

## Be Reconciled

The Gospel of Mark dominates this cycle of the church calendar in which we find ourselves. Compared to the other Gospels, Mark's spares a lot of details and seems to "cut to the chase" from the start: *"Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand!"*

Broadly speaking, repentance is a definitive turning of one's life toward God, including a renunciation of sin and a commitment to shape one's whole life according to the pattern set out by Jesus. Of course, within this definition is the inner act of faith in Jesus as Lord and participation in his divine life through those signs he has established in his Church. Those signs are, of course, the Sacraments, (also called the Mysteries).

Baptism and Reconciliation loom large when one considers the meaning of repentance: We cannot conform our lives to reside in God's Kingdom without his Saving Grace. It isn't just a matter of our decision or conviction or commitment. We all know how weak we are when it comes to such things. We are like the hot coals of a campfire which can easily lose heat and become cool unless stoked. Faith and the practices of faith are ordered toward the reception of the Grace necessary to sustain us on our way.

Of these practices, the New Testament clearly indicates the practice of confessing sins, doing penance and striving to amend one's life. It begins with Jesus bestowal of the authority upon Peter and the Apostles to "bind or loose" the sins of people, (Matt 16:19, 18:18, John 20:22, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This is understood as a power to impose or lift decrees of excommunication and/or to forgive or not forgive sins. In the Letter of James, chapter 5, the act of confessing sins to "one another" is prescribed for Christian believers.

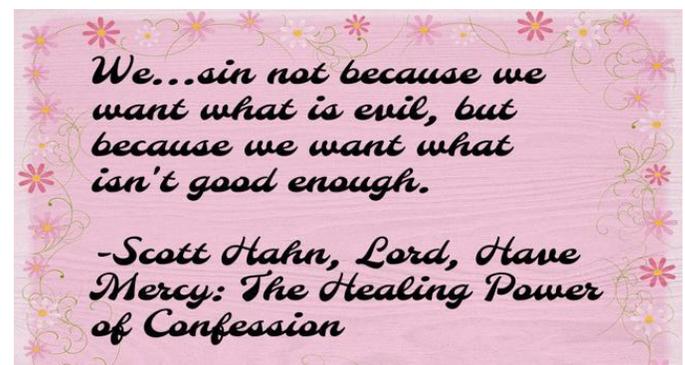
These teachings were enacted in the life of the Church in varied ways: In its earliest days, the focus was more on Baptism: Baptism washes away Original Sin and Personal Sins. But the problem of post-baptismal sin arises in everyone's life. The wound of Original Sin, in the form of disordered desires, along with our personal freedom leads to occasions of sinful behavior requiring some remedy. Thus, early Christians might wait until

near death to be Baptized. This was untenable since Baptism is what initiates the Christian life and provides the Grace to live that life.

Concurrently with this practice of delayed Baptism, the early church's response to the Lord's declaration empowering the Apostles was the establishment of the Rite of Penitents. The word "rite" indicates a ritual process for seeking forgiveness, doing penance and receiving the absolution of the Church. It could be a long and onerous process involving the wearing of sackcloth and ashes and public begging of the Bishop outside the Cathedral.

What emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland was the mode of confession we know today. Penitents would privately consult priest-monks through a sliding door in the wall of a monastery: This was much less onerous than the Rite of Penitents and enabled access to the Grace of Christ's endowment to his church with the power of forgiveness.

I offer a review of the history with an eye to encouraging you to avail yourself of this divine remedy. Certainly, we can ask forgiveness of God in the most private forum, which is our personal prayers. But confession to a priest is an acknowledgment that our sin is never purely private. Inasmuch as we are diminished or distorted by our own sins we cause harm to the community. We don't live our lives in a private bubble. We constantly interact with others and influence them by our goodness or sinfulness.



Confession is a most concrete way to respond to the Lord's call to repentance. It is part of my life as a priest, and I encourage you make it part of your own faith discipline. Don't be off-put by the fact that the priest is, himself, an unworthy sinner. He is only there to provide the listening ear and to mediate the forgiveness of Christ.