

## SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

FOR CATHOLICS THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE WAS GENUINELY SACRAMENTAL, A SACRED DOOR THROUGH WHICH THEY COULD ENTER A REALM OF JUSTICE AND MERCY UNLIKE ANY THAT THEY KNEW ON EARTH.<sup>1</sup>

If only that were true today. Unfortunately, there is a feeling in the Church that confession is something we do privately in our prayers – we have no need of a priest as an intermediary. That we talk with God daily confessing the things that have moved us away from Him is good. But the Sacrament of Reconciliation offers us the opportunity to grow spiritually, to examine our conscience and be absolved of our transgressions through the power of Christ entrusted to the Church. To enter the door of the sacred.

### THE THEOLOGY:

The sacrament of reconciliation has undergone centuries of revision – thank goodness! From a very harsh, public and uncomfortable sacrament that seemed more about punishment than forgiveness, the sacrament is now pastoral, sensitive, forgiving and healing. The preparation for the penitent can still be emotional yet the ritual and the warmth of Christ's forgiveness and mercy, in my view, make it second only to the Eucharist in terms of encountering a personal relationship with God.

Reconciliation involves “a conversion of our hearts to God, a confession of sins to a priest, the forgiveness of our sins, a penance to make some amends for sin, and reconciliation with God and the Church.”<sup>2</sup> The ritual therefore begins prior to entering the Church with the *examination of conscience and an Act of Contrition*. This interior conversion turns us away from sin and towards God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through *confession*, we are liberated from our sins and we are reconciled to God. “We are asked to look into our souls and, with an honest and unblinking gaze, identify our sins.”<sup>3</sup> What powerful words! Look into our souls. That is the only way to encounter God – it is in our souls that nothing is hidden. Through prayers to the Holy Spirit, we look with honesty and we confess with honesty. It is never easy.

Each priest who hears confession is bound to absolute secrecy regarding the sins they hear. This secret is called the “sacramental seal” because what is known by the priest remains sealed by the sacrament.

Following a *discussion with the priest who encourages our moral and spiritual growth*, we say an Act of Contrition and are *absolved from our sins* through the power of Christ entrusted to the Church.<sup>4</sup> For many theologians, the sign of the sacrament is both the confession of the penitent and the absolution pronounced by the priest.

Although absolution removes the sin, satisfaction is required to “remedy all the disorders sin has caused.”<sup>5</sup> This is *making satisfaction for sins*. It may be a physical return of something taken, or a repair of something damaged – or it could be a prayer for spiritual growth. Satisfaction - or penance – is given by the priest. The rite of reconciliation is

completed once the penance has been given. It is then up to us to complete the penance or satisfaction in cooperation with God's grace.

### **THE EXPERIENCE:**

Having only just returned to the sacrament after many years, my first visits to the confessional were very intimidating and unfamiliar and I thought only of wrongs that were easy to identify – things like swearing, lying etc. But I realized that there were more levels to true contrition and conversion.

In preparing for confession, I began by thinking about my transgressions as related to virtues such as humility, prudence, obedience, sincerity, piety, devotion, gratitude. I found it emotional and quite soul-searching. This preparation brought on such a strong emotion in my heart – a true conversion – that continued to surface during my daily prayer times. The ritual of the sacrament had already begun – even before entering the confessional.

I entered the confessional with trepidation. This was my first confession with Father who is not just my parish priest but a friend with whom I have a close working relationship. I became quite nervous - a nervousness that was ill-founded. The sense of sacred in the atmosphere of the confessional created an immediate sense of calm. Father and I spoke briefly and I started my confession. Father closed his eyes in prayer and as an unconscious response, mine closed as well. I entered a prayerful state and felt overwhelmed with the feeling that I was connected to my Father in heaven.

Following the confession, our conversation took on a tone similar to that of spiritual counselling. I felt uplifted and ready to start fresh with a heart that was unburdened. Father talked with me about the penance and ensured I understood how it related to my confession. Rather than punishing, this was pastoral! I felt renewed and ready to continue my spiritual journey. I then received absolution.

Come back to the sacrament – feel the warmth of Christ's forgiveness and mercy. I left the confessional with a strong desire to thank God. I felt truly as if I had gone through the doors to the sacred.

***I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.***

Ezekiel 36:15

Written by: Elizabeth Pietrantonio

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Liguori: Liguori/Triumph, 2001), 312.

<sup>2</sup> United States Conference of Bishops, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009), 236.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 238.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1995), 1424.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 1459.