

the year and, further, that another general absolution may not be sought out until private confession has taken place. Second, general absolution was never envisioned as a normal alternative to private confession and, in fact, was intended to be most exceptional, involving extreme circumstances wherein penitents would have grave spiritual need without access to the Sacrament for a prolonged period of time (CCC 1483). Such a situation is barely imaginable in the United States. Canon 961 of the Code of Canon Law and statements by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith lend their weight to the position I have just outlined, as does the 1988 norm enacted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Why did general absolution become so prevalent in some places? The unfortunate laxity of some priests, the desire of various liturgists and theologians to eliminate auricular confession, and the inclination of some people to take the easiest way out, all combined to make this option so popular. For centuries Catholics have been accused of seeking “cheap grace”; the swiftness with which some Catholics responded to this deformation of Penance gave an ironic credibility to the charge.

It is strange that in an era when the cult of the individual is so strong, the Church should do away with one of her strongest signs of commitment to personalism and replace it with the anonymity of the crowd. Throughout Lent, John Paul II stresses repeatedly that the availability of private confession is a sign of Christ’s love for each one of us as individuals, sacramentalized in the one-to-one encounter between priest and penitent. This revolutionary good news, so desperately needed today, is only obscured and confused by countersigns such as the improper use of general absolution.

#### **First Penance**

A final problem concerns the appropriate time for the celebration of First Penance. In the United States, experimentation with a delayed reception of Penance has occurred, so that a child received First Holy Communion in the second grade and then First Penance in perhaps the fourth grade or even later. The reason given for this change was that youngsters had great difficulty in understanding sin and that a too-early reception of Penance could be psychologically harmful.

No objective data were ever offered to substantiate this approach, which was contrary to that practiced for centuries, and the experience of parents and teachers eventually bore out the validity of the traditional practice. If a child cannot understand the very human experience of sin, how can that same child comprehend the divine mystery of the Eucharist? On the psychological level, it is much less traumatic for a child of seven to confess a sin of disobedience as his first experience

of Penance than for a high-schooler to have to confess fornication for a First Penance, as has happened.

This experiment was terminated years ago by direct order of the Holy See. Canon 914 of the revised Code makes this point very explicitly and with no qualifications. Thus, any parish that persists in delaying First Penance does so against the express will of the Church, God’s people. Some observers have responded by saying that this is “forcing” a child to receive a sacrament, which is a violation of the child’s rights and conscience. But that is unconvincing.

The Church is the guardian of the sacraments, and she has the absolute right to determine the order in which the sacraments should be received. If a man decides he wants to be confirmed without having been baptized, is the Church “forcing” a sacrament on him by insisting that Baptism must precede Confirmation? Of course not. And so it is with First Penance and First Communion. The point is, children should never be pawns in the process of theological debate, especially where their salvation is concerned. And the Catholic Church teaches, quite clearly, that Penance should precede Eucharist. Let us also remember one last point. Controversy is not always a bad thing, especially when it enables us to clarify our thinking on important issues. If we argue the issues Penance raises, it is because this sacrament is so important to us. And because we sense in it matters that have eternal consequences. Originally published by Ignatius Press in *Understanding the Sacraments: A Guide for Prayer and Study*. Used with permission of the author.

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Pamphlet 441

# **Penance**

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## *Peace Begins with Our Personal Desire to Repent*

The first word uttered by the risen Christ was his Easter gift to his Church: “Peace!”

It is significant that immediately following that greeting is the Lord’s commission to his apostles to forgive sins in his name: “If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven; if you hold them bound, they are held bound” (Jn 20:23). What is the connection between the two statements?

*Shalom*, the Hebrew word Jesus would have used that first Easter night, carries within itself so many meanings that it cannot be adequately translated by a single word. *Shalom*, connotes wholeness, harmony, unity, peace, and right relationships. It harkens back to the Genesis accounts that depict God and man in an intimate union of friendship (CCC 399).

That union was destroyed, however, by the sin of our first parents (CCC 39). From that day on, sin has always obstructed the movement of man toward God (CCC 409). For peace to be found, the roadblock of sin must be removed. Hence the link between the Resurrection gift of peace and the Resurrection gift of forgiveness.

That link is maintained by the Church in the Sacrament of Penance (CCC 1468). Not without reason did many of the Fathers of the Church refer to Penance as “the second Baptism”. They saw in this sacrament the consoling possibility of returning to baptismal innocence, the ability to have a second chance if one is only willing to repent and begin again.

## **How We Should Prepare to Receive the Sacrament**

Before approaching the Sacrament of Penance, it is important for the believer to prepare properly: examination of conscience; sorrow for sin; firm purpose of amendment (CCC 1450-54). These steps are essential if our reception of the Sacrament is to be a true encounter between the sinful self and the forgiving Christ. Nothing less than a true desire to turn from sin, to change one’s life, to go through a conversion experience is required.

Frequently, other Christians have the misconception that our approach to sin is one of: “Oh well, I’ll just go to confession on Saturday.” But such an attitude mocks God’s justice and is a parody of Catholic sacramental theology.

After preparing, the penitent is ready to receive the sacrament by the confession of sins to a priest and the performance of an appropriate work of satisfaction (CCC 1455-60). It is in these two areas that the celebration of the Sacrament has so often changed throughout history.

### **How the Practice of Penance has Changed in the Church**

For many years in the early Church, Penance could be received only once in a lifetime. As a result, most people postponed its reception until they thought death was near. Eventually the Church increased the number of times Penance could be received to the point of our present observance, under which it is almost available “on demand”.

Another interesting historical note is that in the early Church, all penance given for sins was “public penance”, which meant that the entire Christian community was aware of the sinfulness of one of its members. Sinners were admitted to the “order of penitents” by the local bishop to perform penances involving corporal mortification, which often extended over months or even years; the mere recitation of a prayer was not sufficient.

In due time, the discipline of the Sacrament was again relaxed as Church thinking about Penance developed. Public penance was abolished, and a penitent could confess his sins to any priest who had received the authority of his Bishop to forgive sins in the name of the Church. This practice became known as “private” or “auricular” confession (CCC 1447).

The privacy gained under this system was most welcome, but an important insight became obscured: Every sin (no matter how personal) diminishes the other members of the Body of Christ, the Church. However, the advantages of this procedure far outweighed the disadvantages because the entire approach could be individualized to correspond to the penitent’s needs and also provide the guarantee of complete confidentiality. Is there a way to combine the best of Penance’s ancient tradition and the benefits of later developments? In our own day there have been attempts to do exactly this. The postconciliar rite of Penance provides for the option of communal celebrations of the Sacrament, which help to recapture more vividly the communal sense of sin, repentance, and reconciliation. In such services all hear the Word of God proclaimed, acknowledge their sinfulness, individually confess their sins to a priest, and then receive the saving forgiveness of God (CCC 1482).

Our emotions in Penance should be genuine sorrow and repentance, for we have sinned against God and one another (CCC 1451-53). But we should also feel hope because the Lord has given us the means to return to him. As God’s people, and

with confidence in our merciful Father, we approach the Sacrament as a path to pardon, consolation, and joy.

If Jesus inaugurated his Resurrection appearances with the greeting of “Peace”, we also know that he began his public ministry with the command: “Repent” (Mk 1:15). The Sacrament of Penance is the means by which Catholics go through the process of repentance, so as to experience Christ’s peace (CCC 1431). Or, as the confessor assures the penitent: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”

### **Some Difficulties in Regard to the Sacrament of Penance**

In spite of the many positive values so apparent in the renewed rite and theology of Penance, one must admit that we have also come upon some difficulties with the Sacrament over the past few decades. Theological questions or practical problems are not unique to the 20th century; they are as old as the Church herself. Handled correctly, difficulties have always launched the Church on a much deeper understanding of the matters under scrutiny. Four such concerns have developed in regard to the Sacrament of Penance.

#### **Confessing to a Priest**

The first issue is really perennial: “Why confess to a priest?” And what is at stake here is probably not so much the Sacrament of Penance as the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Divine forgiveness is not being questioned, but the need for a ministerial priesthood clearly is.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, forgiveness has always been mediated. On Yom Kippur, the Hebrew high priest spoke words of sorrow to the Lord on behalf of the whole people and then symbolically placed the year’s sins on the head of a goat, driving him out of the community into the desert. Jesus consistently presented himself as an agent of divine forgiveness, so much so that some charged him with blasphemy (Lk 5:21). Nor did this mediatory role end with Christ; he clearly intended his apostles to stand in his stead *vis-à-vis* the Church and the world (cf. Jn 20:23; Lk 9:1; Mt 16:19; CCC 1461).

Christians are not rugged individualists; they come before the throne of mercy in the company of all the redeemed. Our relationship with God is personal, of course—but it is also communal. From a Catholic perspective, our personal relationship with God is enhanced by the communal and not diminished by it. The presence of a priest, as the ordained representative of Christ and the Church, is a concrete sign of both the communal and individual dimensions of the Christian’s salvation. His presence is also a reminder that our sins, not only offend the Lord but also his Mystical Body, the Church (CCC 1462).

On the level of human psychology, one can easily see the value of confessing to another person (CCC 1455). Every human being needs to “unload”, to come to grips with personal guilt, and to receive guidance and encouragement. Most importantly, all people need to hear that they are indeed forgiven and to have that forgiveness celebrated in concrete, sacramental form. Surely this insight is why other Christian bodies (for example, Episcopalians and Lutherans) have recently taken a second look at the Sacrament of Penance and decided to reintroduce this rite into their official liturgical life. Ecumenism can teach us to esteem more highly what we already possess by noticing what others are trying to rediscover.

### **Declining Numbers of Catholics Go to Confession**

A second modern problem in regard to Penance is the decline in the numbers of people who use it. The usual response to this observation is: “I don’t commit any mortal sins, Father; I don’t have to go to confession.” While it is true that the law of the Church requires sacramental confession once a year only if a Christian is conscious of having committed grave sin, this is a minimalist view of reality. The enthusiastic believer seeks to do the maximum, not the minimum.

Having heard confessions for many years now, I might agree that few people are guilty of truly grave sins, but I can also say with deep conviction that the best confessions I have heard have been those by people who are attentive to the “small” sins that offend our Lord. I am not speaking of scrupulosity but of sensitivity. As the saying goes, the greatest saints see themselves as the greatest sinners. We regard ourselves as good only because we tend to measure ourselves against some of the pagans among whom we live (and this is self-righteousness as well as a false comparison). We need to measure ourselves against the standard of Jesus Christ. When Peter saw himself in that light, he asked the Lord to leave him because he was such a sinful man (Lk 5:8). Frequent confession provides the impetus for perfection and offers the penitent the support needed for growth in holiness (CCC 1458).

#### **General Absolution**

During the past decades a third problem regarding Penance has been the misuse of “general absolution”. This practice arose out of a misunderstanding or misapplication of the norms for communal penance services. Some priests and bishops assumed that simply because a large crowd appeared for the Sacrament of Penance and an insufficient number of priests were available, the conditions prevailed for the granting of general absolution without private confession of sin (as has always been done in combat situations).

This view was wrong on two scores. First, if general absolution is granted, the congregation must be told that the absolution is valid only if all mortal sins are confessed within