



“Come back to the Lord”

LENTEN RECONCILIATION SERVICES

Wednesday, April 5, 7:00 PM

Saturday, April 8, 1:00 PM

OVERVIEW OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE & RECONCILIATION

Christ commissioned the Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to continue his work of healing and salvation through the forgiveness of sins (*2 Cor 5:18-20*) This Sacrament celebrates the forgiveness of our sins, reconciles us to the Church, provides peace, serenity of conscience, spiritual consolation, and increased spiritual strength to resist the temptation of sin in our lives. (*Catechism 1496*) The regular celebration of this sacrament is essential to the Christian life in order to be healed from our sins and failings so we can more faithfully live out our baptism.

Did you know?

- **In the early Church, the Sacrament of Penance could be received only once in a lifetime.** The penances assigned were often very long and severe, sometimes lasting several years. During this time penitents usually had special places in church, wore special clothes, and commonly left the Sunday liturgy after the homily, just like the catechumens.
- **At one time the Church had a two-track system of public Penance and private Penance.** Public sins required public penance and private sins required private penance.
- **For centuries penitents were required to do their assigned penance and then return to receive absolution.** Practical difficulties with this became apparent when the confessor was a wandering missionary and when the penances sometimes took the penitent on a pilgrimage to foreign lands.

History of the Sacrament

A glance at the history of this sacrament makes it clear that Penance has had a lively and varied past. The primary sacrament of forgiveness in the early Church was baptism. To the first Christians it seemed unthinkable that anyone who had been converted to Christ would return to sin after they had been baptized. Nevertheless, the Church soon found that it had to deal with post-baptismal sin. Through the centuries the Church has continued to develop in its understanding of this sacrament so it can be more responsive to the needs of the people and more meaningful in their lives. Reconciliation, like all sacraments, has a fundamental community dimension. This was most obvious in the early Church with the Order of Penitents. But even with the later development of private penance, the Church has always insisted on the importance of the priest in the experience of reconciliation. This is not because God will not forgive us directly (God always forgives those who repent), but because the priest is the representative of the Church community. Reconciliation with the Church community is the sacramental sign of reconciliation with the Lord. The priest is the representative of the community, as well as the representative of Christ.

NEXT WEEK: HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE SACRAMENT

ART CREDITS Noah and the Ark, Hans Gottfried von Stockhausen, 1994; above, Peter Weeps, Ulrich Henn, 1999, At St. James Cathedral

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 and Reconciliation.

Why do we need a sacrament of reconciliation? Pope Francis says, "It is not easy to entrust oneself to God's mercy, because it is an abyss beyond our comprehension. But we must! ... "Oh, I am a great sinner!" "All the better! Go to Jesus: He likes you to tell him these things!" He forgets, He has a very special capacity for forgetting. He forgets, He kisses you, He embraces you and He simply says to you: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more" (Jn 8:11). "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*).

What happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? "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*). "To celebrate the Sacrament of Penance is to be wrapped in a warm embrace." (*Pope Francis*)

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 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 a contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation" (*CCC 1551*). Through this Sacrament, "we not only have our sins fully absolved,. We also receive the graces we need, not to continue sinning."

Baptism: the First Sacrament of Forgiveness

The Church Fathers saw a close connection between baptism and reconciliation; in fact, reconciliation 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.

God Never Tires of Forgiving!