

Contemporary Confessional Practice

Our current Rite of Penance was revised in 1973 with two options for reconciliation services that would restore the original meaning of the Sacrament as a community sign. Sin does not only affect the sinner, it affects the entire community.

In 1983, the Code of Canon brought more changes, namely: the penitent could kneel on a kneeler or sit in a chair facing the priest. The sign of the cross introduced the confession, all mortal sins needed to be confessed but the confession of venial sins is optional. The priest emphasizes repentance, may offer counsel, and then imposes a penance.

Before the absolution, the penitent prays the act of contrition indicating sorrow for sin against both God and one's neighbor. The priest then prays the words of absolution – the essential words have always been: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Although from time to time the words of absolution may change, the essential words have always endured!

I was once asked how one would know that the priest in the confessional was really a priest. A priest who is administering the sacrament of Reconciliation must have permission from the local bishop or from his religious superior.

The sacramental seal of confession binds not only the priest who is hearing one's confession but all those who may overhear the person's confession. A priest who violates this seal is automatically excommunicated, and anyone who inadvertently overhears a person's confession is bound to the same seal as the priest and automatic excommunication if any part of the conversation is revealed. This seal is so sacred that priests and others have been executed/martyred for not revealing what was said.

General Absolution without Confession is called the "third rite of reconciliation" and is used on rare occasions. General absolution is given to the people after a modified reconciliation service BUT individual confession is required afterward.

Contrary to the likes of so many others, I am one who truly appreciates and uses the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Sin is truly a burden, but confession has, for me, is similar to a shower -- Confession is humbling, but being reminded that I am not perfect, but nevertheless loved by God is worth visiting the confessional on a regular basis.

Sister Helene