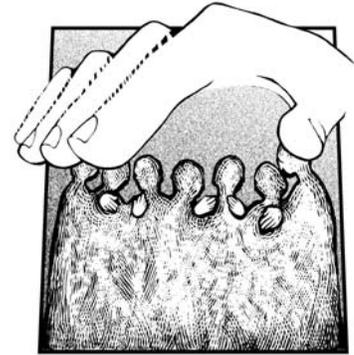


The Sacrament of Penance

Part 1 ∞ Why do we confess our sins?

Despite the fact that multitasking has become the order of the day for most of us, we are amazingly single-minded about tons of other things. When it comes to protecting our children, nothing gets in our way or distracts us. If we are engrossed in a TV show or sports event, we are oblivious even to the cell phone ringing. We also tend to be pretty single-minded about the Sacrament of Penance: we only think of it in terms of sin. But, really, this sacrament has so much more to it than simply confessing a list of sins. It is true: confession includes telling our sins to a priest. But the sacrament is much richer than just this. Let's take the blinders off and look at a wide range of positive fruits of this sacrament.



Relationship & Reconciliation

First of all, we would not think about sin at all if we did not have a number of different relationships. Most important, of course, is our relationship with God. And basic to that relationship is our willingness to surrender ourselves to God's holy will. The basis for this relationship, of course, is our baptismal covenant. Two things about baptism are important for our present consideration. When we are baptized, we enter into a covenantal relationship with God. That means that God is present to us (in fact, is present *within* us through the gift of the Holy Spirit) and is forever faithful in loving us and regarding us as God's beloved daughters and sons. Further, since all of us who are baptized are in relationship with the same God, we are also in relationship with each other. St. Paul says we are all members of the one Body of Christ (see, for example, 1 Cor 12:12-27). We share a common identity and a common grace—the very life of God.

Sometimes, however, we know that we do not do all we can to keep the many relationships we have as strong and loving as they can be. The Sacrament of Penance (through its invitation to prayer, reflection, examination of conscience, acknowledgment of our failings, sincere sorrow, and resolve to change our ways) is an opportunity to restore the weakened covenant and strained relationships. The sacrament involves far more than saying a list of sins to a priest; it also invites us to be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation means repairing weakened or broken relationships; it means bringing together what has been estranged; it means overcoming differences and striving to live in peace and harmony.

Experiencing God's Love

A second fruit of this sacrament flows from the first. Being in relationship with another means experiencing the other as good, desirable, a precious gift. The sacrament is an opportunity to experience the relationship of God's presence, especially God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. As we grow spiritually by the acknowledgment of our failings, then we also grow closer to those with whom we live, work, and spend our leisure time. This sacrament, then, is an occasion to encounter others (especially God), recognize the goodness of the other, and receive the gift of self the other offers us.

This sacrament is not only an expression of God's love, but it is also an expression of our own love for God and others. When we truly love another, we are bothered by anything that causes a rift. Freely acknowledging our failings and seeking forgiveness is really an expression of love. It is a most profound conversion since we turn away from whatever causes pain in a relationship and, hearing the call of Jesus to be faithful followers, we turn toward a renewed commitment to keep our covenantal relationship with God, expressed through our wholesome relationships with others.

Spiritual Growth

Another fruit of this sacrament is a realization that penance is a necessary part of spiritual growth. It isn't enough to confess our sins and then go back to life as usual. This sacrament calls us to discipline ourselves so that whatever weakness causing rifts in our relationship with God and others can be overcome. The positive side of penance and self-discipline is that we surrender ourselves to the greater good of having healthy community with others. To put it another way, we teach ourselves that we are not the center of our world. Doing penance reorients us to what is most important in our lives—those whom we love. Penance establishes patterns of behavior which help us grow in our care for others. In this way, we turn ourselves away from our own selfish desires and needs and begin to regard the other with the new eyes of understanding, respect, and attention.

Joy and Peace

A fourth fruit of the Sacrament of Penance is the joy that comes from knowing we are forgiven and having our weakened relationships restored. This joy is more than a passing feeling. It is a deep sense of happiness that can only come from surrendering ourselves to God's will and the good of others. It is an abiding sense that all is well (even in face of ongoing struggles and difficulties). Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit's dwelling within us (see Gal 5:22). Joy is the product of forgiveness, the abiding sense that past hurts have been overcome and cannot control us or our decisions about the future because we have chosen to let go of the hurts. Joy opens up new creativity about how we express our relationship to God and others.

Sacrament and Sign

Finally, this sacrament reminds us that God does not deal with us humans in the abstract, but in concrete ways that we can perceive through sight and sound and our other senses. This is called the "principle of sacramentality." It means that outward signs perceptible to our senses convey to us inner grace and spiritual realities that are mysteries hidden but nonetheless available to us. The outward sign of confessing our sins to the priest (who is the visible presence of Christ for us as we celebrate the sacrament), expressing our sorrow, and receiving the absolution of the Church are all able to be grasped by us and assure us that God's mercy and forgiveness are, indeed, real and given as gift to us.

This is why we confess our sins: so that we can restore our weakened or broken relationships, experience God's healing presence, strengthen our community bonds, change our way of living, receive the joy of forgiveness. All this is why we want to take our blinders off and see this sacrament in much broader terms than simply confessing sins. All this is why we want to avail ourselves of this most gracious sacrament.

Part 2 Did we always have the sacrament of penance?

How the sacrament of penance developed throughout history.

Part 3 How do we confess?

The forms of the sacrament of penance within the liturgical renewal inaugurated by Vatican II.

Part 4 What do we confess? How we know what sin is?

Coming to that conversion of life that the Sacrament of Penance is really all about.

Part 5 How often and when ought we confess? How we can experience the peace and joy of the sacrament.

Cultivating self-awareness and a reflective attitude about ourselves.



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