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Introduction  
to the  
RITE  
OF  
PENANCE

Reconciliation

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# Introduction to The Rite of Penance

Reconciliation between God and mankind was brought about by Jesus Christ in the mystery of his death and resurrection. He in turn trusted the ongoing mystery of reconciling the sinner with God the Father to his Church. The Church continues to carry out this ministry by preaching the Good News of salvation to all persons and by baptizing them in water and the Holy Spirit.

Yet, because of human weakness, Christians already reconciled with the Father by baptism at times break or weaken their friendship with God by sin. In view of this the Lord instituted the means by which sins committed after baptism could be pardoned and the loving friendship with the Father be reestablished and/or strengthened. We have come to know this as the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

Vatican Council II not only requested the revision of the sacramental Rite of Penance, but in its various documents furnished positive indications for its renewal. Three major considerations were: (1) Sin is at the same time an offense against God and an injury to the complete body of the Church; (2) in penance the sinner is reconciled both with God and with the Church; (3) the entire Church is involved with and works for the conversion and reconciliation of a member who has sinned.

The Rite of Penance as prepared by the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome, distinguishes between three rites:

1. Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents.
2. Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.
3. Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution.

The first of the three rites maintains a close resemblance to the manner in which the sacrament has been celebrated within the Church for hundreds of years. Looking at its major parts, however, we see that in several ways the old rite has been enriched and made more prayerful. The rite includes:

- welcoming the penitent;
- reading the word of God;
- confession of sins and acceptance of satisfaction;
- the prayer of the penitent and the absolution by the priest;
- proclamation of praise and dismissal of the penitent.

The words of absolution have been enriched with a gesture signifying the gift of the Holy Spirit for the remission of sins. The confessor extends his hands (or at least his right hand) over the head of the penitent as he pronounces the form of absolution. By these words and this gesture Christ acts through his Church to bring about the sacrament of reconciliation.

The rite of individual reconciliation should take place in a personal, prayerful atmosphere. For some the confessional box does not provide this. It was for this reason that the bishops of the United States following the recommendation contained in the new Rite of Penance, approved of small chapels or rooms of reconciliation in which penitents might choose to celebrate the Rite of Penance through a face-to-face exchange with the priest. It is desirable that such chapels or rooms be designed to afford the option of the penitent's kneeling at the fixed confessional grill in the usual way, thus safeguarding anonymity for those who so desire it. In every case, the freedom of the individual penitent must be respected.

A frequent criticism of confession was its excessive ritual and moral individualism. Sin was looked upon as affecting only the sinner; confession affected only the sinner. The new Rite of Penance attempts to correct this by emphasizing the social and ecclesial dimension of sin—my sins make the world and Church less holy—as well as the collective, ecclesial nature of the sacrament of reconciliation—I am reconciled with the Church community and with God. The entire Church works for the reconciliation of sinners and joyfully celebrates their conversion. The Rite of Penance itself must appear as an act of the Church to which each individual associates himself or herself.

The second chapter in the Rite of Penance, "The Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution," proposes a form of celebration which helps to highlight these broader dimensions of sin and reconciliation.

The third chapter of the revised rite is entitled the "Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution." Basically, it is the responsibility of the bishop to determine when there is genuine pastoral need for the use of this rite, namely, when in view of the number of penitents there are not enough confessors to hear properly the confessions of each within an appropriate time, with the result that the penitent through no fault of his or her own would be forced to do without the sacramental grace or Communion for a long time.

Several important facts must be kept in mind concerning general confession and absolution. (1) Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses one from this kind of confession. (2) Those who have serious sins forgiven in a celebration which includes general confession and absolution in this collective form, are obliged to confess these serious sins individually to a priest before receiving general absolution again unless a just cause prevents them from doing so. (3) In order that the faithful may fruitfully participate in the sacramental celebration of Penance with general confession and absolution, it is absolutely necessary that they be properly disposed especially through a fitting celebration of the liturgy of the Word.

The conversion of one who has sinned must include sorrow for sin and the intention to lead a renewed life. These sentiments are expressed sacramentally in confession of one's sins along with due satisfaction and amendment of life. Thus the new Rite of Penance correctly states: "God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests" (no. 6).

SECRETARIAT, BISHOPS' COMMITTEE  
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