

Sacrament of Reconciliation

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Extraordinary Forgiveness

A scene from the Broadway show *Les Misérables*—based on the Victor Hugo novel of the same name—offers us a glimpse of the power of forgiveness in human life. The main character, Jean Valjean, just paroled from prison, is in despair because he cannot find work. The requirement that he reveal his past imprisonment to prospective employers makes him virtually unemployable. In the midst of his struggle to find work, a bishop offers him a good meal and a room for the night.

Valjean takes advantage of the bishop's kindness, however, and steal several pieces of the bishop's silver and runs off. Local police intercept him and bring him back to the bishop to report his thievery. In a surprising move, the bishop tells the guards that he had given the silver to Valjean and dismisses the guards. Then he gives Valjean *more* silver pieces! The bishop tells him to take all the silver and use it to become an honest man. The bishop also tells him that through Christ, God has brought him out of darkness.

The bishop's acts of forgiveness and generosity truly move Valjean. He leaves and searches his soul about his life and who he is. He recognizes that his past crimes don't define him and he vows to transform his life.

The surprising element in Valjean's story is not so much that he received forgiveness, but the timing of it. Valjean was in the midst of stealing and seemed totally undeserving. He hadn't expressed sorrow or made amends. The forgiveness preceded and precipitated his transformation. This is the kind of forgiveness God offers us.

God's Love and Forgiveness

A trio of parables in Luke 15 gives us further insight into the nature of God's love. Jesus asks his listeners "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" (Luke 15:4). When the shepherd finds the lost sheep he is full of joy. "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," explains Jesus "than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Then in the second parable Jesus asks "what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" (Luke

15:8). When she finds it she is overjoyed. Jesus explains that “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).

The third parable is the story of a young man who returns home after a period of reckless and immoral living with the hope that his father will take him back as a hired hand. Jesus’ listeners might have expected the father to be angry upon seeing his son especially since the son had spent his entire inheritance foolishly, but quite the opposite was true. The father saw the son from a distance and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, put his arms around him and kissed him. The father said, “Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:23-24).

Now imagine that the young man returning home is your brother and that, unlike him, you have always been a good and obedient son or daughter. Perhaps you can understand the reaction of the second son in Jesus’ parable. When he came in from working in the field, he was angry to encounter a celebration for his brother, who had done so many things wrong. He felt that he himself was much more deserving of the special treatment. The father tried to make him understand saying, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life” (Luke 15:32).

Jesus’ parables are striking because the lost and seemingly undeserving become the recipients of so much care and concern. This is an extremely hopeful message for us. Even when we are at a desperate, low point in our lives, in God’s eyes, we remain lovable and forgivable. Jesus’ relationships with the people he encountered during his earthly ministry convey this same truth.

Can’t Stop God’s Love

The Gospels tell numerous stories of Jesus reaching out to the lost of his day, especially sinners and tax collectors. He even shared meals with them, a sign that he desired a relationship with them. In fact, Jesus earned the reputation of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). He saved a woman caught in adultery from being stoned (John 8:3-11). While dining at the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus graciously accepted an anointing from a woman regarded as a sinner and then defended her hospitality when the host was critical (Luke 7:36-50).

Jesus didn’t wait until “the lost” changed their lives to show them acceptance and befriend them. He reached out to them in the midst of their broken and sinful existence, and this brought about their transformation.

The Gospels recount that some people were critical of Jesus for associating with outcasts. Luke tells of grumbling scribes and Pharisees who complained saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). After Jesus dined with a large group of tax collectors at the

home of Levi he explained why. “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

God’s forgiveness is not a matter of what any of us do to earn it. God is constantly reaching out to us with love and mercy. Nothing we do will make God turn away and abandon us. This is at the heart of Catholic belief. We can harden our hearts and turn ourselves away, but we can’t stop God’s love for us. The real challenge is for us to open our hearts, accept this love, and let it change us.

Sin

Why do we need to change? Why is transformation so important? Not only does Scripture make clear that God’s love is constant, it also clearly conveys that sin is a serious matter in human lives. There is something inherent in us that makes us weak and opens us up to the temptation of sin. This struggle is life-long and it affects us all. Jesus came to call us to repent and to resist the lure of selfish and sinful choices. The outpouring of love from God made possible through Jesus and the Holy Spirit helps us to recognize the reality of sin in our lives and inspires us to do something about it.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes sin as “an offense against God,” as a “failure in genuine love for God and neighbor,” as “disobedience,” as “a revolt against God,” and as “proud self-exaltation” (CCC 1849-1850). “Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it” (CCC 1850). Sins include actions and thoughts as well as omissions – the things we should have done but didn’t. Our sins harm us and disrupt our relationship with God. The sins of individuals also adversely affect the Christian community. They bring about division in what is supposed to be the one unified body of Christ.

Pope John Paul II highlights the communal nature of sin. “There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family” (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 16)

Sacramental Reconciliation

At Baptism, we were welcomed into the Christian community and cleansed of all sin. We even wore white to symbolize our purity and our new life in Christ. Our initiation, however, did not rid us of the inclination to sin. The reality of sin means that the whole of life, ideally, is a process of ongoing conversion. We are always moving and changing. We never become finished products in this life.

The challenge of Christian conversion is the challenge of constantly “turning ourselves toward God. The Church sometimes uses the word *metanoia*, a Greek term for “turning away from sin,” to refer this desired change in our life. Part of the challenge is resisting all the things that try to create distance between ourselves and God. One of the many ways the Church helps us meet this challenge is through the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation gives us an opportunity to confess our sins and reconcile ourselves with God and the Church. This is helpful to all Christians regardless of the seriousness of one’s sins. Even if we have not committed gravely serious sin—mortal sin, rightly named because it brings about a kind of death in a person’s heart and can lead to eternal death—the Church encourages us to participate.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains why. “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults . . . helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit” (CCC 1458). The grace of the sacrament opens our hearts to God’s merciful love and enables us to better follow Jesus’ command to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Preparing to Celebrate Reconciliation

Before celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we are encouraged to prepare by thinking about our lives in relation to the word of God. This is often referred to as an examination of conscience. It can take place in the context of a celebration or be carried out on one’s own at any time. The Rite of Penance, the ritual text that guides the celebration of Reconciliation, includes a series of suggested questions for people to use as a guide. Here is a sampling of the questions:

- Is my heart set on God?
- When I pray, do I really raise my mind and heart to God or is it a matter of words only?
- Do I keep Sundays and feast days holy?
- Are there false gods that I worship by giving them greater attention and deeper trust than I give to God?
- Have I genuine love for my neighbors?
- In my family life, have I contributed to the well-being and happiness of the rest of the family by patience and genuine love?
- Do I share my possessions with the less fortunate?
- Am I concerned for the good and prosperity of the human community in which I live, or do I spend my life caring only for myself?
- If I am in a position of responsibility or authority, do I use this for my own advantage or for the good of others, in a spirit of service?
- Have I tried to grow in the life of the Spirit through prayer, reading the word of God and meditating on it, receiving the sacraments, self-denial?

- Have I imposed my own will on others, without respecting their freedom and rights?
 - 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 Gospel?
 - Have I been lazy and too much given to leisure?
 - Have I been patient in accepting the sorrows and disappointments of life?
 - Have I kept my senses and my whole body pure and chaste as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
 - Have I gone against my conscience out of fear or hypocrisy?
- (*Rite of Penance*, Appendix III)

Central Parts of the Sacrament

God “casts a living light on sin” (CCC 1848). Because of this, the proclamation of Scripture is an important part of reconciliation. The sacrament “should begin with a hearing of God’s word, because through his word God calls his people to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart” (*Rite of Penance*, 24). When the sacrament is celebrated in the context of community a full Liturgy of the Word is celebrated complete with readings and a homily that encourages us to turn away from sin. When a person meets individually with a priest, the rite encourages the two to begin by reading from Scripture.

The sacrament of reconciliation also includes these four key elements:

1. **Contrition.** When we participate in the sacrament, feeling and being contrite is the most important thing we do. Being contrite means being sorry for all of our failings. When we are truly contrite and genuinely sorry we experience a change of heart or *metanoia* that opens the way for a renewed relationship with God. It doesn’t mean a complete transformation. It doesn’t mean we have attained perfect holiness. Without some degree of contrition, however, our participation in sacramental reconciliation is ritualistic and empty.
2. **Confession.** Our contrite hearts lead us to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and to the confession of sins. This involves admitting our sins to a priest confessor. Recognizing and naming our sin is an important step in the process of healing and reconciliation. The sacrament also involves an expression of the sorrow we feel. Here is a sample prayer from the rite for individual penitents:

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
(*Rite of Penance*, 45)

3. **Act of Penance.** The priest hearing confession gives each individual something to do to make amends for his or her sins. Ideally the penance is suited to the sin in the sense that it contributes to a remedy for whatever bad consequences may have resulted from the sin. The penance is not punishment for the sake of punishment. Rather, it seeks to translate a person's change of heart into a change in one's daily practices.

As Pope John Paul II explained, penance is "a conversion that passes from the heart to deeds and then to the Christian's whole life" (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 4). Our whole lives are to be penitential, that is, "directed toward a continuous striving for what is better" (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 4). The acts of penance we receive in the sacrament from the priest are intended to support this goal. "It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we bear" (CCC 1460).

4. **Absolution.** The sacrament is completed by a sign of absolution which expresses God's pardon. The priest extends his hands over the penitent's head and gives absolution with these words:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit
(*Rite of Penance*, 55).

The penitent responds "Amen."

While participating in prayer and worship, we often say the word *amen*, a Hebrew term meaning "so be it." When we use the term in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation we are not simply stating agreement with the ideas expressed in the priest's prayer of absolution. Our "amen" signifies that we surrender ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It signals our desire to open our hearts and minds and accept God's love and forgiveness. Our

“amen” expresses our intention to go forth from the celebration to live out the implications of the celebration.

Our “Amen” in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is closely related to our “amen” when we receive communion and our “I do’s” when we renew our baptismal promises. Likewise, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is closely connected to Baptism and the Eucharist. Reconciliation renews our bond with God and the whole community that was established in Baptism and is strengthened in Eucharist. Our “amen” is a reaffirmation of our Christian identity and a recommitment to fully participate in the life and mission of the Church.

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