

Penance and Reconciliation: A Basic Review

by Christine Alcott

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See the end of the article for "How to Celebrate Confession," "Act of Contrition," and a list of other resources on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Of the Seven Sacraments instituted by Christ and celebrated by the Church, Penance and Reconciliation is the one with which many people are uncomfortable. After all, our broken human nature makes it very hard for us to admit that we have done wrong, that we have sinned, that our actions are an offense against God, and that we have hurt others as well as ourselves. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, however, is not a sacrament designed for humiliation. Rather, it is one of the Sacraments of Healing (the other being the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick), and it does just that: It is a celebration of healing and conversion by which we know God's forgiveness and are reconciled with the Church. Through Penance we encounter God's unconditional love and forgiveness and are strengthened for living out the life of grace to which our faith calls us.

Children preparing to receive First Reconciliation (and some adults who have received the sacrament many times) often struggle with questions about this sacrament. Let's look more closely at the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation so that we can better understand it ourselves and confidently catechize others about the joys of God's love and mercy that are ours in this sacrament.

"Father, I have sinned against you and against heaven." The experience of becoming aware of our sinfulness, the power of conversion, and the joy of forgiveness are beautifully demonstrated in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). Jesus uses this parable to teach about God's unconditional mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Common Questions

Children are full of questions about the Sacrament of Penance; so are adults. Catholics and non-Catholics alike often question the necessity of "going to confession." Here is a collection of basic teachings about the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation based on questions raised by both children and adults.

Q: Why do we confess our sins to a priest? Why can't we talk directly to God?

A: It's not that we *can't* talk directly to God. After all, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is very clear about the forgiveness of sins: "Only God forgives sins" (CCC, no. 1441). Jesus says, "The Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" (Mark 2:5, 10; Luke 7:48). This is divine power and Jesus passes this power and authority to Peter, the first leader of the Church. Jesus tells Peter, "I give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). In Matthew 18:18, Jesus repeats this to all the disciples. "[Jesus] entrusted the exercise of the power

of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the 'ministry of reconciliation'" (CCC, no. 1442).

Many might insist that their discomfort stems from confessing directly to a priest. Yet, the priest is the very presence of the love of Jesus. In the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the priest is a physical presence that calls us to and leads us toward conversion, a full awareness of God's mercy. We know God forgives us, but hearing patient and compassionate words of forgiveness helps us realize the peace and healing of Jesus Christ, which is the fruit of our repentance and the joy of all Christians.

Q: I have heard this sacrament called different names. So which one is correct?

A: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* uses five names for this sacrament (see nos. 1423-1424). Each name helps us better understand the healing power of this sacrament.

The Sacrament of Conversion: Through sin, we harden our hearts to God, to others, to ourselves. We fail to choose what is right in the sight of God. We are called to constantly turn away from sin and toward God. This turning away from sin and toward God is conversion.

The Sacrament of Penance: A penance is an act we perform as a sign to show we are sorry and we want to change. Doing penance helps us further realize the conversion of heart that we long for and that we celebrate in this sacrament.

The Sacrament of Confession: Telling (confessing) our sins to a priest is a necessary part of this sacrament. "Confession" describes what we do. We verbally confess what we have experienced internally—an acute and contrite awareness of our sinfulness. In this "confession," we acknowledge our need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

The Sacrament of Forgiveness: Through absolution, we are forgiven our sins. "As far as the east is from the west, so far have our sins been removed from us" (Psalm 103:12). This sacrament celebrates not only the forgiveness of our sins but also the unfathomable nature of God's forgiveness.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Sin is a wound that damages relationships. Through this sacrament, God reconciles us to our family, friends, the Church, the wider community, and ourselves.

Q: What do I confess?

A: The Church identifies three types of sin: Original Sin, mortal sin, and venial sin. Original Sin refers to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. They committed the first sin in their choice to follow their own will instead of following the commandment of God. From then on, all human persons are born with the inclination to sin. Paul sums it up in Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death...." The Sacrament of Baptism cleanses us from Original Sin, but our human nature remains weak and prone to following our own will—which leads us to mortal sin or venial sin.

Mortal sin breaks our relationship with God because it is a willful turning away from God. For an action to constitute a mortal sin, it must involve a grave matter (think Ten Commandments); we must know the action is, indeed, evil; and we must willingly commit the sin. Mortal sin leads to the

loss of eternity. It requires the healing grace of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Venial sin involves less serious matter than mortal sin. Venial sin does not break our friendship with God, but it does incline us to develop the habit of excusing small wrongs. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is not required for venial sins. Nonetheless, we are encouraged to confess these sins so that our spiritual well-being is strengthened in grace to live a virtuous life of charity and love.

A Sacred Gift

"Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him" (CCC, no. 1432). The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a turning of our hearts away from sin and a turning toward God. This is conversion. As Catholic Christians, our entire lives are oriented toward a relationship with God and the Church that brings about the Kingdom of God. The grace of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a sacred gift by which we come to know our sins, are deeply sorry for our sins, commit our hearts to sin no more, and are reconciled to God and the Church.

Practical Classroom Suggestions

Although one of the effects of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to reconcile us with the Church, the actual celebration of the sacrament does not happen with the community present as witnesses. The person enters the reconciliation room and emerges from the reconciliation room. The following ideas can help you offer learners a better understanding of how to go to confession.

- * Read through the Liturgy of Penance so that you can explain each part of the ritual to your learners.
- * Have learners role-play the liturgy in pairs, with one taking the role of the priest and the other taking the role of the penitent. Emphasize that this is only a practice experience; the purpose is for learners to gain a better understanding of "what happens next."
- * Carefully review with learners the prayerful words that the penitent says: the Sign of the Cross; "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned"; and the Prayer of the Penitent. (You likely can find an Act of Contrition in your textbook. Also, many reconciliation rooms have cards with sample prayers that the penitent can say.)
- * Remind learners that following the priest's words of absolution, the penitent responds "Amen."
- * Be sure your learners know the Our Father and the Hail Mary. These often are the prayers priests give as the penance, especially to young children.
- * Remind learners to say "Thank you, Father," when the priest says tell them to go in peace.

A Helpful Vocabulary

absolution: the act that the priest, by the power that Jesus gave to the Church and through the Holy Spirit, pardons sin "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

Act of Penance: the prayer that we offer in sorrow for sins and a firm resolution not to sin again

contrition: true sorrow for sin and a firm intention not to sin again

examination of conscience: a careful and prayerful review of things we have said and done, and failed to say and do, that are not according to the gospel and the teachings of Jesus (Praying with

the Ten Commandments is a good examination of conscience.)

grace: God's gift to us, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, necessary for salvation, by which we share in the life of God

penance: a conversion of heart by which we turn away from sin and toward God, expressed in acts of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving

penitent: we are a penitent when we have sinned, experience conversion and contrition for our sins, and seek God's forgiveness by which we will be reconciled with God and the Church

reconciliation: God's action that reunites us with himself and the Church as a result of our experience of conversion and in celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

rite: a sacred ritual of actions and words that celebrates and renews the grace of God

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Act of Contrition

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things.

I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy. Amen.

(from *Prayer & Guidelines for Catholics*, Pflaum Publishing Group, pflaum.com)

How to Celebrate Confession

Examine your conscience.

* Review your faithfulness to God's commandments and the precepts of the Church. Reflect on how you have sinned since your last confession.

* Choose whether to confess to the priest face-to-face or with a screen between you.

Enter the confessional or the Reconciliation room

1. After the priest welcomes you, make the Sign of the Cross and say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

2. Listen to the Scripture the priest reads.

3. Tell the priest your sins and mention any other things on your mind with which he might help you.

4. Listen for the priest's advice and the penance he gives you.

5. Pray an Act of Contrition.

6. After the absolution, the priest will tell you to go in peace. Respond, "Thank you, Father."

Follow through with the penance you received.

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