



PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

The two sacraments of healing

The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. (1421)

The sacrament of God's mercy

Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example and by prayer labours for their conversion. (1422)

WHY A SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION AFTER BAPTISM?

The second conversion

'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 Jn 1:8). The Lord taught us to pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses'. (1425)

The new life received in Christian initiation [Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion] has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptised such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed to holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us. (1425)

Baptism is the principal place for the first and fundamental conversion...Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church...a movement of a 'contrite heart' drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first. (1427,8)

St Ambrose talks of the two conversions: 'there are water and tears: the waters of Baptism and the tears of repentance'. (1429)

SCRIPTURE

Christ gives power to forgive sin in his name

Sin is before else an offence 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, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. (1440)

Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, 'The son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins', and exercises this divine power: 'Your sins are forgiven you' (Mk 2:5, 10; Lk 7:48) (1441)

By virtue of his divine authority [Christ] gives this power to men to exercise in his name. (Cf. Jn 20:21-23). He entrusted this power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the 'ministry of reconciliation' (2 Cor 5:18-20). (1442)

Jesus receives sinners at his table. In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Mt. 16:19). The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united with its head. Reconciliation [and communion] with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation [and communion] with God. (1444)

TRADITION AND DEVELOPMENT

The sacrament of forgiveness

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion [with the Church]. (1446)

The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as 'the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace' (Tertullian) (1446)

Over the centuries the forms of the sacrament have varied considerably. In the early centuries reconciliation for grave sins after Baptism (idolatry, murder and adultery) was tied to a very vigorous discipline with public penance before reconciliation. Later private confession developed and from that time on the sacrament has been performed in secret between the penitent and the priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way for regular frequenting of the sacrament. It allowed the integration of grave and venial sins to be integrated into one celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practised down to our own day. (1447)

The fundamental structure of Penance

Beneath the changes in discipline the same *fundamental* structure is to be discerned. It comprises two equally essential elements - on the one hand, the acts of the man who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit: namely contrition, confession and satisfaction; on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church. The Church, who through the bishop and his priests forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction, also prays for the sinner and does penance for him. Thus the sinner is healed and reconciled in ecclesial communion [with the Church]. (1448)

THE ACTS OF THE PENITENT

Contrition

Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place - 'sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again'. (1451)

When [contrition] arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called 'perfect'. This remits venial sins and also mortal sins if it contains the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible. (1452)

'Imperfect' contrition (attrition) is also a gift of God. By itself imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance. (1453)

Confession of sins

Confession of sins, even from a purely human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others and with God. (1455)

Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance. All mortal sins must be recounted in confession. (1456)

Without being strictly necessary, confession of venial sins is strongly recommended by the Church. Regular confession of venial sins helps us to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the spiritual life.

Each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year. (1457-8)

Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion without first having received sacramental absolution. (1457)

Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time. (1457)

Satisfaction

Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins. (1459)

The *penance* the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. (1460)

THE MINISTER OF THIS SACRAMENT

Bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. (1461)

Priests must encourage the faithful to come to the sacrament of Penance, and must make themselves available to celebrate this sacrament each time Christians reasonably ask for it. (1464)

The priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner. (1465)

The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. He must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium [teaching authority] of the Church and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy. (1466)

Every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins his penitents have confessed to him. This 'sacramental seal' admits of no exceptions. (1467)

THE EFFECTS OF THIS SACRAMENT

Reconciliation with God

- Restores us to God's grace, and joins us with him in an intimate friendship.
- *Reconciliation with God* is the purpose and effect of this sacrament.
- It also gives peace, serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation.
- It brings about a true 'spiritual resurrection'. (1468)

Reconciliation with the Church

- This sacrament *reconciles us with the Church*. It restores fraternal communion.
- It has a revitalising effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of its members.
- The sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among the living members of the Body of Christ.
- Reconciliation with God leads to other reconciliations - the penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, reconciled with his brethren, reconciled with the Church, reconciled with all creation. (1469)
- The sinner anticipates in a certain way the judgement to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. The sinner in converting to Christ passes from death to life and 'does not come into judgement.' (Jn 5:24) (1470)

Confession is the only ordinary way to reconcile ourselves with God and his Church

'Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession'.

Christ personally addresses every sinner: 'My son, your sins are forgiven'. He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. (1484)

IN BRIEF

'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week', Jesus showed himself to his apostles. 'He breathed on them, and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained".' (Jn 20:22-23) (1485)

The forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism is conferred by a particular sacrament called the sacrament of conversion, confession, Penance or Reconciliation. (1486)

Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church. (1497)