

The Sacrament of Penance

There may be a better choice of names for this Sacrament. Some call it the Sacrament of Confession. Still others call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Although Penance is the classical term, I prefer to call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is the intent of the Sacrament as the penitent person confesses known sins committed to a confessor. Through it man is reconciled with God and the Church.

In previous times it appeared the early church had a time when penitent people stood in the midst of the congregation and confessed their sins. The congregation declared forgiveness to the penitent. As the congregation grew with new people the trust expressed through open confession was often betrayed, and what was confessed to the Body of Christ got talked about outside the Church. The Christians believed that a sin not only separated them from God, but it also injured the Body of Christ and alienated them from other believers. Because of the abuses that occurred, it was determined that one person would represent the congregation and to that person the confession would be made privately. The Bishop was that person, and in his absence the Priest whose ordination included the authority to pronounce forgiveness in the Name of Christ and the Church. The Confessor was duty bound never to repeat the sin confessed under the penalty of extreme punishment from God. Even at a later time when the Priest and the penitent might meet, the Priest could not bring up the subject of the confession. God puts our sins behind His back, never to recall them; the Priest must do likewise. Violation of the rule of confidentiality could result in excommunication. He represents not only the congregation, but he represents God in pronouncing absolution or forgiveness.

Saint Paul said, “confess your sins one to another”. The rule of our Church is everyone may confess their sins; none must, and some should! Some Priests announce special hours when they are available to hear confessions. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days when it is very appropriate to make a private confession. When personal confession in prayer to God does not satisfy and guilt remains, it is definitely time to go to a Priest. If specific times are not posted an appointment with the Priest is appropriate.

In the liturgy there is usually a time for a General Confession. In some liturgies this comes early in the service. Older liturgies placed the General Confession almost immediately before the consecration of the bread and wine and the communion of the people. I prefer this latter position followed by the “passing of the Peace”. It seems appropriate that when we have confessed to God our sins and asked forgiveness, receiving the absolution from the Priest, we should then reach out to fellow worshipers in the spirit of reconciliation. Jesus said if we are prepared to make our offering and then recall separation from another, leave the offering, go be reconciled and then make the offering. In like manner through the General Confession we are reconciled with God and in “the passing of the Peace” reconciled with our neighbor worshipers who constitute the Church.

What happens in confession? The penitent reviews the things he should confess and in whatever manner prescribed by the local church speaks those sins in a prayerful

spirit to the Priest. He definitely does not need chastisement from the Priest. He has sufficiently chastised himself by admitting to another person that he has failed to live according to the expectations of God. He does not blame his sin on others, but admits it is his own fault. Even if he has sinned due to the temptation of another person, the sinner is responsible for his own yielding to the temptation, and does not involve the tempter in the confession.

Twice in the Gospels we find the pattern for a true confession. The publican prayed, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner". One of the thieves crucified with Jesus said in his dying breath, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom". Each accepted personal blame for their sins even as we must accept personal blame for the things we have done that alienates us from God and one another.

Following is a form that may be used in Private Confession. It may be printed and duplicated as needed.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation Commonly Called The Sacrament of Penance or Confession

Gathered at an appropriate place where there will be no disturbance and where privacy can be maintained,

The Priest and Penitent say the following together

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your loving kindness.

In Your great compassion blot out my offences.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness,

And cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions only too well,

And my sin is ever before me.

Holy God, Holy and Mighty. Holy Immortal One,

Have mercy upon us.

Penitent: Bless me Father, for I have sinned.

Priest: † May God in His love enlighten your heart, that you may remember in truth all your sins and His unfailing mercy. AMEN.

Hear the Word of God to all who true turn to Him:

This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the perfect offering for our sins, and not to ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.

Now in the presence of Christ, and of me, His minister, confess your sins with a humble and obedient heart to Almighty God, our Creator and our Redeemer.

The Penitent says

Holy God, heavenly Father, You formed me from the dust in Your image and likeness, and redeemed me from sin and death by the cross of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Through the water of baptism You clothed me with the shining garment of His righteousness, and established me among Your children in Your Kingdom. But I have squandered the inheritance of Your saints, and have wandered far in the land that is waste.

Especially, I confess to You and to the Church

Here the penitent names the particular sins

Therefore, O Lord, from these and all other sins I cannot now remember, I turn to You in sorrow and repentance. Receive me again into the arms of Your mercy, and restore me to the blessed company of Your faithful people; through Him in whom You have redeemed the world, Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The priest may then offer words of comfort and counsel, and assign penance if any is to be given. The penitent must accept the penance assigned to make the confession valid. Any discussion of what has been confessed may now take place and later never be recalled.

Priest Will you turn again to Christ as your Lord?

Penitent I will.

Priest Do you then forgive those who have sinned against you?

Penitent I forgive them.

Priest May Almighty God in mercy receive your confession of sorrow and of faith, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Priest then lays a hand upon the penitent's head or extends a hand over the penitent, saying

Our Lord Jesus, who has left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive you all your offenses, and by His authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (*The priest will make the sign of the cross over the penitent.*)

Now there is rejoicing in heaven, for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins.

Penitent Thanks be to God.

If the priest has assigned any penance to be done and can be done before leaving the church, the penitent may go to the altar or some quiet place in the church to carry out the assigned penance.

Where may this service take place?

Some churches are equipped with a prayer room. It is appropriate for the Priest to sit with the penitent in the prayer room. Some churches may have a formal confessional booth. Some Priests will sit inside the Sanctuary (the altar area), facing the altar, while the penitent will kneel at the altar rail immediately behind and to the side of the Priest. The location should be an area where there is both privacy and security, and the penitent will be comfortable in his speaking.

The confidentiality of the Confession is so sacred the Confessor must not reveal what has been confessed even in a court of law. Only the penitent can reveal what has been confessed. If the confession involves a criminal act, the penance may be the requirement to turn oneself into the authorities. That would be at the discretion of the Confessor, but he himself cannot turn the person in. If the penance is not accepted the confidentiality of the confession is still valid even though the confession itself is invalid.

Thanks be to God that He loves us, forgives us, and gives us 70 times 7 chances as His children. He expects us to do likewise. “Forgive us of our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us”.