

Penance

1. Early Christianity

- 1st-2nd century: Baptism forgives sins. But what to do with those who commit serious sin *after* baptism?
 - Most sins forgiven by these practices: daily prayer, liturgy of the hours, works of charity, Eucharist
- By mid-2nd century: it is possible to forgive *serious* sin after baptism -- but only once in a lifetime

2. Public Canonical Penance

- 2nd c. Order of Penitents. "Order" = group of people.
- Modeled on catechumenate, a conversion "do-over."
- For serious sins: murder, adultery, apostasy (denying your faith in a persecution).
- Overseen by bishop/pastor of the city. Sinner meets with bishop, enrolls in Order of Penitents.
 - Serious sinners temporarily expelled, pushed to margins of community by their actions.
 - Penitents excluded from Eucharist, not a full member of the communion until reconciled.
 - Months and years of doing penance: prayer, fasting, charity, sackcloth & ashes, no sex.
 - Community would pray for, offer support, guidance, sometimes financial support.
- Reconciled at Holy Thursday liturgy (beginning of Paschal Triduum), bishop presides, lays hands. Readmitted to communion.
- To be reconciled to the church community is to be reconciled and forgiven by God.

3. Demise of Public Penance

- Used rarely. Became too strict, too harsh. By 4th c, even reconciled penitents still had stigma, restrictions.
- Sometimes sinners delayed enrolling until deathbed, to have shorter time of penance.
- Bishops tried to maintain the practice, but few used.
- Only remnant: by 10th c. all become penitents with ashes on Ash Wednesday.



4. Middle Ages – Private Confession

- Irish monks: continued Celtic practice of confiding, praying with spiritual companion. Confess sins to one another, pray together for God's forgiveness. Anam Cara "soul friend."
- Custom brought to Europe 6th c, when Irish go to re-convert Europe.
- Eventually becomes confession to a priest.
- One-on-one, repeatable, short, any sin. No community, no liturgy. Absolution comes before penance.
- "Tariff" Penance: Penitential Books, lists of sins and corresponding penances. Detailed, mathematical.
 - E.g., Eat too much so stomach is distended – 1 day penance; if to point of vomiting – 7 days.
- Abuses with penitential books:
 - Substitutions – pay someone to do your penance, e.g. 30 days fasting, pay 30 villagers each fast 1 day
 - Commutations – e.g. 1 month of fasting on bread & water could be replaced by singing 1200 psalms, if the penitent was kneeling, or 1680 psalms without kneeling (c. 906 C.E.).
- Official church condemned confession & penitential books, but books lasted till 11th century

5. High Middle Ages

- Legalistic, like a courtroom: God = king, commands; sin = crime; priest = judge; penance = sentence
- Emphasis on priest's act of absolution, by 12th c. (compare w early emphasis on acts of penitent)
- 1215 4th Lateran Council. Private confession obligatory, at least once a year confess to a priest.

6. Rite of Penance (1973) – Introduction

- “The rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament.” Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 72
- Reconciliation is **God’s work**, begins with **God’s call**
 - “The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ...” RP 1
 - Confession is a **response** to God’s call. “... coming back to the Father who first loves us” RP 5
 - God: merciful, loving, forgiving, healing. Not legalistic, but about relationship, reconciliation.
- Close **connection to baptism**. “This victory [over sin] is first brought to light in baptism.” RP 2
 - “The Church ‘possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of penance.’” RP 2
 - “[T]hrough the sacrament of penance the **Christian dies and rises with Christ** and is thus renewed in the **paschal mystery**.” RP 44
- **Reconciled with God and Church**
 - “In the sacrament of penance the faithful ‘obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins against him; at the same time they are **reconciled with the Church** which they **wounded by their sins** and which works for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer.’” RP 5
 - “‘By the hidden and loving mystery of God’s design [people] 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.’ Penance **always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters** who are **always harmed by our sins**.” RP 5
- **Sin** is a **break in relationship** (not break a law)
 - “Since every sin is an offense 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.’” RP 5
- Sin is not only personal but **social**. (This theology is mentioned, but not developed.)
 - “In fact, [people] frequently **join together to commit injustice**. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that they who are freed from sin by the grace of Christ may **work with all for justice and peace in the world**.” RP 5

7. Rite of Penance – Four Parts

1. CONTRITION: “‘**heartfelt** sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more.’ ... The **genuineness** of penance depends on this **heartfelt** contrition...” RP 6
2. CONFESSION: “... comes from **true knowledge of self** before God..., made in light of **God’s mercy**. Confession requires in the penitent the will to **open his heart** to the minister of God...” RP 6
3. ACT OF PENANCE (Satisfaction): “The kind and extent of the satisfaction should be **suited to the personal condition** of each penitent so that each one may **restore the order which he disturbed** and through the corresponding remedy be **cured of the sickness** from which he suffered...” (RP 6) “This act of penance may suitably take the form of **prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one’s neighbor and works of mercy**. These will underline the fact that **sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect**.” RP 18
4. ABSOLUTION: “In God’s design the humanity and loving kindness of our Savior visibly appeared to us, and **God uses visible signs** to give salvation and to renew the broken covenant.” RP 6

8. Rite of Penance – Three Possible Rituals

1. RITE OF RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS
 - Retains confession, but is “liturgy,” with ritual dialogue, **laying on hands**, optional reading from Bible
 - “Thus the faithful Christian, as he experiences and proclaims the mercy of God in his life, **celebrates with the priest the liturgy** by which the Church continually renews itself.” RP 11
2. RITE OF RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION
 - New ritual, “drawn up to emphasize the relation of the sacrament to the **community**.” Decree
 - “Communal celebration shows more clearly the **ecclesial nature of penance**.” RP 22
3. RITE OF RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH GENERAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION
 - For “grave need,” when not enough priests “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.” RP 31
 - Must confess individually any serious sin before doing general absolution again. RP 34