for the sacrament to be valid.

Saint John Climacus said, "confession is like a bridle that keeps the soul which reflects on it from committing sin, but anything left unconfessed we continue to do without fear as if in the dark."³⁰ This sacrament is meant to cause heavenly joy as one encounters the merciful love of Jesus. It is on occasion referred to as the Sacrament of God's Mercy, for it is where one comes face to face with His unfathomable love for humanity. Jesus who is not a stern judge, but a Love; He desires nothing more that the good of a soul, to embrace a person who has turned to Him for forgiveness. Simply, God is Love!

¹ Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday Religion. 2009), 789.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1084, 1128.

³ CCC, 1128

⁴ CCC, 1210

⁵ Pope Francis, Encyclical on Faith *Lumen Fidei* (29 June 2013), §40.

⁶ St. Augustine *De Cat. Rud.* 26.50

⁷ *The New American Bible* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1986).

⁸ (Mt 16:19 NAB)

⁹ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* (4 December 1963), §59

¹⁰ Mick, *Penance the Once and Future Sacrament*, 13

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*, 15

¹³ *ibid*, 16

¹⁴ *ibid*, 14

¹⁵ Mt 3:2

¹⁶ Mick, *Penance the Once and Future Sacrament*, 14

¹⁷ *ibid*, 20

¹⁸ *ibid*, 20

¹⁹ *ibid*, 21

²⁰ *ibid*, 22

²¹ *ibid*, 23

²² Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: Penance*, 344

²³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter in the form of Motu Proprio *Misericordia Dei* (April 7, 2002), § 1.

²⁴ *Code of Canon Law. c. 961 §1*, in *Code of Canon Law* (Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

²⁵ *ibid*, 25

²⁶ *ibid*, 26

²⁷ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium* (4 December 1963), §72

²⁸ CCC, 1422

²⁹ CCC, 1491

³⁰<http://chastity.com/research/saint-quotes/reconciliation/reconciliation>

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