

HISTORY OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

The Sacrament of Penance in our tradition can be traced back to the people of Israel. The Hebrews saw the Mosaic and later Davidic covenants as constitutive of their relationship with God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, sin was an act of infidelity which alienates one from God. While sin was spoken of as a breaking of the Law of Moses, it was not so much a juridical offense as an offense against a covenant. To break the covenant was to break relationships with God and affected not only the individual but affected the whole people. In the event of such a sin, Jewish ritual and legislation provided for reconciliation of the sinner to God and to the community that was hurt by the sin. This notion of alienation and reconciliation would later be accepted into the early Christian community.



A distinctly Christian understanding of reconciliation sprang from the power of the Christ-event itself. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus was God's definitive act of reconciliation with an alienated world. The first sacrament of forgiveness celebrated by the Christian community was Baptism. Through this sacrament of conversion, the individual was symbolically immersed into Jesus' Death and Resurrection. It was in Baptism that the convert renounced his/her past sins. He/she died to sin and became alive before God and was embraced by the Christian community, the Body of Christ.

Eucharist was also viewed as a sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation. In fact, it was the principal Sacrament of ongoing forgiveness for the baptized. This was only natural because Eucharist was seen as the representation of Jesus being "broken and poured out" for the forgiveness of sins. It is surprising to note that the Sacrament of Penance was not part of the normal life of the early Church. However, it is a testimony to the power of Baptism that the Christian community felt this sacrament completely freed them from the bonds of sin.

It was not long, however, before the community had to deal pastorally with those who committed apostasy or serious sin. The early Church, experiencing periodic persecution found members of their communities who had rejected the faith under pressure. Since they were already baptized, the Church needed to find some way to reconcile them with the community. What resulted was a long and intense process of reconciliation. Documents in the second and third centuries attest to the practice of granting a one-time post-baptismal forgiveness which required a long period of

public penance. It was often referred to as a “second baptism.” But it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. By the fourth and fifth centuries this came to be known as “canonical penance” because various local councils promulgated a variety of canons to regulate its practice. The penitents were similar to the catechumens. After performing their assigned penitential works, they would be allowed to return to the eucharistic community by a rite known as the “reconciliation of the penitent.”

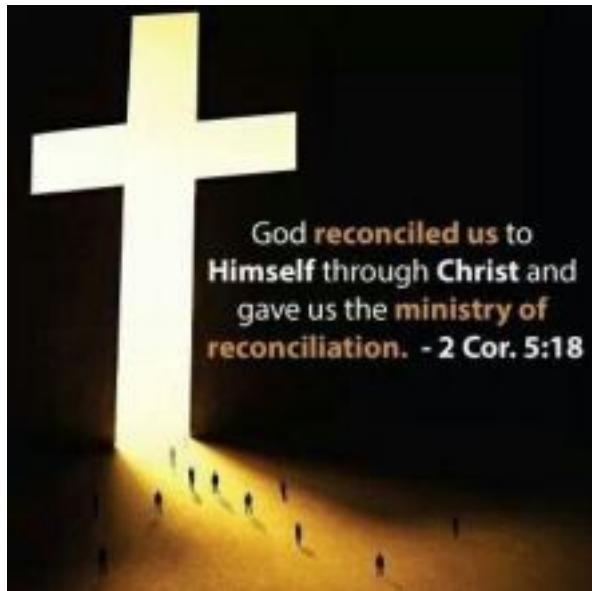
In the sixth and seventh centuries, the celebration of the sacrament underwent a dramatic change largely through the influence of Irish missionaries. Primarily, Christianity was brought to Ireland by the monks from Europe. These monks already had practiced, from their life in the monastery, a form of spiritual direction, which frequently included a personal confession of their specific sins. When these monks came to Ireland, they naturally brought the practice with them. Soon, many of the laity in Ireland also submitted to this private penitential discipline. When the Irish returned to the continent as missionaries, they maintained the practice of this “private confession” which included absolution and the assignment of a satisfaction or “penance.” By the tenth century the Western Church had largely replaced public canonical penance.

Such theologians as Thomas Aquinas tried to balance the essential elements of confession, contrition and the priest’s absolution. Others, like Duns Scotus, strongly emphasized only the priest’s absolution. Scotus maintained that sins could be absolved by a priest even if the penitent had only “imperfect” contrition. Absolution itself became the essence of the sacrament.

The Protestant Reformers challenged much of this theology. The Church responded by correcting numerous sacramental abuses and by clarifying its theological stance in the sixteenth century Council of Trent. The council taught that sacramental confession was the normal means of forgiveness for all serious sins committed after Baptism and defended the validity of the “integral” confession in which all serious sins must be detailed to the best of one’s ability. The Council also cast the sacramental action in juridical terms, with the priest as judge.



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The teaching of the Council of Trent has remained the norm for the Church up to the present time. However, the theological and canonical parameters set by the council left much room for adaptation. The practices had become too juridical, too private, and too individualistic. Sacraments are community events but this sacrament had become totally private. The Second Vatican Council's treatment of this Sacrament, along with the subsequently promulgated New Rite of Reconciliation (1973), has exemplified some of the new directions that the Sacrament may take.

While the individual reception of the Sacrament is still recommended (and required for cases of serious sin), provision is made for a more pastoral, face-to-face encounter (without a confessional screen). In this context, the role of the priest is not only as a representative of Christ but also as a representative of the loving Christian community. The new rite also clearly portrays the priest as healer and guide as much as judge and reflects some of the Sacrament's roots in monastic spiritual direction.

This revised rite (1973) offers three forms in which this one same sacrament can be celebrated:

- **Form 1: Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents** – This is what we usually identify with the shorthand: “going to confession.” Parishes usually schedule times for confessions on a regular basis. During this pandemic, for the health and safety of both

priests and penitent, we have not been able to offer this regular schedule.

- **Form 2: Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution** – This is what we have experienced at our Advent and Lenten Penance Services: a communal celebration with song, scripture readings and prayer, followed by individual reconciliation. The bishop has requested that these celebrations not be held this Advent due to the risk of covid-19.
- **Form 3: Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution** – This form of the rite includes a communal celebration with a general confession of sins as well as a general absolution for all who wish to participate. This form is reserved for extraordinary circumstances. It can only be used with explicit permission of the Bishop. That is why, until recently, most of us have not experienced this form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Due to the extraordinary circumstances in

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which we find ourselves during this pandemic, our Bishop has extended this permission to all priests of the Diocese.

The restoration of the communal dimension of reconciliation reflects the Church's appreciation of the complexity of sin. Recent teachings of the Church have raised our consciousness to the reality of social sin. This sin, which has its roots in the will of individuals, becomes so imbedded in social structures that the structures themselves stand in need of transformation. As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, no concept of social sin should blind us to the reality of sin's roots in the human person. However, we do see more clearly that while sin may begin with the individual, its effects impact the rest of the Christian community and even the whole of society.

The Sacrament of Penance has been and is still in a period of transition. Its form and theology have changed throughout the centuries. Yet the Church of Christ has claimed the power to assist in the reconciliation of sinners to God and the Church. As Richard McBrien has put it, "A Church which cannot forgive the sins of others against itself is not the Church of Christ." The way this sacrament is celebrated may continue to change. The "how" of reconciliation should never overshadow the presence of a reconciling Spirit in the Church of Christ.

