



Come back to the Lord

PREPARING FOR THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

The celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an important part of our Lenten observance. There is no better way to prepare for the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord at Easter than by this sacrament, "which brings about a true spiritual resurrection, restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God" (Catechism 1468). This flyer is the first in a series that will prepare us for the communal celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at St. James Cathedral. The Archdiocesan Day of Reconciliation will be **Saturday, March 24, 2007, from 10:00am until 5:00pm.**

Did you know?

- **In the early Church, the Sacrament of Penance could be received only once in a lifetime.**
The penances assigned were often very long and severe, sometimes lasting several years. During this time penitents usually had special places in church, wore special clothes, and commonly left the Sunday liturgy after the homily, just like the catechumens.
- **At one time the Church had a two-track system of public Penance and private Penance.** Public sins required public penance and private sins required private penance.
- **For centuries penitents were required to do their assigned penance and then return to receive absolution.** Practical difficulties with this became apparent when the confessor was a wandering missionary and when the penances sometimes took the penitent on a pilgrimage to foreign lands.

History of the Sacrament

A glance at the history of this sacrament makes it clear that Penance has had a lively and varied past. The primary sacrament of forgiveness in the early Church was baptism. To the first Christians it seemed unthinkable that anyone who had been converted to Christ would return to sin after they had been baptized. Nevertheless, the Church soon found that it had to deal with post-baptismal sin. Through the centuries the Church has continued to develop in its understanding of this sacrament so it can be more responsive to the needs of the people and more meaningful in their lives.

Reconciliation, like all sacraments, has a fundamental community dimension. This was most obvious in the early Church with the Order of Penitents. But even with the later development of private penance, the Church has always insisted on the importance of the priest in the experience of reconciliation. This is *not* because God will not forgive us directly (God always forgives those who repent), but because the priest is the representative of the Church community. Reconciliation with the Church community is the sacramental sign of reconciliation with the Lord. The priest is the representative of the community, as well as the representative of Christ.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is this sacrament called confession, penance or reconciliation? Yes! This sacrament involves all three elements and historically has been called by all three names. Today the Church refers to it as the Sacrament of Penance or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Why do we need a sacrament of Reconciliation? "Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church..." (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1440). Only God forgives sins. Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be a sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation (CCC 1442). The priest "is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant" (CCC 1466).

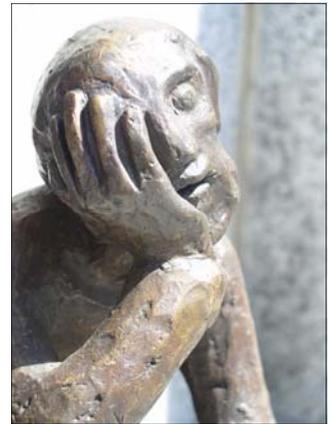
What happens in the Sacrament of Penance? "Through the sacrament of penance, we, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and, intending to reform our ways, receive God's forgiveness and become reconciled with God and with the Church" (USCCB Committee on Pastoral Practices). "Jesus' call to conversion and penance... does not aim first at outward works... but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion" (CCC 1430). Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him.

What sins should be confessed? The Church teaches that "all serious (mortal) sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret... for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly" (CCC 1456). *At the same time*, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) "is strongly recommended... for it helps us to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies (patterns of weakness that can lead us to sin), let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful" (CCC 1458).

What are the effects of this sacrament? "The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being... He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation" (John Paul II). "The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship" (CCC 1468), "for those who receive the sacrament with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation" (CCC 1551).

Baptism: the First Sacrament of Forgiveness

The Church Fathers saw a close connection between baptism and penance; in fact, penance was sometimes referred to as "the more difficult baptism." St. Ambrose said: "There are water and tears; the water of baptism, and the tears of repentance." Penance is a sacrament celebrating conversion, a basic dynamic of the Christian life. Adults and older children preparing for the sacrament of baptism enter an intense period of purification during the Lent season prior to baptism. The Elect reflect upon the stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Then on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent the Elect celebrate the Scrutinies in the midst of the community. During these celebrations the Church prays the ancient prayers of exorcisms over the Elect, calling upon God to protect them from Satan and the power of evil and surrounding them with the love of God.



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Next week: How to Go to Confession: A Practical Guide to Celebrating the Sacrament
For more information, visit www.stjames-cathedral.org

Pardon and Peace

HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION

Many people have avoided celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, sometimes for years at a time, because they “don’t know what to do.” But confession doesn’t need to be scary or intimidating! The following brief explanation will help you understand how the Sacrament is celebrated individually. **The Archdiocesan Day of Reconciliation will be at St. James Cathedral on Saturday, March 24, 2007, from 10:00am until 5:00pm, with priest confessors available throughout the day. For more information, visit www.stjames-cathedral.org.**

1 Preparation

The celebration of this sacrament begins at home, with the private preparation you make. This preparation is called the *examination of conscience*. “The penitent compares his or her life with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.” The examination of conscience should take into account your relationship to God and to others. Usually, we know our sins all too well; the examination of conscience will help us to look at them in the light of the Gospel, and be better able to express them in confession.

The Lord God says: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart.” Is my heart set on God, so that I really love God above all things? Or am I more concerned about the things of this world? Are there false gods that I worship by giving them greater attention and deeper trust than I give to God? Do I keep Sundays and feast days holy by participating in the Mass with attention and devotion? Have I been willing to be known as a Christian in private and public life? Do I offer God my difficulties, joys, and sorrows? Do I turn to God in times of temptation?

The Lord says: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Do I genuinely love my neighbor? Or do I use other people for my own ends? Have I contributed to the well-being and happiness of my family by patience and genuine love? Have I been an obedient child—a good parent—a faithful spouse? Do I truly do all I can to help those less fortunate? Do I look down on other people because of race, class, or creed? Am I concerned for the good of the human community in which I live, or do I spend my life caring only for myself? Have I been ready to forgive those who have wronged me, or do I harbor hatred and the desire for revenge?

Christ our Lord says: “Be perfect as your Father is perfect.” Where is my life really leading me? What use have I made of time, of health and strength, of the gifts God has given me to be used like the talents in the Gospel? Do I use them to become more perfect every day? Have I been patient in accepting the sorrows and disappointments of this life? Have I revered my body as a temple of the Holy Spirit? Have I gone against my conscience out of fear or hypocrisy? Do I experience the freedom of the children of God, or am I the slave of forces within me?

2 Welcome of the Priest

You have the option of confessing your sins face to face, or of confessing anonymously. This is your choice. The priest welcomes you and then both you and he make the sign of the cross, saying, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then in his own words the priest urges you to have confidence in God. If you don't know the priest, you may want to indicate your state of life (i.e. married, single, widowed, divorced), how long it has been since your last confession, and anything else that may help your confessor.

3 Confession of Sins

Next the priest invites you to confess your sins. Occasionally, the priest may ask questions to help you in making a full confession. The confession of sins should be as complete as possible. That doesn't mean it needs to take a long time. The important thing is that the penitent "looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible" (*Catechism* 1455).

4 Advice of the Priest

Sacramental confession is not therapy; the priest will not attempt to solve your problems for you. What he will do, however, is offer some advice to help you in starting a new life. He may also give you a simple "penance," which may take the form of prayer, self-denial, service to one's neighbor, or works of mercy.

5 Prayer of the Penitent

Next the priest invites you to pray an act of contrition. There are many different options for this prayer. You can learn one of the following by heart, or feel free to bring this sheet with you.

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong, and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.

or:

Lord Jesus, you opened the eyes of the blind, forgave the sinful woman, and after Peter's denial confirmed him in your love. Listen to my prayer: renew your love in my heart, help me to live in perfect unity with my fellow Christians that I may proclaim your saving power to all the world.

or:

Father, I have sinned against you and am not worthy to be called your son. Have mercy on me, a sinner.

6 Prayer of Absolution

Now the priest extends his hands over your head and prays the prayer of absolution, making the sign of the cross over you during the final words: "through the ministry of the church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." You respond, **Amen**.

7 Dismissal

Now the priest dismisses you. You respond, **Thanks be to God**. If you are making your confession as part of a communal celebration, remain in the church for the conclusion of the celebration. If not, 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord'!

Based on *Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance: Questions and Answers*,
a publication of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.