

## **Penance**

Penance is one of the two sacraments of healing. It is the sacrament by which sins committed after Baptism are forgiven through the absolution of the priest.

Only God can forgive sins. But He can decide for Himself how He wants to do it. The way He has decided upon is to use priests as His instruments. We can truly say that Christ forgives sins, using the lips and hands of the priest, or we can say that the priest forgives sins by the power Christ gives him.

To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world. To return to communion with God after having lost it through sin is a process born of the grace of God who is rich in mercy and solicitous for the salvation of men. One must ask for this precious gift for oneself and for others.

---

### **What is this sacrament called?**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> refers to this sacrament as Penance. However, it is also referred to by several other names as well:

**Sacrament of Penance** – since it consecrates the sinner's steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction.

**Sacrament of Conversion** – because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.

**Sacrament of Confession** – since the confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense, it is also a "confession" – acknowledgement and praise – of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man.

**Sacrament of Forgiveness** – since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace".

**Sacrament of Reconciliation** – because it imparts to the sinner reconciliation with God and neighbors.

### **Confession of our sins to a priest**

Confession is the telling of our sins to an authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness.

We must confess our sins to a priest because Jesus gave the power to forgive sins to priests when He spoke to the Apostles and their successors in the priesthood: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

Unless we confess our sins to a priest we will not know whether our sins are forgiven or retained.

### **The words that the priest uses to absolve (take away) sin are:**

God, the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of his Son  
has reconciled the world to himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins;

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.

**What is necessary to receive Penance worthily?**

- 1) Examine our conscience.
- 2) Be sorry for our sins.
- 3) Have a firm purpose of not sinning again.
- 4) Confess our sins to the priest.
- 5) Be willing to perform the penance the priest gives us.

**Examination of conscience** – This is a thinking over what you have done against God's will, your habits of sin, specific sins and dangers that have harmed you, others and your relationship with God. Such a review is in itself a considerable help to right living.<sup>4</sup>

**Being sorry for our sins (Contrition)** – Contrition is sincere sorrow for having offended God, and hatred for the sins we have committed, with a firm purpose of sinning no more. God will not forgive any sin, whether mortal or venial, unless we have true contrition for it. Sorrow for sin is true contrition when it is **interior** (from the heart), **supernatural** (motivated by faith rather than by natural consequences), **supreme** (hating sin as the highest evil in the world and being willing to endure any suffering rather than offending God in the future), and **universal** (sorrow for every moral sin which we may have committed).

**Firm purpose of not sinning again** – This is a formal promise to God and yourself to seriously try to eliminate these sins and to avoid any occasions of sin. This in itself is enormously beneficial.<sup>4</sup>

**Confessing our sins to the priest** – This is an honest, sincere, humble admission that you are a sinner, that you indeed have sinned and have offended God and man. There is considerable therapeutic value, healing power, in just this. The proud person cannot admit this – and that is the weakness, the undoing of the proud person. There is benefit of receiving personal advice from a wise, experienced spiritual counselor. A prudent confessor is of immeasurable help to thousands of people, guiding them along the narrow path of holiness.<sup>4</sup>

**Performing the penance the priest gives us** – Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm done by sin (for example, return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. **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. This **satisfaction** is also called “penance.” 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. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and, above all, the patient acceptance of the crosses we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all.<sup>1</sup>

### How to make a good confession

**Before entering the confessional** : We should take sufficient time to examine our conscience, excite our hearts to sorrow for our sins and to make a firm purpose not to sin again.

**Enter the confessional and begin by saying** : Bless me Father, for I have sinned”, and then mention how long it has been since our last confession.

**Confess any mortal sins** committed since our last confession and also any that we may have forgotten in a previous confessions, telling the nature and number of each.

**Confess any venial sins** we wish to mention.

**End our confession by saying** : “I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life, especially for ...” ; and then it is well to tell one or several of the sins or category of sin which we have previously confessed and for which we are particularly sorry.

**After confessing our sins** : We should answer truthfully any question the priest asks, seek advice if we wish, listen carefully to the spiritual instruction and counsel of the priest and accept the penance he gives us.

**At the time of absolution**: The priest will ask you to recite the Act of Contrition.

**After leaving the confessional** : We should thank God for the sacrament we have received, beg Our Lord to supply for the imperfections of our confession, pray for the priest who heard our confession and promptly and devoutly perform our penance.

### Perfect & Imperfect Contrition

Contrition is **perfect** when we are sorry for our sins because sin offends God, whom we love above all things for His own sake. A person in mortal sin can regain the state of grace before receiving the Sacrament of Penance by making an act of perfect contrition with the sincere purpose of going to confession.

Contrition is **imperfect** when we are sorry for our sins because they are hateful in themselves or because we fear God's punishment. To receive the sacrament of Penance worthily, imperfect contrition is sufficient, although we should always strive for perfect contrition.

### When or how often should we go to confession?

This sacrament is necessary whenever one has sinned seriously or whenever God's spirit points to a change of heart. Such a conversion should take place minimally during Lent and Advent. It should also occur at the start of any new state of life – confirmation, marriage, ordination, new occupation, new school, move to a new city, etc. It should take place whenever one participates in an event aimed at a change of heart – a retreat, starting a school year, starting a vacation. It should happen when a person feels that life is becoming a rut, that one is becoming careless or lazy or materialistic. A practical pattern for serious-minded Catholics is monthly confession.<sup>4</sup>

### Effects of the sacrament of Penance, worthily received

- 1) Reconciliation with God which restores or increases sanctifying grace.
- 2) Reconciliation with the Church.
- 3) The forgiveness of sins.
- 4) Remission of eternal punishment (if necessary) and at least part of the temporal punishment due to our sins.
- 5) Help to avoid sin in the future – an increase in spiritual strength for the Christian battle.
- 6) Restoration of the merits of our good works if they have been lost by mortal sin.
- 7) Gives us the opportunity to receive spiritual advice and instruction from our confessor.
- 8) Peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation.

### Is it necessary to confess every sin?

It is necessary to confess every mortal sin which has not yet been confessed and forgiven.

It is not necessary to confess our venial sins, but it is better to do so.

Anybody who deliberately omits a venial sin in confession does not make a bad confession, but loses much of the grace of the sacrament which would help him overcome this sin. Besides, there is a danger of convincing oneself that a sin is only venial which is really mortal. It is always safer and better to tell even venial sins.

### Sins that we don't tell in confession

.....Knowingly concealing a mortal sin in confession causes none of our sins to be forgiven and adds a mortal sin of sacrilege.

.....A person who has knowingly concealed a mortal sin in confession must go back to confession and confess that he has made a bad confession, tell the sin he has concealed, mention the sacraments he has received since that time, and confess all the mortal sins he has committed since his last good confession.

.....A person who without fault forgets to confess a mortal sin, may receive Holy Communion, because that person has made a good confession and the sin is forgiven. However, that sin must be mentioned in confession if it again comes to mind.

### The Seal of Confession

No sense of shame or fear should keep us from telling our sins in confession because a priest is bound to keep his lips sealed about what he hears in confession. St. John Nepomucene died a martyr's death because he refused to reveal what he had heard in confession.

### What are the chief qualities of a good confession?

Humble – we accuse ourselves of our sins with a conviction of guilt for having offended God.

Sincere – telling of our sins honestly and frankly.

Entire – we confess at least all of our mortal sins, telling their kind, the number of times we have committed each sin, and any circumstances changing their nature.

### Punishment due to our sins

Eternal punishment – The everlasting punishment of hell, due to unforgiven mortal sins. Eternal punishment is God's angry punishment which balances the scales of justice, upset by sin. This punishment is reserved for those who refused to let God correct them on earth.

Temporal punishment – Punishment lasting only for a time, due to venial sins and forgiven mortal sins. This is God's loving, corrective punishment, like medicine a mother gives a child, given either on earth or in purgatory.

**It is a grace from God to know our sins.**

“The just man falls seven times a day.” [Proverbs 24:16]. Most likely we sin more than we are aware or can remember. If we are “just men”, that would be over 200 sins in a month. Have we ever confessed that many sins in the confessional?

In a sense the spiritual development of a person can be shown by the person’s attitude towards sin. The unreligious person or the beginner in spirituality will have little or no realization of self as a sinner or of sin as something horrible. The unreligious person does not think much about sin, does not go to confession, does not take personally the penitential rite that begins every Mass. The unreligious person can live with sin and not worry about it – because faith is not there. Part of faith is seeing sin as sin and self as a sinner.<sup>4</sup> But just as sunlight coming into a darkened room tends to show the dust that we did not see when it was dark, the light of Christ’s grace helps us to know our sins as we progress in holiness. We should continually pray for the grace to know our sins.

**Communal celebration**

The sacrament of Penance can also take place in a framework of a **communal celebration** in which we prepare ourselves together for confession and give thanks together for the forgiveness received. Here, the personal confession of sins and individual absolution are inserted into a liturgy of the word of God with readings and a homily, an examination of conscience conducted in common, a communal request for forgiveness, the Our Father and a thanksgiving in common. However, individual confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church.

In the case of grave necessity, recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with **general confession and general absolution**. Grave necessity of this sort can arise when there is imminent danger of death without sufficient time for the priest or priests to hear each penitent’s confession. The diocesan bishop is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist. A large gathering of the faithful on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity.

**Indulgences**

Through indulgences, the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory. An **indulgence** is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions. An indulgence is **partial** or **plenary** according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin.

**A good confession makes us saints – A Story<sup>3</sup>**

“ST. FRANCIS OF SALES CONSOLES HIS PENITENT”

One day St. Francis of Sales was hearing the Confession of a poor woman, who, for many years, had lived a very sinful life. She made her Confession with very great humility and contrition, and shed many tears at the remembrance of how she had offended God.

When she had finished her Confession, she said to the Saint: “My Father, what do you think of me now, after hearing what I have just told you, all these terrible sins which I have committed?”

“My child,” he answered, “I look upon you now as a Saint.”

“Ah, my Father!” she replied, “your conscience must tell you that you must consider me quite the opposite of a Saint, after such a life of sin and evil.”

“Not at all,” replied the Saint; “I say exactly what I think, and if men may still look on you as the Pharisee did on St. Mary Magdalen, I look on you as Jesus Christ did on her.”

“But, my Father,” continued the woman, “what do you think of my past life?”

“I do not think of it at all. What did exist in the past does not exist now; it has been entirely blotted out. I now praise God for having granted you the grace of conversion. Ah, I would like to be with the angels in Heaven, to join with them to-day in their joy at seeing one reconciled to God who had been living at a distance from Him.”

While saying these words, tears rolled down the Saint’s cheeks. The woman saw them and said to him: “Father, you are weeping. No doubt it is on account of the abominations of my past life that you weep.”

“Oh no,” said St. Francis, “I weep with joy at seeing you risen again to a life of grace.”

So it is with every priest of God when he sees a sinner returning to the life of grace. He rejoices with the angels, and gives glory to God for His infinite love to poor sinners.

Rejoice also, my child, and as you approach the altar think that you hear the voice of Jesus saying to you what He said to His Apostles on the Sea of Galilee: “It is I: be not afraid.”

### **References**

- 1) **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, pp. 357-374.
- 2) **Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism** , Official Revised Edition, No. 2, Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, 1962, pp. 184-205.
- 3) Chisholm, Rev. D., **The Catechism in Examples, Volume IV, Grace: The Sacraments** , Roman Catholic Books, Ft. Collins, CO, first published in 1919, pp. 311-313.
- 4) **Vatican II Weekday Missal**, Daughters of St. Paul, 1975, pp. 980-981, 1532-1533, 1540.