

# Reconciliation and Penance

## I. The Nature of Sin

### A. Definition (cf. CCC 1849-1851)

- a. against God and His love for us
- b. against neighbor
- c. against reason, truth, and right conscience
- d. it is manifested and remedied in Jesus' Passion

### B. Kinds of Sin

- a. according to its object
- b. according to the virtues it opposes
- c. according to the commandments it breaks
- d. according to persons
- e. according to spiritual or carnal
- f. according to thought, word, deed and omission

### C. Gravity of sin

#### a. Mortal sin

1. destroys charity
2. turns man from God as His ultimate end
3. three conditions

- grave matter
- full knowledge
- complete consent

#### b. Venial sin

1. offends and wounds charity
2. impedes the realization of call to holiness
3. disposes to mortal sin
4. St. Augustine: "if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills the river; a number of grains makes a heap" (cf. CCC 1863).

#### c. Sin against the Holy Spirit

1. Mt. 12:31; Mk. 3:29; Lk. 12:10
2. "There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss" (CCC 1864).

## D. The Contagion of Sin

- a. sins engender vice
- b. increase concupiscence
- c. personal sin begets “structures of sin” and “social sin” which are sin only in the analogous sense

## II. The Confession of Sins in the Old Testament

### A. Lev. 16 and Day of Atonement

- a. Lev. 16:20-22 Aaron “shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, and all their sins...”
- b. Practice of confessing sins since last Day of Atonement in late Judaism: “With the approach of the Christian era confession of sins on the day of expiation had probably become already far more widespread. Individuals were invited to confess at least those sins that they had committed since the last feast” (Bonsirven, *Le Judaïsme palestinien au temps de Jesus Christ*, p. 99).
- c. Thus, the confession of sins became part of the sacrificial rite

B. **Neh 9:1-3** The Israelites “stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers” (v. 2).

### C. Penitential Psalms

- a. Ps. 32 Not confessing brought anxiety and sickness; confessing gives deliverance; don’t resist confessing – like horse and mule, unintelligent, needing bridle and bit
- b. Ps. 51
  - “For I know my transgressions” (v. 3) – acknowledgment of sin
  - “Against thee, thee only, I have sinned” (v. 4) – sin is an offence against God
  - “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (v. 5) – original sin
  - “Restore to me the joy of thy salvation” (v. 12) – asks for restoration (return to grace)
  - “The sacrifice acceptable to God is broken spirit” (v. 17) – essential role of contrition
- c. Other Penitential Psalms

## III. Jesus Forgives Sins

### A. Mk 2:1-12

- a. “My son, your sins are forgiven you” (v. 5) – the real problem; the authority over sin
- b. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v. 7) – the reaction of His listeners; the truth of their statement; the ability of God to give His authority to men

- c. “that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” (v. 9) – Jesus proves His authority as Son of man
1. *bar nasha* – taken by His hearers in a non-messianic sense

#### B. Lk. 7:36-50

- a. “She loved much” (v. 47) – the power of love (perfect contrition) and the expression of contrition
- b. “Your sins are forgiven” (v. 48) – Jesus absolves her sin
- c. “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” (v. 49) – the reaction of Jesus’ hearers

### IV. Jesus Promises the Power to Absolve Sins

#### A. Mt. 16:13-20 (Here a special power, and it is given to Peter alone)

- a. “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom” (v. 19)
  1. a promise in the future
  2. the role of the keys
    - Is. 22:22-24 – Shebna and the giving to another
    - Big break of Mt. 15:14 “Let them alone; they are blind guides”
    - Context of Mt. 16:6,12 “Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees;” “Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees”
- b. Rev. 3:7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.’”
- c. “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 20)
  1. without restrictions
  2. a judicial act
- d. *Asar* – to bind
- e. *Shera* – to loose
- f. Reconciliation with the Church
  1. “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” (CCC 1445).

#### B. Mt. 18:15-20

- a. to Apostles as a body with Peter

1. The context is that of speaking about fraternal correction and the telling to the Church (v. 17)
2. The judicial nature of the text: “if two of you agree” (v. 19)
  - The Jews were quite familiar with the power of excommunication given to the leaders of the people
3. Again, there are no restrictions
4. Mt. 18:21ff begins Peter’s query about how often this must be done. Jesus says 70 times 7 times.
  - the need of everyone for God’s mercy
  - the need to extend mercy
  - against the rigorists who held for no forgiveness of certain sins after Baptism, or for only one time for grave sins after Baptism.

## V. Fulfillment of Promise: The Sacrament as a Second Plank after Shipwreck

### A. Jn. 20:19-23

- a. The first thing Jesus entrusts to His Apostles after the Resurrection
- b. interpreted as intended only for Apostles
  1. St. Cyprian: “The power of remitting sins was given to the apostles, and to the Churches which they set up as sent by Christ, and to the bishops who succeeded them by vicarious ordination” (*Epistle 75,16*).
    - Power was not a personal charism of the Apostles but entrusted as a perennial gift to the Church. Thus, it was to be handed on through apostolic succession to their successors.
- c. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (v.23).
  1. It is a judicial act
  2. It has no restriction
  3. It presumes the necessity of confession of sins if there is to be a judgment concerning whether to forgive or retain

### B. Use in St. Paul

- a. 1 Cor. 5:1-5
  1. a case of incest in the Corinthian church
  2. a lack of sensitivity to this sin on the part of the community there
  3. “I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus..” (v. 3-4).
    - Paul exercises his power of the keys by excommunicating him
  4. “...that his spirit may be saved” (v. 5)

- Excommunication has medicinal value

b. 1 Tm 1:19-20

1. Some who have rejected conscience have “made shipwreck of the faith”
  - This implies persons who have been baptized and now have sinned grievously
  - Paul mentions two of them by name – Hymenaeus and Alexander
2. “I have delivered to Satan” (v. 20)
  - Use of his power of the keys
  - “that they may learn not to blaspheme” – medicinal character of the excommunication

**C. Consideration of some passages which seem to imply limits to God’s mercy**

a. Heb. 6:4-8

1. “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance...if they then commit apostasy” (v. 4-5).
2. Cf. Spiq’s commentary on adjective *adunatos* - impossibility of sinner “of himself” to return

b. Mt. 12:32 “And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”

1. implies existence of purgatory – forgiveness of some sins in the age to come, after this age
2. Church understands this that one must acknowledge His need for mercy and accept it in order to be forgiven (cf. our treatment in the section on sin above).

c. 1 Jn. 5:16-17 “If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.”

1. Scriptural foundation for the distinction of sin between mortal and venial.
2. Context implies and is interpreted as not to be included in the Prayers of the Faithful as they are unable to participate in the Eucharistic Communion
3. Compare with text earlier in St. John: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8-10).
  - all have sins, at least venial
  - necessity of confessing them

- God will forgive “all unrighteousness”

#### **D. Confession in the Early Church – some witnesses**

##### a. The *Didache* (50-70 AD)

1. “In the congregation thou shalt confess thy transgressions, and thou shalt not occupy thyself in prayer with an evil conscience” (c. 4).
2. “On the Lord’s day assemble for the breaking of bread and the Eucharist, after having first confessed your sins that your sacrifice may be spotless” (c. 14).

##### b. St. Clement of Rome (96 AD)

1. “You therefore, who were responsible for beginning the dissension, submit yourselves unto the presbyters, bowing the knees of your hearts” (1 Cor. c. 57).

##### c. Second Corinthians (150 AD)

1. “For after we have departed out of this life, we can no more make confession or again repent” (2 Cor. c. 18).

##### d. Ignatius of Antioch (107 AD)

1. “Where there is division and anger, God does not make his abode. To those, however, who repent, the Lord gives pardon, provided that their penitence leads them to the unity of God and to the bishop’s council” (*Epist. Ad Philad.* C. 8).

##### e. Shepherd of Hermas (140-159 AD)

1. In his recounting of several visions, he has one which speaks of the scattered stones which are those who have sinned but are not far from the bishop: “Those which were cast away...are those who have sinned and wish to do penance. And therefore they are not cast far outside the tower, for if they do penance, they will be useful in building” (*Vis.* 3, 5, 5).

##### f. Hippolytus of Rome

1. In his *Apostolic Tradition* he gives a prayer for the consecration of a bishop and references the power of forgiving sins: “by the high priestly Spirit he may have authority to forgive sins according to thy command...to loose every bond according to the authority thou gavest to the apostles...” (*Apostolic Tradition*).

## **VI. The Minister of the Sacrament**

A. Because Christ gave the power to absolve sins to His Apostles, it belongs to the bishops (the Apostles’ successors) and their co-workers the priests

B. **Bishops and priests** have the power to absolve all sins by virtue of Holy Orders

- a. The bishop is the moderator of the penitential discipline in his diocese, thus he controls the use of the power to absolve in his presbyterate
  1. Priests need faculties to exercise their power of absolution
  2. Certain sins and penalties can be reserved to the Holy Synod or to the ordinary of a diocese

#### C. Case of confession to a deacon or layman

- a. Such was recommended in the case of danger of death when there was no recourse to a priest. It was clearly not seen as giving a power to absolve from sins to someone not a priest, but an efficacious act to manifest sorrow and the desire for the sacrament
- b. A desire for the sacrament (*votum sacramenti*), as has been seen with baptism, could effect forgiveness in one dying without having the opportunity to confess sins to a priest

#### D. Qualifications of the Confessor

- a. should encourage the faithful to approach the sacrament
- b. should hear the confessions of the faithful whenever they reasonably ask for this sacrament
- c. As Confessor, the priest is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love, and thus should exercise this ministry accordingly
- d. Confessor should manifest the charity of Christ as He dealt with sinners (eg. Parable of the prodigal son; the woman caught in adultery; the good thief; etc.)
- e. Confessor should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior
- f. He should be experienced in human affairs
- g. He should manifest respect and sensitivity to the penitent
- h. He should have a love for the truth
- i. He should be faithful to the Magisterium
- j. He should patiently lead his penitent to full Christian maturity
- k. He should pray for his penitent and commend him to God's mercy

#### D. The Sacramental Seal

- a. "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. 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" (CCC 1467).
  1. Direct breaking of the seal is automatic excommunication
  2. Indirect breaking can be punished with proportionate censures
  3. Not only priest, but interpreter, or someone earshot of the Confessional are also bound by the seal
  4. Penitent is not bound, but should use discretion

b. The Seal in the Early Church

1. Persons were not bound to publicly confess their sins of a secret nature, though the penance was public
  - St. Leo the Great: “It is sufficient that the guilty conscience should be made known to the priests only in secret confession...all sins are not of such a character that a penitent would fearlessly publish them” (Epistle 168).
- c. Fourth Council of Lateran (1215): “...we decree that anyone who ventures to make known a sin disclosed to him in the tribunal of penance must not only be deposed from his priestly office, but must also be incarcerated in an enclosed monastery, to do perpetual penance.”

## VII. The Recipient of the Sacrament

- A. A baptized person
- B. Intention of receiving the Sacrament
- C. Guilty of sins after Baptism
- D. Faith and pious disposition
- E. Confession of grave sins kind and number as far as possible
- F. Obligation to confess grave sins at least once per year and in event of danger of death
- G. Worth and valid reception of the Sacrament coalesce with the Sacrament of Confession because of the essential acts of the penitent

## VIII. The *Matter* of the Sacrament

- A. St. Thomas refers to the “matter” of the Sacrament as “quasi matter” since it differs from the matter used in other Sacraments, such as oil, water, bread and wine. Yet, it is the matter that must be present and which is determined by the form, expressed in the words of absolution by the priest.
- B. The matter of Confession is the acts of the penitent: contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction

### a. Contrition

1. Definition: “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’” (CCC 1451).
  - sorrow – first and foremost a sorrow of mind and will, not to be confused with emotional expression
  - detestation for the sin – hatred for sin coupled with a desire to undo the sin if it could be possible
  - sorrow and detestation concern the sin itself and not primarily with the punishments caused by sin (e.g. getting caught)
  - resolution not to sin again – not that the person vows not to sin again, but has the intention of not committing the sin again. This requires a purpose of amendment which must be firm, efficacious (take the necessary means



to avoid sin in future) and universal (like with sorrow, not just one particular sin, but all mortal sins w/o exception).

2. Perfect contrition or contrition of love: a contrition which arises from the motive of love of God, loved above all else
  - such contrition obtains forgiveness of mortal sins providing the person has a firm resolution to use sacramental confession as soon as possible
3. Imperfect contrition or *attrition* or *contrition of fear*: such is also from God.
  - It is motivated by fear of punishment by God or by a consideration of the ugliness of sin
  - With the help of actual graces it can initiate the process of repentance, but cannot obtain forgiveness of grave sins. It disposes to the forgiveness of these sins in the Sacrament of Penance
  - A person who is *attrite* can become *contrite* by the Sacrament. The Sacrament infuses sanctifying grace which engenders contrition.
4. The recipient of the Sacrament should prepare prior to the reception of the Sacrament by a diligent examination of conscience in light of the Word of God
  - Mt. 5-7
  - Rom 12-15
  - 1 Cor 12-13
  - Gal 5
  - Eph 4-6

#### **b. Confession of sins**

1. Its value, even from a human psychological view
2. Kinds of confession
  - auricular confession
  - public confession
  - general confession
  - devotional confession
  - generic confession
  - specific confession
  - integral confession
  - non-integral confession
3. The necessity of confessing in kind and number all mortal sins that one is conscious of after having made a diligent self-examination (cf. CCC 1456).
  - if one hides one grave sin, none are forgiven
  - if one forgets a grave sin or sins, that sin is forgiven, but once the penitent becomes conscious of it in the future, he is obliged to submit it to the power of the keys at his next confession

- the kind of the sin must be declared. Thus, saying “I committed some sexual sins” is not sufficient
- circumstances must be given if they change the nature of the sin
- details are not necessary ordinarily
- the number of times that particular grave sin has been committed, in so far as possible, must be stated
- even if the grave sins are not externally manifested and are hidden in the heart or mind, they must be confessed (e.g. sins against the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> commandment).
- Catholics, once they have reached the age of discretion, are obliged to confess grave sins at least once a year
- One must not receive Holy Communion if he is conscious of a grave sin until he has first had recourse to the Sacrament – only for a grave reason can one making a perfect act of contrition (as defined above) receive Holy Communion – this would include the firm resolve to have recourse to the Sacrament as soon as possible and the condition that no priest is available at the time to hear one’s Confession.

4. Confession of venial sins is strongly recommended (cf. CCC 1458)

- they are forgiven *ex opere operato* as opposed to *ex opere operantis* of good works, acts of charity, etc.
- such confession of venial sins helps form conscience
- helps against evil tendencies
- we allow Christ’s healing to work in us
- we are spurred to be merciful as He is merciful

5. If the penitent is not conscious of any sins, mortal or venial, since his last confession, he must mention a past sin for the validity of the Sacrament. Here the effect of the absolution would be for the temporal punishment due to that sin and for the healing of the wound in the person’s soul

**c. Satisfaction**

1. Definition: “the voluntary acceptance or endurance of the penance imposed by a confessor, in order to compensate for the injury offered to God, and for the remission of the temporal punishment that may still remain, even after the guilt of the sin has been pardoned” (Council of Trent, quoted in Barton, p. 81).
2. Necessity in justice to do what is possible to repair the harm caused by sin
  - eg. stealing, one must give back or make restitution; slandering one’s reputation, one must try to restore it; causing injury to a person or his property, one must pay compensation.
3. Sin also wounds the individual penitent and his relationship with God and neighbor.
  - “Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused” (CCC 1459).

- The sinner must make satisfaction for, expiate, for his sins – this satisfaction is called “penance” which is given by the priest to the penitent
  - the penance has special value and works *ex opere operato*
  - the penance should take into account the gravity of the sin, the penitent’s personal good, and his personal situation.
  - The penitent must have at least the intention of fulfilling the penance for a valid confession
4. The satisfaction is more that of Christ than ours. We suffer with Him so as to share in His glory. The fruits of repentance have their efficacy from Christ, “by whom they are offered to the Father, and through him they are accepted by the Father.” (Augustine as quoted in CCC 1460).

## IX. The *Form* of the Sacrament

- A. In the form, the priest acts as a judge, and gives his judgment. The form is determined by the Church, as it is done with the other Sacraments. In the Roman Rite, the form is:
- a. “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and 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” (CCC 1449).
    1. Father of Mercies effects the reconciliation
    2. He does so through the Passion of His Son through the Gift of the Holy Spirit
    3. He does it through the prayer and the ministry that His Son has given to the Church
  - b. The Councils of Florence and Trent both defined that the form of the Sacrament consists essentially in the words “I absolve you...” In the first centuries the form didn’t always have the first person singular as the subject (in the indicative form). Nonetheless, some theologians claim that failing to use the indicative form in the West today would invalidate the Sacrament. It would certainly be illicit.
    1. The Gelasian Sacramentary (5<sup>th</sup> century) has in its rite of public penance: “May he [our Lord Jesus Christ] by my ministry absolve you through the intercession of his precious blood, poured forth for the remission of sins, from all your sins, whatever you have done negligently in thought, word or deed, and may he be pleased to lead you, absolved from the bond of sin, to the kingdom of heaven” (quoted in Penance and Absolution, by John Barton).

## X. Absolution and the Effects of the Sacrament (cf. CCC 1496)

- A. reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace
- B. reconciliation with the Church
- C. remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins
- D. remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin
- E. peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation
- F. an increase in spiritual strength for the Christian battle

## **XI. The Present Crisis of the Sacrament**

- A. John Paul II in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*
- B. The sin of the century “the loss of the sense of sin”
- C. The disuse of the Sacrament
  - a. influence of behavioral sciences
  - b. sin of century
  - c. accessibility to priests and willingness of priests to hear confessions
  - d. rise of individualism
- D. Admission to Holy Communion without recourse to Sacramental Confession
- E. Use of Form C of Sacrament without proper permission and warranted circumstances (cf. CCC 1483)

## **XII. Frequent and Fervent Confession: Active Participation**

- A. Get in touch with sin in our lives
  - a. expose the roots of sin, and not just acts
- B. Get in touch with Whom we offend
  - a. cultivate deeper contrition
  - b. form a firm purpose of amendment
- C. Get in touch with Whom we approach in the Sacrament
  - a. Be attentive to the profound moment of absolution
- D. Fervent and Frequent
- E. Use of general confession
- F. Question of re-confessing past sins already directly absolved

## **XIII. Indulgences**

- A. Definition: “An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment for sin the guilt of which is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful obtains under certain and definite conditions with the help of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints” (CIC 992).
- B. Development of indulgences
  - a. Martyrs
  - b. Commuting of penances

C. Divisions of Indulgences

- a. Plenary vs. partial
- b. By way of absolution or suffrage

D. Conditions for an indulgence

- a. baptized
- b. state of grace, at least by completion of indulgenced work
  - for plenary indulgence, free from mortal and venial sin, an attachment to all sin, even venial
- c. intention of receiving the indulgence
- d. fulfillment of the enjoined works, at stated time, in due fashion

E. Normal works accompanying indulgenced acts

- a. Confession
- b. Holy Communion
- c. Prayers for the Holy Father

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