

# Doctrine Overview: Reconciliation

God alone forgives sins, but he chose to empower his Apostles and their successors in the priestly ministry of absolution as stewards of the mercy of God (CCC 1440, 1442). Jesus gave his Apostles the authority to forgive sins in his name (John 20:22-23).

The Sacrament of Penance brings forgiveness, peace, and wholeness on every level, restoring in the penitent the sanctifying grace that is lost through mortal sin and reconciling him or her with the Church. Remission from eternal punishment and varying degrees of remission of temporal punishments caused by sin also result from this Sacrament. The penitent's conscience is put at ease and an increase in strength for the Christian walk is supplied (CCC 1496).

## How the Sacrament is Celebrated

To make a valid confession a penitent must have contrition for sins: "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again" (CCC 1451). One can experience perfect contrition (motivated by pure love of God and a desire not to hurt or offend him) or imperfect contrition (contrition out of fear of damnation or an awareness of the ugliness and negative effects of sin on the penitent). Imperfect contrition is a prompting of the Holy Spirit that leads the sinner to seek absolution in the Sacrament. Only perfect contrition is sufficient to absolve sins outside this Sacrament, and this only if the penitent has the firm intention of confessing to a priest as soon as possible (CCC 1452-1453).

After making an examination of conscience (CCC 1454) the penitent must confess sins to a priest. It is good to confess venial sins, but not required (CCC

1458). All mortal sins that one is aware of must be confessed or the Sacrament is invalid. The hurting sinner should never withhold a mortal wound from the Divine Physician: "...for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know" (CCC 1456). A person who is cognizant of a mortal sin should not receive Holy Communion until he or she is absolved in the Sacrament of Penance. The faithful who have attained the age of reason should confess serious sins at least once a year (CCC 1457).

After the confession of sins a penance (satisfaction for sin that must be completed in the form of prayers, good works, or other actions) is given by the priest. Finally, absolution is given. Absolution wipes the sin away completely, but the satisfaction of a penance must be rendered by the penitent. For though the sin is forgiven a wound still remains because of the harm wrought by the sin, and the prescribed penance serves to offer satisfaction for this (CCC 1459).

The parable of the Prodigal Son gives us the proper image of what takes place in the Sacrament of Penance, and of how God the merciful Father views us (CCC 1439, Luke 15:11-32). Every penitent who returns to the Father in the Sacrament of Penance should realize that the Father receives us there not in shame, scorn, or judgment, but in deepest love, mercy, and rejoicing.

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