

# *A Brief History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

*by Fr. Scott Detisch*

Catholics would certainly agree with the statement that "reconciliation is a sacrament of the church." But I suspect most Catholics would be perplexed by the statement, "The church is the sacrament of reconciliation." And yet this is what the Second Vatican Council proclaimed in *Lumen Gentium* (11). It taught that sinners do not experience the merciful embrace of God apart from the community of believers. However, for too many Catholics, the community plays no pivotal role at all in the sacrament of reconciliation. The diminished role of the community defies the scriptural and foundational theology that shaped the early history of this sacrament. It is to this history and theology that the sacrament must now be reconciled if it will have a vital place in the life of the church.

## **A brief history of the sacrament of reconciliation**

### **The early church**

In the writings of St. Paul, we read that, as baptized believers, we are all members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13) and what each individual does affects the whole Body (2 Cor 2:5). For this reason, Paul sees the sin of one member as yeast that infects the whole mass of dough, that is, the whole community (1 Cor 5:6-8). Holding fast to the legacy of Paul, the early church understood sin as a violation of the community (common-union). Therefore, to participate in the common-union of the Eucharist was to experience reconciliation as well. The church that gathered at Eucharist mediated the mercy and love of God and drew each believer into a deeper experience of conversion in Christ, whose Body is the church. However, as Christianity became a persecuted church, standing in holiness against the sin of the world, a question arose: How should the church reconcile those members who commit serious sins that deeply violate the holiness of the church?

### **Canonical penance (2nd to 6th centuries)**

The pastoral response to this question became canonical penance. During this time, acts of murder, adultery, and apostasy (denying the faith to save oneself from persecution) severely offended the church's self-understanding as the Body of Christ and a community of holiness. These sins were regarded as a betrayal of the community. Those who committed them were publicly enrolled in the order of penitents and excluded from the Eucharist for a time. More importantly, however, the entire Christian community repeatedly prayed for the penitents and

supported them in their process of conversion. Finally, these penitents were reconciled to the community on Holy Thursday when, in a powerful ritual that expressed the whole community's sorrow for sin and offer of God's mercy, the bishop laid hands on them and welcomed them back into the Body of Christ.

However, canonical penance did not last for several reasons. Since it could only be received once in a lifetime, it gave rise to "deathbed penance" and even "deathbed baptism" for the many who did not want to commit to a life of Christian conversion but wanted to commit to Christ as a final option. Second, the ritual became impractical as more and more people were becoming Christian and the tangible experience of common-union waned considerably. Finally, fewer people were willing to endure such a process when other options became available.

Notice how sin, in these first two periods of the history of the sacrament of reconciliation, was defined in a "horizontal" way: The sin of any individual believer was seen as affecting the whole community; therefore, to reconcile with the community was the means of being drawn into the mercy of God. All this changed when Christianity shifted from being a persecuted religion to being the privileged one in the Roman Empire.

### **Monastic penance (5th to 11th centuries)**

In its new privileged position, Christianity grew in leaps and bounds; yet something was lost. Smaller, close-knit communities of believers were no longer able to mediate the reconciling and healing life of God. So penitents sought out spiritual mentors - holy men and women living in monasteries who would assist individuals in examining their lives in light of the Gospel. Penitents sought from these spiritual guides a religious encounter in which they could explore the process of conversion in their lives. Many of them still sought out the bishop for a ritual of reconciliation, but it was a ritual that had less and less to do with the community.

Over time, sin became understood in a "vertical" way: as something private between the individual and God. This practice of monastic penance eventually influenced entire regions around monasteries and beyond. It shifted from the monasteries to the local churches in which monastics were replaced by priests.

### **Tariff penance (9th to 20th centuries)**

As the church moved into the early Middle Ages, it quickly adopted the European sense of law and justice that dominated Western culture. At that time, order in society was maintained by "tariff justice" (wrongdoers must pay the price, that is, a "tariff," for what they have done). This affected people's notions of sin and reconciliation. It was no longer enough to experience God's forgiveness through an encounter with a confessor; now one needed to make amends (pay the price) for one's sins. To that end, private penance was contracted between the penitent and the priest after the confession of sins. The priest's role became one of "absolver" and "judge" (with "the power of the keys" given to Peter in Matthew 16:19 to release people from their sins) rather than "reconciler to the community" as was the role of the bishop in canonical penance.

At this time, sin was considered a personal offense that upset the order of one's relationship with God and for which one had to make amends. It is important to note how the role of the community was completely lost in practice, though it remained in theory since the confessor was a public leader of the church. Also important to note is the reduction of the conversion experience to the endless cycle of: *sin-guilt to confession-absolution-penance to return to a life in which the same sin-guilt recur.*

By the mid-20th century, the church was experiencing a tremendous scriptural, theological, and liturgical renewal. All this reawakened the awareness that religious experience in Catholicism is necessarily linked to the community of believers. In addition, after centuries of tariff penance, people began to raise the question: If sin is an offense against God, then why does the penitent need to confess to a priest? Also, the impersonal nature of the confessional box no longer resonated with the more personal sense of God highlighted by the renewal movements within the church. Furthermore, the utter devastation of two world wars and the Holocaust, the injustices that gave rise to the civil rights movements, and the threat of nuclear annihilation from the Cold War made it painfully clear that sin is not merely a personal offense against God - it greatly affects God's people.

## **Vatican II**

One might say that the Second Vatican Council sought to reconcile the sacrament of reconciliation to its own history, particularly to the foundational periods of the early church and canonical penance. Yet the Council also sought to maintain the pastoral value of the spiritual guidance offered by a confessor in a one-on-one sacramental encounter, which monastic and tariff penance provided. This is why the 1973 rite of penance offers three options:

- Rite 1: For the reconciliation of individual penitents (for example, the Saturday afternoon confessions)
- Rite 2: For the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution (for example, the Advent and Lent penance services)
- Rite 3: For the reconciliation of several penitents with general absolution (only allowed in exceptional cases in the United States)

Theologically, the 1973 rite of penance seeks to retrieve the horizontal dimension of sin and reconciliation. In quoting *Lumen Gentium*, the introduction to the new rite teaches: In the sacrament of penance the faithful "obtain God's mercy pardon for having offended him and at the same time reconciliation with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion" (4). In addition, the words of absolution in the new rite clearly express that penitents are reconciled to God "through the ministry of the Church."

## **Reconciling the sacrament to its own history**

One of the marvelous things about the church is that it is an organic reality - it grows and adapts to the needs of each age because of the amazing pastoral instinct that lies at the heart of the church. We see this in our review of the history of the sacrament of reconciliation. The church restructured the way the sacrament was celebrated to meet the concrete needs of the people of God in every age. When those needs were no longer effectively met in the way the church

celebrated the sacrament, the ritual was adapted. But each period of the sacrament's history has taught the contemporary church something about reconciliation:

Sin affects not only one's relationship with God (vertical) but also one's relationship to the Body of Christ, the church (horizontal).

Therefore, the sacrament is not only about the forgiveness of sins (a personal experience between a penitent and God); it is also supposed to celebrate and effect reconciliation, which is a communal, structural reality that graces us with the ability to be the Body of Christ more effectively.

However, the sacrament must be able to bring about a personal encounter with God, mediated by a spiritual mentor (priest-confessor), that furthers a penitent's lifelong conversion.

While the privacy of confession to a priest is important, the dynamic of reconciliation is a public reality since it involves the church community in some way.

The rite of penance is a liturgy that genuinely expresses how a parish recognizes itself as a reconciling community in which every member is a sinner in need of God's mercy and all members are responsible for bringing the mercy of God to bear on one another's lives.

*Father Scott Detisch, PhD, is associate professor of systematics and co-director of spiritual formation at Christ the King Seminary, East Aurora, N.Y.*

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

Is this sacrament called confession, penance or reconciliation? Yes! This sacrament involves all three elements and historically has been called by all three names. Today the Church refers to it as the Sacrament of Penance or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### **Why do we need a sacrament of Reconciliation?**

“Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God’s forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church...” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1440). Only God forgives sins. Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be a sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation (CCC 1442). The priest “is not the master of God’s forgiveness, but its servant” (CCC 1466).

## **What happens in the Sacrament of Penance?**

“Through the sacrament of penance, we, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and, intending to reform our ways, receive God’s forgiveness and become reconciled with God and with the Church” (USCCB Committee on Pastoral Practices).

“Jesus’ call to conversion and penance... does not aim first at outward works... but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion” (CCC 1430). Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him.

## **What sins should be confessed?**

The Church teaches that “all serious (mortal) sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret... for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly” (CCC 1456). At the same time, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) “is strongly recommended... for it helps us to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies (patterns of weakness that can lead us to sin), let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful” (CCC 1458).

## **What are the effects of this sacrament?**

“The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being... He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation” (John Paul II). “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship” (CCC 1468), “for those who receive the sacrament with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation” (CCC 1551). **Baptism: the First Sacrament of Forgiveness** The Church Fathers saw a close connection between baptism and penance; in fact, penance was sometimes referred to as “the more difficult baptism.” St. Ambrose said: “There are water and tears; the water of baptism, and the tears of repentance.” Penance is a sacrament celebrating conversion, a basic dynamic of the Christian life. Adults and older children preparing for the sacrament of baptism enter an intense period of purification during the Lent season prior to baptism. The Elect reflect upon the stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Then on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent the Elect celebrate the Scrutinies in the midst of the community. During these celebrations the Church prays the ancient prayers of exorcisms over the Elect, calling upon God to protect them from Satan and the power of evil and surrounding them with the love of God.

*It Has Been So Long!*

*I Can't Remember What To Do!*

Many people have avoided celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, sometimes for years at a time, because they “don’t know what to do.” But confession doesn’t need to be scary or intimidating!

The following brief explanation will help you understand how the Sacrament is celebrated individually.

## **Preparation**

The celebration of this sacrament begins at home, with the private preparation you make. This preparation is called the examination of conscience. “The penitent compares his or her life with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.” The examination of conscience should take into account your relationship to God and to others. Usually, we know our sins all too well; the examination of conscience will help us to look at them in the light of the Gospel, and be better able to express them in confession. Take some time with your bible to read the Gospels. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5 is a good start for an examination of conscience.

### **1. Welcome of the Priest**

You have the option of confessing your sins face to face, or of confessing anonymously. This is your choice. The priest welcomes you and then both you and he make the sign of the cross, saying, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Then in his own words the priest urges you to have confidence in God. If you don’t know the priest, you may want to indicate your state of life (i.e. married, single, widowed, divorced), how long it has been since your last confession, and anything else that may help your confessor.

### **2. Confession of Sins**

Next the priest invites you to confess your sins. Occasionally, the priest may ask questions to help you in making a full confession. The confession of sins should be as complete as possible. That doesn’t mean it needs to take a long time. The important thing is that the penitent “looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible” ( Catechism 1455).

### **3. Advice of the Priest**

Sacramental confession is **not** therapy; the priest will not attempt to solve your problems for you. What he will do, however, is offer some brief advice to help you in starting a new life. He may also give you a simple “penance,” which may take the form of prayer, self-denial, service to one’s neighbor, or works of mercy.

### **4. Prayer of the Penitent**

Next the priest invites you to pray an act of contrition. There are many different options for this prayer. You can learn one of the following by heart, or feel free to bring this sheet with you.

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.

or:

Lord Jesus, you opened the eyes of the blind, forgave the sinful woman, and after Peter's denial confirmed him in your love. Listen to my prayer: renew your love in my heart, help me to live in perfect unity with my fellow Christians that I may proclaim your saving power to all the world.

or:

Father, I have sinned against you and am not worthy to be called your son. Have mercy on me, a sinner.

## **5. Prayer of Absolution**

Now the priest extends his hands over your head and prays the prayer of absolution, making the sign of the cross over you during the final words:

“through the ministry of the church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

You respond, Amen.

## **6. Dismissal**

Now the priest dismisses you. You respond, Thanks be to God. If you are making your confession as part of a communal celebration, remain in the church for the conclusion of the celebration. If not, ‘go in peace to love and serve the Lord’!

*Based on Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance: Questions and Answers , a publication of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.*