Reconciliation

Jesus said to [the apostles] again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ~ John 20:21-23

THE sacrament of Reconciliation continues the work of conversion and forgiveness in the life of the Christian — a work that is necessary, because the inclination to sin is not removed in Baptism and our life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin. As long as we live on earth, we must struggle against this inclination, and thus we demonstrate our choice to love God above all else, to be saints.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1:8), *"since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23), even after Baptism. For this reason, Jesus gave to the Twelve the power to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, especially for those who have committed mortal (deadly) sin (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). In this way, we receive spiritual healing and salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

"Through the priest, God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner."

The Prodigal Son, by Gustave Doré, 1833-1883

The Names of the Sacrament

The preferred name for this sacrament is "Reconciliation," because this name identifies the very purpose of the sacrament. The sacrament reconciles one with God and restores their intimate friendship. Nevertheless, each of the names given to this sacrament highlights important aspects. The name "sacrament of Conversion" emphasizes Jesus' command, *"Repent, and believe in the gospel,"* which is given to every person (Mk 1:15; see also Lk 15:18). The name "sacrament of Confession" points to the essential element of "confession" in which the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) both confesses his or her sins and a belief in God's mercy. The name "sacrament of Penance" is perhaps the oldest name for this sacrament and underscores the importance of doing penance as both a sign of thanksgiving to God for his mercy and an expression of the desire to repair the damage caused by sin. The last two names, "sacrament of Forgiveness" and "sacrament of Reconciliation," are closely united. Through the priest, who acts *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner who converts, confesses, and repents. In this

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way, *"God ... through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Cor 5:18). This ministry is both a gift and a duty for the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) — as he or she is forgiven and reconciled, likewise he or she must forgive and reconcile as Christ's ambassador (see 2 Cor 5:20).

The Rite of Reconciliation

Although this sacrament may be received as often as desired, there are occasions when the sacrament is obligatory (required). The Church obliges all the faithful to confess their sins once a year. Also, the Christian is obliged to go to Confession before receiving Communion if even one mortal (deadly) sin has been committed (see 1 Cor 11:27).

Jesus gave only the apostles the authority to forgive sins, and so bishops, as the successors of the apostles, and priests are the only ones with the authority to forgive sins (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). As part of this great authority, they are required to keep the "sacramental seal," that is, they must keep everyone's confession absolutely secret. Neither a bishop nor a priest may ever make known to anyone, for any reason, in any way, the confession of another person. Even if someone were to confess sins as serious as murder, drug dealing, or rape, they may never reveal even the smallest detail of the confession.

The essential elements of the Rite of Reconciliation are the sinner's repentance, confession, and intention to do their penance, and the priest's absolution. The first essential element, the sinner's repentance, begins before the actual rite. Repentance or contrition is a gift from God in which one experiences sorrow (great pain and detestation) for sin: *"therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes"* (Jb 42:6). Genuine repentance includes the choice of the sinner to make a firm resolution to sin no more. Many times, the weight of our sin, especially habitual sins, make it more difficult to make that firm resolution in the face of countless resolutions made and broken in the past, but Jesus gently invites us to come to him with our sorrows and burdens (see Mt 11:28). The sacrament is for the weak, so we need not worry about how many resolutions have been broken. When questioned on the limit to forgiveness, the Lord says, *"[Not] seven times, but seventy times seven"* (Mt 18:22). With the Lord there is no limit to his forgiveness. Those who approach the sacrament in humble contrition will receive forgiveness from him: *"a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise"* (Ps 51:17). Those, however, who approach it in a spirit of complacency, accepting the fact that they will do wrong again, are not truly sorry and are not really seeking forgiveness. God honors the freedom he has bestowed on the human person. If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God: *"Restore us to thyself, O Lord! Renew our days as of old!"* (Lam 5:21).

"If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God."

Jesus' descent to the dead, 12th century book of the Gospels

Before seeking Reconciliation, the penitent must prepare to receive the sacrament by asking God's help in examining his or her conscience: *"Behold, we*

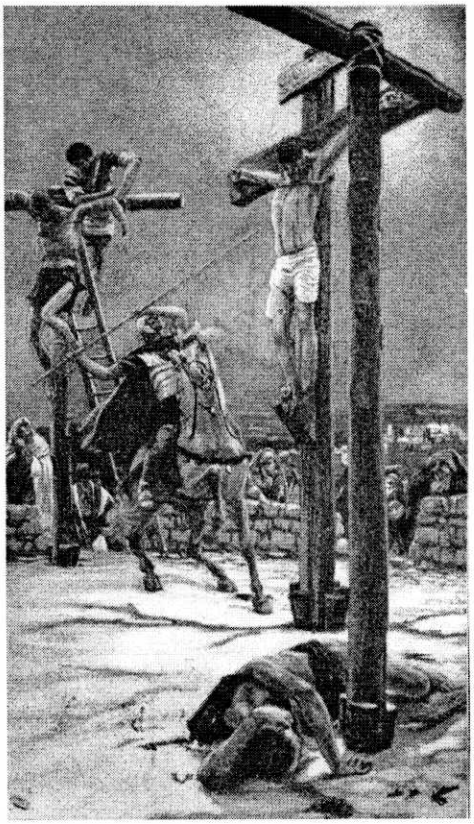
are before thee in our guilt, for none can stand before thee because of this" (Ez 9:15), and to grant the gift of contrition. Various Scripture passages may be used in examining one's conscience, for example, the Ten Commandments (see Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (see Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and on love (see 1 Cor 12-13), the conduct of Christians (see Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and the Spirit (see Gal 5:19-23).

Following the examination of conscience, true repentance, and a resolution not to commit those sins again, the penitent is prepared to receive the sacrament, choosing to sit face-to-face with the priest or kneeling behind a curtain.

The actual Rite of Reconciliation begins with the priest's greeting and blessing of the penitent, which may be followed by a reading from Scripture. After this, the penitent begins his or her confession by making the Sign of the Cross and saying words similar to these, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned; my last confession was a month ago." Next, the penitent confesses to the priest every mortal (deadly) sin committed since the last confession, and the approximate number of times each one was committed. Intentionally withholding mortal sin from confession is the serious sin of sacrilege, because of his dishonesty and failure to trust in God's mercy. It is beneficial to the penitent to confess venial sins, a practice that helps in realizing the seriousness of these sins and how they, too, offend God and harm one's relationship with him. The confession is concluded with the penitent's own words or a traditional formula such as, "I am sorry for these and all my sins."

At the completion of the penitent's confession, the priest may ask questions to give suitable counsel. Then, the priest gives some penance for the sinner to do in order that the person may begin to repair the damage done by his or her sin, to make satisfaction, and to make necessary changes to avoid sin in the future. Next, the priest asks the person to make an Act of Contrition aloud, such as the following: "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).

"The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation."



The piercing of the side of Jesus, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

The priest then grants the sinner absolution by extending his hand over the penitent: "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* 46).

The priest may then offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." The penitent responds, "His mercy endures forever." The rite concludes with a dismissal and a blessing, for example, "The Lord has freed you from your sins, go in peace."

After the priest's absolution, the penitent then does the penance given to him or her by the priest, in order to make reparation for the sin he or she committed.

The Effects of Reconciliation

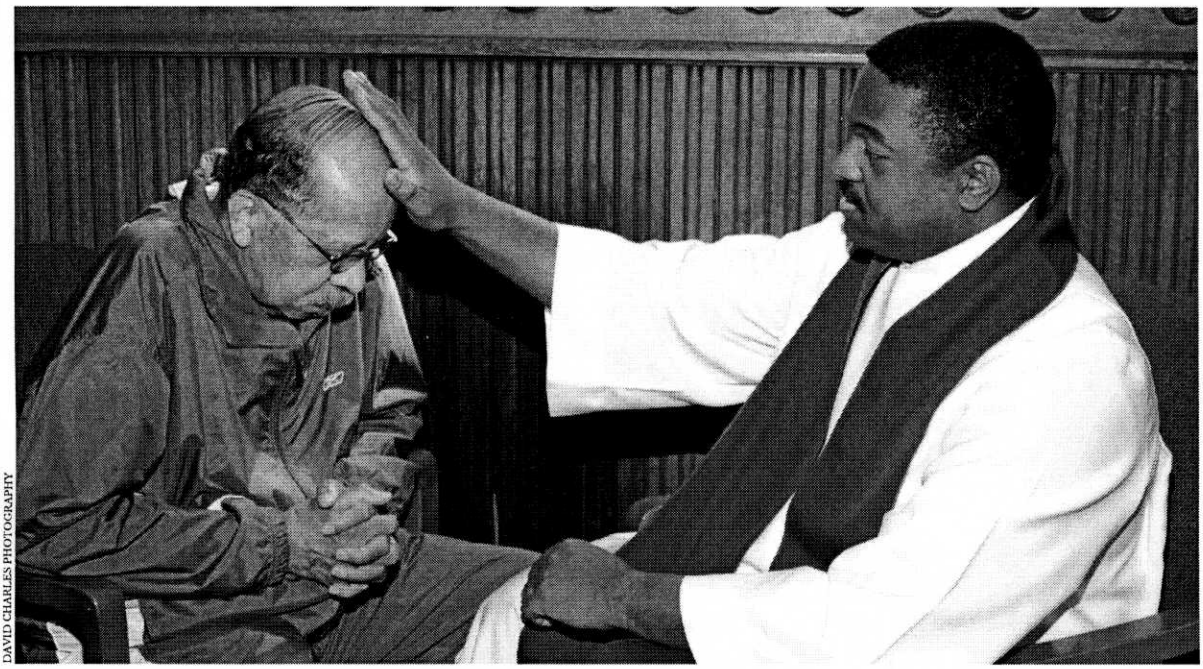
The sacrament of Reconciliation reunites the sinner with God. Through mortal sin, we destroy our intimate friendship with God. Sin separates us from

God by weakening his life within in us and causing us to neglect the abundant gifts he first gave to us in Baptism. Sinners become like the prodigal son, who separated himself from his father and squandered his inheritance (see Lk 15:11-32). So too we sinners must humble ourselves and beg our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, as the prophet cries: *"Hear, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned before thee"* (Bar 3:2). The Father, who longs for our return, can then run to us, embrace us, and kiss us (see Lk 15:20). Again and again, when we fall, our Father offers his mercy to the truly repentant: *"Thou art merciful to all, ... and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.... Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living"* (Wis 11:23, 26).

in Christ, but also to every other baptized person. We become both children of God and brothers and sisters to one another in the Trinity-family, the communion of saints (see Gal 4:5-7, 1 Cor 12:12-31). For this reason, Reconciliation is also necessary to reconcile us with our brothers and sisters in the Church.

The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation. Every sin, however, has temporal consequences connected to it. These temporal punishments are only partially remitted in Reconciliation. In order to be free of those consequences, the forgiven sinner must do penance to repair the harm done by his or her sin, that is, "to make satisfaction."

Proper reception of the sacrament provides sac-



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Reconciliation is a sacrament of mercy and healing

Reconciliation is the way for the baptized who have committed mortal sin to return home, to re-establish their intimate friendship with God. And our Heavenly Father is full of mercy, ever willing to reconcile the penitent sinner to himself: *"Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"* (Mi 7:18-19).

Furthermore, mortal sin separates the faithful from the family of God, the Church. This is so because in Baptism, each one is united not only to God

ramental grace in abundance. These graces assist the penitent in making satisfaction, in growing in virtue and in fighting temptation. They are invaluable and they are a major reason for the recommendation for frequent reception of this sacrament. Not only are we strengthened in virtue but we learn, ever more, the dreadful reality of our sins so that we might strive ever more to avoid them: *"Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass, and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin, that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord"* (Wis 12:2).

(CCC 976, 979-983, 1420-1484)