

True Confessions: The Sacrament of Penance in the Church



Pope Francis instructs confessors



Sacrament of Penance in the *Catechism*

“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 have 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” (CCC, 1446).

“During his public life Jesus not only exhorted people to do penance: he welcomed sinners and reconciled them to his Father. “It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them his own divine power to forgive sins: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (Jn 20:23)” (CCC, 976).

“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” (CCC, 1442).

Personal confession

Individual confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and with the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.

- **Emergencies**
- **Battles**
- **Contagious disease**

How did the Church's practice get there?

- **Divine Revelation in the Old and the New Testaments**
- **Jesus' authority and practice to forgive sins**
- **Jesus' commission to the Apostles**
- **The Church's subsequent teachings and *praxis***

Confession of sins in the *Old Testament*

- “...he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.” *Numbers 5:7*
- “Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the guilt of their fathers. While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God.” *Nehemiah 9:2-3*
- “If a man [sins] with a woman... they shall not be put to death... But he shall bring a guilt offering for himself to the Lord... And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin which he has committed; and the sin which he has committed shall be forgiven him.” *Leviticus 19:20-22*

Confession in the *New Testament*: John the Baptist

- **“Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” *Matthew 3:6***
- **“And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.” *Mark 1:5***

Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Penance

- **Son of Man has the power to forgive sins (*Mark 2:10*)**
- **Jesus gives this power (the “keys”) to Simon at Philippi (*Matthew 16:13-20*)**
- **Jesus solemnly gives this power to all the Apostles on Resurrection Day (*John 20:22*)**

The practice of confession in the Early Church

- **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” *James 5:16***
- **“Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.” *Acts 19:18***
- **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” *1 John 1:9***

Confession in the *Didache*

The *Didache* commands Christians to gather on Sundays for the celebration of the Eucharist, “...*after having confessed your transgressions*” and establishes that from the very origins of the early Church, the tradition was that confession was a requirement for the worthy reception of Communion.

Source: “Origins of Mandatory Private Confession in the Church”

Three eras of sacramental *praxis* in the Church

- **Early Church (until the 500s)**
- **“Dark”/Middle Ages (500 to 1500s)**
- **Contemporary (1500s to present)**

Elements of early Church penitential discipline

- **Serious sins (especially Homicide, Adultery, Idolatry)**
- **Penitents formed a “special class” in the Church**
- **Prayer for and with penitents**
- **Public penance practices**
- **Bishop restores sinners to communion at Holy Week**
- **Laying on hands and prayers of intercession**

Tertullian on *Exomologesis* (confession)

“*Exomologesis* is the discipline which obliges a man to prostrate and humiliate himself and to adopt a manner of life that will draw down mercy. As regards dress and food, it prescribes that he shall lie in sackcloth and ashes, clothe his body in rags, plunge his soul in sorrow, correct his faults by harsh treatment of himself, use the plainest meat and drink for the sake of his soul and not of his belly: usually he shall nourish prayer by fasting, whole days and nights together he shall moan, and weep, and wail to the Lord his God, cast himself at the feet of the priests, fall on his knees before those who are dear to God, and beseech them to plead in his behalf.”

Penance in Early Middle Ages (500-1100s)

- **Early practice seen as too severe (did not work well)**
- **People would defer baptism**
- **Monks teach that everyone is a sinner**
- **No special “bad class” of Christians**
- **Introduction for the need for private penance**
- **Monks introduce the “Tariff Penance”**

Confession becomes a universal requirement

“By the 9th century, private confession for lay people was required at least once a year, along with a whole new penitential discipline, including the silence of the confessor (the “seal of confession”) so absolute that if, for example, he learned from a penitent of a plot on his own life, he could not thwart it.”

Source: J. Hitchcock, *History of the Catholic Church*

High Middle Ages and St. Thomas Aquinas

- **Individual penance becomes recommended practice**
- ***“Ego te absolvo”* becomes form of the sacrament**
- **Private confessions made individually in Church**
- **Sacramental seal of confession**
- **Though confession is private, still it retains a public character
(in churches, with use of stole)**
- **Penance still a required element of the sacrament**

Fourth Lateran Council (1215) Canon 21

“All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist, unless perchance at the advice of their own priest they may for a good reason abstain for a time from its reception; otherwise they shall be cut off from the Church (excommunicated) during life and deprived of Christian burial in death.”

“[A priest] who dares to reveal a sin confided to him in the tribunal of penance, we decree that he be not only deposed from the sacerdotal office but also relegated to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life.”

Contemporary era: Council of Trent (1551)

“[This] holy Council teaches that the *form* of the sacrament of penance, in which its force chiefly consists, is set down in these words of the minister: "I absolve thee, etc."; to which indeed certain prayers are laudably added according to the custom of holy Church... The *matter*...consists in the acts of the penitent himself, namely contrition, confession, and satisfaction [can. 4]. These, inasmuch as by the institution of God they are required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament for the full and perfect remission of sins, are for this reason called the parts of penance.”

Use of “confessional” and “confessional screen”

- Invented during the Council of Trent
- 1565 Council of Valencia prescribed its use
- 1565 St. Charles Borromeo introduced it in Milan
- 1614 the *Roman Ritual* commanded its use in all churches
- Confessional with screen protects penitent and priest
- Separation and anonymity is maintained
- Simplicity and efficiency of conversation is maintained

Source: H.C. Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain, Vol. 2*

Second Vatican Council (1965)

- **United the sacraments with the community**
- **Maintained the practice of private confession**
- **Inspired the new *Rite of Penance* (1974)**
- **Offered 3 forms of the Rite**
- **3 forms not to be used arbitrarily**

The apostolate of Confession



Proper use of general absolution



Important points to remember...

- **Confession is one of the seven Sacraments instituted by Jesus**
- **Confession of sins has been practiced since the Church's beginning**
- **All sins can be forgiven**
- **Private, personal confession has been the *praxis* since the 1200s**
- **Sorrow, confession, and satisfaction for sin are necessary (matter)**
- **“*Ego te Absolvo*” is necessary (form)**
- **Frequent confession is a good *praxis*, so fly high in God's grace!**

Finis

