

# To Walk in the Newness of Life

## A Brief History of Reconciliation

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From the earliest times in the Church until today, the Sacrament of Reconciliation has gone through numerous changes. In the early Church, reconciliation was intimately linked with conversion. One was fully initiated into the Body of Christ through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. Baptism washed away all sin and the Eucharist was seen as a Sacrament of Reconciliation, which mediated the mercy and love of God.

Soon the Church had to face the reality of how to reconcile those who had ruptured their relationship with Christ and the Church especially through such grievous actions as murder, adultery, or denying the faith. Thus began the public order of penitents. The penitents confessed their sins to the Bishop. They wore sackcloth and ashes. Each Sunday they were dismissed to a place separate from the assembly and were excluded from receiving the Eucharist. The community was encouraged to pray and support them in their conversion. On Holy Thursday, the bishop laid hands on them and reconciled them back into the Body of Christ.

This form of penance did not last. It could only be received once in a lifetime. Some penances were severe, lasting for many years or even a lifetime. Many began to wait to confess their sins on their deathbed. Finally, changes in the sacramental practice emerged when Christianity became a privileged religion and spread throughout the Roman empire.

With the rise of monasteries, the practice of seeking spiritual advice in private developed. In the sixth century, the Irish monks took their monastic practice of frequent private confession to the churches in Europe. People began to confess their faults and sins privately to the priest. A private penance was given to them. Lists of sins with corresponding penances were written down in books called Penitentials for use with the uneducated clergy. The sacrament could now be received many times throughout one's life.

In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council made yearly confession mandatory for all Christians. People were especially encouraged to confess sins during Lent. A uniform rite of private confession was developed. In the 1500s the Council of Trent decreed that the confessing of sins to a priest was mandatory for absolution.

Following the Council of Trent and until the Second Vatican Council, the understanding and practice of the sacrament became somewhat legalistic. Emphasis was placed on an accurate listing of sins and the number of times they were committed. Due to the influence of the heresy of Jansenism, many refrained from receiving Communion unless they went to confession even though they were not in the state of mortal sin. To combat this thinking, Pope Pius X mandated that weekly confession was not required for Holy Communion.

At the Second Vatican Council, it was determined that the sacrament needed reform. The Council required that "the rite and formularies for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and the effect of the sacrament."

The revised Rite of Penance highlights the original purpose of the sacrament, that is, reconciliation with God and the Church. It emphasizes the importance of conversion and the need to rearrange our lives according to the holiness and love of God. Lastly, it restores the communal nature of the sacrament with the premise that the celebration of the sacrament is primarily a liturgical action.