

The Sacrament of Reconciliation
Also called
Confession or Penance

With the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Church comes to understand the instruction given to Saint Peter, "and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
(Matthew 16: 18-19)

As a priest confessor I have come to be most fulfilled and inspired when celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In fact, prior to being ordained a priest I already had a great desire to bring the relief and peace this sacrament has to offer to others. It is most satisfying to offer this grace to people who are on retreats, parish renewals or at moments of conversion. Then do I find people most sincere, inspired, open to God's loving mercy and ultimately filled with joy. However, overall this Sacrament is not used as often as it might be or with the greatest fruitfulness. (Archbishop Dolan, "The Altar & the Confessional: Pastoral Letter on Sacrament of Penance", March 17, 2012) I say this not to scold though. **My wish here is to help you better understand the sacrament, in short, through some explanation as to its theological and historical development.**

Least Understood – Most Liberating

Have you ever thought to yourself, "I am worthless, bad, or evil? No one can love me as I am? No one can dependably meet my needs?" This is one way to view sin. It is a sinful belief system. (Patrick McCormick, C.M. *Sin as Addiction*, Paulist Press. 1989) It ignores if not denies God's love that is always ready to reconcile you to yourself and others. It says God created you inferior to all of creation or that God "makes junk." It can even be a way to attract attention to one for selfish reasons. Actions that arise from this way of thinking and believing can and do offend God and God's people. Great negative consequences can result that effect not only one but many other people. The institutional Church too can sin although its head Jesus Christ is without sin. (Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life*. Crossroad Publishing. 1998) There is no such thing as a private sin. However, God's mercy and grace can reverse this sinful belief system. **The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a celebration of God's mercy, the way that leads to making amends to those offended and the way to lift the guilt of sin from ones shoulders.**

Therefore, while people do not exercise the use of this sacrament as often as they could it might be because they misunderstand this celebration of God's grace. There is even a sense ones sin and forgiveness for it is a matter between one and God alone. This negates the communal aspect of sin. Let us not dwell on sin however. This piece is about the way God has given us through His Church to overcome sinful ways. Reconciliation as a sacrament is most liberating. It lifts guilt from the body, mind and soul of those wise enough to partake of it. As a sacrament it is one of the seven institutionally guaranteed moments of an encounter with Jesus Christ. As sacrament it is our reaching to God and God touching us in a visible and perceptible way. It is an

infusing of God's saving grace that is most liberating! It is not only one's rightful expression of contriteness, humility and willingness to make up for what one did wrong (responsibility). It is the means through which one hears God say, "You are forgiven." What a freeing action! What a relief! It is liberating!

Some Honest Questions

Perhaps you ask some questions. Or, you have heard others ask questions regarding the practice and necessity of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Questions are acceptable. They can lead to greater understanding and unfolding of God's revelation to humankind.

Questions asked may be such as the following. How is the sinner forgiven? Is one forgiven through contrition? Is forgiveness gained through actually making one's confession and not just intending to do so at some time in the future? Is it the absolution of the priest that brings forgiveness, rather than the mere act of contrite confession of the penitent? These are all good questions and you are not alone in asking them. In fact, as the Church struggled with Jesus' instruction to Saint Peter in Mathew 16 it asked the same questions. Its best prayerful thinkers did so very vigorously in the twelfth century. Eventually, the Church resolved these questions, even working on them beyond the 12th century, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading to the practice we have today. (Theology Today No. 20, *The Theology of Penance*. Margaret Hebblethwaite & Kevin Dnovan, S.J. Clergy Book Service, 1979. pp.42-44.)

Toward Some Broad Answers

We the Church have come to realize through Scripture and Tradition Jesus Christ is about repentance and forgiveness of sin. God truly is not about wanting us to suffer. God calls to us to turn around from evil and sinful thinking and actions to be one with Him and our brothers and sisters. That, in fact, is what the word *reconciliation* means. It means to be made one with.

It is not just between one and God alone. It is about the entire community of faith making its way, each one helping the other, through this earthly life to God. It is a "push me pull me world." As theologians have come to discover, included in this way is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the way the Church comes to deal with sin as it understood Jesus's instruction. **"What we are concerned with is not just the individual relationship between a Christian and God, but the way in which other Christians are involved."** (*ibid.* p. 11.)

Baptism is the first step of initiation into the community of faith. It brings the grace to overcome Original Sin. Through Baptism we enter a new life and are expected to put sin behind us. Saint Paul raises the ongoing struggle humanity encounters from the point of Baptism onward. "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:2)

We are to resist and remain outside of the sinful belief system and its consequences. Yet, we do not live up to the ideal. Again, scripture says, "If we say we have no sin, we

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deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1Jn. 1:8) Thus, right away the Church develops procedures for repentance and reconciliation. This is shown in its scriptural texts. "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass,...Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal.6:1-2) Moreover, "Do not look on him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (2Thess.3:15) **See, therefore, the communal nature of mending and rebuilding the community of faith when there have been breeches in it. The community is involved.** 1 Corinthians 12 points out the faith community is an interdependent body. If one part is hurt the other parts suffer. Further, early on the community recognized there will be those who will resist reconciliation.

Those who resist reconciliation, who might not be sincere in love of God and of neighbor, can do harm to the community. Such people may have to be put outside the community in order to protect the frail ones. It is more than an action that punishes or forces a point of correction. Saint Paul says a person may be treated as outside the community. Have "nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed." (2Thes. 3:14)

Jesus himself points out we must take the approach of brotherly advise. But, if that fails it may become a Church matter. The person may face expulsion from the community. "If your brother sins against you....Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mt. 18:15-18) **However, Scripture shows the community develops the notion of reconciliation and not just excommunication.** This is found in 2 Cor. 2:5-10, "...so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Perhaps now you can see how and why the Sacrament of Reconciliation develops as we have it today. **The sacrament celebrates mercy while making us face our faults and outright sins.** In a discrete manner the whole community rejoices with us as we each become one again. We all reconcile with the Lord and the Lord's people. As I said earlier, there is no such thing as a private sin. Our actions affect everyone. Likewise, there is no such thing as a private good. The good we do, including through the act of reconciliation effects everyone for the good.

Saint Paul points out that Jesus is involved in the public acts of excommunication and reconciliation. The Church, therefore, is an agent of divine punishment and reconciliation. Further, such is a communal act in the presence of Jesus. Authority is given to the Church through the apostles that is passed on down through the ages. Jesus extends his own mission to the disciples. (Ibid. p15.) This is found in John 20: 2-3, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." Jesus then breaths his Holy Spirit on them. He tells them, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven...."

The authority extends beyond the first generation of the Church. It is handed down by what is called apostolic succession, the laying on of hands, one bishop to the next. **God wants forgiveness and reconciliation to continue until the end of time.** God does not want this for only one generation of people. The grace of God is to be tangible throughout all ages so as to continue to build His Church. To put it plainly, why would God stop at any point to build His Church? Why would He want it to fall apart? After all, God the Father sent His only Son to redeem the world! "The disciples might forgive sins initially through 'baptism for the forgiveness of sins', but there is

certainly no reason to limit this instruction to baptism. The Council of Trent saw this passage as the divine institution of the sacrament of Penance." (Ibid.) This leads back to the opening scripture passage.

The authority is given to Peter as an individual in Matthew 16: 18-19. Peter is the visible leader on Earth of Christ's Church. There must be order to human society even as it is on a divine mission. The institution of the Church is founded. To bind and to loose refers to legislative and judicial power. To bind someone is to excommunicate and to loose someone is to free him or her from excommunication.

Let us fast forward a moment to understand what the Church understands to be the nature of the Sacrament of Reconciliation today. In the 1960s the Church had its most recent Council. It was called the Second Vatican Council or Vatican Council II.

Councils of the Church bring together the leaders of the Church, namely the Bishops, from around the world. They assess the times they live in to recognize the challenges that face Christ's Church. The challenges might be to the actual teaching of Jesus Christ or to the practice of the faith, matters of morality and the need to clarify all of the above. Councils might revise the rites or Liturgy of the Church. That is, a council might revise the way the faithful people publically celebrate the faith and worship God. Theologians, scripture scholars and scholars of other disciplines are called to discuss the issues before the council. From these prayerful proceedings then come writings or documents that teach and lead the faithful forward.

From Vatican Council II came only little concerning the nature and effect of the Rite of Reconciliation. It was important though. (Ibid. p.57) One document that much defined the Church itself, *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* said this concerning the nature of the sacrament.

Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for offences committed against Him. They are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion. (par. 11)

To put this statement of Vatican II in my own words, the sacrament is something people come to by one's own free will. A person, be it you or me, feels the burden of the guilt of sinfulness. It is heavy, holding one down from moving on in life freely. Thus, one wants to hear he or she is forgiven. Out of contriteness the offenses one knows of are listed by him or her in recognition of what must be forgiven. These, quite simply, are what offended God. Not only did these sins offend God but, as pointed out earlier, hurt the community at large. Remember, there is no such thing as a private sin. Yet, through brotherly and sisterly love, the members of the Church with God who have been offended sincerely wish the sinner to be reconciled. Together, all the members of the Church are represented in the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. All of us truly pray each day, in the Lord's Prayer and other prayers, that everyone is reconciled. What the Lord wants, that we are all one with Him, is desired by all the members of the Church. When any one sinner recognizes the need for forgiveness and reconciliation,

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confesses and receives absolution it is an answer to every Church member's prayers. Everyone rejoices with the penitent person.

A Short Historical Development of Understanding Jesus's Instruction

Prior to today the Church's developing understanding and practice of Reconciliation went through phases. Its understanding of the sacrament was expressed in the public practice. Starting with the earliest of days the Church practiced what was called Canonical Penance then it developed the Tariff Penance and then Modern Penance. (see Hebblethwaite and Conavan on the Theological Development)

These changes over time showed a change in emphasis by the Church in its developing understanding of Christ's instruction.

The Canonical Penance of the ancient Church called for the penitent person to come before the whole community with the Bishop present. There he or she confessed the sin or sins. This was for something that most mortally breached one's life in Christ and His Church. A person had only one opportunity after Baptism to reconcile. The early Church was under persecution and strict discipline was needed to keep everyone in order.

The Bishop acted as the mediator and his prayers/intercessions said God will forgive the sin. Some penance was assigned for all to see the person do. It showed the person's sorrow and conversion of heart. Along with this the community prayed for the person. The matter was very communal. It involved public ritual. With the completion of the penance the Bishop brought the person back into the community of faith. So, the Bishop interceded with God and represented the community too. The sinner was welcomed back into the community and in doing so came God's forgiveness. In time there was less persecution and the practice became more lenient.

The Tariffed Penance developed about the sixth century in Ireland. In fact, elements of this were in practice among the desert monks prior to this period. (Chadwick, Owen, "John Cassian" in *The Study of Spirituality*. Oxford, 1986.) People were afraid of falling into sin again and therefore there was the need to formally reconcile to God and His Church. Thus, with the Tariffed Penance system one may repeat the sacrament over and over again. The emphasis here was to permit people to continually direct sincere lives toward God with God's grace. At the same time the person was still making up to the community of faith for the wrong done. This practice had a more private manner to it as distinct to the Canonical Penance of the ancient Church. This practice became frequent to a good Christian and not just for some extreme instance.

With the greater frequency of practice it fell upon the local priest to be the confessor. A bishop was no longer needed solely. Yet, today we still see this sacramental duty coming from the ministry of the bishop to the local priest. In this form the priest confessor intercedes for God's forgiveness. He prays for God's forgiveness and gives instruction as to how to obtain forgiveness and fulfill due punishment. It is called Tariffed

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Penance because there was a literal list of sins and the recommended penance to go with them. This brought some consistency and fairness to the whole practice for all involved, those who offended and those offended. Tariffed Penance was like settling a debt.

In Modern Penance the priest confessor becomes the agent of God. This is called an indicative absolution. Now the Church comes to understand Jesus's instruction as to mean the priest forgives in the name of God. He is more than an intercessor. Also, like the Canonical system of reconciliation in the ancient Church the Modern Penance takes on being a sign of sorrow, that is contrition. However, the sign of contrition is more symbolic than before. The Church better realizes only Jesus Christ can make up for sin. No penance done by a person can make up for sin as Jesus' action did. One now makes a gesture of good faith that shows the internal disposition of contrition. There is no need of long and elaborate displays of sorrow. Also, the absolution is given before the penance is done.

In Today's Penance there is little change from Modern Penance. Earlier in this piece the nature of the sacrament as taught by Vatican Council II was spoken of. Mostly, the celebration of the sacrament has evolved. (see the *Rite of Penance*)

Reconciliation in Communal celebrations with individual confession may be used on occasions. Such may be seen at parish renewals or missions. These Liturgies involve the reading of Scripture and the praying of prayers. It harkens back to the days of the Canonical Penance when all the members of the community were present. However, now since all will have the opportunity to confess sins privately it is apparent all people sin and all support the other in one's quest to be one with God and with God's people.

Reconciliation with General absolution may be given to very large crowds of people on the most rare of occasions. There must be some great and moral reason to leave out individual confession of sins and permission for this must be given by the bishop. It might happen when people of a particular region of the world are unable to get to Confession due to great distances and the fact there are too few priests to act as confessors.

Reconciliation of Individual Penitents emphasizes a more warm setting. The priest confessor greets the person in a friendly manner and invites him or her to enter into spiritual and actual communion with the Lord. The priest guides the penitent as needed and shares the Scriptures with the person. Although it is not a spiritual counseling session the priest may offer some direction to the person. Matters that might need greater counsel are to be taken outside of the Seal of Confession.

The Seal of Confession refers to the fact the priest confessor may never reveal the content of the individual confession of sins. In this way people may always feel open to reconciling to the Lord and the Lord's people. This is the law of the Church and one may depend on it. However, while this practice of the Church is generally respected by the civil government in the U.S. it is not the law of the land. A priest may have to go

to jail for not revealing the contents of confession in a court of law. Client privilege refers to the client and not to the professional (priest, doctor, lawyer, social worker). If the client were to give up the privilege, such as with a client and doctor, the doctor may then reveal all information about the client. However, regardless of what the penitent might "give up" a priest will never reveal the contents of the confession.

Contemporary Pastoral Outreach

As I stated at the beginning of this piece my wish is to help you better understand the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Now a short historical theological development of the sacrament has been presented. It should be obvious this sacrament is more than just implicit in Jesus's founding of the Church upon Peter and the Apostles. Forgiveness of sin and making all one with God is His mission. **The Church has continued to unfold the meaning of Jesus' instruction in Matthew 16: 18-19. This has been shown in the Scriptures and other documents and writings of the Church. The Sacrament emphasizes the individual and communal nature of sin and reconciliation and God's closeness to each person.**

To quote Archbishop Dolan again, "...reading the four Gospel accounts together, we can see that the sacrament of penance is not some kind of later invention, some afterthought, something left over, something ancillary." (Archbishop Dolan) In deed the Sacrament of Reconciliation is part of the whole of the Church's practice and discipline. It is as much a part of the spirituality of the people of God as the Eucharist. **It draws us closer to God the Father and to each other as we recognize our need for redemption that can only be given by Jesus Christ through His Church.** "We receive the gift of mercy to the extent that we realize our need for it. We desire forgiveness only if we acknowledge the seriousness of sin." (Ibid.)

Dolan and others, including myself, observe how **in our society there is a love to confess.** If one is not making a confession for oneself a confession is made on behalf of others. There is a rush to "out" every leader, celebrity or prominent person in society. If the perceived infraction is not large enough it is expounded on until the person under attack is made to be the worst human being on Earth. That is he or she is the worst until the next target of society's own unadmitted guilt is exposed. This obsession to confess humankind's sins is even played out in entertainment such as reality shows and interviews on talk shows. **So why do some ridicule the Roman Catholic Church for continuing to offer the Sacrament that helps rid us of guilt of sin and in a manner that is personal and kind in comparison?**

Again, Archbishop Dolan makes a profound statement in regard to society's need to confess. He says, "Our culture does not need to be taught how to confess; it needs to discover where forgiveness can be found. Our culture does not need to further expose the stain of its sinfulness: it needs to discover the only One who can wash it away." (Ibid.)

My own reflection shows me how fortunate we all are to have a God who loves us much. The Lord never gives up on us. It is almost as though God delights that there has

been sin. **Sin has given the Lord the opportunity to make intimate contact with humankind.** The Church exclaims at the start of the Easter Vigil Liturgy in the Easter Proclamation, **“O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!”** It is awesome to realize Jesus keeps us in his hand. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is one of the liberating ways (sacraments) He keeps us in his hand in such a magnificent manner.

Yes. It is humbling to have to confess one’s sins. One feels uncomfortable. Yet, it is what a good Christian must do as he or she comes to understand Jesus’ instruction as the whole Church has. By His grace we make up for our offenses to other people and to God. It is what one does compelled by conscience to restore dignity of self. It lifts the burden of guilt off the back. **Reconciliation is a celebration of God’s mercy not His punishment. It is truly liberating.** One walks away from the experience unburdened and uplifted. **God has actually said, “You are forgiven!”**

So, come home! Come home to Jesus in His Sacrament of Reconciliation in His Church. It is a Church filled with sinners all trying to find a way to fullness of fulfillment of life. There is room for one more sinner, YOU.

Join us at Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church.

FORM OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Three Acts of the Penitent:
Contrition, confession and satisfaction.

Enter the Reconciliation Room.

Make the Sign of the Cross and say, “Bless me father for I have sinned. It has been (state the period of time) since my last confession.” This statement of time helps the priest confessor put the whole matter into perspective.

The priest will greet you. Remember, he too is a sinner. He might offer a prayer or words of encouragement even from the Scriptures.

Then state in what way you have sinned against God and God’s people. Remember, sins include what one has done and what one has failed to do. The second, what one has failed to do, is often forgotten about.

Then say, “I am sorry for these sins and all the sins of my past life.”

The priest will then offer some direction or encouragement as needed and assign a penance (discipline).

One accepts the penance and the priest asks the penitent to recite the Act of Contrition. One version is the following: O my God, I am sorry for my sins. In choosing to sin, and failing to do good, I have sinned against You and your Church. I firmly intend, with the help of your Son, to make up for my sins and to live as I should. Amen.

Finally, the priest gives the Absolution and the penitent leaves the room refreshed and strengthened to face another day of living in God's grace.

Some Quotes of Noted People

I found these quotes in *YOUCAT: The Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Ignatius Press, San Francisco. WWW.YOUCAT.ORG. You might find something of inspiration in them.

Peter Sellers (1925-1980) "The closest thing to a father confessor is probably a bartender."

Mother Theresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) "Some saints described themselves as terrible criminals because they saw God, they saw themselves—and they saw the difference."

Saint Gregory Nazianzen (330-390) "Penance is the second Baptism, the baptism of tears."

Saint John Vianney (1786-1859) "After a fall, stand up again right away! Do not leave sin in your heart for even a moment!"

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965, American Poet) "Repentance results from a knowledge of the truth."

Pope Benedict XVI (Feb. 17, 2007) "It is not correct to think we must live like this, so that we are never in need of pardon. We must accept our frailty but keep on going, not giving up but moving forward and becoming converted ever anew through the Sacrament of Reconciliation for a new start, and thus grow and mature in the Lord by our communion with him."

Brother Roger Schutz (1915-2005) "However awkward confession may be, it is the decisive place where one experiences anew the freshness of the Gospel, where one is reborn. There we also learn to blow away our pangs of conscience, just as a child blows a falling autumn leaf. There we find the happiness of God, the dawn of perfect joy."