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BISHOPS' COMMITTEE ON THE LITURGY

# STUDY TEXT 4

RITE OF PENANCE



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**Study Text IV**

**Commentary on**  
**The Rite of Penance**

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# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....   | 1  |
| I. SIN—PENANCE—RECONCILIATION .....  | 3  |
| The Consciousness and Experience of Sin .....  | 3  |
| The Practice of Penance Today .....  | 6  |
| The Church: Sign and Ministry of Reconciliation..  | 7  |
| Why a Sacrament of Reconciliation? .....   | 9  |
| Why a Celebration of Reconciliation? .....   | 12 |
| II. PASTORAL COMMENTARY ON THE<br>RITE OF PENANCE .....                                    | 15 |
| General Orientation .....  | 15 |
| The Mystery of Reconciliation in the<br>History of Salvation .....                         | 17 |
| The Reconciliation of Penitents in the<br>Life of the Church .....                         | 19 |
| Offices and Ministries in the<br>Reconciliation of Penitents .....                         | 22 |
| The Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance .....  | 23 |
| III. THREE FORMS OF CELEBRATION .....  | 27 |
| The Reconciliation of Individual Penitents .....   | 27 |
| The Reconciliation of Several Penitents with<br>Individual Confession and Absolution ..... | 32 |
| The Reconciliation of Several Penitents with<br>General Confession and Absolution .....    | 36 |
| IV. APPENDIX .....   | 40 |
| A Suggested Bibliography .....   | 40 |



## Introduction

Study Text IV is being made available as diocesan liturgical commissions, parish liturgy committees, study groups, teachers, confessors, and faithful turn their attention to the preparation needed for a proper and fruitful implementation of the new rite for the celebration of the sacrament of penance.

Fourth in the series of study texts, this booklet provides a practical explanation of the *Ordo Paenitentiae* (Rite of Penance) as promulgated by the Congregation for Divine Worship on December 2, 1973 and approved in English translation by the Apostolic See on March 11, 1975. It is the hope of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy that this study text will help place the celebration of penance in its proper place within the pastoral practice of the Christian community.

It is suggested that a copy of the Rite of Penance be referred to as the material of Study Text IV is studied. In addition to a general treatment of sin, penance and reconciliation, this booklet offers a pastoral commentary on the introduction to the new rite along with a thorough discussion of the three forms of sacramental reconciliation.



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# I. Sin—Penance—Reconciliation

“I have not come to invite the self-righteous to a change of heart, but sinners” (Luke 5:32). More than ever these words of the Lord compel Christians to rethink their perception of the Gospel and the whole task of pastoral ministry. In a world torn by division, and in an age in which even the Church is not exempt from conflict and division, Christ’s words and life’s ministry are still present and meaningful. The Lord still calls men and women to conversion, repentance and reconciliation. Thus the new Rite of Penance, the last major section of the Roman Ritual to be reformed, comes at a time when it is most needed.

After ten years of liturgical reform, the Church is still learning that the praise and worship of the Lord depend on our lives being transformed by the healing and reconciling grace of God. The experience of conversion, expressed liturgically and sacramentally, is as central to the life of the Christian as is the recognition of sinfulness and dependence on God. To come to the Lord as worshippers “in spirit and in truth” Christians must at the same time change their way of life, repent and believe.

The new Rite of Penance is central to good liturgical reform and as such will be a rich source for the pastoral ministry. The various options, the possibility of three different rites, the centrality of the scriptures, the warmth and prayerful dialogue envisioned by the rites, all underline the fact that the Church’s ministry is one of healing, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Underscoring the new Rite of Penance is a broader and deeper understanding of sin and sinfulness. If the word of God is a call to conversion, it is therefore a challenge to men and women to recognize the human condition and predicament. Conversion implies change and so a movement away from sin. The bible enables one to recognize the presence of sin, its true meaning and extent, and to understand one’s involvement in evil. Hearing the word of God, hearing the call to repentance, makes man conscious that he is indeed a sinner, that he is weak and in

1

THE CONSCIOUSNESS AND  
EXPERIENCE OF SIN

need of healing—that he must choose. For only in hearing God’s word can man understand the need for salvation.

Many people are asking: “Whatever became of sin?” Pastors wonder about it when confronted with the statistics of the decline in confessional practice. Are people no longer conscious of sin? Has responsibility for one’s acts been completely transferred outside the individual person to the realm of behavioral determinism? Does the word “sin” even have any meaning today? And in any case, why confess one’s sins in intimacy to another human being?

Undoubtedly, the fact that such questions are even asked demonstrates the change that has taken place in moral consciousness. Likewise, the scope and extent of penitential practice has always been a barometer of the moral environment of a society. So where are we today? Are we witnessing a moral decline of great magnitude, or a change (for better or worse?) in our understanding of sinfulness?

The change has been neither sudden nor recent, for one thing. Rather, there has been a gradual and progressive movement away from the idea that sin can only be measured as an individual and personal transgression of some law or precept. A good case can be made for the notion that moral consciousness has really developed and deepened in our time. For the meaning of sin has often in the past been too narrow and too limited to the individual act. We are witnessing today not only a new consciousness of the individual but also a newer awareness of the corporate responsibility of all men and women for the condition of society. The shocking and wretched misery of so many human beings, problems of peace, justice, oppression and hunger are now posed as personal and corporate questions of conscience. They are the responsibility of all human society. This change in consciousness has also contributed to a change in the concept of sin. However two factors continue to obscure the problem.

Moral theologies of the past often confused sin and moral fault, identifying one with the other, because of constant reference to precise individual acts and catalogues of sin. In a legalistic moral theology, where value is defined in terms of what is allowed and what is forbidden and in which God is seen almost exclusively as legislator and judge, sin became identified

with the transgression of rules and commandments, divine or ecclesiastical. As a consequence, conversion came to be understood as that process of “getting back in good order,” but always with reference to an external set of rules.

The same process can be observed in a moral theology of intention in which human values are seen as ideals. Sin is then understood as failing to live up to those ideals. In such a theology, the person of Christ becomes viewed as that of an idealist and do-gooder. Good behavior and human idealism are projected on to his person and ministry. Conversion in such a system is not radical; it simply means living up to a vague ideal.

Neither system says enough about the biblical idea of conversion as radical transformation of one’s life. Jesus was not content simply to announce the Kingdom. His whole ministry brought the power of the Kingdom to bear on all human activity, thus dealing a blow to such comfortable ideas that man is self-sufficient, or that riches (Mark 10:21-25) or pride (Luke 18:9) can solve a person’s problems. For Jesus conversion is the return of the total person to God, becoming a “little child” (Matthew 18:3 *passim*) who depends totally on the Father. Human existence must be measured and arranged according to this new law of love and dependence. Thus conversion is *transformation*, and necessarily means a change in human conduct.

We live in explosive times, an era in which traditions, ideas and ideologies which took and kept shape for so long, are giving way. However, the rapid change which modern men and women are experiencing today has, as a consequence, caused deep feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Thus a displacement of moral consciousness has taken place with regard to ancient references. No longer is it viable to consider good Christian conduct as mere conformity to a set of rules. Likewise, dearly held values of the past, e.g., power, comfort, order, security—all are being contested.

What remains constant, however, is both the consciousness of evil and the aspiration for good. We are witnessing a creative dissatisfaction in man with ordinary and useless ways of doing things, arranging the world, and solving problems. Such a dissatisfaction is leading mankind in new and different directions and is changing men and women, not always for the better, but changing them nonetheless.

Change in sacramental practice is symptomatic of the broader change in human consciousness. Undoubtedly, the central role once played by the sacrament of penance is no longer the same, nor as important as it once was. Many Catholics have given up the practice of monthly confession. Priests and religious have set aside weekly confession. Yet accompanying the decline in number and frequency of confessions has been the steady, and to some, startling increase in the number of communions. At any given Sunday eucharistic assembly, the majority of people receive communion. One of the most basic reasons for this development is the fact that Catholics no longer see a necessary link between confession and communion. Nor did frequent confession in the past necessarily imply frequent communion. Too often Catholics felt unworthy to receive communion at Mass even though they had recently confessed.

Penitential practice has changed for many reasons. The constant repetition of the "same old sins," the impersonalism of the confessional, the all too frequent short shrift given to penitents in the confessional, the new sense of freedom among Catholics—all are factors in the change of climate and status of the sacrament of penance. But perhaps the most important element has been in the understanding given to the notion of "serious" or "mortal" sin. The obscurity of meaning surrounding the idea of sin is closely tied to the decrease in confessional practice, and to the evolution of both moral consciousness and moral theology.

Changes in moral theology were not always perceived in terms of any evolution in ecclesiology. People have grasped certain ideas of the "new" moral theology without also understanding the theology of the Church which supports those ideas. Thus if people believe it is more difficult to be involved in mortal or deadly sin than we had hitherto supposed, the very need for the sacrament of penance is then questioned. After all, if I am not in serious sin why do I have to confess to a priest? What is there to confess? The problem here is ecclesiological.

God's merciful kindness cannot be conceived only in terms of deadly sin but as the condition and climate of Christian thinking and of human relations. The Church exists not as a structure to organize society but as the witness and continuation of the healing presence of the Lord in the world. The Church

is a reconciling community, in which all Christians must constantly recognize the need to establish peace through mutual forgiveness and by being a sign of forgiveness for all men and women. Within the Church, through her sacraments, Christians realize the mutual support needed in the ongoing task of change of heart. Reconciliation itself is an ecclesial, sacramental reality in which all Christians are engaged. This has not always been understood in recent centuries. The new rite of reconciliation comes, then, at a time when it is most needed. But why reconciliation?

If moral responsibility in both the personal and collective spheres of human activity is a crucial issue in the modern world, so is the issue of peace, mutual forgiveness, healing, in a word, reconciliation. For reconciliation conceived in terms of peace and healing, and forgiveness, reaches into our inner souls in a more profound manner than any other reality dealt with in the Church's liturgical/pastoral renewal. The reform of penance gets at the heart of our personal and civic lives and challenges us to move in a different direction. The new Rite enables us to see the Church as a reconciling community, the sign of God's healing presence in the world, a Church charged with a ministry of reconciliation.

The very relevance of the Church is in question today. So the question, Why reconciliation? must be coupled with the question, Why Church?

Human liberation is a key issue of our age. It is the key issue of the Gospel. The freedom of minorities and colonial peoples, the liberation of women, and the very freedom of all men and women living in free societies in which economic competitiveness leads all too frequently to economic victimization and enslavement are all facets of the problem of human liberation. What has the Church, which claims to have received the Spirit of freedom, done in this area is a question many ask. One view of history would lead us to believe it has done exceedingly little, and therefore deserves to be phased out of existence or forgotten.

If one looks at the past, at times it might be hard to see how the Church has significantly contributed to human development and freedom. The disaffection of many Christians is due

3

THE CHURCH: SIGN AND  
MINISTRY OF  
RECONCILIATION

to a view of history which maintains that from generation to generation Christians have not improved and that the Church has not progressively evolved over the centuries into a better and more perfect institution. Rather, it would seem that the evidence demonstrates that the Church, as with all human institutions, has had its bad as well as good periods. If the Church is truly the community of believers committed to bringing the freedom of Christ, why has humanity changed so little in two thousand years? Despite technological advancement there are the same wars, the same forces of oppression, the same hunger and injustice, and a solution hardly seems in sight. What has the Church done?

The liberation wrought by God in Jesus Christ is the central message of the Gospel and spiritual liberation can be signified by human freedom. The prophets of Israel announced liberation by rising up against the forces of oppression of their times but they did so in each generation in differing historical circumstances. They proclaimed that the message of liberation is achieved through personal conversion.

Conversion is simply not transmittable from one generation to the next. Each generation of Christians must be converted and changed. Thus the re-creation of humanity is a work that each generation must attempt because the Kingdom is near at hand. While their spirit may be transmitted, freedom and love are not a heritage which can be handed down from one era to the next. The Church, then, in each age must be a sign and cause of forgiveness and conversion for that age.

The Church's task to be a sign of reconciliation means that it must engage in a ministry of reconciliation. The Good News is a message of hope, ". . . that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them, and he has entrusted this message of reconciliation to us" (II Corinthians 5:19). Through Christ and in him all things, all creation is reconciled and is at peace "both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of the cross" (Colossians 1:20). The process begun in Adam's fall is gloriously reversed for all creation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ (*See* Romans 8:19-22). The very worship of God depends upon our reconciliation with one another for one "who has no love for the brother he has seen, cannot love the God

he has not seen . . . whoever loves God, must also love his brother” (I John 4:20b, 21; Matthew 5:23 ff).

The Church’s task, or ministry, is to announce reconciliation and peace to all men and women and to bring it about sacramentally. Not infrequently the question is raised: “Why can I not confess directly to God?” “Why must I confess to a priest of the Church?” Questions of this type open up a much broader area for consideration. What must be discussed is one’s membership to a particular community (the local church), the effect one’s sinfulness has upon it, and how one is reconciled with the church community and with God when one has sinned seriously. Implied in the priest’s ministry of forgiveness in the sacrament of penance is certainly the idea that the Father has given all judgment to the Son and that Christ in turn has given judgment to the Apostles and their successors in the priesthood (See John 20:22). Thus all judgment on sin is ultimately the Father’s judgment, ministered by Christ and by the Apostles and by their successors in the Church. The actual submission of the sinner (who has turned penitent) to the Church through the Rite of Penance configures the sinner to Christ Himself who willingly submitted to the Father’s judgment on sin, “even to accepting death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

The introduction to the new rite of penance does not only pose the question, How? The real question is one of attitude: Why a Sacrament of Reconciliation? Why the insistence in the new rite on reconciliation?

In order to answer these questions we must first look at the whole question of the vocabulary of the sacrament.

Names and titles are sometimes more important than we think. The fact that the sacrament has been called “confession” for so long both in popular and technical theological language tells us a great deal about the popular perception of the sacrament. Even though its official title was “penance,” the term “confession” has been most extensively used. The new rite proposes a third title, that of “reconciliation,” while still retaining “penance” as the generic name of the ritual.

The rite continues to use “penance” since it is an ancient title and was canonized, as it were, by the Councils of Florence <sup>1</sup>

4

WHY A SACRAMENT OF  
RECONCILIATION?

—A NEW VOCABULARY

and Trent.<sup>2</sup> The rite does not contain only the sacramental rites of reconciliation but also presents a variety of non-sacramental celebrations which, while penitential in character, are not sacramental celebrations. The broader title of Rite of Penance also embraces these celebrations. But why not “Confession?”

—CONFESSIO

In English, “confess” has many meanings. First of all, it signifies “admitting one’s sins in confession.” The full sense of “confession” in the earliest Christian usage not only meant the recognition and self-accusation of sins committed against God and neighbor but also the praise of God (*confessio laudis*), and the affirmation of faith (*confessio fidei*).<sup>3</sup> These three meanings form a totality when the word is used in the scriptures, particularly in the psalms. The early Latin Christians gave a new meaning to “confiteri” by attaching to it the biblical notions of confession of praise and faith (*confessio laudis et fidei*). In pre-Christian Latin *confiteri*—it should be pointed out—had primarily a juridical connotation, that is, to recognize a fault or debt before a judge. By linking the biblical ideas to the Latin juridical term, Christians gave the world the fuller meaning of accusation and praise.

During the age of persecutions “confession of faith” (*confessio fidei*) became the primary meaning. Later on, the confession of sins held first place. Already Augustine lamented that “confession” was becoming too restricted in use to mean confession of sin, and attributed this usage to the fact that the faithful were deficient in biblical formation.<sup>4</sup> Of course, in our own time and since the early middle ages confession has meant *only* confession of sins. *Confessio* in its fullest and richest sense has been nearly forgotten.

—PENANCE AND METANOIA

Confession of sins is only one aspect of the sacrament of penance, even when the term is used to express its full significance. For the terms “penance” and “metanoia” bring out another important element—conversion.

In the New Testament, *metanoia* is used principally by Luke in the third Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. In Greek literature the term denotes repentance, often of some misdemeanor. “The Jewish background of *metanoia* focuses attention on the deeply interior quality of repentance. For the



Synoptics some kind of interior renewal must accompany forgiveness of sins.”<sup>5</sup>

The first Latin Christians translated *metanoia* with *paenitentia* which in classical Latin designated regret for something which happened (for example, Cicero employs the word when speaking about regret of old age). They gave the term a new and exclusively moral meaning, that is, conversion of life. To “do penance” (*paenitentiam agere*) was a Christian way of translating *metanoiein*.<sup>6</sup>

For the ancient Church the sacrament of penance was the *paenitentia secunda* or second conversion, as baptism was the first *metanoia*. Augustine’s catechesis distinguished three kinds of penance: baptism or first penance, the sacrament of penance for serious sins, and ordinary penitential discipline (for example, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, etc.) which must be a central part of living according to the Gospel for every Christian.

As with the terms penance and conversion, “reconciliation” is also an ancient term for the sacrament under consideration. Its roots are Pauline and behind it lies the Old Testament idea of atonement. Basically, reconciliation signifies the restoration of harmony between man and God, the healing of the situation of alienation which exists in man without God (*See* Ephesians 2:12). Sin creates alienation and expiation brings about reconciliation. Paul viewed reconciliation in terms of man and God, man and his fellows (I Corinthians 7:11; Matthew 5:24), and between Jew and Gentile (Romans 11:7-32; Ephesians 2-3).

—RECONCILIATION

In Romans 5:8-11 the estrangement between God and man is described as enmity, a kind of objective hatred: “the broken relationship is a gulf needing to be bridged.”<sup>7</sup> Only divine love can rectify the situation. It is not God’s attitude which must be changed, but man’s. For God hates sin but not the sinner. Paul stresses the fact that it is the actual death and resurrection of Christ which effects reconciliation and that this death is an act of God on man’s behalf and is in no way a form of human propitiation offered by man to God. For God “reconciled us to himself” (II Corinthians 5:18), and God in Christ reconciled the whole cosmos to himself.<sup>8</sup>

It is Christ, therefore, who is the agent of reconciliation, and it is Christ’s death and resurrection which brings it about. Ac-

According to Paul the Church possesses a ministry of reconciliation, for it has received the message of peace to bring to the world, "the gospel of peace" (See Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15).<sup>9</sup>

The use of the term "reconciliation" to describe the sacrament is ancient. The *Gelasian Sacramentary* (VIIth century) already speaks of the reconciliation of a penitent and gives prayers for the occasion. A prayer for the reconciliation of a penitent at time of death asks God to admit the penitent to the sacrament of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> The XIIIth century pontifical of the Roman Curia includes prayers of absolution under the same generic title.<sup>11</sup>

The roots for the term "reconciliation" are earlier still for in the ancient Church the central liturgical act in the sacrament of penance was the reconciliation of the sinner, the restoration of his role in the ecclesial assembly.<sup>12</sup> Reconciliation designated the sacramental act by which the Christian was re-introduced into the Christian community once the period of penance had been fulfilled.<sup>13</sup> The term then has the advantage of being both biblical and rooted in the earliest liturgical tradition of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

5  
WHY A CELEBRATION  
OF RECONCILIATION?

All Christian existence is situated in the context of the covenant established in Christ between God and man, a covenant which is expressed in ecclesial and sacramental realities. Thus was penance understood in the primitive Church. The earliest witnesses of the sacrament, Hermas and Tertullian, saw penance as a distinct reality, a kind of second baptism for the pardon and remission of post-baptismal sin, received only once in a lifetime. And even though the sacrament has changed a great deal throughout the centuries, the one common denominator has always been that penance is for the pardon of sins. Cutting through all the names and titles, pardon is the one constant factor. Thus the Church has always believed that through the sacramental action of her minister God effects the pardon of sins.

All pardon, all reconciliation comes from the Father through Christ's death on the condition of faith.<sup>15</sup> But Christian faith is faith in the word of God, a word which is visible and tangible because it is audible in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Because the word is alive and accessible to the senses, the economy of salvation, the covenant, implies structures which are in continuity with the incarnation. The totality of these covenant-structures coming from the Father's love constitute a sacramental universe: Christ is the primordial sacrament, the sign of God's living and working presence in the world. The Church is thus the sacrament of salvation present in the name and power of Jesus Christ, and the sacraments themselves are this presence made visible in the dimensions of human existence. While baptism is concerned to insert men and women into the sacramental universe of Christ's presence through reconciliation and the pardon of sins, penance is concerned to re-insert the baptized into a dynamism weakened or lost through sin, the dynamism of relationships with God and other persons.

In the new covenant all relationships are lived and expressed in sacramental, signifying terms. If such are the structures of the new covenant then we must recognize that there is no road to salvation which does not pass through the sacramental universe of Christ-Church-sacraments. For every gift of God has by its very nature an ecclesial dimension. A gift is not given to any one individual but to a person insofar as he is a member of the body of Christ. The sacraments are not an appendix to God's grace but they belong to the very dynamism of grace whose expression they are.

Once we understand the covenant and Christian life in sacramental terms then there is no opposition between life and sacrament. They are the same dynamism. Conversion/lived-reconciliation and conversion/celebrated-reconciliation are one and the same.

Baptism is the sacrament of birth into a reconciled existence within a reconciled community, the Church. Penance acts as a re-insertion into this life and community, a re-insertion into the dynamism of one's baptism. For the sinner belongs to the Church and the Church, the servant of Christ, is the sacrament of reconciliation. A Christian is not converted by himself but only with reference to and within the reconciling community, the Church, for it is a people whom God has called and with whom he has made a covenant. *Conversion is a reality of the community* and not simply of the individual; the individual is converted within

the community. Thus the converted and reconciled sinner himself becomes a sign of God's love, and so, a reconciler.

Truly repentant, the sinner is reconciled with God and the Church. The sacrament of reconciliation is a moment in the *visible celebration* of conversion in the Church, a celebration of the initiative of God's love in Christ to reconcile all things to himself. The sacrament itself is the celebration of repentance, conversion, and reconciliation.

The celebration of reconciliation, therefore, is a part of a dynamic process of interior and exterior reconciliation lived concretely by the Christian. What is celebrated in the sacrament by minister and community is that the initiative of conversion and the fact of reconciliation have come not from man but from God. Yet at the same time the sacrament is a new gift, for what the word of God says, it does in the action of the Church's minister here and now: the sacrament does not simply reaffirm that which God has already done but rather grants pardon here and now in a new way, as part of the ongoing process of reconciliation begun in Christ.

In the sacrament of penance God achieves and seals a reconciliation wrought in Christ at his initiative through a celebration of forgiveness on a human level. The sacrament is a gift because it is the expression, the celebration, of a new and progressive encounter between a forgiving God and a repentant person.

<sup>1</sup> See Denzinger—Schönmetzer 1323 (Hereafter = DS).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1667-1693.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre-Marie Gy, "Les noms ont une importance," *Pénitence et Réconciliation Aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1974, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Sermon XXIV, 2,2.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll Stuhlmueller, "The Gospel According to Luke," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 44-46.

<sup>6</sup> Gy, *op. cit.*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> G. Buttrick (gen. ed.), *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, New York, 1958, 215-217.

<sup>9</sup> See V. Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 83-129.

<sup>10</sup> L. C. Mohlberg, *Sacramentarium Gelasianum* IV, nos. 83, 349, 354 ("reconciliationis gratiam"), 360, 367.

<sup>11</sup> M. Andrieu, *Le Pontifical de la Curie Romaine*, II, XLVII, nos. 1-6, 484-486.

<sup>12</sup> An earlier term for *reconciliare* was *dare pacem*. See Cyprian of Carthage, *On Modesty*, 10, 31-96 and the study by J. Ramos-Regidor, "Reconciliation in the Primitive Church and Its Lessons for Theology and Pastoral Practice Today," *Concilium* 61 (1971) 76-88.

<sup>13</sup> Gy, *op. cit.*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> DS 1520-1550

## II. Pastoral Commentary on the Rite of Penance

In this section our aim is threefold: (1) to situate the sacrament of reconciliation within the totality of the Christian mystery and in the life of the Church; (2) to offer a descriptive analysis of the various sections of the Rite of Penance; (3) to grapple with some of the pastoral questions and problems of implementation. In doing so we use the General Introduction to the revised rite as our source. It is a basic document written in the language of the scriptures and the Fathers, yet attentive to the discoveries of contemporary human sciences. It is suggested that you have the Introduction handy as you read and study the following matter.

The Latin, typical edition of the *Ordo Paenitentiae* consists of 120 pages. After the decree of promulgation, there is a General Introduction (*Praenotanda*) consisting of forty sections. The *Ordo* is then divided into three chapters:

- A. Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents (nos. 41-47);
- B. Rite of Reconciliation for Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution (nos. 48-59);
- C. Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution (nos. 60-66).

The fourth chapter is a collection of various texts, readings and prayers, which may be used in the three rites (nos. 67-214). Two appendices follow. The first is for the absolution from censures and for the dispensation from irregularity. The second appendix consists in models of non-sacramental penitential celebrations for various occasions and groups, for example for children, teenagers, Lent, Advent. Finally the third appendix presents a schema for an examination of conscience.

The Introduction not only describes how each rite is to be celebrated but also gives general orientations necessary for the implementation of the rite.

1

GENERAL ORIENTATIONS

—*ROOTED IN DAILY LIFE*

First of all, this new ritual of penance is an invitation to restore the sacrament within the total dynamism of Christian existence (nos. 3-5). For the sacrament of penance and reconciliation to be a truly effective instrument it must be rooted in the daily lives of Christians leading them to a renewed and deeper commitment to the service of the Lord and of their brothers and sisters.

—*ACTIVITY OF THE CHURCH*

The new Rite of Penance recognizes and underlines the necessary role of the Christian community in the sacramental act. Each of the three rites underscores the ecclesial dimensions of the sacrament, as does the new form of absolution. It is to the entire Church as priestly people of God, acting in diverse ways, that the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted (no. 8). The action of the minister is not isolated from the Christian community, for “the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors” (no. 8).

—*GENUINELY PERSONAL*

Likewise the personal dimensions of penance and reconciliation are given fresh emphasis. This rite is concerned with such human signs as greeting, welcoming, kindness and generally putting penitents at their ease, so that fruitful dialogue may take place in a spirit of Christian charity. This more open setting can also be an efficacious sign of the Church’s concern for the individual person. Incentives for personal prayer within each of the three rites help to underscore the personal dimensions of the sacrament.

—*SCRIPTURALLY ENRICHED*

A more organic place is made for the word of God in all three rites. This is in response to one of the most fundamental principles of the liturgical renewal initiated by the Council. “In sacred celebrations there is to be more reading from scripture, and it is to be more varied and suitable.”<sup>1</sup> The scriptures are not simply “used” to give the sacrament a more “biblical look.” Rather, reconciliation is seen as a call and challenge directly flowing from the Gospel. Thus, reading the scriptures is not limited to the communal forms of celebrations, but it also forms part of the central core of the reconciliation of individual penitents.

Finally, the rite presents a diversity of forms of celebration. The ritual proposes four types of celebration: three sacramental, one non-sacramental. The Rite of Penance is a call for personal and social penance and conversion. It commits us to a whole life of reconciliation with God and with our neighbor. The sacrament of penance and reconciliation is only one aspect of the Christian life. By celebrating the sacrament from time to time, the Christian engages himself in the task of conforming oneself more to Christ. Thus the rite challenges Christians to such practices as mutual forgiveness, fasting, struggling against injustice, prayer and a spirit of hope.

The first section of the Introduction draws a sketch of the history of salvation, salvation basically seen as “reconciliation.” The background is Pauline. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who, through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us a ministry of reconciliation. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Reconciliation means setting right the estrangement that exists between God and man; an alienation which causes the hostility and strife that mar human relationships. God is the initiator of reconciliation and Christ is the means. Man becomes a new creation because God does not reckon his sins against him. More specifically, this re-ordering of relations is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The Church possesses such a ministry because reconciliation is the heart of the mystery of salvation, and because Jesus himself practiced a ministry of reconciliation: He came to free all men and women from the slavery of sin<sup>4</sup> and to call them out of darkness into light.<sup>5</sup> Salvation is the intervention of God in man’s history to liberate him from sin, to enable man to be at peace within his own being, so that peaceful order (*shalom*) may be established between man and God and be the ground upon which all human relations are founded.

Thus the imperative of the Gospel, “Repent, and believe the Good News,”<sup>6</sup> is a call to continual faith and conversion. The imperative stems from the nearness of the Kingdom, of which the presence of Jesus is the sign, his death and resurrection the beginning and means. The whole Gospel is really concerned with reconciliation and the work of Jesus toward that end.

2

THE MYSTERY OF  
RECONCILIATION IN THE  
HISTORY OF SALVATION  
(NOS. 1-2)

—THE GOSPEL

The call to repentance and reconciliation established the prophetic dimension of the Good News. Thus we see the interdependence of the terms, healing, forgiveness, repentance, conversion and reconciliation.<sup>7</sup> For Jesus' ministry of healing is itself a ministry of reconciliation. When he forgave sinners it was nearly always in a context of healing, physical and spiritual.

The essential kerygma of forgiveness, penance and reconciliation of the Gospel is also the kerygma of the primitive Church. The Spirit was given to the Church by Christ so that Jesus' ministry of reconciliation be continued in time. The Church's ministry does not exist apart from Christ's for it is evangelical. Thus, the kerygmatic sermons of Peter and Paul,<sup>8</sup> the preaching of the early Church, are calls to conversion and peace with God. The gift of the keys must be seen within this evangelical context.

—*BAPTISM*

The preaching of forgiveness and reconciliation is brought about effectively through sign. Section two of the Introduction to the revised rite is concerned to situate the sacrament of penance in the total sacramental context of the Church. Baptism, "the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins," is the fundamental sacrament of conversion and reconciliation in which the victory of Christ over sin and death is shared with all who repent and believe. For by baptism all die in Christ and rise with him to new life.<sup>9</sup> Baptism places us in a new situation which totally changes our old relationship to God, it separates us from our old self. For Paul the depth of meaning of baptism comes from reflection upon the liturgy. As we go down into the water, we enter the tomb and are buried with Christ. Rising clean from the waters of baptism we are raised with Christ in his resurrection.<sup>10</sup> Thus, beginning with our conversion, baptism makes us new creatures.

—*THE EUCHARIST*

The eucharist proclaims and effects our reconciliation and peace with the Father. For Christ's death and resurrection has reconciled us to God.<sup>11</sup> His sacrifice made our peace with God so that "we may be brought together in unity."<sup>12</sup> The Mass, the sacrifice of Christ, brings about forgiveness of sins "so that if we draw near to God with an upright heart and true faith, with fear and reverence, with sorrow and repentance through the Mass we may obtain mercy . . . for by this oblation the Lord is ap-



peased, he grants grace and the gift of repentance, and he pardons wrongdoings and sins, even grave ones.”<sup>13</sup>

The sacrament of penance forms part of a sacramental triad. As baptism is the “first washing” so penance, in the tradition of Hermas, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose and Augustine, is a “second baptism,” a baptism of forgiveness granted through the tears of repentance. As Ambrose says, the Church “possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of repentance.”<sup>14</sup>

“The Church is holy but always in need of purification” (no. 3). Since the mystery of salvation is essentially a mystery of God’s reconciling love, reconciliation must always take first place in the life of the Church, its worship, and in Christian action and life. The Church is holy with the holiness of Christ, but it is a Church of sinners in continual need of reform.<sup>15</sup>

“Penance in the Church’s Life and Liturgy” (no. 4). God’s people must be a sign of conversion and peace to all the nations of the world. So the work of penance and reconciliation must be expressed in a variety of ways. The liturgy must be the expression of the perpetual purification and conversion in which the Christian community is engaged in its pastoral ministry of service and charity.

“The Purpose of Penance and Reconciliation” (no. 5). The first purpose is reconciliation with God. Sin is disruptive, it breaks our friendship with God. That is why the ultimate purpose of penance is deeper love and friendship of God, as Pope Paul has pointed out in his Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*.<sup>16</sup>

Penance brings about reconciliation with others. Men and women are bound together in a common bond of solidarity so that what each person does affects the other. Reconciliation with God is dependent upon reconciliation with others. For we cannot love the God we do not see if we do not love the brother whom we do see (*See* I John 4:20).

The new Rite of Penance brings out this concept of solidarity very well. Not only are individuals sinful, but nations and other social groups also sin, for “men frequently join together to commit injustice” (no. 5). But there is solidarity in

—PENANCE

3  
THE RECONCILIATION OF  
PENITENTS IN THE LIFE  
OF THE CHURCH (NOS. 3-7)

—THE PURPOSE OF PENANCE

grace as well as in sin, and this is the basis for communal celebrations, for any celebration of reconciliation.

—THE ESSENTIAL PARTS OF  
THE SACRAMENT

“The Sacrament of Penance and Its Parts” (no. 6). This section is basically a repetition of the Thomistic and Tridentine doctrine of the parts of the sacrament placed in an evangelical and patristic context. On God’s initiative the sinner responds by seeking inner conversion. The inner conversion is expressed by:

*Contrition.* This is the first and the most important act of the penitent. For one who has cut himself off from God it is the start of a renewed life in Christ, the first act in the interior process of reconciliation. God’s grace is given in an act of illumination so that the sinner may see herself or himself as he/she really is and not in terms of a false self-image. Contrition, then, is not simple remorse for sin, but a cold, hard (sometimes brutal) look at oneself in terms of self, others and God. Contrition is the first step of conversion.

*Confession.* Illumined by the Spirit, the sinner can make an avowal of guilt and self-accusation. Confession is the willingness to admit things to oneself, compelling one to be open to God in the presence of the Church’s minister. Thus confession implies self-knowledge on the part of the penitent and a certain sensitivity and spirit of discernment on the part of the confessor.

*Act of Penance.* God’s gift of forgiveness is free and unconditional. Satisfaction is not made to appease God, but to set things right between oneself and others, oneself and the Church. Thus the act of penance should imply and express satisfaction for faults, improvement of conduct, reparation for injury, that is, it should be a healing remedy for renewal and a new beginning. The confessor should not make the act of penance a mere repetition of prayers (three Hail Marys, etc.), but truly make it an act of penance.

*Absolution.* God uses visible signs to express his love and mercy. His Son is the ultimate visible and tangible expression of this love. So too the absolution which the Church grants through its minister is a sign that God pardons the penitent who confesses his sins. It is a sign of *God’s* initiative. Even before the prodigal son came on his father’s property, the father ran out to embrace and forgive him. And so he spread before him a banquet. Abso-

lution in the sacrament of reconciliation thus leads to the eucharist where the Father's love for mankind is fully celebrated.

"The Necessity and Benefit of the Sacrament" (no. 7). In presenting reconciliation as the essence of the sacrament of penance, the new Rite of Penance poses several problems which it might be good at this point to discuss.

—NEED FOR PENANCE

Reconciliation is necessary if there is a rupture or break in either the relationship between the penitent and God or between the penitent and others. But if it is simply a question of a lack of attention towards others, petty manifestations of egotism, or of what has been called venial sin, why then a sacrament of reconciliation? Is this term not too restrictive? The problem is not dealt with in the Introduction. Rather it repeats Trent's doctrine: "To obtain the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, according to the plan of our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin which they remember upon examination of conscience." Nevertheless, where the Council says *iure divino* the revised text says "according to the plan of our merciful God" which is less juridical; and in place of mortal sin the Introduction speaks of grave sin. The expression "mortal sin" does not appear once in the entire document.<sup>18</sup>

Frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament (no. 7b) does not necessarily imply the repetition of the same confession of sins nor the exercise of psychology for the correction of faults, but "a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism." The concern is not so much for this or that particular minor sin, as for one's state of sinfulness, the weakness that is the lot of every human person. The sacrament might be celebrated frequently so that one's likeness to Christ might be further perfected, so that one might be more open to the action of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, whether the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is useful to some or necessary for others, it is always a proclamation of the Church's faith in the mercy of God and an act of thanksgiving for the freedom given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The sacrament thus possesses both a eucharistic and an eschatological perspective.

The ministry of reconciliation belongs to the whole Church, the Church as priestly people reconciled to God. For each Christian must be at peace with his brother to worship the Lord. Christian service (*diakonia*) and charity (*agape*) demand that we help one another recognize ourselves and our faults, that we be solicitous for the welfare of one another, and for the whole world. Thus each Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, must be involved in a ministry (*diakonia*) of reconciliation.

The Church becomes the instrument of conversion and absolution through the ministry entrusted to it by Christ to the apostles and their successors (*See* Matthew 18:18; John 20:23). For while recognizing that all Christians engage in a ministry of peace and reconciliation, the Church believes that it is empowered to grant the forgiveness of the Father in the name of Jesus Christ. "The universal agreement of the Fathers has always understood that by such striking action (the gift of the Holy Spirit: Acts 2:38; John 20:22ff) and by such clear words the power of remitting and retaining sins, and of reconciling the faithful who have fallen after baptism was communicated to the Apostles and to their legitimate successors."<sup>19</sup>

—THE PERSON OF THE  
MINISTER

"The Minister of the Sacrament of Penance" (no. 9). The minister of reconciliation is no abstraction. The personal dimensions of the celebration stand or fall to a significant measure with the person of the minister, the priest-confessor. Beyond juridical competence (faculties, etc.), the rite looks for other qualities. For the confessor is not merely a judge, a passive listener or dispenser of absolution.<sup>20</sup> Rather he is a man who should be able to "understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them" (no. 10a).

Qualities such as discernment and wisdom are necessary in the minister if he is to understand the state and condition of the penitent, but so are warmth, friendliness, and availability. For the confessor must "reveal the heart of the Father and show the image of Christ the Good Shepherd" (no. 10c). He must be a man steeped in the scriptures and in both personal and liturgical prayer. The trust and intimacy of the celebration of the sacrament always demands the inviolability of the sacramental seal of confession.

“The Penitent” (no. 11). If the new rite is demanding on the minister (definitely implying a reform both of attitude and of method), it is no less challenging to the penitent. Perhaps the newest attitude for the penitent will be for him to realize that in the sacrament of penance he is engaged in the celebration of a liturgy, a liturgical encounter between himself and the Lord.

Confessions without sufficient preparation impede and hinder true celebration. Close attention to personal peccadillos without consideration of one’s broader responsibilities to obey the Gospel injunction of love and service of God and others, abandons the sacrament of reconciliation to the realm of routine. Thus the acts of the penitent are all important for the proper celebration of the sacrament. Personal prayer and reflection before the celebration are as necessary for the penitent as they are for the confessor.

“The Place of Celebration” (no. 12). Obviously the new ritual points to a more open, personal and warmer celebration, and in two cases to communal forms of that celebration. Number 12 of the Introduction says very little on the subject: “The sacrament of penance is celebrated in the place and location prescribed by law.” No longer, however, is the screen necessary for the celebration of the sacrament.

5

THE CELEBRATION OF THE  
SACRAMENT OF PENANCE  
(NOS. 12-14)

The 1614 ritual was the first to prescribe the grill or *grates* to separate the priest from the penitent. Its rise is not anterior to the second half of the sixteenth century. Its origin probably goes back to St. Charles Borromeo when he was Archbishop of Milan. His diocesan statutes forbade his priests to hear women’s confessions “outside the confessional unless there is a divider between them.”<sup>21</sup> The Code of Canon Law (1918)<sup>22</sup> and the ritual of 1925 continued to prohibit hearing the confessions of women without benefit of a grill. Thus the origin of a grill or barrier is not to be found in a desire for anonymity. That came as a secondary effect because of the separation and darkness of the confessional.

—PLACE OF CELEBRATION

For celebration of individual confessions the most desirable location would be a small chapel or room in which penitents might choose to confess their sins and seek sacramental reconciliation through an informal face-to-face exchange, with the opportunity for appropriate spiritual counsel. Likewise, since

the rite calls for the extension of hand(s) during absolution (nos. 19, 46), such a room or chapel provides for the use of this gesture. Mutual prayer and reading from the scriptures during the rite require a warm and open setting in which both the penitent and the confessor may be at ease. Such rooms should be designed to afford the penitent the option of anonymity, for in every case the freedom of the penitent to confess in the usual way is to be respected. It goes without saying, however, that catechesis in this area is extremely important. For if the fullness of meaning of the new rite is to come out, and if the pastoral implementation of the new rite is to be effective, prior explanation not only must be given but is required.

Other areas for the celebration of the rite of individual reconciliation are possible, and often more desirable, depending on the interior arrangement of a given church building. A classical place for the celebration of penance is the presidential chair, the symbol of apostolic authority, from which in ancient times the bishop would preach and instruct the faithful. This is especially good for the celebration of communal penance.

Another area for the celebration might be the baptistry. From the second century penance was seen as a "second baptism." This aspect of the sacrament of penance would be enhanced if confessions were celebrated there. Any chair built into or placed within the baptistry or baptismal area should be seen as the extension of the presidential chair.

Chapels of the blessed sacrament, where they exist, may also be used for the celebration of penance, for the reserved sacrament is a pledge and abiding sign of the covenant. Likewise, the forgiveness and healing power of the eucharist is easily recalled in such a setting.

—*THE TIME OF  
CELEBRATION*

"The Time of Celebration" (no. 13). The sacrament of reconciliation may be celebrated at any time and on any day. However, people should know about the fixed times when the priest is available for this ministry. It is obvious that confessions should not be heard during Mass or any other liturgical celebration.

The most appropriate season for the celebration of penance is Lent, for the very theme of Lent is conversion and reconciliation. Greater emphasis should be given to Ash Wednesday as

the inauguration of the great penitential season, the day when the whole Christian community begins a time of deeper personal conversion in preparation for the great festival of Easter. It is a time for acknowledging the need for personal reform and commitment. Thus the celebration of the sacrament of penance should be one of the high points of this period. In any case, to properly observe the Easter celebration, the sacrament of penance should be celebrated before Holy Thursday night whenever pastorally possible.

Advent—although it is clearly not a penitential season—might be a good time for penance since the themes of joyful watchfulness and preparation for the Lord's coming may be underscored in the celebration. The Baptist's injunction: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" is clearly brought out in the sacrament. In this way the eschatological dimensions of penance and reconciliation are underlined.

The manner in which the new Rite of Penance is celebrated will also dictate how we schedule the sacrament. For example, Saturday no longer seems to be the best day for the celebration of penance. So many people go away for the weekend or use Saturdays for their own entertainment. The Sunday anticipated Mass on Saturday evening also militates against the celebration of penance at that time. Likewise, since Sunday is the Day of the Lord, the Day of the Resurrection, it is not appropriate that penance be celebrated on that day. Even Sundays of Lent traditionally remain outside the penitential discipline. Thus scheduling the sacrament, whether individual or communal, before or after Sunday Masses or on Sunday evenings is discouraged.

Parish priests should be available at all times for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. However, it is good to set aside at least one day a week when parishioners know that a confessor is easily available. Thursday evening might be a good time for this. Friday, the Church's traditional day of fasting and penance is also a fitting time to celebrate the sacrament.

The diversity of ministries within worship is manifested by the different liturgical vestments which are worn (*See* no. 14). The alb is the common vestment for all ministries.<sup>23</sup> For communal celebrations, a cope may also be worn. Vestments should

—LITURGICAL VESTMENTS

always contribute to the overall beauty and visual impact of the rite. The stole should be given particular prominence and should be of such size, design and fabric as to enhance the symbolism of the entire celebration. For the reconciliation of an individual penitent, the practice common in the United States, of wearing a cassock or clerical suit and stole may still be followed.

<sup>1</sup> *Constitution on the Liturgy*, no. 35.

<sup>2</sup> II Cor. 5:17-18.

<sup>3</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Milwaukee, 1965, 722-723.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 8:34-36.

<sup>5</sup> I Pe 2:9.

<sup>6</sup> Mk 4:12-17; Lk 4:14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 5:20; Mt 9:2-8.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:14-42; 3:12-4:12; 17:22-31.

<sup>9</sup> Rom 6:3-13.

<sup>10</sup> Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul*, New York, 1967, 331.

<sup>11</sup> Eucharistic Prayer III.

<sup>12</sup> Eucharistic Prayer II.

<sup>13</sup> DS 1743.

<sup>14</sup> Epist. 41:12 (PL 16, 1116).

<sup>15</sup> *Constitution on the Church*, no. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Apostolic Constitution, *Paenitemini*, Feb. 17, 1966 (AAS 58 [1966], 179).

<sup>17</sup> DS 1707-1708.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Journel, "La liturgie de la reconciliation," *La Maison-Dieu* 117, 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> DS 1670.

<sup>20</sup> Gerard T. Broccolo, "A Commentary on the Reform of the Sacrament of Penance," Chicago, 1974, 5.

<sup>21</sup> A. G. Martimort, et al., *L'Eglise en priere*, Paris, 1965 (3rd edition), 594-595.

<sup>22</sup> *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Canon 909, 2: "Sedes confessionalis grate fixa ac tenuitur perforata inter poenitentem et confessorium sit instructa."

<sup>23</sup> *General Instruction*, no. 298 ff.



### III. Three Forms of Celebration

Catholics until recently have been familiar with only one form for the celebration of the sacrament of penance: individual confession and absolution. With the publication in 1972 of the "Pastoral Norms Concerning the Administration of General Sacramental Absolution" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) communal penitential services were encouraged especially during the liturgical seasons of Advent and Lent.

The revised Rite of Penance presents three distinct forms for celebrating the sacrament of penance: individual reconciliation; the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution; and the reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution. The rite is quick to point out, however, that "individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession" (no. 30).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the new rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents is the atmosphere and context within which it is to be celebrated. For the tone of the celebration is to be one of warmth, healing, communication and dialogue between confessor and penitent. Thus there should be no haste, no hurrying along because of the number of penitents or other reasons. For this reason, the preparation of both penitent and confessor before the celebration is of capital importance.

Priest and penitent should spend some time before the celebration in prayer, especially in the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The confessor needs to pray for enlightenment and charity so that he will be able to accept and understand the penitent. The penitent prepares himself also by seeking illumination, comparing his life with the examples and commandments of Christ, seeking through prayer the pardon which in faith is accessible to him from God (*See* no. 15).

In the past preparation before confession seemed to consist

1

THE RECONCILIATION OF  
INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

in a hasty prayer before the altar and going to the confessional with little consciousness of what was to take place. Catechesis should be strong in this regard, recommending ways for the penitent to prepare himself. Nor should Christ's own manner be ignored by the priest and penitent; joining fasting to prayer Christ prepared himself for every great event in his ministry. The manner in which each prepares himself would thus aid in atmosphere of the celebration itself.

The celebration basically takes place in five steps: reception of penitent and opening rites; reading of the word of God; confession of sins and acceptance of satisfaction; prayer of the penitent and absolution; proclamation of praise of God and dismissal.

—*OPENING RITES*

The priest welcomes the penitent warmly, with charity and should address him/her in a friendly manner. The consideration, interest and respect which the confessor shows right from the beginning will set the tone for the whole celebration, enabling the penitent to better experience the mercy of God in the kindness of the priest.

The penitent then makes the sign of the cross. The priest invites the penitent to have trust in God by means of an invocation such as, "May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy." The confessor may use these words, another formula given in the rite (nos. 67-71), or his own words. "If the penitent is unknown to the priest he may indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading a Christian life. . . ." This is so that the priest may be aided in exercising his ministry of spiritual counseling. It also makes the sacrament less impersonal, especially if the penitent has opted for anonymity. It helps the penitent to better see himself or herself and the priest to assign the proper satisfaction.

—*READING THE  
WORD OF GOD*

"Through the word of God the Christian receives light to recognize his sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in the mercy of God" (no. 17).

In placing a scripture reading at this point, the ritual reaffirms the centrality of the word of God in the call to repentance and in the gift of forgiveness from God. The word of God “as an event has a symbolic power of its own, apart from its content and hence has its own significance for the achievement of man’s salvation as well.”<sup>1</sup> The Lord is present not only in the proclamation of the word, but also in the very hearing of it. The word of God is always a call to penance and conversion.

So the word should have both a prominent role and place in the celebration. A beautiful, modern edition of the bible should be displayed prominently in the area where confessions are heard. Reading the scriptures is an option in the rite, yet clearly it has more than a decorative value. In using the scriptures, participants proclaim their faith in God’s mercy revealed in his word, recognizing that the source of divine forgiveness is God who continually speaks to man.

When the penitent presents herself or himself for confession no specific formula is required. Formulas can be helpful, but there is always the danger that they re-enforce the mechanical enumeration of sins, something which should be avoided in the renewal of the sacrament of penance. However, where it is the custom, the penitent may begin with a general formula such as the *Confiteor*. If necessary, the priest may aid the penitent in making an integral confession and expressing proper sorrow.

—*CONFESSION OF SINS AND  
ACCEPTANCE OF  
SATISFACTION*

The counseling which the confessor gives should center around the mystery of Christian conversion. “He (the confessor) urges him to be sorry for his faults, reminding him that through the sacrament of penance the Christian dies and rises with Christ and is thus renewed in the paschal mystery” (no. 44). This is really spiritual direction of the best sort. The encounter which takes place in the sacrament of penance is an encounter with the saving mystery of Christ in his death and resurrection. This must constantly be pointed out to penitents so that they may see the real meaning of the sacrament.

The work of satisfaction that is given to the penitent should be viewed as a symbol of the real satisfaction which should occur, that is, personal and interior conversion. For this reason what is chosen is important. The satisfaction should reflect at least two things: (a) a corrective for the sins committed; (b)

a real means to help in the long-range process of continual conversion. A satisfaction may be a public or private event, prayers or acts, such as fasting, charity, involvement in some activity for the benefit of the penitent. The confessor must always be careful, however, not to overburden the penitent. Perhaps the penance-satisfaction may be arrived at by consultation with the penitent himself. The penitent should accept the satisfaction in a spirit of humility recognizing the presence of God's mercy, and with a firm purpose of amendment.

No matter what satisfaction, there is one thing that should be absolutely avoided. Never should the impression be given that the forgiveness that comes from God is earned or merited. For the mercy and pardon of God are totally gratuitous. Nothing we do can merit forgiveness. It is a free gift from the Lord. Therefore, the idea and practice of satisfaction should not be modeled on any analogy with human justice. The justice and mercy of God are beyond human understanding.

—PRAYER OF THE  
PENITENT AND ABSOLUTION

The priest asks the penitent to express his sorrow. The penitent does so in a prayer of contrition which also seeks the help of the Lord for his conversion. This may be a simple declaration or the penitent may use one of the prayers found in the ritual (nos. 45, 85-92), or one of his own composition, or even a spontaneous prayer. If the penitent is seated up to now, he may wish to kneel for this prayer and the absolution.

The priest then extends his hands over the head of the penitent (or at least his right hand) saying the words of absolution. The gesture of laying-on of hands is ancient in connection with penance. Saints Cyprian, Augustine and Leo the Great all witness to its widespread usage in the West.<sup>2</sup>

Medieval speculation on what is absolutely necessary and what is not absolutely necessary for valid celebrations of the sacraments led St. Thomas to affirm that no particular rite or gesture was needed *per se* for the proper celebration of penance.<sup>3</sup> This opinion, shared by many other theologians, contributed to the gradual disuse of the gesture of imposition. However, the ritual of 1614 re-introduced the rite—the elevation of at least the right hand. But the progressive popularity of the confessional made even this a useless gesture. While the new rite gives one the option of full laying on of hands or simple elevation of

the right hand, it does so only in recognition that the confessional screen remains an option. Good pastoral practice requires that we reestablish this ancient usage whose roots are in the very actions of Jesus himself.

The prayer of absolution, which the penitent should carefully listen to, should stand out as the center of the rite. The prayer is trinitarian and essentially biblical. Father, Son and Spirit are invoked in the context of their actions in salvation history. God is the Father of mercies from whom all things proceed; reconciliation comes to us on the initiative of the Father. The Father's love and mercy is concretized in the saving death and resurrection of the Son who sent the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins. The prayer also brings out the ecclesial nature of divine forgiveness. For it is through the ministry of the Church that pardon and peace emanate from God because the Church is the body of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

As the priest says the second part of the prayer "I absolve. . ." he makes the sign of the cross over the penitent as a continuation of the laying on of the hands.

After the absolution the priest continues, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," to which the penitent concludes, "His mercy endures forever." Alternate forms are provided in the rite (no. 39). The priest then dismisses the penitent who has been reconciled, saying, "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace."

The rite provides for a shorter form to be used in special situations when "pastoral need dictates it." However, except in cases of imminent danger of death, the integrity of the rite must be safeguarded, that is, it must include the following elements: confession of sin and the acceptance of the act of penance; the invitation to contrition, the formulas of absolution and dismissal.

The new ritual leaves rather ambiguous the pastoral question of how frequently one should celebrate penance. Obviously it is necessary for the penitents who have cut themselves off from a loving relationship with God by grave sin. It is, nonetheless, useful to those of the faithful who in spite of their serious attempt to grow in holiness and Christlikeness find themselves guilty of lesser sins which to one degree or another strain or stress their

*—PROCLAMATION OF  
PRAISE AND DISMISSAL*

*—A SHORTER RITE*

*—HOW OFTEN SHOULD  
ONE CONFESS?*

relationship with God and neighbor. For this reason the Introduction asserts that “frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly” (no. 7b).

The enriched structure for the rite of reconciliation of one penitent should make the individual celebration of penance more fruitful. Confessors as well as penitents should recognize the value of the sacrament and celebrate it in a manner most beneficial for the individual’s growth in holiness. Although the individual is not reconciled from a state of profound aversion to God or converted from the depths, it must be admitted, there is still reason for celebration on a regular pattern.

2  
THE RECONCILIATION OF  
SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH  
INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION  
AND ABSOLUTION

The second form given for the celebration of the sacrament of penance structures a communal setting for the individual form. It is a ratification of the desire for a community celebration of penance that has been expressed in recent years by penitential liturgies, with or without the sacrament as part of those liturgies. The individual confessions are set within a context of community preparation and thanksgiving. Numbers 22-30 and 48-57 enshrine this liturgical development for the sake of bringing out the ecclesial dimensions of the individual form in more evident fashion.

“A communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance” (no. 22). The ritual gives as its reasoning for this rite not only the ecclesial element, but also the very fact of large gatherings of the faithful. When a number of penitents come together at the same time for penance, ideally at set times in the month or liturgical year, the sacrament should be celebrated in this manner so that all are prepared together for its reception. This rite focuses on the liturgy of the word which prepares penitents for confession and mutual prayer. Then, “after each person has confessed his sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people which he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son” (no. 22).

The rite takes place in four steps: introductory rites; celebration of the word of God; rite of reconciliation; dismissal of the faithful.

—*BASIC STRUCTURE*

As with all good celebrations, the gathering begins with a song which expresses the penitential stance of the assembly or the character of the liturgical season in which the sacrament is being celebrated. Examples of appropriate antiphons which bring out the mercy and compassion of the Lord are given in number 48.

—*INTRODUCTORY RITES*

The priest or another minister, such as the deacon or reader, speaks briefly about the importance and purpose of the celebration, taking care to explain the order of the service. Such an introduction must be brief and practical, stressing the major theme of reconciliation. Explaining the order of service is necessary if the liturgy is to be celebrated smoothly and easily.

The introductory rites are concluded by an opening prayer. The priest invites all to pray, remembering God's continual call to conversion. Several examples of this prayer are given (nos. 97-100). Essentially, such a prayer is a petition for pardon which brings with it peace and true freedom.

The word of God is read because it is a call to repentance and true conversion of heart, and the readings that are chosen should reflect that call. The ritual is a rich source for such readings and sections 101-201 have rightly been called a "Lectionary of Penance," for it contains 32 readings from the Old Testament, 15 psalms, 28 apostolic readings, and 26 gospel pericopes. The celebration may be structured like any liturgy of the word with a number of readings and responses, followed by a homily.

—*CELEBRATION OF THE WORD OF GOD*

The readings, introduced by a brief comment to help focus one's attention, should reflect one of the following themes:

(a) the voice of God calling men back to conversion and ever-closer conformity with Christ;

(b) the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ as well as through the gift of the Holy Spirit;

(c) The judgment of God on good and evil in men's lives as a help in examination of conscience.

The homily should reflect what has been proclaimed to the congregation and should lead the penitents to examine their consciences. "It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one's neighbors as well as against the sinner himself" (no. 25). Therefore, in conjunction with the main themes of the readings, the homily should recall:

(a) the infinite mercy of God, greater than all our sins, by which he continually calls us back to himself;

(b) the need for interior repentance, by which we are prepared for making reparation for sin;

(c) the social aspect of grace and sin, by which the actions of individuals in some degree affect the whole body of the Church;

(d) the duty of making satisfaction for sin; this is effective because of Christ's work of reparation, and requires especially in addition to works of penance the exercise of true charity toward God and our neighbor (no. 25).

After the homily a period of silence should occur so that all present may fruitfully examine their consciences and awaken true contrition for sin. The priest, deacon or other minister may aid the assembly with brief considerations or a litany which may be suitable to the background, age or culture of the group assembled.

#### —RITE OF RECONCILIATION

This rite takes place in four steps: a general confession of sin, a litany of confession and contrition, the Lord's Prayer which is never to be omitted and the confession and absolution.

The rite begins with a general confession of sinfulness while the congregation kneels or bows. The *Confiteor* or other formula may be used. Then all stand while the deacon or other minister invites the assembly to confess its sins and pray for each other so that God may heal them. Such a litany should express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy.

The litany is concluded with the Lord's Prayer, for in it the faithful seek God's forgiveness and mercy for our sins and affirm that they need to forgive and be forgiven by others. The



ancient Church clearly understood the effectiveness of this prayer for forgiveness of sins. Saint Augustine attests that all our weaknesses are effaced by the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. When the faithful say, "forgive us our trespasses," and beat their breasts, the daily penance of good and humble Christians is effected, declares Augustine.<sup>5</sup>

The place of the Lord's Prayer in the sacrament of penance is of great importance, not only because it is the Lord's Prayer, but also because it situates our appeal to God for mercy in the proper gospel context. The *Gelasian Sacramentary* in commenting on the prayer's meaning has this to say:

" 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' The meaning of this precept is the following: we cannot merit pardon of our sins unless we ourselves beforehand have forgiven our brother who has sinned against us, as the Lord says in the Gospel, 'If you do not forgive the sins of others, the Father will not forgive you yours' " (Matthew 6:14).<sup>6</sup>

The Lord's Prayer should not only be a help to us but should regulate our lives. It is concluded by a kind of embolism as in the Mass, or in the form of a litany.

The penitents are then instructed that, if they wish, they may go to individual priests to confess their sins and receive absolution. Each penitent accepts a fitting act of penance and is individually absolved. Collective absolution by a number of priests or general absolution by one priest is not permitted in this rite. The practice of general absolution is discussed in the next section.

When all the individual confessions are completed, the principal celebrant or president of the assembly with all the other confessors gathered about him, invites the reconciled to offer thanks to God. He should encourage them to do good works which will give witness to the grace of conversion which the community has received. So it is fitting that all sing a hymn of thanksgiving and gladness expressing joy in and acknowledgement of God's power and mercy. Examples such as the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) or Psalm 135 are given in the ritual. Paragraph number 206 also lists many other possible sources for hymnody, psalms and Old and New Testament canticles.

—PROCLAMATION OF  
PRAISE AND DISMISSAL

The priest concludes the thanksgiving with a prayer, again stressing the wonder of God's love for mankind, a love which transforms us into the likeness of the Son; a prayer which ends by giving glory to God. Thus the confession of sins (*confessio peccatorum*) is joined to the confession of faith and praise (*confessio fidei and confessio laudis*).<sup>7</sup> The prayer is followed by a final blessing of the assembly (nos. 58, 212-214). Then the deacon, reader, other minister or the priest himself dismisses the congregation: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace." All answer, "Thanks be to God" (no. 59).

There is a danger that this second rite may become too long, especially if the majority of people present wish to make individual confessions. Therefore, it is important that there always be a sufficient number of confessors present, that the congregation have a clear idea where they are stationed, and that access to them is easy and orderly, without regimentation.

All the rites should be characterized by and structured with dignity and simplicity. Too many readings, an overlong homily and too many litanies can make the celebration excessively verbal, lessening the impact of the power of the Word to excite contrition and conversion. While retaining the openness and warmth called for by the first *Ordo* for the actual confession of sins, spiritual counseling should be kept at a minimum, unless of course the situation demands it.

3  
THE RECONCILIATION OF  
SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH  
GENERAL CONFESSION AND  
ABSOLUTION

In this third rite everything takes place as in the rite of reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution except for the individual confessions and absolutions. At the end of or during the homily those seeking general absolution are instructed as to the proper disposition necessary for absolution, contrition for sin, resolve to repair any scandal or harm, resolution to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which cannot be confessed at the present moment. An act of penance is suggested which all might do.

The deacon or another minister at the proper moment calls upon the congregation to show by some sign such as bowing their heads or kneeling that they wish to be absolved. Together all present make a general confession by using a formula such as the *Confiteor* which may be followed by a litany or penitential song. The Lord's Prayer is said by all. The priest next invokes

the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, gives sacramental absolution, and then invites the congregation to give thanks.

The norms for general absolution found in the revised rite (nos. 31-34) essentially repeat those expressed in the pastoral norms, *Sacramentum Paenitentiae*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on June 16, 1972. The background against which these norms have been drawn up is to be found in the Instruction of the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary of March 25, 1944, and in the teaching of the Council of Trent, Session XIV, on integral confession.<sup>8</sup>

“Particular and occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give absolution in general to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession” (no. 31). The 1972 pastoral norms require serious necessity: “namely, when in view of the number of penitents there are not enough confessors at hand to hear properly the confessions of each within an appropriate time, with the result that the penitents through no fault of their own would be forced to do without sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time . . . this is not lawful, however, when confessors are able to be at hand, merely because of a great concourse of penitents such as can for example occur on a great feast or pilgrimage” (no. 3).

The judgment as to the presence of any of the above conditions belongs to the bishop of the diocese who must take counsel with the other members of the episcopal conference. An individual priest, if he judges it necessary to give general absolution may do so if he first has recourse to the Ordinary of the place. If this is not possible, he must notify the bishop after he has given the absolution.

After the general confession, the priest holds his hands extended over the penitents and says the prayer of absolution. He may use the absolution for individual penitents, in the plural, but the extended prayer of absolution provided for this occasion is preferred.

This prayer, like the individual form, is also trinitarian and biblical. It is divided into four parts, the first three being invocations of each of the divine persons in their roles in salvation history, the fourth section is the declaration of absolution itself.

—WHEN MAY GENERAL  
ABSOLUTION BE GIVEN?

—THE RITE OF  
GENERAL ABSOLUTION

The biblical background for the first invocation, to the Father, may be found in Ezekiel 33:11 and I John 4:9-10. Romans 4:25 and John 20:22-23 are the background for the invocation to the Son. The invocation of the Holy Spirit is based in John 20:23; Ephesians 2:18 and I Peter 2:9.

The rite is concluded by an appropriate proclamation of thanksgiving followed by the dismissal.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter IV of the ritual consists of a rich selection of texts which may be used in the various forms of the sacrament. Once the new ritual is implemented, confessors and planners of penitential liturgies should be open to all the options which are given in this chapter. They are given precisely because a fixed routine, structure, or pattern should be avoided. A certain amount of creativity is desirable.

Appendix II is also a rich source for the Church's liturgical life. In it are given six sample non-sacramental penitential liturgies: for Lent, for Advent, common celebrations, for children, for young people, and for the sick. The purpose of these non-sacramental celebrations is not so much reconciliatory (in the sense that one is reconciled to the Church through absolution), but rather they are aids for the Christian community as it progresses in gradual understanding and conversion. While they are remissive of lesser sins, such celebrations may motivate one who is in serious sin to seek out absolution in another context. The benefits of "devotional confession" might also accrue from such a celebration. It should be clear, in any case, that Appendix II only provides models; other texts and formats may be used.

## CONCLUSION

The need for conversion and the call to repentance apply to all, for Jesus came not to save the self-righteous, but the sinner and all Christians share in the sinful condition which requires reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> The Church in promulgating the Rite of Penance has given its ministers and faithful a wonderful instrument for the realization of reconciliation in its own household. For as a reconciling and reconciled community, the Church can truly be a witness to the liberation which Christ wishes to give to those who believe.

<sup>1</sup> Otto Semmelroth, *The Preaching Word: On the Theology of Proclamation*, New York, 1965, 179.

<sup>2</sup> “. . . ut per manus nostrae impositionem te cooperante, infundantur eis spiritus sancti gratia, descendat super eos caelestis benedictio, tribuatur eis peccatorum remissio.” (Romano-German Pontifical [X century], XCIX, 243, 29-32.)

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, III, art. 4.

<sup>4</sup> For the biblical background of the new prayer of absolution, See II Cor 2:3, 5:14-15, 18-19; also Jn 20:22-23, Mt 16:19, 18:18.

<sup>5</sup> Epist. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Text from A. Hamman, *Le “Pater” explique par les peres*.

<sup>7</sup> Other examples are given in nos. 207-211.

<sup>8</sup> DS 1704, 1706-1709.

<sup>9</sup> A short rite may be found in nos. 64-66.

<sup>10</sup> Lk 5:32.

## Appendix I

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