

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

(C 1422-1497, USC Ch. 18)

“On the evening of that first day of the week...Jesus showed himself to his disciples.... He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’” (Jn 20:19, 22-23)

“The forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism is conferred by a particular sacrament called the sacrament of conversion, confession, penance or reconciliation.” (C 1486)

In this lesson we will look at:

- Biblical Roots of the Sacrament
- A Brief History of the Sacrament
- The Essential Elements of the Sacrament
- Seven Questions Often Asked about the Sacrament

Biblical Roots of the Sacrament (USC p. 235)

As we read the gospels, it is very clear that a central part of Jesus’ ministry is reaching out to sinners and extending God’s mercy to them. When a sinful woman kneels at his feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus forgives her sins because she “loved much,” unlike the Pharisee who has little or no sense of his need for God’s mercy (Lk 7:36-50). In Lk 15:3-31, the religious leaders are complaining because Jesus “welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus goes on to tell three wonderful parables, each of which speaks of God’s mercy.

While the Church teaches that only *God* can forgive sins, she also teaches that Jesus willed that the Church continue his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation on earth. We see this desire of Jesus expressed in Jn 20:21-23 (see opening quote).

A Brief History of the Sacrament (C 1447)

The *Catechism* (1447) states: “Over the centuries the concrete form in which the church has exercised this power received from the Lord, has varied considerably.”

In the history of this sacrament, one will not find reconciliation rooms for many centuries. In the early years of Christianity, the Church exercised her ministry of reconciliation in a variety of ways. Three such ways were:

- *Participation in the Eucharist removed sin.* The *Catechism* (1393) states that “the Eucharist cannot

unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins.”

- *Anointing of the Sick.* Jas 5:13-15 states that the prayer of faith prayed during the anointing “will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.”
- *Works of charity/almsgiving.* 1 Peter 4:18 tells us that ‘love covers a multitude of sins’. In Luke 7:47, Jesus says to the sinful woman who had washed his feet: “her many sins will be forgiven because she has shown much love”. Luke 11:41 states: “... give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you”.

During the second to the fifth century, an *Order of Penitents* developed to help the Church deal with serious sins like murder, idolatry and adultery. Penitents had to perform rigorous penances to show that they had converted from their sinful ways.

In the seventh century, Irish monks introduced to Europe the practice of private confession, which also introduced people to spiritual direction. This was the beginning of private or one-to-one confession that we know today.

In 1974, the Vatican promulgated a new *Rite of Penance* for the Church. The new *Rite* has three forms.

- *Private, one-to-one* confession with an option to confess face-to-face to a priest.
- *Communal penance service with individual confession.* This form emphasizes the *communal* nature of sin and reconciliation. No matter how secret sin is, it is never private. It not only hurts our relationship with God but also diminishes our relationship with our Church family. When we are less than we can be, our community is diminished by our failure.
- *Communal penance service with General Absolution.* This form, which is rarely used, occurs when there is a large number of people and an insufficient number of priests present to administer the sacrament.

Pause: What struck you most about what we have just read? What did you underline or might have underlined?

The Essential Rite (C 1448)

Despite changes and developments in the way the sacrament has been celebrated over the course of the Church's history, we note a fundamental structure comprising two essential elements: the acts of the penitent and the acts of Christ through the ministry of the Church. We will now look at both of these.

The Acts of the Penitent (C 1450-1460, USC pp. 237-240). The acts of the penitent are threefold: contrition, confession of sin, and satisfaction or penance for sin.

Contrition (C 1451-1454). The *Catechism* (1451) states that “among the penitent’s acts, contrition occupies first place.” Contrition and repentance are the terms used to speak of sorrow for our sins.

A sense of sorrow or repentance for sin is a wonderful blessing and is only possible through the grace of God at work in our soul. Many people sin and have little or no sense that they are doing wrong, or little or no sorrow for sins that they are aware of. Without the grace of God, our conscience will be asleep to sinful behaviors and attitudes. This was the situation of King David. He committed adultery and then arranged for the murder of the husband (2Sam 11:1-27). He was asleep to both sins until the prophet Nathan came and helped him to wake up (2Sam 12:1-14). It is always a good spiritual practice to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be aware of the existence of sin in our lives and to pray for the grace of true repentance.

Pause: Have we lost the sense of sin today? If so, what are some of the reasons?

Confession of Sins (C 1455-1458). The second action of the penitent is confession. Once we are aware of our sins and are blessed with the grace of repentance, we confess them to a priest. We must confess all mortal sins. It is recommended that we also confess venial sins, though it is not strictly necessary.

Confession of faults is good for the soul spiritually and psychologically. Naming our sins and confessing them to another can be quite humbling. Such an act of humility is good medicine for the pride that may lead us to think that we are morally and spiritually superior to others. Confession is also good for us psychologically. The very act of naming and sharing our faults, some of which may be causing us to experience a lot of guilt and shame, can be very healing especially when the confessor can effectively communicate to us God’s love and mercy.

Pause: If confessing our sins to a priest is good for the soul, why are so many Catholics reluctant to take advantage of this great sacrament?

Satisfaction/Penance (C 1459-1460). The third action of the penitent is satisfaction. The *Catechism* (1459) states that “*absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. ...the sinner must try to recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’...his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’*”

Contrary to what some think, when Catholics perform a penance after confession, it does *not* mean that we are somehow paying a price for God’s mercy. God’s mercy is a gift, freely given and it cannot be earned (Eph 2:8-10). The only “price” we have to pay is a repentant heart—for God cannot give his gift of mercy to an unrepentant heart.

While all sin that we are sorry for is forgiven in confession, the wounds or consequences of sin are not miraculously removed. These wounds or consequences of sin are sometimes called the “temporary punishment” connected to sin. For example, if we break into our neighbor’s house and steal some of his property, he may be kind enough to forgive us. But it doesn’t stop there. We must also return the stolen property or pay to repair damages.

Sin wounds our relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. The repairing of the damage done by sin begins with an appropriate penance given in the confessional. If we confess neglect of our relationship with God, God through the priest totally and happily absolves us. But a decision to take more time to pray will help to repair our relationship with God. If we have hurt our bodies through the abuse of food and alcohol, those sins are forgiven in the confessional. But a penance to fast and exercise restraint in those areas will help to restore balance and moderation in our lives.

God’s Action—Absolution (C 1461-1467, USC p. 239). As stated above, the core or essential acts of the sacrament of reconciliation are the *acts of the penitent* (contrition, confession and satisfaction) and *God’s action* administered through the Church’s representative.

The phrase “God’s action” seeks to make clear the belief of the Church that God alone has the power to forgive sin (C 1441). But the Church teaches that God through Jesus has given the Church the power to forgive sin in his name. “Whose sins you shall

forgive, they are forgiven them” (Jn 20:23). The priest says the following 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.

Pause: Does the penance you receive in reconciliation normally fit the sin?

Effects of the Sacrament (C 1496, USC p. 242). Each sacrament has spiritual effects for the one receiving it. The spiritual effects of the sacrament of reconciliation are threefold:

- Reconciliation with God and the Church
- Restoration of peace to the soul
- Reception of divine strength to fight the battle against temptations to sin

Seal of Confession (C 1467). The seal of confession refers to the fact that a priest cannot reveal anything he hears during a person’s confession. This refers to the sins confessed, and any other matters discussed during confession. The seal of confession admits of no exceptions.

Seven Questions Frequently Asked about this Sacrament

1. Why confess to a priest? Why the need for a middleman?

Isn’t it interesting that no one asks this question when it comes to the other sacraments, three of which also cleanse us of sin: Baptism, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick. In Catholic tradition, grace is mediated (comes to us) through persons, signs and symbols.

But the main reason we bring our sins to a priest is the Church’s deep sense that sin diminishes our relationship not only with God but also with others. Hence, the need for us to confess not only to God but also to the Church. In the confessional, the priest represents both God and Church.

2. How often should one celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Strictly speaking, one only has to go to confession when one has committed a mortal sin. But the Church recommends a more frequent use of the sacrament. Automobile engines run more smoothly if they have a regular tune-up, and teeth stay healthier if they are

cleansed regularly by a dental hygienist. In a similar way, our spiritual lives are enhanced by the frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

3. Is there an unforgivable sin?

Mk 3:28-29 implies that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin. The only unforgivable sin is the sin we are not sorry for. If we are not sorry for a particular sin, God cannot forgive us.

4. Why are some people afraid of confession or find it very hard to go to this sacrament?

There may be one or more reasons for the fear. We may have had a bad experience as a child in which a priest yelled or shamed us or even refused to give us absolution. We may have a difficult time being vulnerable before another or we may be ashamed of some sins. Or pride may be at work in us—making it very hard for us to admit that we have failed. If we are fearful of going to the sacrament, we should pray for a healing of the fear and pray for courage. We could also visit with a priest and share with him our fear of the sacrament.

Pause: Any questions or comments on what we have just read?

5. Why do so few Catholics go to the sacrament of Reconciliation today?

Loss of the sense of sin is widespread in our culture today. People can be mean and nasty to others and think they have not done wrong. Many Catholics believe that sin is a private matter between God and them. Some are fearful of the sacrament. Many Catholics who have not gone to the sacrament for years have a strong resistance to returning. Finally, priests are partially to blame because of their failure to preach about sin, to stress the value of confession and to offer more opportunities for people to celebrate the sacrament.

6. Do you have any suggestions for those of us who seem to confess the same sins all the time? What can I do if I am stuck in some recurring sin?

If we confess the same sins repeatedly, we may have to take a deeper look at *how* we examine our conscience. Perhaps our examination of conscience is very narrow and superficial. Do we ever examine our conscience in the light of Scripture, especially passages like Mt 5, 6 and 7, or in the light of the good that we could have done (sins of omissions)?

As for dealing with a recurring or habitual sin, here are five suggestions:

- Begin each day by admitting you are powerless in dealing with your particular area of weakness. Pray: “Jesus, I admit my total weakness or addiction to this sin (name it). But I also believe that you can help me to overcome this sin. Please help me to do so *today*.”
- As you go through the day, be aware that you are engaged in a spiritual battle and Jesus is on your side. Be determined to avoid whatever leads you into the occasion of committing this sin.
- At night do a brief examination of conscience. For the successes, say: “Thank you, Lord.” For your failures, say an act of contrition and then resolve to fight the battle again tomorrow.
- Go to the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly until you experience victory in this area of weakness and, ideally, go to the same priest who can counsel and encourage you.
- Do some appropriate form of fasting which will train your inner muscles to say “no” to sinful habits.

The main reason we repeat some sins over and over is because we never get serious about eliminating them. If we commit ourselves to acting on the above five suggestions, we will be surprised at how quickly we may experience victory over an area of weakness.

7. Do you have a suggestion for a way to examine our conscience?

Remember that sin is not only “choosing to do wrong,” but also “failing to do good.” As disciples of Jesus, we are called not only to keep the Ten Commandments, but also to live according to the new commandment of love.

- What am I doing to express my love for God? To what extent do I seek to discover God’s will when it comes to how I use my time, treasure and talent, and make decisions? Is fostering a relationship with God through prayer a priority in my life? If it is, we will gradually become ever more aware of sinful habits in our lives. Remember that the loss of the sense of sin is nearly always connected to a loss of the sense of God. Committing to being honest with God in prayer is the best thing we can do to have a clear sense of God and his ways alive in our heart.
- To what extent do I seek to live the Golden Rule (treating others as I wish to be treated)? To what extent have I developed a compassionate heart for the marginalized members of society? Are the poor included in my budget or do they only get loose change or my leftovers?

- To what extent am I aware of my call to develop my talents and use them to some extent to bless the communities I belong to?

Pause: What guide do you use when examining your conscience? What are some sins that many, if not most, people do not regard as sin today?

Suggested Action

If you have not been to the sacrament of Reconciliation for many years, pray that the Holy Spirit would lead you to return and discover the spiritual value of the sacrament. If you presently frequent the sacrament, consider focusing on one area of weakness using the five suggestions offered in the response to question #6 above.

Meditation

*Coming to his senses the prodigal son thought,
 “How many of my father's hired workers have
 more than enough food to eat,
 but here am I, dying from hunger.
 I shall get up and go to my father
 and I shall say to him,
 ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven
 and against you. I no longer deserve
 to be called your son;
 treat me as you would treat
 one of your hired workers.’”
 So he got up and went back to his father.
 While he was still a long way off,
 his father caught sight of him,
 and was filled with compassion.
 He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
 His son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against
 heaven and against you;
 I no longer deserve to be called your son.”
 But his father ordered his servants,
 “Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
 put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
 Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
 Then let us celebrate with a feast,
 because this son of mine was dead,
 and has come to life again;
 he was lost, and has been found.”
 Then the celebration began.*

(Lk 15:17-24)

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