

## X. A. HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF PENANCE

The need for repentance and the practice of doing penance is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Christian Scriptures. Prophets challenged the Hebrew people to turn away from their sinful lives and do acts of penance. John the Baptizer preached an urgent message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (*Mt* 3:2) Basic themes in the Gospel focus on God’s love for repentant sinners. The Story of the Prodigal Son is a prime example. (cf *Lk* 15:11-32) Reconciliation is central to the life and mission of Jesus.

God’s mercy is evident in many stories told by Jesus.

"Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity--greedy, dishonest, adulterous--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (*Lk* 18:10-14)

Peter, also with urgency, challenged people to reform their lives. “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away, and that the Lord may grant you times of refreshment and send you the Messiah already appointed for you, Jesus .... ” (*Acts* 3:19-20) Paul made the need for repentance central to his ministry.

The Christians of the first decades after the resurrection of Jesus took seriously his message: “For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.” (*Lk* 17:21) They enjoyed a relative peace as they shared a common goal and posed little threat to the Roman government or Jewish religion. Small and minor disputes and transgressions were dealt with in the breaking of the bread.

The early Christians believed that because a person had died and risen with Christ in Baptism, there could be no stepping back. But some did commit grave sin. Such a case is found in Paul’s *1Corinthians* 5:1-13. Paul told the community to expel the sinner from the community until the person showed signs of repentance, that is, signs of regret and feelings of sorrow.

It was persecution that seems to have led to the development of a formal reconciliation ritual. By the second century, apostasy was seen as the great sin and it was the threat of persecution that led many Christians to renounce Christ. After the persecution was over, some of these Christians wanted to be re-admitted into the community. Some leaders stated that there could be no re-admittance. Baptism, the rite for bringing people into the community, could not be repeated. The idea of forgiveness only once after Baptism became the norm.

Public sinners who committed apostasy, murder, adultery or any sin that caused scandal and serious injury to the Church, would come to the bishop and declare their sin. Between 300 and 500 A.D. the person who had sinned gravely was enrolled in “the order of penitents.” This separated a person from the rest of the community. Those in the order of penitents were not permitted to receive the Eucharist, and in some cases were given a guardian or sponsor to counsel them and testify to the community that they had truly reformed. After a time of doing penance that often lasted years, the repentant sinner was reconciled with the community through a ritual that included the imposition of hands by the bishop and sometimes by the community.

Those seeking re-admittance to the community sometimes had to wear garments of goat hair to symbolize their estrangement from the flock of sheep led by Christ, the Good Shepherd, or they had to carry chains that symbolized their captivity to sin. Although these penances were harsh, they also served to mark the penitents for special concern and prayer.



But the severe penances and the order of penitents lasted only as long as the persecutions did. When the age of the martyrs ended in 313 with the Edict of Constantine, people no longer became Christians at great personal risk and ties with the believing community were not as strong as before. From the late 4<sup>th</sup> century on, those who joined the Church were not necessarily motivated by the high ideals manifested in the first three centuries. As a result, those who sinned were often not willing to enroll in the order of penitents in order to rejoin the community. Some waited until they were about to die to ask for forgiveness and Eucharist. The Canonical Penance system or the order of penitents was becoming less effective. Out of the decline arose a new form of penitence.

European monks went to Ireland as missionaries and built monasteries that became centers of Christian life. The monks from the monasteries would go into the countryside to baptize, preach the forgiveness of sins and celebrate the Eucharist. The converted clan folk of Ireland did not wholeheartedly accept the moral norms of Christianity. Some sinned and then hoped to receive the Church’s ritual of forgiveness on their deathbeds. The monks met this situation by adapting their monastic practice of discernment, asking forgiveness and praising the merciful God, to the needs of the people. Monks would hear a person’s confession; give a penance to be performed for a limited period of time, then pray for the penitent’s forgiveness. This was a new development, for now there was no longer an official excommunication followed by a reconciliation with the community from which the sinner had been cut off.

The new form of penance introduced by the monks in Ireland had three key features: 1) the form of penance covered all sins; 2) it could be repeated as many times as needed by the penitent; 3) a private act of satisfaction was substituted for the communal act of public reconciliation.

The new form of penance was brought back to the continent where ordinary peasants could now find deliverance from the divine punishment due to sins committed in adulthood. Some bishops thought this new practice to be too easy on penitents but about the year 650 other bishops were approving this form of confession of sins to priests as a healthy “medicine for the soul.” During the 700s, bishops and local church councils began to require confession of grave sins to a priest.

In the 800s another innovation was introduced; penitents were admitted to the Eucharist after they had completed only a portion of their required penance. For example, in an emergency situation, when the penitent was dying, the priest prayed for God’s forgiveness and reconciled the person to the Church immediately after hearing the penitent’s confession.

By the 900s, this emergency reconciliation became standard practice. One who confessed sins would be reconciled to the Church but the person would still have to do penance. But the question was raised: If a person died before completing the prescribed penance, would that person be admitted to heaven? To resolve this issue, another change was introduced. Up until this time the priest-confessors prayed that God would forgive the person’s sins. Now priests began to pray for the forgiveness of the person’s sins and for absolution to be granted should the person die before completing the penance.

By the 1200s, the words pronounced by the priest, after hearing a person’s confession of sins, had changed from the format of a prayer asking for God’s forgiveness to a declaration of absolution. Thus the satisfaction for sins (doing the required penance) no longer had a severe and public character and the theology stressed more and more the efficacy of priestly absolution. The elements which stressed personal conversion and reconciliation with the community became less prominent as did the role of the bishop in reconciling the sinner with the community. The role of the bishop in reconciling the sinner with the community remained only in case of “reserved sin,” that is, sins that only the bishop could forgive, e.g., apostasy.

A new understanding of the Scriptures that dealt with the forgiveness of sins continued the development. It came to be understood that Christ had intended priests to forgive sins as indicated in: “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (*Jn 20:22-23*) Those words were spoken by Jesus to the disciples when he appeared to them after his Resurrection. Up until the sixteenth century, lay persons sometimes heard confessions and assured the persons that God would forgive their sins. This was not seen as valueless but as a non-sacramental act. However, when it was determined that priests had divine authority to absolve, confessing one’s sins to a lay person was no longer seen as beneficial.

Thomas Aquinas taught that the sacrament of Penance was made up of both the actions of the penitent and the actions of the priest. Thomas also taught the communal dimension of sin and repentance. He understood that the desire of the sinner to express sorrow to God for one’s sins also implied the desire to be re-united with God’s people. Thus reconciliation with the Church was the sign that expressed and effected the sinner’s reconciliation with God.

Other medieval concerns led to a loss of clarity regarding sin and forgiveness. In the theological discussions of the times, sin was more and more perceived in legal terms. Thus, sin was primarily seen as the breaking of God's commandments rather than a person's interior turning away from God. God's justice seemed to require punishment for every sin. The assignment of a particular penance in the sacrament of forgiveness was seen as a way of helping to shorten the sinner's time in purgatory, where the "temporal punishment due to sin" was expiated after death.

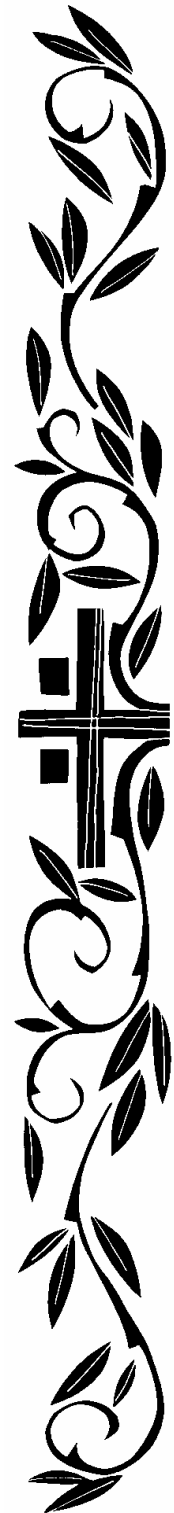
In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) declared that Jesus had instituted "the integral confession of sins, and that divine law makes the sacrament of Penance necessary for all those who sin after their baptism." An integral confession was one in which all mortal sins were confessed in terms of number and kind, as well as circumstances which might modify the character of the sin.

In seminary formation after the Council of Trent, priests received more thorough training. This led them to function as judges in the administration of the sacrament of Penance, making judgments about the nature of sins confessed and then deciding on the penances to be performed by the penitents. One reason the Council of Trent retained this legalistic view of sin and forgiveness is the fact that the bishops at Trent had assumed that repeated private confession had been practiced this way since the time of the apostles.

In the next three centuries there was little development. In 1910 Pope Pius X decreed that children of seven years (the age of discretion) could receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. This step was taken for many reasons, including the desire to have Catholics receive the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist more frequently than once a year.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for revision of both the rite and formula of each of the sacraments. The bishops benefited from many developments in moral theology, including Fr. Bernard Haring's three-volume *The Law of Christ* as an ethical-religious ideal. Fr. Haring called for a biblically based, liturgically celebrated, pastorally sensitive, dynamic morality stressing conversion and responsibility. A liturgical commission was given the task of revising the Rite of Penance to reflect past traditions and a biblical yet contemporary understanding of sin and forgiveness. The new *Rite of Penance*, promulgated in 1976, expounds on the communal nature of reconciliation but keeps the individual confession and absolution as the first of the rites. It encourages use of Scripture along with prescribed prayers and allows for flexibility in each of its forms.

The Sacrament of Penance, as it is officially called, places renewed emphasis on reconciliation and the communal nature of sin. Reconciliation indicates the ongoing process of conversion from a state of alienation from God and Church to a stance of unity and love



with both God and the community through the sacrament of Penance. The sacrament is a celebration of God's grace-filled mercy.

The *Rite of Penance* has three approved forms. The "Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents" is the traditional private confession which preserves the Tridentine experience with some changes. Scripture reading is encouraged for example. It involves an individual penitent celebrating the sacrament but not in a community setting or celebration. The "Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession" brings together the traditions of public prayer and private confession into one community ritual of scripture, reflection, prayer, homily, individual confession and absolution. It clearly offers an opportunity for understanding sin as affecting each other. It is the rite used by many parishes when celebrating first reconciliation. The third rite, "Rite of Absolution and Reconciliation for Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution," is to be used only in emergency situations. Persons make a general statement of their sinfulness and receive absolution without verbally confessing individual sins.

*The Code of Canon Law 989* states: "After having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least one a year." Canon 988§2 reads: "it is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins." The commentary on these Canons reminds us that forgiveness of venial sins may be sought and obtained in many ways other than in the Sacrament of Penance.

The *CCC* makes several references to these means:

Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ increases the communicant's union with the Lord, forgives his venial sins, and preserves him from grave sins.... (#1416)

...efforts at reconciliation with one's neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbor, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity. (#1434)

The Sacrament of Penance developed slowly in the early centuries of the Church. It continues to evolve to meet the need of persons reconciling with God and the community. Church law requires that young Catholics receive this sacrament prior to First Communion. In the case of serious sin all are obliged to confess before reception of Communion. It is always recommended the venial sins be confessed. (Canon 988)