THE COUNCIL OF TRENT
ON THE MOST HOLY SACRAMENTS OF PENANCE AND EXTREME UNCTION
FIRST DECREE

Being the fourth under the Sovereign Pontiff, Julius III., celebrated on the twenty-fifth of November, 1551.

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Though the holy, ecumenical and general Council of Trent, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same legate and nuncios of the holy Apostolic See presiding, has in the decree on justification,[1] by reason of a certain necessity induced by the affinity of the subjects, given much consideration to the sacrament of penance, yet so great is in our days the number of errors relative to this sacrament, that it will be of no little general benefit to give to it a more exact and complete definition, in which all errors having under the guidance of the Holy Ghost been pointed out and refuted, Catholic truth may be made clear and resplendent, which [truth] this holy council now sets before all Christians to be observed for all time.

CHAPTER I - THE NECESSITY AND INSTITUTION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

If in all those regenerated such gratitude were given to God that they constantly safeguarded the justice received in baptism by His bounty and grace, there would have been no need for another sacrament besides that of baptism to be instituted for the remission of sins.[2] But since God, rich in mercy,[3] knoweth our frame,[4] He has a remedy of life even to those who may after baptism have delivered themselves up to the servitude of sin and the power of the devil, namely, the sacrament of penance, by which the benefit of Christ's death is applied to those who have fallen after baptism. Penance was indeed necessary at all times for all men who had stained themselves by mortal sin,[5] even for those who desired to be cleansed by the sacrament of baptism, in order to obtain grace and justice; so that their wickedness being renounced and amended, they might with a hatred of sin and a sincere sorrow of heart detest so great an offense against God. Wherefore the Prophet says: Be converted and do penance for all your iniquities, and iniquity shall not be your ruin.[6] The Lord also said: Except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish;[7] and Peter the Prince of the Apostles, recommending penance to sinners about to receive baptism, said: <Do
penance and be baptized every one of you.> Moreover, neither before the coming of Christ was penance a sacrament nor is it such since His coming to anyone before baptism. But the Lord then especially instituted the sacrament of penance when, after being risen from the dead, He breathed upon His disciples, and said: <Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.> The consensus of all the Fathers has always acknowledged that by this action so sublime and words so clear the power of forgiving and retaining sins was given to the Apostles and their lawful successors for reconciling the faithful who have fallen after baptism, and the Catholic Church with good reason repudiated and condemned as heretics the Novatians, who of old stubbornly denied that power of forgiving.[10] Therefore, this holy council, approving and receiving that perfectly true meaning of the above words of the Lord, condemns the grotesque interpretations of those who, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, wrongly contort those words to refer to the power of preaching the word of God and of making known the Gospel of Christ.

CHAPTER II - THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SACRAMENT OF Penance AND THAT OF BAPTISM

Besides, it is clear that this sacrament is in many respects different from baptism.[11] For apart from the fact that in matter and form, which constitute the essence of a sacrament, it differs very widely, it is beyond question that the minister of baptism need not be a judge, since the Church exercises judgment on no one who has not entered it through the gate of baptism. <For what have I to do, says St. Paul, to judge them that are without?>[12] It is otherwise with regard to those who are of the household of the faith, whom Christ the Lord has once by the laver of baptism made members of His own body.[13] For these, if they should afterward have defiled themselves by some crime, He wished not to have cleansed by the repetition of baptism, since that is in no manner lawful in the Catholic Church, but to be placed as culprits before this tribunal that by the sentence of the priests they may be absolved, not only once but as often as, repentant of the sins committed, they should turn themselves thereto. Moreover, the fruit of baptism is one thing, that of penance another. For by baptism <we put on Christ>[14] and are made in Him an entirely new creature, receiving a full and
complete remission of all sins; to which newness and integrity, however, we are by no means able to arrive by the sacrament of penance without many tears and labors on our part, divine justice demanding this, so that penance has rightly been called by the holy Fathers a laborious kind of baptism. This sacrament of penance is for those who have fallen after baptism necessary for salvation, as baptism is for those who have not yet been regenerated.

CHAPTER III - THE PARTS AND FRUITS OF THIS SACRAMENT

The holy council teaches furthermore, that the form of the sacrament of penance, in which its efficacy chiefly consists, are those words of the minister: I absolve thee, etc., to which are indeed laudably added certain prayers according to the custom of holy Church, which, however, do not by any means belong to the essence of the form nor are they necessary for the administration of the sacrament. But the acts of the penitent himself, namely, contrition, confession and satisfaction, constitute the matter of this sacrament, which acts, inasmuch as they are by God's institution required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament and for the full and complete remission of sins, are for this reason called the parts of penance. But that which is signified and produced by this sacrament is, so far as its force and efficacy are concerned, reconciliation with God, which sometimes, in persons who are pious and who receive this sacrament with devotion, is wont to be followed by peace and serenity of conscience with an exceedingly great consolation of spirit. The holy council, while declaring these things regarding the parts and effect of this sacrament, at the same time condemns the opinions of those who maintain that faith and the terrors that agitate conscience are parts of penance.

CHAPTER IV - CONTRITION

Contrition, which holds the first place among the aforesaid acts of the penitent, is a sorrow of mind and a detestation for sin committed with the purpose of not sinning in the future. This feeling of contrition was at all times necessary for obtaining the forgiveness of sins and thus indeed it prepares one who has fallen after baptism for the remission of sins, if it is united with confidence in the divine mercy and with the desire to perform the other things that are required to receive this sacrament in the proper manner. The holy council declares therefore,
that this contrition implies not only an abstention from sin and the resolution and beginning of a new life, but also a hatred of the old,[17] according to the statement: <Cast away from you all your transgressions by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.>[18] And certainly he who has pondered those lamentations of the saints: <To thee only have I sinned, and have done evil before thee;[19] have labored in my groanings, every night I will wash my bed;[20] I will recount to thee all my years in the bitterness of my soul,>[21] and others of this kind, will easily understand that they issued from an overwhelming hatred of their past life and from a profound detestation of sins. The council teaches furthermore, that though it happens sometimes that this contrition is perfect through charity and reconciles man to God before this sacrament is actually received, this reconciliation, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to the contrition itself without a desire of the sacrament, which desire is included in it. As to imperfect contrition, which is called attrition, since it commonly arises either from the consideration of the heinousness of sin or from the fear of hell and of punishment, the council declares that if it renounces the desire to sin and hopes for pardon, it not only does not make one a hypocrite and a greater sinner, but is even a gift of God and an impulse of the Holy Ghost, not indeed as already dwelling in the penitent, but only moving him, with which assistance the penitent prepares a way for himself unto justice.

And though without the sacrament of penance it cannot per se lead the sinner to justification, it does, however, dispose him to obtain the grace of God in the sacrament of penance. For, struck salutarily by this fear, the Ninivites, moved by the dreadful preaching of Jonas, did penance and obtained mercy from the Lord.[22] Falsely therefore do some accuse Catholic writers, as if they maintain that the sacrament of penance confers grace without any pious exertion on the part of those receiving it, something that the Church of God has never taught or ever accepted. Falsely also do they assert that contrition is extorted and forced, and not free and voluntary.
From the institution of the sacrament of penance as already explained, the universal Church has always understood that the complete confession of sins was also instituted by the Lord and is by divine law necessary for all who have fallen after baptism;[23] because our Lord Jesus Christ, when about to ascend from earth to heaven, left behind Him priests, His own vicars,[24] as rulers and judges,[25] to whom all the mortal sins into which the faithful of Christ may have fallen should be brought in order that they may, in virtue of the power of the keys, pronounce the sentence of remission or retention of sins. For it is evident that priests could not have exercised this judgment without a knowledge of the matter, nor could they have observed justice in imposing penalties, had the faithful declared their sins in general only and not specifically and one by one. From which it is clear that all mortal sins of which they have knowledge after a diligent self-examination, must be enumerated by the penitents in confession,[26] even though they are most secret and have been committed only against the two last precepts of the Decalogue;[27] which sins sometimes injure the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those that are committed openly. Venial sins, on the other hand, by which we are not excluded from the grace of God and into which we fall more frequently,[28] though they may be rightly and profitably and without any presumption declared in confession, as the practice of pious people evinces, may, nevertheless, be omitted without guilt and can be expiated by many other remedies. But since all mortal sins, even those of thought, make men <children of wrath>.[29] and enemies of God, it is necessary to seek pardon of all of them from God by an open and humble confession. While therefore the faithful of Christ strive to confess all sins that come to their memory, they no doubt lay all of them before the divine mercy for forgiveness; while those who do otherwise and knowingly conceal certain ones, lay nothing before the divine goodness to be forgiven through the priest; for if one sick be ashamed to make known his wound to the physician, the latter does not remedy what he does not know. It is evident furthermore, that those circumstances that change the species of the sin are also to be explained in confession, for without them the sins themselves are neither integrally set forth by the penitent nor are they known to the judges, and it would be impossible for them to estimate rightly the grievousness of the crimes and to impose the punishment due to the penitents on account of them. Hence it is unreasonable to teach that these circumstances have
been devised by idle men, or that one circumstance only is to be confessed, namely, to have sinned against another. It is also malicious to say that confession, commanded to be made in this manner, is impossible, or to call it a torture of consciences; for it is known that in the Church nothing else is required of penitents than that each one, after he has diligently examined himself and searched all the folds and corners of his conscience, confess those sins by which he remembers to have mortally offended his Lord and God; while the other sins of which he has after diligent thought no recollection, are understood to be in a general way included in the same confession; for which sins we confidently say with the Prophet: <From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord.>[30] But the difficulty of such a confession and the shame of disclosing the sins might indeed appear a burdensome matter, if it were not lightened by so many and so great advantages and consolations, which are most certainly bestowed by absolution upon all who approach this sacrament worthily. Moreover, as regards the manner of confessing secretly to a priest alone, although Christ has not forbidden that one may in expiation for his crimes and for his own humiliation, for an example to others as well as for the edification of the Church thus scandalized, confess his offenses publicly, yet this is not commanded by divine precept; nor would it be very prudent to enjoin by human law that offenses, especially secret ones, should be divulged by a public confession. Wherefore, since secret sacramental confession, which holy Church has used from the beginning and still uses, has always been recommended by the most holy and most ancient Fathers with great and unanimous agreement, the empty calumny of those who do not fear to teach that it is foreign to the divine command, is of human origin and owes its existence to the Fathers assembled in the Lateran Council,[31] is convincingly disproved. For the Church did not through the Lateran Council decree that the faithful of Christ should confess, a thing that she recognized as of divine law and necessary, but that the precept of confession should be complied with by each and all at least once a year when they have attained the age of discretion. Hence this salutary custom of confessing during that sacred and most acceptable period of Lent is now observed in the whole Church to the great benefit of the souls of the faithful, which custom this holy council completely endorses and sanctions as pious and worthy of retention.

CHAPTER VI - THE MINISTER OF THIS SACRAMENT AND ABSOLUTION
With regard to the minister of this sacrament, the holy council declares false and absolutely foreign to the truth of the Gospel all doctrines which perniciously extend the ministry of the keys to all other men besides bishops and priests, in the belief that those words of the Lord: <Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven;> and, <Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained,> were, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, addressed indiscriminately to all the faithful of Christ in such manner that everyone has the power of forgiving sins, public ones by way of rebuke, if the one rebuked complies, and secret ones by way of a voluntary confession made to anyone. It [the council] teaches furthermore that even priests who are in mortal sin exercise, through the power of the Holy Ghost conferred in ordination, as ministers of Christ the office of forgiving sins, and that the opinion of those is erroneous who maintain that bad priests do not possess this power. But although the absolution of the priest is the dispensation of another's bounty, yet it is not a bare ministry only, either of proclaiming the Gospel or of declaring that sins are forgiven, but it is after the manner of a judicial act, by which sentence is pronounced by him as by a judge. The penitent, therefore, ought not so flatter himself on his own faith as to think that even though he have no contrition and there be wanting on the part of the priest the intention to act earnestly and absolve effectively, he is nevertheless really and in the sight of God absolved by reason of faith alone. For faith without penance effects no remission of sins, and he would be most negligent of his salvation who, knowing that a priest absolved him jokingly, would not diligently seek another who would act earnestly.

CHAPTER VII - THE RESERVATION OF CASES

Wherefore, since the nature of a judgment requires that sentence be imposed only on subjects, the Church of God has always maintained and this council confirms it as most true, that the absolution which a priest pronounces upon one over whom he has neither ordinary nor delegated jurisdiction ought to be invalid. To our most holy Fathers it seemed to be a matter of great importance to the discipline of the Christian people, that certain more atrocious and grave crimes should be absolved not by all but only by the highest priests;
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whence the sovereign pontiffs in virtue of the supreme authority given to them in the universal Church could with right reserve to their own exclusive judgment certain more grave cases of crimes.[40] And since all things that are from God are well ordered,[41] it is not to be doubted that the same may be lawfully done by all bishops, each in his own diocese,[42] unto edification however, not unto destruction, in virtue of the authority over their subjects that is given to them above other priests inferior in rank, especially in regard to those crimes that carry with them the censure of excommunication. That this reservation of crimes have effect not only in external administration but also in God's sight is in accord with divine authority. But that no one may on this account perish, it has always been very piously observed in the same Church of God that there be no reservation in <articulo mortis>,[43] and that all priests, therefore, may in that case absolve all penitents from all sins and censures; and since outside of this single instance priests have no power in reserved cases, let them strive to persuade penitents to do this one thing, betake themselves to superiors and lawful judges for the benefit of absolution.

CHAPTER VIII - THE NECESSITY AND FRUIT OF SATISFACTION

Finally, in regard to satisfaction, which, of all the parts of penance, just as it is that which has at all times been recommended to the Christian people by our Fathers, so it is the one which chiefly in our age is under the high-sounding pretext of piety assailed by those who <have an appearance of piety, but have denied the power thereof>,[44] the holy council declares that it is absolutely false and contrary to the word of God, that the guilt is never remitted by the Lord without the entire punishment being remitted also.[45] For clear and outstanding examples are found in the sacred writings,[46] by which, besides divine tradition, this error is refuted in the plainest manner. Indeed the nature of divine justice seems to demand that those who through ignorance have sinned before baptism be received into grace in one manner, and in another those who, after having been liberated from the servitude of sin and of the devil, and after having received the gift of the Holy Ghost, have not feared knowingly to violate the temple of God[47] and to grieve the Holy Spirit.[48] And it is in keeping with divine clemency that sins be not thus pardoned us without any satisfaction, lest seizing the occasion and considering sins as trivial and offering insult and affront to the Holy Spirit,[49]
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we should fall into graver ones, <treasuring up to ourselves wrath against the day of wrath.>[50] For without doubt, these satisfactions greatly restrain from sin, check as it were with a bit, and make penitents more cautious and vigilant in the future; they also remove remnants of sin, and by acts of the opposite virtues destroy habits acquired by evil living. Neither was there ever in the Church of God any way held more certain to ward off impending chastisement by the Lord than that men perform with true sorrow of mind these works of penance.[51] Add to this, that while we by making satisfaction suffer for our sins. we are made conformable to Christ Jesus who satisfied for our sins,[52] from whom is all our sufficiency,[53] having thence also a most certain pledge, that <if we suffer with him, we shall also be glorified with him.>[54] Neither is this satisfaction which we discharge for our sins so our own as not to be through Christ Jesus; for we who can do nothing of ourselves as of ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of Him who strengthens us.[55] Thus man has not wherein to glory, but all our glorying is in Christ,[56] in whom we live,[57] in whom we merit, in whom we make satisfaction, <bringing forth fruits worthy of penance,>[58] which have their efficacy from Him, by Him are offered to the Father, and through Him are accepted by the Father. The priests of the Lord must therefore, so far as reason and prudence suggest, impose salutary and suitable satisfactions, in keeping with the nature of the crimes and the ability of the penitents; otherwise, if they should connive at sins and deal too leniently with penitents, imposing certain very light works for very grave offenses, they might become partakers in the sins of others. But let them bear in mind that the satisfaction they impose be not only for the protection of a new life and a remedy against infirmity, but also for the atonement and punishment of past sins; for the early Fathers also believed and taught that the keys of the priests were bestowed not to loose only but also to bind.[59] It was not their understanding, moreover, that the sacrament of penance is a tribunal of wrath or of punishments, as no Catholic ever understood that through our satisfactions the efficacy of the merit and satisfaction of our Lord Jesus Christ is either obscured or in any way diminished;[60] but since the innovators wish to understand it so, they teach, in order to destroy the efficacy and use of satisfaction, that a new life is the best penance.
CHAPTER IX - THE WORKS OF SATISFACTION

It [the council] teaches furthermore that the liberality of the divine munificence is so great that we are able through Jesus Christ to make satisfaction to God the Father not only by punishments voluntarily undertaken by ourselves to atone for sins, or by those imposed by the judgment of the priest according to the measure of our offense, but also, and this is the greatest proof of love, by the temporal afflictions imposed by God and borne patiently by us.