

# Reconciliation

In the Light of Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Liturgical Documents

Lit 86

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## **INTRODUCTION**

All the sins that you ever committed in the past, God can forgive; all the sins that you might commit in the future you do not have to commit.

One of the greatest privileges Christ has given us is his forgiveness which is always there for us when we ask. With this forgiveness we also experience the relief of conscience. We are restored to our original innocence, and we receive the opportunity to start anew. At that moment when we are forgiven we are as pure as an innocent child that has never sinned. If death should strike us there and then we would share the lot of the good thief who was told that that day he would be with the Lord in paradise.

The marvel of it all is that if we would enter paradise that day, we would not receive a begrudging welcome. We would not feel a little out of place among the saints and the heavenly hosts. On the contrary, and much to our surprise, there would be greater rejoicing than at the welcome of ninety-nine holy souls who have no need of repentance.

We can only appreciate this relief and joy for what it is if we have experienced the burden of sin and guilt. The greater that burden of guilt was the greater the joy and relief. Jesus said himself in the house of Simon the Pharisee when he referred to the woman who wiped his feet with her hair. She loved much who was forgiven much. Frequently we see the greatness of saints who had "a past". Mary Magdalene from whom he had expelled seven demons had the courage to look for him at the tomb, totally obvious of her own safety. Paul never stopped expressing how great a sinner he himself was, and infinite the mercy of him who had called him and set him to carry out the work of an apostle. St. Augustine ranked among the greatest saints of his epoch.

Quite often we do not quite believe that our misdeeds can be wiped away without a trace. How could they possibly be removed? In nature that is impossible. Habits die hard. Things that have happened to us or that we have done leave a trace in the rest of our life. Harm we have done to others may be impossible to undo. People undergo long therapies often without much effect. How can we then believe that our sins are removed without a trace? The Pharisees pronounced a great truth when they said that no one can forgive sins except God. Only they failed to grasp even a

greater truth of realizing that indeed God was before their own eyes and doing just that.

God does remove our sins through his Son. But not even for God is the removal of sin such an easy thing. In the same episode in which the Pharisees asserted that only God can forgive sins, Jesus asked them which they believed was easier: to forgive sins or to make a cripple walk. They did not give an answer, but we can surmise that in his mind it was much easier to command a crippled body to regain health than to remove sins. He who commanded the dead to come back to life and stilled the waves of the sea could only plead with his apostle not to do the wrong he intended to do, and eventually he could not persuade him. To create the world he only commanded with his powerful word; to redeem it he had to die a slow and painful death. But having offered the sacrifice for sin he has now availed the merits of his sacrifice for his Church, so that those who have sinned have only to ask; those bitten by the lethal serpent have only to look up at the bronze serpent, those in need of forgiveness have only to ask a priest. It is that easy!

That is another marvel of the infinite power of God; that he can dispense this power through feeble and sinful human beings. Only he can forgive sins, but he has chosen to do so through the instrumentality of humans that he gives this power. And it is through his mercy and wisdom that he has made in such a way that the dispensation of this power does not depend on the holiness of the individual, for otherwise very few if any would be forgiven. Because forgiveness is granted regardless of the holiness of the minister, all of us who can access a priest can also obtain it.

Of course there will be work to be done on our part. Even though sin is totally forgiven leaving no trace, still it leaves behind a healed scar, a weakened will, a greater inclination to that same fault. The journey to fuller restoration is slow and painful. To say that our sins are totally forgiven, and at the same time that sin leaves a trace may sound paradoxical or contradictory but it is not. A physical disease can be totally healed by some medication. But usually the body is left weak and vulnerable, and unless the person who has recovered takes the necessary precautions it is possible to catch another disease due to the weakened immune system. This does not change the fact that the healing was total.



It is a fact that in many areas today the sacrament of Reconciliation has suffered neglect and that some of the faithful have almost abandoned it all together. It is not uncommon for one to find confessionals in churches that are full of dust and cobwebs and obvious signs of disuse. There are many churches in which there are no regular schedules for the hearing of confession. In many others where there are regular times for confession, one frequently finds that very few people go to confession during those times or at any other time.

There are many causes for this neglect of the sacrament of Reconciliation. To start with conversion has never been easy. To humiliate oneself and confess one's sins and failures requires great courage as well as conviction and faith in the necessity of such an action. Now there are many factors that undermine faith in the sacrament of reconciliation and people's sense of sin. The following are some of them:

The bad example of pastors whom the parishioners know to be living in serious sin and whom they know has no access or does not avail himself to confession, and yet goes to communion regularly: "Priest does not confess, but we know his sins"

Where there are no other confessors, the sense of shame and embarrassment to have to go to the same confessor: "The priest knows me too well".

Self-sufficient sometimes generated by the influence of Christian denominations that do not believe in the penance through the mediation of Christi's ministers: "I can talk to God directly, I do not need a human mediator"

Discouragement due to persistent habits and the failure to change one's unwanted behaviour in spite of frequent confession: "I confess the same things, but never change".

Fear to cut a bad figure: "I no longer recall how to confess, what do I say when he tell me to make an act of contrition?"

The erroneous mentality that only very serious sins are taken to confession. "People will wonder what I have done!"

The effect of modern psychology and the erroneous attitude that sin is simply a psychological illness that requires psychiatry or psychotherapy rather than the mercy of God. This mentality also

is often accompanied with the reasoning that to emphasise the doctrine of sin is to encourage guilt feelings that are the source of numerous neuroses. There is of course much truth in that, but one must avoid exaggeration.

Lack of enough priests in certain areas to hear confession.

Lack of adequate catechesis to the faithful regarding the sacrament of reconciliation.

Language barrier and the ignorance of the possibilities of overcoming such barriers.

Lack of knowledge regarding the confessional seal and the fear that one's sins might be made known.

Abuse of the sacrament by priests such as breaking of the confessional seal or solicitation may lead some of the faithful away from the sacrament.

But conversion has never been easy for anyone. It involves abandoning the well-beaten path, rowing against the current. In the history of God's people, prophets who called people to conversion were persecuted, because of the inner resistance to change in the hearts of those that were called. But hard as it is, it is the only right way that leads to happiness. That is why the courageous messengers of God did not mitigate their message.

Many people say to themselves, why should I continue going to confession, when I confess the same sins. It is always the same story. After confession I commit them again. All I do is to suffer the humiliation of confessing them. I even feel like a hypocrite, because even as I confess them I feel deep in my heart, that I will commit them again. It is simply a cycle.

But confession is like a bath. Perhaps there are people with exceptional will power, who, having been sinners, when they convert, do so permanently, without further need of confessing the real enslaving habits they had before, even though they will commit other minor sins. But these must be very few. The majority are like people who, when they take a bath, need to continue doing so regularly. Because they become dirty again as regularly. Now, a person who knows that after having this bath he will become dirty again, does not for that reason stop bathing, saying to himself, but what is the use? Nor does one who is clean make himself deliberately dirty just



because he knows he will take a bath and become clean again. So is confession. The knowledge that we will sin again should not discourage from going to confession. Nor should we deliberately sin because of the assurance that we shall go to confession and obtain forgiveness.

Confession is also like water in a glass. It may look pure if looked at in a dark place. But when observed against the background of a strong light then the impurities that were not detachable before begin to appear. We may believe ourselves not to have any sins if we never examine our consciences against the strong light of God's commandments.

The refusal to confess one's sins is compared to the story of Naaman the Syrian. His leprosy was a most serious disease. What he was asked to do by the Prophet Elisha was very little in comparison with the gravity of his condition. He was asked to bath in the Jordan seven times. He could have done much more in order to procure a healing. But because of its smallness he despised it. It was only at the persuasion of his slave girl that he obeyed the prophet and attained a healing. The price of forgiveness that we obtain through the humiliation of confession is infinitesimally little in comparison to the eternal damnation which our sins could bring us. One has only to consider how civil law punishes offences that are easily forgiven in the confessional. A murderer may serve a death sentence or life imprisonment. Consider also the price that was paid in order for the Son of God to procure our forgiveness.

Reconciliation, however, is much wider than just the sacrament of penance. We now look at it from a broader perspective.

## **RECONCILIATION IN THE SCRIPTURES**

### THE PRIMARY ROLE OF THE HOLY TRINITY IN RECONCILIATION

The prayer of absolution summarises well the role of the Trinity in the sacrament of reconciliation. This prayer states: "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..."

The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross. "For if while we were enemies, we were

reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life". (Romans 5:10)

### *The Son*

The Son of God made man liven among us in order to free us from the slavery of sin<sup>1</sup> and to call us out of darkness into his wonderful light.<sup>2</sup> He therefore began his work on earth by preaching repentance and saying: "Turn away from sin and believe the good news" (Mark 1: 15). This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by prophets, prepared the hearts of men for the coming of the Kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist who come 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1: 4).

Jesus, however, not only exhorted people to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord,<sup>3</sup> but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, by healing the sick he signified his power to forgive sin.<sup>5</sup> Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justifications.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion, he instituted the sacrifice of the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8: 34-36)

<sup>2</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1Peter 2: 9)

<sup>3</sup> e.g. the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

<sup>4</sup> The story of the Paralytic Luke 5: 20; the conversion and call of Levi Luke 5: 27-32; the repentant woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee Luke 7: 48.

<sup>5</sup> Story of the Paralytic in Matthew 9: 2-8

<sup>6</sup> "...who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." Romans 4: 25

<sup>7</sup> "...for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26: 28).

## *The Holy Spirit*

After his resurrection Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins<sup>8</sup> and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name.

### THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION ENTRUSTED TO THE CHURCH

The second part of the prayer of absolution runs: "...through the ministry of the Church may God grant you pardon and peace..." We see in this that although only God can forgive sins, he has chosen to do so through the instrumentality of his Church. The Church carries out this ministry of reconciliation of the world to God, not only through the sacrament of Reconciliation but also through evangelisation,<sup>9</sup> baptism<sup>10</sup> and the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 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 them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." John 20: 19-23.

<sup>9</sup> This began on Pentecost when Peter preached the forgiveness of sins by baptism: "Repent and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2: 38). See also Acts 3:19, 26; 17: 30.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. Rm 6: 4-10

<sup>11</sup> His body and blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are offered to God again by the Church for the salvation of the world.

## **RECONCILIATION IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH**

In the days of the apostles, reconciliation was seen in terms of conversion and transformation (*metanoia*) of a person. On the day of Pentecost, St. Peter urged the people to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:37).

In the early Church there was no formal separation between Baptism and Penance or Reconciliation. In other words, Reconciliation was an integral part of Baptism. Historically, there is no evidence of the formal celebration of the sacrament of penance, apart from its inclusion in the baptismal ceremony. All the same, there is reference to the sacrament of Penance being celebrated apart from Baptism, as is alluded to in Matthew 18: 15-18.<sup>12</sup> In this case sinners were asked to confess their sins and to repent their ways before the community. Those who did not repent were denied forgiveness and were banished from the community.<sup>13</sup>

The first concrete information we have of the ancient rite of Penance is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. This canonical penance included prayers, pilgrimages, good works, retreats or other activities imposed on a sinner by a priest or a bishop. These forms of penance were also required to reconcile a heretic to the Church. Ecclesial or public penance involved such sins as murder and idolatry and required public repentance. Some of the penances imposed on individuals were for life.

A debate arose in the Church as to the problem of forgiveness for baptised individuals who had committed serious sins, such as apostasy, murder and adultery. The question at stake was whether the Church could forgive sins other than through Baptism. To solve this dilemma, after much debate the Church recognised the possibility of serious sins being remitted after Baptism. This remission, known as the Second Baptism or Second Penance, was a one-time option for a sinner.

Once a person was known as having committed a serious sin, as the first step in forgiveness he or she joined an order of penitents - sometimes for

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<sup>12</sup> "And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother..."

<sup>13</sup> e.g. 1Corinthians 5:1-13: the incestuous man whom Paul recommends to be banished from the community.

several years. These penitents, like the catechumens, were permitted to attend the Eucharistic celebration, up to the homily, when they were dismissed. Penitents were expected to fast, pray and perform works of charity. They were not permitted to eat meat, serve in the military, engage in trade or bring a case before civil court. Penitents had to abstain from marital intercourse. Sometimes, penitents had to remain celibate for the rest of their lives.

The entire process - like that of the catechumenate - was very public. The Church considered this public manifestation of penance as a means of strengthening the penitents, rather than humiliation. The Church witnessed the faith of the penitents and prayed for them as a sign of solidarity. Nonetheless the practice of penance was most difficult, and those who availed themselves to it during their lifetime are to be admired. Because of its harshness, sinners often waited until the moment of death before confessing their sins. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, it was suggested that substitute acts of charity, almsgiving, shedding of tears, recognition of one's sinfulness before God, the acceptance of suffering, amendment of one's ways, intercession for the brethren, mercy and faith, personal conversion and forgiving offences could be considered for the remission of sins.

Still the system of public penance had its difficulties. For instance where it was granted once in a lifetime, how was one to deal with serious sinners who committed sin again after undergoing public penance? Then there were those who trying to postpone their penance to the moment of death were overtaken by death without preparation. Again one had to contend with the majority who simply did not avail themselves to the discipline. Indeed some deferred their very baptism for fear of sinning after being baptised. There was also the realisation that we are all sinners in the need of God's mercy.

During the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, public penance progressively diminished, since it was only reserved for serious sins. In the days of St. Augustine public penance was still in vogue. St. Augustine refers to three ways in which sins were remitted in the Church: by Baptism, by prayer and by the greater humility of penance for the more serious sins.<sup>14</sup>

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Irish monks introduced private penance in the Church. Originally seen as an outgrowth of spiritual direction, this new form of penance lacked public rituals. It was a matter between the penitent and the

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<sup>14</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Creeds*, 16.

confessor. In the beginning, this practice was strongly opposed by the bishops, but eventually was adopted because of pastoral concern. The new form changed the ritual of confession from public to private, or secret. Both the confession and the penance were done secretly. From that time on the sacrament has been performed 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 allowed 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.<sup>15</sup>

In the light of Vatican II, it was felt that the rite of Penance should more clearly express both the nature and effects of the sacrament.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly in 1973 the Congregation for Divine Worship issued the New Rite of Penance which provides three forms of reconciliation. Each form, even the private confession, is considered a liturgy and public ritual of the Church. It is this ritual that is studied in greater detail below.

## EVALUATION OF THE HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Canonical or Public Penance must be understood in the context of the epoch. These were tough times in general. This is also the period of the rigorous heresy of Montanism. Again this is the post-Constantine era where there was a close relation between Church and state. Church leaders had considerable civil authority and punishment of public sins could at the same time take the form of civil punishment, something similar to the present Sharia law and its punishment of sins. The sins punished by canonical penance were serious social crimes, which even today are punished seriously by civil states. Consider for instance the punishments for murder and adultery in a civil law court. These sins that were punished with public penance were few. For other minor offences there were other ways of obtaining forgiveness, such as mentioned above.

At the same time canonical penance teaches us the seriousness with which the Church of the time regarded sin. This is in contrast with the modern tendency to undervalue the seriousness of sin. We need constantly to remind ourselves what it cost the Saviour to buy our ransom from the

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<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1447.

<sup>16</sup> SC, 72.

slavery of sin and death. We also need to know how much damage serious sin causes to the community.

Canonical Penance also taught the importance of the ecclesial nature of reconciliation. It taught the importance of reparation as a means to restore the life of grace. But the merits of the development of private penance also need to be mentioned. This allowed greater freedom for timid souls to approach the mercy of God. It made that mercy available even after sins have been forgiven before. It also brought out the ministerial nature of Reconciliation as instituted by Christ.

## **THE THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION**

### THE CHURCH IS BOTH HOLY BUT ALWAYS IN CONTINUOUS NEED OF PURIFICATION

The Church is holy in the first place because of its union with Christ. Christ 'loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.'<sup>17</sup> He united the Church to himself as his bride.<sup>18</sup> He filled her with his divine gifts,<sup>19</sup> because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, 'while Christ, "holy, innocent, and unstained" (Hebrews 7:26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), the Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal.'<sup>20</sup>

### DIFFERENT WAYS OF PURIFICATION OF THE CHURCH

The people of God accomplishes and perfects this continual repentance in many different ways. It shares in the sufferings of Christ by enduring

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<sup>17</sup> (Ephesians 5: 25-26) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word...

<sup>18</sup> (Rev 19:7) Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...

<sup>19</sup> (Eph 1:22ff) And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church...

<sup>20</sup> LG, 8.

trials.<sup>21</sup> It carries out works of mercy and charity,<sup>22</sup> and adopts ever more fully the outlook of the gospel message. Thus the people of God becomes in the world a sign of conversion to God. All this the Church expresses in its life and celebrates in the liturgy when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. This happens in penitential services, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayer, and in the penitential aspects of the Eucharistic celebration,<sup>23</sup> and finally and most fully through the sacrament of Reconciliation.<sup>24</sup>

## BASIC DIMENSIONS OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation as two dimension: reconciliation with God and with the Church. Since every sin is an offence against God, which disrupts our friendship with him, ‘the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him.’<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who ‘first loved us’.<sup>26</sup> Secondly he

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<sup>21</sup> 1Peter 4:13 “...but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.”

<sup>22</sup> (1 Pt. 4:8) Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

<sup>23</sup> Such as the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass, in the Gloria in which we ask him who takes away the sins of the world to have mercy on us, the Our Father in which we ask God to forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us; in the song Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us, and in repeating the words of the centurion: Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say a word and I shall be healed. However, all these cannot be regarded as substitutes to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Cf. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Instituted by Christ, Jn. 20: 22ff. This remains the ordinary way of remittance of grave sin. See *Sacramentum Paenitentiae*, On General Absolution, Not. 8(1972) 312-317. DOL, p. 949, no. I.

<sup>25</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, February 17, 1966. See also LG, 11.

<sup>26</sup> (1Jn 4:19) We love because he first loved us.



comes back to Christ who gave himself up for us.<sup>27</sup> And thirdly he comes back to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time Reconciliation is made also with the Church. ‘By the hidden and loving mystery of God’s design men are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others.’<sup>29</sup> Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins. In fact, human beings frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all people of good will for justice and peace in the world.

### THE INFINITE MERCY OF GOD; THE GRAVITY OF SIN

God’s mercy is boundless. There is no sin that is so great as to be unforgivable, apart from the sin of despair and the sin of refusal to see the truth; to accept the mercy of God that is offered. “All men’s sins will be forgiven them apart from the sin against the Holy Spirit”. There is so much in scripture that shows us that. While we were still sinners he died for us. There will be great rejoicing over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous who have no need of repentance. There is no greater love than that a man lays down his life for his friends.

The implication of that is that we should never feel hesitant to approach God’s mercy, expecting forgiveness, no matter what we have done. He forgave the good thief who probably had stolen and robbed much of his life, but who repented at the last moment. If God has forgiven us we should also have the courage to forgive ourselves and to start life anew in gratitude. There are many people who are haunted with their past even after they have confessed their sins. This is useless suffering, and sometimes it can even be a sign of pride. We have to overcome the natural tendency to run and hide once we have offended God, the same way as

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<sup>27</sup> (Gal 2:20) and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

<sup>28</sup> (Tit 3:6) This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...

<sup>29</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, January 1, 1967, no. 4. Pius XII, encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943:

Adam did. For one thing God sees us anyway, and there is no point in hiding. For another, then we offer ourselves into the hands of our enemy the tempter who lies in waiting where we hide.

On the other hand God's infinite mercy does not mean that he condones sins. There must be a serious intention to repent. We must never underestimate the gravity of sin and the damage it does. Read the readings of the seventh week of Ordinary time year I, Thursday, about the gravity of sin. If your eye causes you to sin... do not heap sin after sin presuming that God will forgive me...

## **THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND ITS PARTS<sup>30</sup>**

Basically the sacrament of Reconciliation requires conversion; that is the sorrow for the sins one has committed accompanied with the intention to change and lead a new life. This inner conversion is transformed into a sacrament when a person receives absolution from the Church through the ministry of a priest. "In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a lawful minister, are sorry for those sins and have a purpose of amendment, receive from God, through the absolution given by that minister, forgiveness of sins they have committed after baptism, and at the same time they are reconciled with the Church, which by sinning they wounded."<sup>31</sup> The following are the different elements of the sacrament viewed individually.

### CONTRITION

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."<sup>32</sup> In many, if not all cases, in which Jesus forgave sins he required the one forgiven to go and sin no more. A typical example is that of the woman caught in adultery and the cripple who was lowered through the roof. Similarly the sacrament of reconciliation requires that the penitent has the intention not to sin again. It does happen

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<sup>30</sup> Rite of Penance, no. 6a-d.

<sup>31</sup> Can. 959.

<sup>32</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1450.

however, that a penitent, while aware of the gravity of a sin committed does not at the same time feel heartfelt sorrow and aversion of that sin. That does not mean that one should not seek penance for that sin until the sorrow comes. The movement of the will is more important, that the emotional feeling. “Here, as in everything else, neither God nor the Church asks of us what is beyond our powers, for we cannot call up feelings at will...”<sup>33</sup>

## CONFESSION

The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission we look squarely at the sins we are guilty of, take responsibility for them, and thereby open ourselves again to God and to the community of the Church in order to make a new future possible.<sup>34</sup> This confession wounds our pride, builds humility, and may serve as a deterrent to future sin due to the pain and shame experienced in self-exposure. Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.<sup>35</sup>

## SATISFACTION

Many sins wrong our neighbour. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and wakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbour. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance’.

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<sup>33</sup> Don Claude Jean-nesby, *Conscience and Confession*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965. P. 59.

<sup>34</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1455.

<sup>35</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1457; Can. 960.

The *penance* the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbour, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penance help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all.<sup>36</sup>

## ABSOLUTION

Through the sign of absolution God grants pardon to the sinner who in sacramental confession manifests his change of heart to the Church's minister, and thus the sacrament of penance is completed. "In the sacrament of penance the Father receives the repentant son who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies this temple of God again or lives more fully within it. This is finally expressed in a renewed and more fervent sharing of the Lord's table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar."<sup>37</sup> The prayer of absolution which ideally should be learned by heart brings out the role of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the role of the Church and the individual minister who acts in the Church's name; as well as the effects of the sacrament which are pardon and peace. It is also good for the confessor to wait until the penitent has finished saying the act of contrition before saying the prayer of absolution. That way the penitent is not confused by the simultaneous praying, while at the same time he or she is given a chance to listen to the prayer said on his or her behalf.

## BENEFITS OBTAINED THROUGH THE SACRAMENT<sup>38</sup>

The sacrament brings about reconciliation with God and with the Church.<sup>39</sup> The healing which the sacrament effects is varied according to

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<sup>36</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1459-1460.

<sup>37</sup> Rite of Penance, no. 6d.

<sup>38</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> LG, 11: "Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time,

the variety of sin. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God.<sup>40</sup> The healing is also varied according to the degree of repentance and the amount of love of God manifested. Those who manifest absolute contrition and wholehearted return to God, even when they sins were many and grievous, benefit from the sacrament more than those with half-hearted repentance, even if their sins are less.<sup>41</sup>

Just as it is easier in ordinary life for a person who often apologises for his or her mistakes to do so again, than one who does not do so often, so also with confession. The person who confesses regularly finds it easier to admit personal mistakes and to say “I am sorry” both to God and to neighbour. In that case the sacrament increases the virtue of humility and of knowledge of self-knowledge. Besides giving God’s grace the sacrament also imparts peace. It gives salutary discipline of self, and it promotes growth of the general good of the community, just as sin damages that general good.

## CONDITIONS FOR BENEFITTING FROM THE SACRAMENT

In order to benefit from the sacrament one ought to confess every grave sin that one remembers after a careful examination of conscience. One ought also to make a concerted effort to change one’s life and to overcome mistakes that have been forgiven.

## **OFFICES AND MINISTERS<sup>42</sup>**

### ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does

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reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example and by prayer labours for their conversion.”

<sup>40</sup> See *Eucharisticum Mysterium* no. 35, on Penance and Communion.

<sup>41</sup> Luke 7:47: “Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

<sup>42</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 8-11.

the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.

Individual Christians, therefore, by virtue of their baptism, and in their capacity as a priestly people, can contribute to the cleansing of sin from the Church calling sinners to repentance in the light of the gospel, interceding for sinners in their prayers, offering sacrifice and accepting suffering to obtain forgiveness for others, brotherly correction and playing a conciliatory role among those that have disagreements.

#### THE MINISTER OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE <sup>43</sup>

The Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and presbyters. By preaching God's word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins. In the exercise of this ministry presbyters act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office of regulating the penitential discipline.<sup>44</sup>

The competent minister of the sacrament of penance is a priest who has the faculty to absolve in accordance with canon law.<sup>45</sup> All priests, however, even though not approved to hear confession, absolve validly and licitly all penitents who are in danger of death.

#### PASTORAL EXERCISE OF THIS MINISTRY: REQUIREMENTS

In the first place one should have an understanding of the disorders of the soul. In this regard some minimum training in pastoral counselling is essential. One should know that some people are timid in the confession and require delicate treatment, some mention something different from the

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<sup>43</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 26:

<sup>45</sup> This faculty must be received from his bishop, for "Only the local Ordinary is competent to give to any priests whomsoever the faculty to hear the confessions of any whomsoever of the faithful..." Can. 969 §1.

actual problem, and only through patient, prudent and charitable prompting do they come to the actual issue. Some require prompting while other prefer that the confessor keeps quiet and does not interrupt while they confess. Some are put off immediately one tries to give advice on issues he does not fully understand. Some are more spiritually advanced than the confessor himself, and may confess things that appear trivialities to him, when for them are serious matters. Some come to confession not so much to receive forgiveness as consolation in their sorrows. Even these should not be dismissed without some word of consolation. Some “confess” sins of others rather than their own!

The pastor who understands the different disorders of soul can then apply the appropriate remedies. In order to fulfil his office of wise judge he should acquire the knowledge and prudence necessary for this task.<sup>46</sup> He should undertake serious study, guided by the teaching authority of the Church and especially by fervent prayer to God. It is also recommended that the confessor himself receives confession regularly.<sup>47</sup> This frequent reception of the sacrament helps the confessor, among other things, to experience the difficulty of confessing which those who come to him have, and to encounter them with compassion. This helps him also be more worthy of the ministry, for even though the sacrament is valid in spite of the state of the confessor, still God prefers to work through hearts that are pure. Moreover the penitents go more readily to those whom they judge to be true to the gospel. Such souls may even attract others to receive the sacrament. A conscience that is itself freed from sin has a clear and unclouded vision to answer to the spiritual needs of others. It also has the confidence to execute the merciful but firm judgement of God without the feeling of passing judgement on itself. One who confesses regularly also learns from other confessors the art of confessing.

An effective ministry of confession requires discernment of spirits, which is a deep knowledge of God’s action in the hearts of people; it is a gift of the Spirit as well as the fruit of charity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 18: “The ministers of sacramental grace are intimately united to Christ the Saviour and Pastor through the fruitful reception of Penance.”

<sup>48</sup> “...this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless...”

The confessor should always be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful when they make a reasonable request of him.<sup>49</sup> Sometimes a member of the faithful may ask for the reception of this sacrament at an awkward moment such as when one is about to say Mass, or when one is to attend to a sick call; or when some one asks for the sacrament shortly before the official time set for confessions is about to come. It would equally be unreasonable of the faithful to call the priest, say at midnight, that he hears their confession. Under such circumstances one might have to charitably explain to the person that they have to wait until an appropriate time. But denial should not be purely for the personal comfort of the confessor, such as watching television, entertaining visitors, etc.

By receiving the repentant sinner and leading him to the light of the truth the confessor fulfils a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who mercifully accomplished the saving work of man's redemption and who is present by his power in the sacraments.<sup>50</sup>

The duties of the pastors in the ministry of reconciliation also include availing confessors, as well as regular time for the sacrament of reconciliation,<sup>51</sup> informing people of the obligation to confess mortal sins before communion,<sup>52</sup> organisation and celebration of penitential services<sup>53</sup> and not restricting confession to grave sins only.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13: [Priests] are united with the intention and charity of Christ when they administer the sacraments. They do this in a special way when they show themselves to be always available to administer the sacrament of Penance whenever it is reasonably requested by the faithful."

<sup>50</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> "Local Ordinaries and priests, to the extent that it applies to them, have a serious obligation in conscience to make sure that there is not a scarcity of confessors because some priests neglect this important ministry, involving themselves rather in secular concerns or in less important ministries, especially when these could be provided by deacons or qualified lay people. DOL, p. 950 no. IV

<sup>52</sup> "Priests are to instruct the faithful that they are forbidden, if they are burdened with mortal sin and there are sufficient confessors available, to put off by design or neglect fulfilling the obligation of individual confession in expectation of an occasion when a general absolution will be given. DOL, p. 950 no. VIII



## THE SACRAMENTAL SEAL

As the minister of God, the confessor comes to know the secrets of another's conscience, and he is bound to keep the sacramental seal of confession absolutely inviolate. "The sacramental seal is inviolable. Accordingly, it is absolutely wrong for a confessor in any way to betray the penitent, for any reason whatsoever, whether by word or in any other fashion."<sup>55</sup> The confessor is wholly forbidden to use knowledge acquired in confession to the detriment of the penitent, even when all danger of disclosure is excluded.<sup>56</sup> A confessor who directly violates the sacramental seal, incurs a *Latae Sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; he who does so only indirectly is to be punished according to the<sup>57</sup> gravity of the offence. Since not even a superior may use the knowledge attained in a confession against the detriment of their inferiors, that is why superiors are forbidden to hear the confessions of their subjects unless the latter ask for it.<sup>58</sup>

### **RELATION BETWEEN PENANCE AND EUCHARIST<sup>59</sup>**

The Eucharist is also presented to the faithful as a medicine, by which we are freed from our daily faults and preserved from mortal sin. The faithful should be shown how to make use of the penitential parts of the liturgy of

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<sup>53</sup> "The faithful should receive thorough instruction that liturgical celebrations and communal penitential services are extremely useful as a preparation for a more beneficial confession and for amending their life. But care must be taken against confusing such celebrations or services with sacramental confession and absolution." DOL, p. 950 no. X

<sup>54</sup> "On the subject of frequent, "devotional" confession, priests are not to dare to discourage the faithful from this practice. On the contrary, they are to extol its great benefits for the Christian life, and to make it clear that they are always ready to hear such confessions whenever the faithful reasonably request. What must be absolutely avoided is the restriction of individual confession to mortal sin alone. That would deprive the faithful of an important effect of confession and would injure the good name of those who receive the sacrament individually. DOL, p. 950 no. XII

<sup>55</sup> Can. 983 §1.

<sup>56</sup> Can. 984 §1.

<sup>57</sup> Can. 1388 §1.

<sup>58</sup> Can. 985.

<sup>59</sup> *Eucharistic Mysterium*, 35.

the Mass. The precept, “let a man examine himself”<sup>60</sup> should be called to mind for those who wish to receive communion. The custom of the Church declares this to be necessary, so that no one who is conscious of having committed mortal sin, even if he believes himself to be contrite, should approach the holy Eucharist without first making a sacramental confession. If someone finds himself in a case of necessity, however, and there is no confessor to whom he can go, then he should first make an act of perfect contrition.<sup>61</sup>

The faithful are to be constantly encouraged to accustom themselves to going to confession outside the celebration of Mass, and especially at the prescribed times. In this way, the sacrament of Penance will be administered calmly and with genuine profit, and will not interfere with participation in the Mass. Those who receive communion daily or very frequently, should be counselled to go to confession at time suitable to the individual case.

## **THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE**

### PLACE OF CELEBRATION

The sacrament of penance is celebrated in the place and location prescribed by law. The law prescribes that the proper place of hearing confession is a church or an oratory. Except for a just reason, confessions are not to be heard elsewhere than in a confessional. As far as the confessional is concerned, norms are to be issued by the Episcopal Conference, with the proviso however, that confessionals, which the

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<sup>60</sup> 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

<sup>61</sup> Can. 916: “Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible.”

faithful who so wish may freely use, are located in an open place, and fitted with a fixed grill between the penitent and the confessor.<sup>62</sup>

### TIME OF CELEBRATION<sup>63</sup>

The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day, but it is desirable that the faithful know the day and time at which the priest is available for this ministry. It is common practice to indicate the times for confession on a signpost somewhere near the Church, or on the notice board where other announcements are made, or in the parish bulletin where that exists. In societies with a big percentage of illiteracy it helps to include the times of confession in the announcements on Sunday. During those indicated times the pastor should strive to be present even when there are only a few confessors. He can busy himself with some useful activity during the time for confession as he waits for penitents such as spiritual reading, praying of the rosary, meditation or even praying for those for sinners. He can also indicate his presence in the confession, for instance by switching on the confessional light, or by leaving the window or door open.

The faithful should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated and especially during the scheduled periods.<sup>64</sup>

The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God has heard the solemn invitation 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news'. It is therefore fitting to have several penitential celebrations during lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbour and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter Triduum with renewed hearts.

Confession can also be arranged by appointment. This is practical for those of the faithful who are not available because of the nature of their occupation, on the normal scheduled hours. Confession by appointment may also permit more time for counselling in more complicated cases

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<sup>62</sup> Can. 964.

<sup>63</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 35, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 86.

which could not be handled in normal confessional times when there is a queue of people waiting their turn.

### LITURGICAL VESTMENTS REQUIRED

The regulations, if any, laid down by the local Ordinaries for the use of liturgical vestments in the celebration of penance are to be observed. Traditionally it is an alb and a purple stole. It is good to keep a stole in the confessional or any other suitable place set apart for the hearing of confession. It is good not to neglect the use of vestment in the celebration of the sacraments. Psychologically it helps to emphasise that the confessor acts not in his name, but in the person of Christ who alone can forgive sins. However, in case of need when it is not possible to access vestments the sacrament remains valid even when administered without the proper liturgical vestments.

### **DIFFERENT FORMS OF CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT**

#### RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

Where time permits the following is the structure of the longer rite of reconciliation of individual penitents:

Preparation of priest and penitent

Welcoming of the penitent

Reading of the word of God

Confession of sins and the act of penance

Prayer of the penitent and the absolution by the priest

Proclamation of praise and dismissal of the penitent

The priest and penitent should first prepare themselves by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity. The penitent should compare his or her life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of his or her sins.

The priest should welcome the penitent with fraternal charity and, if the occasion permits, address him or her with friendly words. The penitent then makes the sign of the cross, saying: ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit Amen’. The priest may also make the sign of the cross with [and over] the penitent. Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God. If the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for him to indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life,<sup>65</sup> and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

Then the priest, or the penitent himself, may read a text of holy Scripture, or this may be done as part of the preparation for the sacrament. Through the word of God the Christian receives light to recognise his or her sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in God’s mercy. The reading of the word of God may also make the penitent become more composed. However, sometimes the confessor may judge it better to let the penitent “unload”, thus omitting the reading of the word of God. Some may come with an appearance that shows that they are anxious not to forget what they have to say.

Next follows the confession of sins and the act of penance. The penitent confesses his or her sins, beginning, where customary, with a form of general confession: *I confess to almighty God.*<sup>66</sup> If necessary the priest should help the penitent to make a complete confession. He may for instance mention possible areas of self examination: relation with one’s spouse if married, with one’s children at home, with the people at work; one’s prayer life, Sunday attendance, whether one has any need to forgive or be forgiven by those one lives with, etc. If the prompting is not necessary then perhaps it is better that the confessor listens without interrupting. The priest should also encourage the penitent to have sincere sorrow for his or her sins against God. Finally, the priest should offer suitable counsel to help the penitent begin a new life and, where necessary, instruct him in the duties of the Christian way of life. The counselling should be adapted to the penitent’s circumstances. It should not be unnecessarily prolonged. It should be realistic; it is better to say nothing when one has nothing to

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<sup>65</sup> Only what is necessary to clarify the subsequent confession. Expression of difficulties should not be an excuse of one’s guilt.

<sup>66</sup> Although this may sound too formal in as far as it is a community prayer. “...and you my brothers and sisters...”.

say, than to propose solution that do not work. A good counsellor avoids making decisions for the penitent.

If the penitent has been the cause of harm or scandal to others, the priest should lead him or her to resolve that he will make appropriate restitution. Then the priest imposes an act of penance or satisfaction on the penitent; this should serve not only to make up for the past but also to help him to begin a new life and provide him with an antidote to weakness. As far as possible, the penance should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one's neighbour and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect.

After this the penitent manifests his contrition and resolution to begin a new life by means of a prayer for God's pardon. It is desirable that this prayer should be based on the words of scripture. There are several alternatives suggested in the rite of Penance.<sup>67</sup> But the penitent should feel free also to express the sorrow in the prayer most familiar to them. They may even say it in their own language if confessor and penitent do not use the same mother tongue. The prayer is addressed to God and the confessor need not understand what is said. Where the penitent does not remember any formal prayer the confessor may suggest to them, if he judges is feasible that the penitent formulates a prayer to God to express sorrow and readiness to amend. In other circumstances the confessor may recite the prayer with the penitent to help the penitent who cannot say any prayer, but also as an indication of solidarity. The confessor has assumed the judgement seat of God, nevertheless he remains a human being, equally in need of God's mercy.

Following the prayer of contrition, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution,<sup>68</sup> in which the essential words are: *I absolve you from your sins*

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<sup>67</sup> RP, 47. There are fourteen different prayers proposed in the rite. Some are quotations from Scripture while others are simply based on it. The lecturer may read some of the prayers to demonstrate to students.

<sup>68</sup> The gesture may have greater weight if the confessor stands at the absolution. It is also permissible to impose the hands on the penitent if the confessor judges it prudent, for instance in the case of children. The lecturer should avoid unravelling people's hairdos.

*“God the Father of mercies, through the passion and death of his Son, as reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of the world. Through the ministry of the Church may God grant you pardon and peace and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*<sup>69</sup> As he says the final words the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. The form of absolution indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.

Finally is the proclamation of praise and dismissal of the penitent. After receiving pardon for his or her sins the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from scripture. Then the priest tells him or her to go in peace.

The penitent continues his conversion and expresses it by a life renewed according to the gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for 'love covers over a multitude of sins.'<sup>70</sup>

#### SHORTER RITE

When pastoral needs dictate it, the priest may omit or shorten some parts of the rite but must always retain in their entirety the confession of sins and the acceptance of the act of penance, the invitation to contrition, and the form of absolution and the dismissal. In imminent danger of death, it is sufficient for the priest to say the essential words of the form of absolution, namely, 'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.'

#### RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION<sup>71</sup>

When a number of penitents assemble at the same time to receive sacramental reconciliation, it is fitting that they be prepared for the

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<sup>69</sup> Even if these words form the essential part, it is good for the confessor to make an effort and learn the full prayer and recite it over the penitent, and not use just the essential words or fabricate some concoction of his own.

<sup>70</sup> 1Peter 4:8.

<sup>71</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 22-30.

sacrament by a celebration of the word of God. Those who will receive the sacrament at another time may also take part in the service.

Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his or her sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son.

Penitential services are particularly suited in preparation of important celebrations such as Easter, Christmas, Retreats and Recollections. They provide opportunities of pastoral collaboration among priests. People who on their own are reluctant to go for confession may be encouraged in the context of a penitential service. Penitential services also provide a better environment for the celebration of the word of God: the readings are longer than in private confession. There is also room to give a homily, which may not be practical in the context of private confessions.

It is good that people are informed long before hand when there will be a penitential service. On the occasion itself, if necessary, several priests should be available in suitable places to hear individual confessions and to reconcile the penitents. It is to be noted that penitential services are not to be integrated with holy Mass. "...according to a most ancient tradition of the Roman Church, it is not permissible to unite the Sacrament of Penance to the Mass in such a way that they become a single liturgical celebration. This does not exclude however, that priests other than those celebrating or concelebrating the Mass might hear the confessions of the faithful who so desire, even in the same place where Mass is being celebrated, in order to meet the needs of those faithful..."<sup>72</sup>

### *Introductory Rite*

When the faithful are assembled, a suitable hymn may be sung. Then the priest greets them, and, if necessary, he or another minister gives a brief introduction to the celebration and explains the order of service. Next he

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<sup>72</sup> *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 76.



invites all to pray and after a period of silence completes the (opening) prayer.

### *The celebration of the Word of God*

The sacrament of penance should begin with a hearing of God's word, because through his word God calls us to repentance and leads us to a true conversion of heart. One or more readings may be chosen. If more than one are read, a psalm, another suitable song, or a period of silence should be inserted between them, so that the word of God may be more deeply understood and heartfelt assent may be given to it. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from the gospel.

Readings should be chosen which illustrate the following: a) the voice of God calling us back to conversion and ever closer conformity with Christ; b) the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit; c) the judgement of God about good and evil in our lives as a help in the examination of conscience; d) the duty to make satisfaction for sin, which is effective because of Christ's work of reparation and requires especially, in addition to works of penance, the exercise of true charity toward God and neighbour. The homily might tackle such themes as a) the infinite mercy of God which is greater than our sin; b) genuine repentance involves readiness for reparation and change; c) the social aspect of sin and its harm to the community; d) exercise of charity and works of mercy in reparation for sin.

After the homily a suitable period of silence should be allowed for examining one's conscience and awakening true contrition for sin. The priest or a deacon or other minister may help the faithful with brief considerations or a litany, adapted to their background, age, etc.

If it is judged suitable, this communal examination of conscience and awakening of contrition may take the place of the homily. But in this case it should be clearly based on the text of scripture that has just been read.

### *The Rite of Reconciliation*

At the invitation of the deacon or other minister, all kneel or bow their heads and say a form of general confession (for example, *I confess to almighty God*). then they stand and join in a litany or suitable song to express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy. Finally, they say the Lord's Prayer, which is never omitted.

After the Lord's Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.

When the confessions are over, the priests return to the sanctuary. The priest who presides invites all to make an act of thanksgiving and to praise God for his mercy. This may be done in a psalm or hymn or litany. It may also take on the form of a meditative reflection.<sup>73</sup> Finally, the priest concludes the celebration with prayer, praising God for the great love he has shown us.

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<sup>73</sup> One possible reflection could be as follows: a) God's forgiveness is total. Regardless of my former state, no matter I had done, if I should die now before I commit another sin, I am ultimately assured of salvation even if I should have to do some reparation. I am more or less in the same condition as a newly baptised. All this is through the merits of Christ's immaculate self-sacrifice. b) The soul that has been impaired by sin remains fragile. I am like a delicate seedling newly exposed to the sun. I am like a dog rescued from a nearly fatal fight, full of wounds. I need the protection and help of God while I heal. My inclination to sin is still great due to past sins. Habits once formed die hard. The same occasions of sin of the past can still ensnare me. My mind still has the records and memories, even these weaken me. My associates in sin who have not sought the same sacrament of healing can still drug me back. If I should fall back immediately I might become even weaker. I would like one who falls sick while in still in the process of recovering from a dangerous disease, and whose immune system is weakened. I would be like a fighter hit in the same sport over and over again. I would be like a house from which a bad spirit has been cast out, only to bring seven other spirits because its former abode is clean and swept. I should strive to win the assistance of God, to fill my house with the Holy Spirit allowing no place for the enemy. c) I have the duty to repair the damage caused by sin as far as possible. Those that I had offended may still be suffering from the offence. Those that I cheated are still deprived. Those I scandalised remain scandalised. Those that I abused still bear the damage. Work omitted remains undone. Those that I killed, whether physically or spiritually, remain dead. I have the obligation to repair as much as this is in my power to do. d) Now is the favourable moment to start again. He who has forgiven has equally the ability to assist me on. All the powers of goodness are on my side. Even hard tasks that I undertake help me to build my muscle of resistance to future falls. I need to know the importance of proceeding with prudence; not to take on what is beyond me, not to cower and remain inert, to know my need of God and to ask for his assistance.

### *Dismissal of the People*

After the prayer of thanksgiving the priest blesses the faithful then the deacon or the priest himself dismisses the congregation.

## RECONCILIATION WITH GENERAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION<sup>74</sup>

### *The Discipline of General Absolution*

Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses 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.

In addition to cases involving danger of death, it is lawful to give sacramental absolution to several of the faithful at the same time, after they have made only a generic confession but have been suitably called to repentance, if there is grave need, namely when, in view of the number of penitents, sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions properly within a suitable period of time, so that the penitents would, through no fault of their own, have to go without sacramental grace or holy communion for a long time. This may happen especially in mission territories but in other places as well and also in groups of persons when the need is established.

General absolution is not lawful, when confessors are available, for the sole reason of the large number of penitents, as may be on the occasion of some major feast or pilgrimages.

The judgement about the presence of the above conditions and the decision concerning the lawfulness of giving general sacramental absolution are reserved to the bishop of the diocese, who is to consult with the other members of the Episcopal conference.

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<sup>74</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 31-35. Cf. "Absolution, General", in Peter E. Finks, *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*. Pp. 12-14.

Over and above the cases determined by the diocesan bishop, if any other serious need arises for giving sacramental absolution to several persons together, the priest must have recourse to the local Ordinary beforehand, when this is possible, if he is to give absolution lawfully. Otherwise, he should inform the Ordinary as soon as possible of the need and of the absolution which he gave.

In order that the faithful may profit from sacramental absolution given to several persons at the same time, it is absolutely necessary that they be properly disposed. Each one should be sorry for his or her sins and resolve to avoid committing them again. They should intend to repair any scandal and harm they may have caused and likewise resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which they cannot confess at present.<sup>75</sup> These dispositions and conditions, which are required for the validity of the sacrament, should be carefully recalled to the faithful by priests.

Those who receive pardon for grave sins by a common absolution should go to individual confession before they receive this kind of absolution again, unless they are impeded by a just reason. They are strictly bound, unless this is morally impossible, to go to confession within a year. The precept which obliges each of the faithful to confess at least once a year to a priest all the grave sins which he has not individually confessed before also remains in force in this case too.

Some people may wonder why this discipline and restriction on general absolution. Some would strongly argue in favour of general absolution on the grounds that it is easier for many who have otherwise abandoned the sacrament. Also it is quicker for the busy pastor. It does not leave tensions between penitent and confessor, since the confessor does not get to know the sins of the penitent. Some also use the historical argument: once general absolution was the norm, and individual penitence was seen as an abuse.<sup>76</sup> Some would indeed say that in some areas it is the only meaningful form of confession.

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<sup>75</sup> Those sins are forgiven at the general absolution. They are confessed again as a test for the sincere intention the penitent had to expose them. This also opens the confessor the healing power of confession. See also canon 965 and the commentary on the code p. 680.

<sup>76</sup> This argument however, does not take into account all historical facts. When public penance was the norm it was a very severe matter involving humiliation,

General absolution is minimised so that individual absolution does not fall into total disuse. It is also discouraged because it eliminates the possibility of counselling to the penitent. It excludes the healing power entailed in admitting sin. Indeed some people develop a sense of sin through frequent individual confession. In circumstances where general absolution is the only alternative then it should indeed be advocated.

### *The Rite of General Absolution*

For the reconciliation of penitents by general confession and absolution in the cases provided by law, everything takes place as described above for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, with the following exceptions: a) After the homily or during it, the faithful who seek general absolution should be instructed to dispose themselves properly, that is, each one should be sorry for his sins and resolve to avoid committing them again. He or she should intend to repair any scandal and harm he or she may have caused and likewise resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which cannot be confessed at present. Some act of penance should be proposed for all; individuals may add to this penance if they wish. a) the deacon, another minister, or the priest then calls upon the penitents who wish to receive absolution to show their intention by some sign (for example, by bowing their heads, kneeling, or giving some other sign determined by the Episcopal conferences). They should also say together a form of general confession (for example, *I confess to almighty God*), which may be followed by a litany or a penitential song. They the Lord's prayer is sung or said by all. c) Then the priest calls upon the grace of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, proclaims the victory over sin of Christ's death and resurrection, and gives sacramental absolution to the penitents. d) Finally, the priest invites the people to give thanks, as described in the rite of absolution of several penitents with individual penance above. Omitting the concluding prayer, he immediately blesses and dismisses them.

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alienation and suffering. Then private confession was the easier way out. The present public penance is the contrary as it excludes the pain of exposing one's shame. If the Church then avoided an easy escape from the consequences of one's sin, it still does the same through minimising general absolution.

## ANOTHER POSSIBLE FORM OF GENERAL ABSOLUTION<sup>77</sup>

The penitents confess their sins individually. The confessor does not give them absolution, although he may give individual penance since sins are not of equal gravity and since each individual has peculiar needs for healing. The penitents then all gather together. Then the confessor says the prayer of absolution over them all. The advantage of this form is that it saves time and it emphasises further the communal nature of reconciliation.

## **PENITENTIAL CELEBRATIONS<sup>78</sup>**

### NATURE AND STRUCTURE

Penitential celebrations are gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God's word. This invites them to conversion and renewal of life and announces our freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. The structure of these services is the same as that usually followed in celebrations of the word of God and given in the *Rite for reconciliation of Several Penitents*.

It is appropriate, therefore, that after the introductory rites (song, greeting, and prayer) one or more biblical readings be chosen with songs, psalms, or periods of silence inserted between them. In the homily these readings should be explained and applied to the congregation. before or after the readings from scripture, readings from the Fathers or other writers may be selected which will help the community and each person to a true awareness of sin and heartfelt sorrow, in other words, to bring about conversion of life.

After the homily and reflection on God's word, it is desirable that the congregation, united in voice and spirit, pray together in a litany or in some other way suited to general participation. At the end of the Lord's Prayer is said, asking God our Father 'to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us... and deliver us from evil.' The priest or the minister who presides concludes with a prayer and the dismissal of the people.

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<sup>77</sup> This form is combined with individual penance. It is not included among the options provided. However, it is exercised by some pastors. There is no reason why it cannot be proposed for consideration.

<sup>78</sup> *Rite of Penance*, 36-37.

## BENEFIT AND IMPORTANCE

Care should be taken that the faithful do not confuse these celebrations with the celebration of the sacrament of penance. Penitential celebrations are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart. It is desirable to arrange such services especially for these purposes: a) to foster the spirit of penance within the Christian community; b) to help the faithful to prepare for confession which can be made individually later at a convenient time; c) to help children gradually to form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ; d) to help catechumens during their conversion.

Penitential celebrations, moreover, are very useful in places where no priest is available to give sacramental absolution. They offer help in reaching that perfect contrition which comes from charity and enables the faithful to attain to God's grace through a desire for the sacrament of penance.

## **ECUMENICAL ASPECTS OF THE RITE OF RECONCILIATION**

Today the practice of public confession is exercised widely in some Evangelical Churches. Certain charismatic groups within the Catholic Church may practice in the form of testimonies which may easily be mistaken for public confession, both by outsiders to the groups and members who are not fully informed. No doubt there are some positive elements for which such practices are commendable. They are a manifestation of courage and determination to overcome sin, if someone can overcome the shame involved and tell his or her sins in public. They thus entail salutary suffering and shame for the sins committed. Indeed they may deter from falling back, out of fear of public criticism. Furthermore they are in a sense evangelical: a call to others to abandon their sins.

However they do have adverse elements as well. One may cause scandal to the community, when one confesses sins that the community did not even imagine possible in such an individual. Thus one may actually weaken the faith and confidence of others in the institution to which the repentant belongs. They may lose confidence in the penitent himself should he relapse. Such confessions may even evoke revenge when sins confessed have hurt others who did not know before who the culprit was and who are not as ready to forgive. Again the identity of accomplices may be revealed who have the right not to be exposed if it is not their choice to do

so. Above all such practices are to be discouraged if they lead others to understand that giving testimony is sufficient to obtain God's forgiveness, for then they would attribute the power of forgiveness to the community and not to the priestly ministry as instituted by Christ.

## **ADAPTATION OF THE RITE TO VARIOUS REGIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES**

### BY EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES

In preparing particular rituals Episcopal conferences may adapt the rite of penance to the needs of individual regions so that after confirmation by the Apostolic See the rituals may be used in the respective regions. It is the responsibility of Episcopal conferences in this matter: a) to establish regulations for the discipline of the sacrament of penance, particularly those affecting the ministry of priests and the reservation of sins; b) to determine more precise regulations about the place proper for the ordinary celebration of the sacrament of penance and about the signs of penance to be shown by the faithful before general absolution; c) to prepare translations of texts adapted to the character and language of each people and also to compose new texts for the prayers of the faithful and the minister, keeping intact the sacramental form.

### BY INDIVIDUAL ORDINARIES

It is for the diocesan bishop: a) to regulate the discipline of penance in his diocese,<sup>79</sup> including adaptations of the rite according to the rules proposed by the Episcopal conferences; b) to determine, after consultation with the other members of the Episcopal conference, when general sacramental absolution may be permitted under the conditions laid down by the Holy See.

### OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO INDIVIDUAL MINISTERS

It is for priests, and especially parish priests: a) in reconciling individuals or the community, to adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents. The essential structure and the entire form of absolution must

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<sup>79</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 26.



be kept, but if necessary they may omit some parts for pastoral reasons or enlarge upon the, may select the texts of readings or prayer, and may choose a place more suitable for the celebration according to the regulations of the Episcopal conference, so that the entire celebration may be rich and fruitful; b) to propose and prepare occasional penitential celebrations during the year, especially in Lent. In order that the texts chosen and the order of the celebration may be adapted to the conditions and circumstances of the community or group (for example, children, sick persons, etc.), they may be assisted by others, including the laity; c) to decide to give general sacramental absolution preceded by only a generic confession, when a grave necessity not foreseen by the diocesan bishop arises and when recourse to him is not possible. they are obliged to notify the Ordinary as soon as possible of the need and of the fact that absolution was given.

#### THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION IN SEMINARIES<sup>80</sup>

In the spiritual life of future priests, great importance is to be given to the sacrament of penance. Because it is a sacrament, of all penitential acts it is the one most capable of developing in them those dispositions that the imitation of Christ and the spirit of the Gospel require: a conversion that is daily more complete, purity of heart and virtue of penance with its readiness for a crucified life.

The student therefore should often receive the sacrament of reconciliation to acquire the grace they need for their daily spiritual struggles. Frequent confession is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly.”<sup>81</sup>

Reception of the sacrament of reconciliation is a very personal act, to be carried out individually. Its liturgical character is always to be retained and, as a rule, it is to be distinct from spiritual direction. The frequency of confession is to be decided by each person with his own confessor, following the traditions of masters of spirituality and the laws of the Church.

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<sup>80</sup> Liturgical Formation in Seminaries, nos. 35-36.

<sup>81</sup> Rite of Penance, Introduction no. 7.

Furthermore to point out more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance it will be useful on occasion, especially during Lent and during retreats, to have a liturgical penitential service, based on what is proposed in the Roman Ritual, either without sacramental confession or else with confession and individual absolution. But when there is confession the freedom of each person is to be respected.

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