

The Sacrament of Penance

God calls each one of us to receive new life in Him, which is 'the life of sanctifying grace'. We first received new life through Baptism, which takes away original sin and makes us temples of the Holy Spirit.

What about the sins we commit after Baptism? How can we be washed clean again? By the wonderful sacrament of Penance (also called Reconciliation or Confession) - the gift of God's love and mercy to his people.

On the night that Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to His apostles and gave them the priestly power to celebrate This Sacrament.

Saint John, who was an eyewitness at this event, describes it for us: *On the evening of the first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them. "Peace be with you", he said. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced. "Peace be with you", he said again. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them: if you hold them bound, they are held bound."* (Jn 20:19-23)

Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins, something only God can do.

Read (2 Cor 5:19-20).

Understanding the Sacrament of Penance

We can better understand this sacrament by looking more closely at the words Jesus used when he gave it to the Church.

"Peace be with you": This tells us that Jesus was giving the sacrament as a way to have true peace in our lives. Through it he takes away our sins. This helps us to free our guilty conscience which robs the soul of inner peace.

"As the Father has sent me": This reminds us that Jesus was the ambassador of God the Father. An ambassador is someone who is sent by someone else with an important message to deliver. The message Jesus brought to us was the Good News of salvation - the truth that we can be saved from our sins and from Hell if we follow him.

"So I send you": This reminds us of the passage we just read from Saint Paul, where he calls himself and the other priests "Ambassadors of Christ". As the Father had sent Jesus to take away sins, so now Jesus sends his priests to do the same thing.

"Receive the Holy Spirit": Remember that in the Sacrament of Confirmation the Spirit is full of power. This is the power of God which alone can take away sins. When we go to Confession, the priest forgives our sins by the power of the Holy Spirit. He cannot do this on his own because he is a sinful man just as we are, but as a priest he has this power.

"If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them": This tells us that Jesus did give the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation to the apostles. They, in turn, passed this work on to other priests down to our own day. We do not have to wonder whether God forgives us when we go to Confession, for we have Jesus' word that he does!

"If you hold them bound, they are held bound": This reminds us that the priest can also refuse to forgive us our sins. If he asks us to give up a sinful action and we say "no", then he will not give us absolution. Why? Because this shows that we are not really sorry for the sin; we still want to commit it. Our sins can be forgiven only if we are truly sorry and promise to avoid them in the future.

The Sign and Effects of Penance

The sign of Penance - The confession – is made up of two steps –

- i. Telling of sins to the priest - The sign of our confession shows that the sins we are revealing **WILL** be taken away.
- ii. The words of **absolution**, or forgiveness, which the priest says while making the Sign of the Cross over us. The tells us that our sins **ARE** taken away. sign of absolution

The cross which the priest makes over us with his hands reminds us that sins can be forgiven only because Jesus died on the Cross for them.

Effects of Penance –

If we have properly prepared ourselves for this sacrament, God does wonderful things for us.

God takes away the sins we have confessed and restores the life of grace to our souls if we had lost it by mortal sin. When we confess our venial sins, God increases his grace within us and strengthens our friendship with him. Thus, we can receive this sacrament even when we have not broken off our relationship with God by mortal sin. We can either make up for our sins in this life by prayer and acts of penance or in the next life by being purified in Purgatory.

Lastly, in the sacrament of Penance God gives us all the actual graces we need in order to do good and avoid sin in the future. He rewards our honesty in going to Confession by giving us the help we need to overcome the sinful desires and actions we have confessed. For example, if you confess to lying and committing impure actions, God will give you even more strength to be truthful and pure in the days ahead.

How to Make a Good Confession

We need to do five things in order to make a good Confession:

1. Examine your conscience before receiving the sacrament - helps you to recognize all of your sins clearly.
2. Have true sorrow for having sinned and having offended God, who loves us so much. Without true sorrow our sins will not be forgiven.
3. Make a firm resolution to do all you can to avoid sin and occasions of sin in the future
4. Confess your sins to the priest honestly, not trying to hide anything out of shame or embarrassment. Remember that the priest will not yell at you or think you are a terrible person; He is there to give you God's forgiveness, and he is glad that you have had the honesty and courage to come to the sacrament.
5. Do the penance which the priest gives you. .

The Rite of Penance

Greeting - Upon entering the **confessional**, the priest will greet you. You make the Sign of the Cross saying: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Confessing of your sins - The priest then may read a short passage from the Bible or simply tell you to begin confessing your sins. You begin thus –

- How long has it been since your last Confession?
- Reveal your sins, the mortal ones first, if you have committed any.
- Tell the priest how many times you committed a sin and any information that is relevant.

Advice & penance - After you have finished confession, the priest will give you some advice on living a better Christian life and give you your penance. If it is prayer, you should say it before you leave the church. If it is a good deed, try to do it as soon as possible.

Act of contrition /Absolution - Before giving you absolution, he will ask you to show your sorrow by reciting an **Act of Contrition**. He will then say the words of forgiveness: God, the Father of mercies, through the death and Resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Final prayer - He will say goodbye to you with a short prayer that says: "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good," ..you reply: "His mercy endures for ever."

Words to note: sign of penance, confession of sins, absolution, confessional, Act of contrition.