

RCIA CLASS 17A - THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

I. The Sacrament of Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) is God's gift to His people to assure them of His forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism.

A. During His public ministry Jesus indicated to His Apostles that they would have special authority to forgive sins.

1. During His time of preaching, Jesus gave first Peter, and then all of the Apostles the authority to bind and loose sins. See Matt. 16:19, 18:18.

2. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the Apostles in the Upper Room and said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them. Whose sins you retain are retained." John 20:22-23.

B. Jesus personally spoke to penitents during His public ministry and assured them of their forgiveness. See, e.g., Mark 2:5; Luke 7:36-50, 23:39-43; John 8:11. It was not enough for them to confess non-verbally to God, or simply to sense mentally His forgiveness. His personal presence and words of absolution were crucial.

- Likewise, Jesus wants us to be able to speak to Him our sins, and to receive His forgiveness. The sacrament of Penance gives us this ability.

C. The sins spoken to the priest are spoken to Christ, with the priest simply standing in for Him.

2. Most importantly, the sacrament of Penance guarantees that, if the person going to confession is honest and has true contrition for sins, Jesus Himself does confer forgiveness of sins and restoration of friendship with Him. The sacrament also confers strengthening against future sins. As the Vatican II Council says, "Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon through God's mercy for the offense committed against Him and are, at the same time reconciled with the Church whom they have wounded by their sins and which, by charity, by prayers and by prayer labors for their conversion." Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1965) 11.

2. Because he hears the sins for Christ, and not for Himself, and to avoid compromising the mercy of God, the priest must keep the person's sins absolutely secret, with the severest penalties (excommunication and removal from ministry) for deliberate violations. "Every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. . . This secret, which admits of no exception, is called the 'sacramental seal.'" Catechism 1467.

- A priest likewise may never use anything said in the confessional to the detriment of the penitent or for any governance decisions.

- Even in private direction, in order for a priest to mention to a penitent the things he said in confession, he is supposed to get the penitent's permission.

- A priest may use understanding gained in the confessional for his own spiritual improvement (for some penitents are rather insightful and even inspiring.) Furthermore, if the same things have been confessed so many

times that it cannot possibly be connected to any particular confession, the priest may use insights gained from the general patterns of confession in his preaching, teaching and guidance.

3. A priest tries to use his judgment in giving advice to penitents. The forgiveness conferred by the confession is infallible (if the penitent is really contrite and honest); the advice is generally based upon expertise and experience, and thus, as with the homily at Mass, is usually helpful. Even if it is not, however, the penitent receives the main benefit of confession, the forgiveness of sins as well as strength to do better in the future.

II. From the standpoint of both the mystery of grace and natural reason, the sacrament of Penance is fitting, for it enables one to be reconciled, through verbal and physical means, with God and the Church, but in a fashion that avoids public shame.

A. In addition to the Scriptural call to confession, see, e.g., James 5:16, natural reasons for this sacrament include the need to reconcile with God verbally, the need to reconcile with the Church, and the need for an independent evaluation.

1. Verbal confession and absolution satisfy a natural human need to confess sins to another person and hear the words of God's forgiveness. "The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others." Catechism 1455. As Fr. Stanley Jaki pointed out in his 2001 Commentary *Praying the Psalms*, Psalm 32 and the other penitential psalms described 3000 years ago the psychological and physical effects of guilt and the healing power of confession. Modern psychology has only recently come to understand the same principle, but without a sense of God. "Hence the confessional has been replaced by the couch."

2. Because sins not only offend God and injure individuals, but also harm the Church, receiving words of forgiveness from a representative of the Church is most fitting. "Sin is above all an offense against God. . . . At the same time, it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and reconciliation." Catechism 1440.

3. In addition, verbal confession leads us to assess our relationship with God and receive an objective assessment from a representative of Christ, "Through such an admission, man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God." Catechism 1455

B. On the penitent's part, the sacrament of Reconciliation involves true contrition for sins, an honest confession of sins, and performance of a penance for reparation. "The penitent's acts are repentance, confession or disclosure of sins to the priest and the intention to make reparation and do works of repentance." Catechism 1491.

1. Contrition is: (1) a true sorrow for sin, based upon reasons of faith; and (2) an intention to avoid this sin in the future.

- The sorrow must be real and not based only upon earthly concerns, although it is often mixed with earthly concerns, such as the damage to one's standing in the community.

- It is best if the sorrow is more perfect and based more purely upon the love of God, but even very imperfect sorrow (e.g., sorrow based upon the fear of hell, the desire to have a good conscience, or very much mixed with fear of the worldly effects of sin) is sufficient.

- The intention to avoid sin may exist even if one knows that, through weakness, one will find it difficult to avoid the same sin again. But an active effort to avoid the sin is needed.

2. An honest confession involves a statement of any unconfessed grave sins, that is, sins severe enough to break one's relationship with God. Confession of venial sins is also very helpful and highly recommended, for it gives strength to live positively a life of the Spirit and to avoid getting close to mortal sins. As the instructions to the sacrament say, "To obtain the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, according the plan or our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each every grave sin that they remember after an examination of conscience. . . . Moreover, the frequent and careful celebration of the sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism."

a. The confession of unconfessed mortal sins that one is aware of is essential. "One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience. The confession of venial faults, without being necessary in itself, is nevertheless strongly recommended." Catechism 1493.

- To commit a mortal sin is "to choose deliberately - that is both knowing it and willing it - something gravely contrary to the divine law and to the ultimate end of man." Catechism 1874.

-Once a sin (mortal or venial) is confessed, one does not need to keep focusing on it, unless a recalling it is helpful for a specific purpose, such as avoiding the sin in the future or being compassionate toward others. Thus, one does not keep confession sins that have already been forgiven.

b. As cuts and bruises weaken a body, and make one more likely to contract more severe diseases, so venial sins weaken one's soul and make mortal sin more likely. Thus, in addition to the advantages of living a better life and avoiding Purgatory and the earthly punishments of sin, avoiding venial sins and confessing them is still very important.

3. Penance is an attempt to begin reversing the evil done by sins; it also involves actions that strengthen the will against sin in the future. In the confession, the priest will give an act or acts of penance for these purposes, which generally involves prayers or practical acts of charity. The penance does not fully make up for the sins, but helps one begin to restore the love and order that sin has disrupted

B. The sacrament also requires a priest to listen to the confession and give verbal absolution. “Since Christ entrusted to his Apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops, who are their successors, and priests, the bishops’ collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. . . . The confessor is not the master of God’s forgiveness, but its servant.” Catechism 1461.

III. The process for going to confession is fairly simple, and tries to emphasize the presence of Christ.

A. Confessions are ideally heard in a confessional, a room or area specifically set aside for the purpose of this sacrament.

- Confessionals are of many shapes and sizes, but they should all give an opportunity to go to confession anonymously (“behind the screen”.) They may also give one the ability to go to confession “face to face” that is with the priest and penitent able to see each other, as Saint James Church does.

- Usually, they have a kneeler, especially on the screen side, emphasizes humility and asking God for forgiveness and strength.

B. Before going to confession, one should make an examination of conscience, a reflection upon one’s life since the last confession and careful thought about what failings there have been.

- There are a number of written examinations that list a series of questions, frequently organized around the Ten Commandment, to ask oneself in preparation for confession, or simply on a regular basis. They can be helpful in organizing one’s thoughts about what to confess, but no list of questions can cover all possible sins.

- It can also be helpful to review the virtues, the Beatitudes, or the like to think about how one has been carrying out one’s call to holiness.

C. The penitent begins confession with the sign of the cross. He then says, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned” and says how long it has been since his last confession. (If it is one’s first confession, one says that.)

- It can also often be helpful to say what one’s general situation in life is (e.g., a middle aged married man with children, a widow, a businessman, a student), for that information can give the confession a context.

- At the beginning, or at this point, the priest may read a passage of Scripture, give a short greeting, or say a prayer.

D. The penitent then states the sins to be confessed.

- All mortal sins that one remembers and that have not been confessed must be confessed. With regard to other sins, it is helpful to focus on the most common or most important sins or even strong temptations. Although temptations are not in themselves sins, inviting them would be; and, in any case, recognizing and opposing them is important in the spiritual life.

- One should state enough circumstances for the priest to understand what the sin was (e.g., whether a lie was told out of greed, fear, or a desire to tell a good story),

but not go on with side details (e.g., which day it was on or who else was doing the same thing.) If one needs more lengthy discussion of a complex matter, it is a good idea to make an appointment to see the priest in his office.

E. The priest will usually give some advice about how to strive for holiness and avoid the sins confessed or similar sins. This advice is extra; and so if a priest does not give advice, or it is not particularly helpful, do not worry. The main reason for confession is forgiveness of sins, and the most important secondary effect is strength for the future.

F. The priest will then give a penance to perform, which in this country usually involves praying about something or for someone.

- The penance does not itself make up for sins or earn forgiveness. However, it helps the process of reversing the effects of sin, and it shows a desire to repair the damage to oneself and others. The penitent must be willing to perform the penance if it is feasible; however, the forgiveness of sins is immediate and does not await the performance of the penance. In the current world, the penance usually involves prayers to offer and perhaps reflecting on a particular issue (e.g., thanksgiving to God or kindness that one can show to others.)

G. The priest then usually asks the penitent to pray an “act of contrition,” i.e. a prayer that expresses sorrow for sins and a resolution to improve, with God’s help, in the future. There are traditional acts of contrition, but one can also compose one’s own prayer that expresses contrition.

H. The priest will then pray the prayer of absolution (i.e. release from sin.) In the Latin rite, the crucial words of the prayer are “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” There is also a lead-up to that conclusion, but priest *must* say those words for the confession to be valid.

I. The priest will then say a few words in closing.

- The two most common of the closing phrases are: “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good”; and “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.” The first of these phrases quotes the 106th and 107th psalms, while the second reflects the fact that the forgiveness of Jesus is freedom from sin and gives us peace with God. See Luke 7:50, 8:48; John 8:32-38; Romans 6:15-23; see also Luke 28:28-29

- The fitting response to the first of these phrases is “His mercy endures forever” from the beginning of Psalms 106, 107, and 118, and the repeated refrain of Psalm 136. As with the Mass, the response to “Go in peace” is “thanks be to God” expressing a gratitude at receiving God’s forgiveness and assistance. See 2 Cor. 2:14-15, 9:11-15.