

A Pastoral Letter to

**The Reverend Clergy, Devoted Religious
and Faithful Laity of the Diocese of Rockford
on Penance**

I. INTRODUCTION

Praised be Jesus Christ, who in the power of his resurrection, filled the Apostles with his Spirit and gave them authority to forgive sins.

"Peace be with you.

**As the Father has sent me,
even so I send you."**

**When he had said this he breathed on them and said,
"Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive,
they are forgiven them. Whose sins you shall retain,
they are retained." (John 20:21-23)**

Since Jesus himself linked the Holy Spirit to the Church's ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is very appropriate for us to meditate on this great sacrament at this time. For we are in the "year of the Holy Spirit" in our preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. With the Holy Father, we should view the Jubilee in its Old Testament tradition as a year of liberation and the canceling of oppressive debts. He writes, "For the Church, the Jubilee is precisely this 'Year of the Lord's favor', a year of the remission of sins and of the punishments due to them, a year of reconciliation between disputing parties, a year of manifold conversions and of sacramental and extra sacramental penance."¹

It is in response to the Holy Father's exhortation that I present this Pastoral Letter on the Sacrament of Penance. For I share the Pope's ardent desire that we may all prepare for the Jubilee by embarking on "a journey to the Father," a "journey of authentic

conversion---of liberation from sin---a renewed appreciation and more intense celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in its most profound meaning.²

II. THE NATURE OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

The rich meaning of this sacrament is accessible to all, now that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has presented it so beautifully. I urge everyone who is able, to give thoughtful study to paragraphs 1422 to 1470, where the biblical roots of our Catholic faith regarding this sacrament are set forth.

It will be helpful here to review the concise description of the sacrament given in Canon 959:

"In the Sacrament of Penance the faithful, confessing their sins to a legitimate minister, being sorry for them and at the same time proposing to reform, obtain from God forgiveness of sins committed after baptism through the absolution imparted by the same minister; and they likewise are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning."

A. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Non-Catholics prefer to view repentance as a private matter, affecting only an individual's relationship to God. But a close study of God's word shows that it is in the Church that Christ acts to restore sinners to union with God.

St. Paul insists that it is indeed through Christ that reconciliation is possible, but he adds that Christ gave him the "ministry of reconciliation" and entrusted him with the "message of reconciliation" so that God makes his "appeal" through Paul: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Cor. 5:18-20)

The Church preaches repentance, promotes a habit of prayer, gives witness to the redeeming power of Christ, and approaches individual sinners in an effort to restore them to grace and unity with the Church, all in its ministry of reconciliation.

It is right for individuals to appeal for God's mercy as soon as possible after committing some offense. But we must recognize the importance of Jesus' words giving the Church the power to forgive sins. He would not have bestowed this awesome power had there been some alternative way, pleasing to God, to receive his mercy after serious sin. We do penance in other than sacramental ways, of course, and God never fails to hear our prayer for forgiveness. But serious, that is, mortal sins must be submitted to the tribunal of the Church, in the Sacrament of Penance.

B. A MOST UNUSUAL TRIBUNAL

Presenting ourselves to the priest is far different from being brought before a civil judge. Indeed, we declare ourselves guilty at the start! The Supreme Judge has already endured the penalty of our sins on the Cross. This Divine Judge loves us dearly as his own children, and is eager to pardon us. In this unique tribunal, we need never fear the glance of an angry Master. When we peer into the eyes of Jesus the Judge, what we see are his tears. As he once wept over the hard-hearted people of Jerusalem, so Christ has pity on all who are sorry for having resisted or rejected God's love. In his mercy, Jesus gives the sinner two gifts: the grace of sorrow for sin, and a sacrament for the return to his love and service.

When we go to confession, we ought to be very conscious that it is Jesus whom we encounter in this sacrament, just as he is present and acts in all the sacraments. But what of his representative, the priest who hears our confession?

C. THE PRIEST'S ROLE

Since the Lord gave the Church power to forgive or to retain sins, the priest must make

a judgment whether to give or to refuse absolution. It is rarely necessary to refuse absolution, but it can happen, for example when a penitent clearly lacks any intention of giving up a mortal sin.

What is the priest thinking about in the confessional? He might not be feeling well, or he may be exhausted, or too hot or too cold. But any priest can tell you that hearing confessions brings one a sense of the presence of God. The priest finds God at work in the souls of penitents, giving them humility, sorrow for sins, a desire to serve God more worthily, a longing to receive Holy Communion once again, a resolve to live in harmony with others. To be honest, a priest who witnesses the sacred moment of a person's metanoia-conversion is truly humbled and even moved to approach the sacrament himself, conscious that his own sins are more abominable than those he hears confessed by his good people.

Here I draw attention to the benefit many Catholics derive from taking part in communal penance services which often take place in many parishes during Advent and Lent. These religious exercises, which must always include private, individual confession and absolution, can help the sinner to recognize and repudiate one's offenses, and respond to the loving mercy of God in company with other members of the Church. It can be a strong witness to us when we see others who also come to the Church seeking forgiveness, and in a more public way admit by their very presence that they, as we ourselves, are sinners.

III. RECONCILIATION: CELEBRATING FORGIVENESS

A. JOY IN THE HEART OF GOD

Jesus made an astounding revelation of God's longing to be reconciled with sinners. Only he could know the heart of God, for he said, "no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mat. 11:27).

Jesus taught us that the conversion of heart, called metanoia in Greek, does not begin with us. Reconciliation with God is not one of the human "works" which depend on our

initiative. No! All repentance, all sorrow for sin, all desire to be reunited with God is a gift of God, whose infinite love and mercy is the source of all transformation of our hearts. Penance is a gift of God.

Our Holy Father writes beautifully of this teaching of Jesus, whose parable of the Prodigal Son reveals the very heart of God (See Luke 15:11-32). Our Lord made it clear that love is greater than sin.³ Here Jesus leads us to discover the Father's deep affection for the sinful child who has abandoned him. It is the memory of the Father's love which leads the sinner to leave his miserable state and come back home. The Father is so elated by the son's return that he calls for all to celebrate with him. There is great joy in heaven, that is in God himself, over one sinner who repents in response to God's gift of sorrow (Luke 15:7).

B. FORGIVE US...AS WE FORGIVE

The Father's inexpressible desire that sinners be reconciled to him derives from his infinite love for us. But as Jesus' parable continues, what comes to light is the profound desire in God's heart that we sinners be reconciled with each other. In the parable we see the anguish in the father's heart when he hears the elder son's angry resentment. Our Father is not pleased when his children are "jealous and haughty, full of bitterness and anger", unconverted, not reconciled with a brother, selfish, hard of heart, or even enraged that God would forgive a sinner who had distanced himself from him.⁴

Jesus taught us to pray every day for forgiveness, but only "as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Mat 6:12). We receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation worthily only when our sorrow for sin includes an openness to our neighbor, a willingness to forgive. Before we come to the altar with the gift of our worship, Jesus insists, we must first be reconciled with anyone who "has anything against" us (Mat. 5:23).

C. THE GRACE TO FORGIVE OUR NEIGHBOR

When we forgive someone who has hurt us, we are relieved of the gnawing resentment

we feel upon being unfairly treated. Until we forgive, the rage in our heart goes on aggravating us, making us more and more bitter, and deepening our hostility and isolation. To forgive others does not mean that we have to ignore the fact that they are causing us injury, or are betraying us in some way. That would be foolish. Even God requires that we repent before we can be received back into the embrace of God's love and God's people.

So forgiveness means a willingness to accept another back into our friendship whenever he or she wishes to use their freedom to be reunited with us. We must understand that some people cause us such painful suffering that it will take a long time for us to forgive them. Until our forgiveness is complete, the most we can muster sometimes is the sentiment found in the popular expression: "Have a good day--somewhere else." After all, forgiveness is not a one-time event: Jesus implied this when he required that we forgive "seventy times seven times", that is, over and over (Mat. 18:22).

Every day we hear God's call to speak again with an alienated person, to put aside painful memories, to be sympathetic, to end bitter hatreds or feuds, to seek to understand a hostile person. The Holy Father refers to one's refusal to forgive as a "suicidal act" which damages the "fabric of one's relationship with others."⁵ As a preacher once said, the one who benefits most from forgiveness is the one who forgives.⁶

IV. CONFESSION

A. HOW PLEASANT SHOULD CONFESSION BE?

Catechists in our day do their best to prepare little children for their first confession. They try to take the "sting" out of this new experience, arrange a little party afterwards, and give the children a memento in cheerful colors. In this, they show good pedagogy.

But it is not long before it dawns on us: confession is not meant to be an enjoyable experience. We begin to realize how awful sin is, that it could be expiated only by the suffering and death of Jesus. Worse still, it is very difficult for us to admit, even to ourselves, that we

have failed God or offended another person. Most difficult of all, many people prize their privacy, and find it most repugnant to reveal their sins to an outsider, a priest. To confess one's sins requires that virtue of the strong: humility.

But going to confession, hard as it may be, becomes possible and even satisfying when the Lord helps us by his grace. He gives us the self-knowledge we need, along with humility, sorrow for our sins, and confidence in the redemption won by Christ and extended to us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. So there is joy to be found in the confessional. The priest experiences it, as we mentioned above. The humble penitent tastes the peace of God, who resists the proud but exalts the lowly, as the Blessed Virgin Mary exclaimed to St. Elizabeth (Luke 1:51-52).

B. HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE CELEBRATE THIS SACRAMENT?

Catholics are obliged by the law of the Church to confess their serious sins at least once a year, after reaching the age of discretion (Canon 989). The Sacrament of Penance must precede one's First Holy Communion (Canon 914). One who is conscious of mortal sin may not receive the Holy Eucharist without prior sacramental confession when this is possible (Canon 916).

But we should not wait twelve months after committing a mortal sin before we respond to God's call to repentance. Far better to make an act of contrition as soon as we can, and go to confession without delay. We certainly do not want to live in a state of separation from God, and even more, to die in that state. We should fear to hear the words of the Divine Judge: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mat . 25 : 41) . Neither should we want to have to abstain from Holy Communion for any length of time.

There is another reason for frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance. It is because every sin diminishes our ability to fulfill our responsibilities before God. Any sin I might

commit will make me a less effective bishop. The sins of priests detract from their ministry. The sins of parents scandalize their children and wound their marriage. And so on with all the duties of one's state in life. The sooner we repent, the sooner we recover the state of grace, the more will God's grace strengthen us to resist temptation and to give witness to Christ by the goodness of our lives.

And so the Church asks bishops, priests and deacons to approach the sacrament "frequently" (Canon 276.5). I heartily encourage all the faithful to do likewise, especially as we draw near to the Great Jubilee of mercy and renewal.

V. A CONCLUDING PRAYER

As your bishop I beg the Holy Spirit, the consoler and our advocate, to give us true contrition for having offended the God who loves us so much. I pray that more and more Catholic people will approach the sacrament of reconciliation, of penance, of conversion, of forgiveness and peace with God. I praise the Lord Jesus Christ for shedding his precious Blood for the forgiveness of sins. I thank him for giving his Church the mission of continuing his work: to bring back the lost sheep, to welcome home the prodigal son or daughter, to restore us to loving union with our heavenly Father. Blessed Mary, Mother of God, pray that we may obtain this grace.

With St. Paul I offer this prayer of praise: Blessed be God, who has "delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13).

¹ Tertio Millenio Adveniente, by Pope John Paul II, #14

² Ibid., #50

³ Reconciliation and Penance, an Apostolic Exhortation after the Synod of Bishops on penance and reconciliation, 2 December, 1984 (in Origins, vol. XIV: n. 27, p. 439)

⁴ Ibid., #6

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bid., #15

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From a sermon by Lewis Smedes at the Chicago Sunday Evening Club (1998, program #4101)

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION

(Taken from the Catechism of the Catholic Church - with permission)

1422 "Those who approach the Sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion."⁴

I. WHAT IS THIS SACRAMENT CALLED?

1423 It is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father⁵ from whom one has strayed by sin.

It is called the *Sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.

1424 It is called the *sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a "confession" - acknowledgment and praise - of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man.

It is called the *sacrament of forgiveness*, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace."⁶

1 2 Cor 4:7; Col 3:3.

2 2 Cor 5:1.

3 Cf. Mk 2:1-12.

4 LG 11 §2.

5 Cf. Mk 1:15; Lk 15:18.

6 OP 46: formula of absolution.

It is called the *sacrament of Reconciliation*, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God."⁷ He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go; first be reconciled to your brother."⁸

II. WHY A SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION AFTER BAPTISM?

1425 "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."⁹ One must appreciate the magnitude of the gift God has given us in the sacraments of Christian initiation in order to grasp the degree to which sin is excluded for him who has "put on Christ."¹⁰ But the apostle John also says: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."¹¹ And the Lord himself taught us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses,"¹² linking our forgiveness of one another's offenses to the forgiveness of our sins that God will grant us.

1426 *Conversion* to Christ, the new birth of Baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ received as food have made us "holy and without blemish," just as the Church herself, the Bride of Christ, is "holy and without blemish."¹³ Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls *concupiscence*, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life.¹⁴ This is the struggle of *conversion* directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.¹⁵

7 2 Cor 5:20.

8 Mt 5:24.

9 1 Cor 6:11.

10 Gal 3:27.

11 1 Jn 1:8

12 Cf. Lk 11:4; Mt 6:12.

13 Eph 1:4; 5:27.

14 Cf. Council of Trent (1546): DS 1515

III. THE CONVERSION OF THE BAPTIZED

1427 Jesus calls to conversion. This call is an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."¹⁶ In the Church's preaching this call is addressed first to those who do not yet know Christ and his Gospel. Also, Baptism is the principal place for the first and fundamental conversion. It is by faith in the Gospel and by Baptism¹⁷ that one renounces evil and gains salvation, that is, the forgiveness of all sins and the gift of new life.

1428 Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This *second conversion* is an uninterrupted task for the whole church who, "clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification, [and] follows constantly the path of penance and renewal."¹⁸ This endeavor of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a "contrite heart," drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first.¹⁹

1429 St. Peter's conversion after he had denied his master three times bears witness to this. Jesus' look of infinite mercy drew tears of repentance from Peter and, after the Lord's resurrection, a threefold affirmation of love for him.²⁰ The second conversion also has a *communitarian* dimension, as is clear in the Lord's call to a whole Church: "Repent!"²¹

St. Ambrose says of the two conversions that, in the Church, "there are water and tears: the water of Baptism and the tears of repentance."²²

15 Cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1545; LG 40.

16 Mk 1:15.

17 Cf. Acts 2:38.

18 LG 8 §3.

19 Ps 51:17; cf. Jn 6:44; 12:32; Jn 4:10.

20 Cf. Lk 22:61; Jn 21:15-17.

21 Rev 2:5, 16.

22 St. Ambrose, ep. 41, 12: PL 16, 1116.

IV. INTERIOR PENANCE

1430 Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.²³

1431 Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).²⁴

1432 The human heart is heavy and hardened. God must give man a new heart.²⁵ Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him: "Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored!"²⁶ God gives us the strength to begin anew. It is in discovering the greatness of God's love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from him. The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced:²⁷

Let us fix our eyes on Christ's blood and understand how precious it is to his Father, for, poured out for our salvation it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance.²⁸

23 Cf. Joel 2:12-13; Isa 1:16-17; Mt 6:1-6; 16-18.

24 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1676-1678; 1705; cf. Roman Catechism, II, V, 4.

25 Cf. Ezek 36:26-27.

26 Lam 5:21.

27 Cf. Jn 19:37; Zech 12:10.

28 St. Clement of Rome, Ad Cor. 7, 4: PG 1, 224.

1433 Since Easter, the Holy Spirit has proved "the world wrong about sin,"²⁹ i.e., proved that the world has not believed in him whom the Father has sent. But this same Spirit who brings sin to light is also the Consoler who gives the human heart grace for repentance and conversion.³⁰

V. THE MANY FORMS OF PENANCE IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

1434 The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, *fasting*, *prayer*, and *almsgiving*³¹ which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. Alongside the radical purification brought about by Baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: 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 "which covers a multitude of sins."³²

1435 Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right,³³ by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance³⁴

1436 *Eucharist and Penance.* Daily conversion and penance find their source and nourishment in the Eucharist, for in it is made present the sacrifice of Christ which has reconciled us with God. Through the Eucharist those who live from the life of Christ are fed and strengthened. "It is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins."³⁵

29 Cf. Jn 16:8-9.

30 Cf. Jn 15:26; Acts 2:36-38; John Paul II, DeV 27-48.

31 Cf. Tob 12:8; Mt 6:1-18.

32 1 Pet 4:8; cf. Jas 5:20.

33 Cf. Am 5:24; Isa 1:17.

34 Cf. Lk 9:23.

35 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1638.

1437 Reading Sacred Scripture, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Our Father - every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins.

1438 *The seasons and days of penance* in the course of the liturgical year (Lent, and each Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church's penitential practice.³⁶ These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works).

1439 *The process of conversion and repentance* was described by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, the center of which is the merciful father:³⁷ the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father's house; the extreme misery in which the son finds himself after squandering his fortune; his deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed swine, and still worse, at wanting to feed on the husks the pigs ate; his reflection on all he has lost; his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father; the journey back; the father's generous welcome; the father's joy - all these are characteristic of the process of conversion. The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet are symbols of that new life - pure, worthy, and joyful - of anyone who returns to God and to the bosom of his family, which is the Church. Only the heart of Christ who knows the depths of his Father's love could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way.

VI. THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION

1440 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

36 Cf. SC 109-110; CIC, cann. 1249-1253; CCEO, cann. 88~883.

37 Cf. Lk 15:11-24.

forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.³⁸

Only God forgives sin

1441 Only God forgives sins.³⁹ Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, "The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" and exercises this divine power: "Your sins are forgiven."⁴⁰ Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name.⁴¹

1442 Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the "ministry of reconciliation."⁴² The apostle is sent out "on behalf of Christ" with "God making his appeal" through him and pleading: "Be reconciled to God."⁴³

Reconciliation with the Church

1443 During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact that Jesus receives sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the return to the bosom of the People of God.⁴⁴

38 Cf. LG 11.

39 Cf. Mk 2.7.

40 Mk 2:5, 10; Lk 7:48.

41 Cf. Jn 20:21-23.

42 2 Cor 5:18.

43 2 Cor 5:20.

44 Cf. Lk 15; 19:9.

1444 In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in

Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."⁴⁵
"The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head."⁴⁶

1445 The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.

The sacrament of forgiveness

1446 Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the Sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as "the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace."⁴⁷

1447 Over the centuries the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord has varied considerably. During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation. To this "order of penitents" (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime. During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been

45 Mt 16:19; cf. Mt 18:18; 28:16-20.

46 LG22 § 2.

47 Tertullian, *De Pænit.* 4, 2; PL 1, 1343; cf. Council of Trent (1547): DS 1542.

performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day.

1448 Beneath the changes in discipline and celebration that this sacrament has undergone over the centuries, the same *fundamental structure* is to be discerned. It comprises two equally essential elements: on the one hand, the acts of the man who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit: namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction; on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church. The Church, who through the bishop and his priests forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction, also prays for the Sinner and does penance with him. Thus the sinner is healed and re-established in ecclesial communion.

1449 The formula of absolution used in the Latin Church expresses the essential elements of this sacrament: the Father of mercies is the source of all forgiveness. He effects the reconciliation of sinners through the Passover of his Son and the gift of his Spirit, through the prayer and ministry of the Church:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

VII. THE ACTS OF THE PENITENT

1450 "Penance requires . . . the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction."⁴⁹

48 OP 46: formula of absolution.

49 Roman Catechism II, V, 21; cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1673.

Contrition

1451 Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again."⁵⁰

1452 When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called "perfect" (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.⁵¹

1453 The contrition called "imperfect" (or "attrition") is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance.⁵²

1454 The reception of this sacrament ought to be prepared for by an *examination of conscience* made in the light of the Word of God. The passages best suited to this can be found in the Ten Commandments, the moral catechesis of the Gospels and the apostolic Letters, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic teachings.⁵³

50 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1676.

51 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1677.

52 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1678; 1705.

53 Cf. Mt 5-7; Rom 12-15; 1 Cor 12-13; Gal 5; Eph 4-6; etc.

The confession of sins

1455 The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. 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 and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.

1456 Confession to a priest is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance: "All 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 and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly."⁵⁴

When Christ's faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember, they undoubtedly place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon. But those who fail to do so and knowingly withhold some, place nothing before the divine goodness for remission through the mediation of the priest, "for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know."⁵⁵

1457 According to the Church's command, "after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year."⁵⁶ Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental

54 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1680 (ND 1626); cf. Ex 20:17; Mt 5:28.

55 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1680 (ND 1626); cf. St. Jerome, in Eccl. 10, 11: PL 23:1096.

56 Cf. CIC, can. 989; Council of Trent (1551): DS 1683; DS 1708.

absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.⁵⁷ Children must go to the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.⁵⁸

1458 Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church.⁵⁹ Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, 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.⁶⁰

Whoever confesses his sins... is already working with God. God indicts your sins; if you also indict them, you are joined with God. Man and sinner are, so to speak, two realities:

when you hear "man" - this is what God has made; when you hear "sinner" - this is what man himself has made. Destroy what you have made, so that God may save what he has made.... When you begin to abhor what you have made, it is then that your good works are beginning, since you are accusing yourself of your evil works. The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. You do the truth and come to the light.⁶¹

Satisfaction

1459 Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused.⁶² Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance."

57 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1647; 1661; CIC, can. 916; CCEO, can. 711.

58 Cf. CIC, can. 914.

59 Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1680; CIC, can. 988 § 2.

60 Cf. Lk 6:36.

61 St. Augustine, In Jo. ev. 12, 13: PL 35, 1491.

62 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1712.

1460 The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him."⁶³

The satisfaction that we make for our sins, however, is not so much ours as though it were not done through Jesus Christ. We who can do nothing ourselves, as if just by ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of "him who strengthens" us. Thus man has nothing of which to boast, but all our boasting is in Christ... in whom we make satisfaction by bringing forth "fruits that befit repentance." These fruits have their efficacy from him, by him they are offered to the Father, and through him they are

accepted by the Father.⁶⁴

VIII. THE MINISTER OF THIS SACRAMENT

1461 Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation,⁶⁵ bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

1462 Forgiveness of sins brings reconciliation with God, but also with the Church. Since ancient times the bishop, visible head of a particular Church, has thus rightfully been considered to be the one who principally has the power and ministry of reconciliation: he is the moderator of the penitential discipline.⁶⁶ Priests, his collaborators, exercise it to the extent that they have received the commission either from their bishop (or religious superior) or the Pope, according to the law of the Church.⁶⁷

63 Rom 8:17; Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:1-2; cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1690.

64 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1691; cf. Phil 4:13 1 Cor 1:31 2 Cor 10:17; Gal 6:14; Lk 3:8.

65 Cf. Jn 20:23; 2 Cor 5:18.

66 Cf. LG 26 § 3.

67 Cf. CIC, cann. 844; 967-969; 972; CCEO, can. 722 §§ 3-4.

1463 Certain particularly grave sins incur excommunication, the most severe ecclesiastical penalty, which impedes the reception of the sacraments and the exercise of certain ecclesiastical acts, and for which absolution consequently cannot be granted, according to canon law, except by the Pope, the bishop of the place or priests authorized by them.⁶⁸ In danger of death any priest, even if deprived of faculties for hearing confessions, can absolve from every sin and excommunication.⁶⁹

1464 Priests must encourage the faithful to come to the Sacrament of Penance and must make themselves available to celebrate this sacrament each time Christians reasonably ask for it.⁷⁰

1465 When he celebrates the Sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.

1466 The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. The minister of this sacrament should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ.⁷¹ He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy.

1467 Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry and the respect due to persons, the Church declares that 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. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives.⁷² This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "sacramental seal," because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains "sealed" by the sacrament.

68 Cf. CIC, cann. 1331; 1354-1357; CCEO, can. 1431; 1434; 1420.

69 Cf. CIC, can. 976; CCEO, can. 725.

70 Cf. CIC, can. 986; CCEO, can. 735; PO 13.

71 Cf. PO 13.

72 Cf. CIC, can. 1388 § 1; CCEO, can. 1456.

IX. THE EFFECTS OF THIS SACRAMENT

1468 "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."⁷³ Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. For those who receive the Sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation."⁷⁴ Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.⁷⁵

1469 This sacrament *reconciles us with the Church*. Sin damages or even breaks fraternal communion. The Sacrament of Penance repairs or restores it. In this sense it does not simply heal the one restored to ecclesial communion, but has also a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members.⁷⁶ Re-established or strengthened in the communion of saints, the sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ,

whether still on pilgrimage or already in the heavenly homeland:⁷⁷

It must be recalled that... this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.⁷⁸

73 Roman Catechism, II, V, 18.

74 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1674.

75 Cf. Lk 15:32.

76 Cf. 1 Cor 12:26.

77 Cf. LG 48-50.

78 John Paul II, RP 31, 5.

1470 In this sacrament, the sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, *anticipates* in a certain way *the judgment* to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. For it is now, in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin.⁷⁹ In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and "does not come into judgment."⁸⁰

79 Cf. 1 Cor 5:11; Gal 5:19-21; Rev 22:15.

80 Jn 5:24.

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