

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

In Catholic Teaching, the **Sacrament of Penance** (commonly called *Confession*, is the method given by Christ to the Church by which individual men and women may be freed from sins committed after receiving Baptism. (It is not necessary to confess sins committed before baptism, as baptism itself is considered to remove the guilt of all prior sins.)

In 1215, a requirement that every Catholic Christian receive this sacrament at least once a year was instituted as part of the Canon Law at the Fourth Council of the Lateran.

Minister of the Sacrament

Catholics believe that no priest, as an individual man, however pious or learned, has power to forgive sins. This power belongs to God alone; however, God can and does exercise the power to forgive sins through the Catholic priesthood.

Form of the Sacrament

The form of Penance has not changed for centuries, although at one time confessions were made publicly. The role of the priest is as a minister of Christ's mercy. He acts *in persona Christi*. In the Catholic tradition, the penitent confesses mortal sins in order to restore his relationship to God and to receive the fullness of God's grace and salvation. The sinner may as a pious matter confesses venial sins, especially if the sinner has no mortal sins to confess. The intent of this sacrament is to provide healing for the soul as well as to regain the grace of God, lost by sin. The Council of Trent quoted John 20:22-23 as the primary Scriptural proof for the doctrine concerning this sacrament, but Catholics also consider

Matthew 9:2-8 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 to be among the Scriptural bases for the sacrament.

The essential words of absolution are: "**I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**"

The penitent makes an act of contrition, i.e. a prayer of sorrow acknowledging his/her faults before God. Reconciliation is necessary before receiving the sacrament of Eucharist for the first time. The Catholic Church teaches that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the only ordinary way in which a person can receive forgiveness for mortal sins committed after baptism. However, perfect contrition (a sorrow motivated by love of God rather than of fear of punishment) is an extraordinary way of removing the guilt of mortal sin before or without confession (if there is no opportunity of confessing to a priest). Such contrition would include the intention of confessing.

Mortal sin

To commit a mortal sin three conditions must be met:

- The matter of the action must be grave or serious
- the person must know the action to be sinful
- The person commits the action with full consent of the will

Other sins would be classed as venial; confession of venial sins is strongly recommended but not obligatory, and is said to strengthen the penitent against temptation to mortal sin. Serious matters for a mortal sin, according to Catholic teaching, include murder, blasphemy, fornication, rape, perjury, the use of artificial contraception, or missing Mass without a good reason on a Sunday or holiday of obligation. (Look up the **7 deadly sins** – pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth). It is a widely held belief of the Catholic faith that if a person guilty of mortal sin

dies without either receiving the sacrament or experiencing perfect contrition with the intention of confessing to a priest, he/she risks eternal damnation.

Conditions for validity

In order for the sacrament to be valid the penitent must do more than simply confess his known mortal sins to a priest. He must also:

- be truly sorry for each of the sins he has committed,
- have a firm intention not to commit them again.

Also, in addition to confessing the types of mortal sins committed, the penitent must disclose how many times each sin was committed, to the best of his/her ability. If a person deliberately conceals a serious sin when confessing, a sacrilege has been committed and in his/her next confession he must reveal this to the priest.

Frequency of Reception

The Code of Canon Law requires all Catholics to confess mortal sins. Traditionally many receive the sacrament during the liturgical seasons of **Lent or Advent**, or prior to special times in life such as confirmation or marriage. Couples co-habiting before marriage which is a serious sin, must confess before they get married in the Catholic Church.

Frequent confession has been recommended by Popes. Confession of everyday faults is "strongly recommended by the Church." (CCC 1458) According to **Pope Pius XII** and echoed by **Saint Pope John XXIII**, "We particularly recommend the pious practice of frequent confession, which the Church has introduced, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, as a means of swifter daily progress along the road of virtue." **Blessed Pope Paul VI** said that frequent confession is "of great value." **Saint Pope John Paul II**

who went to confession weekly enumerated these advantages of frequent confession:

- we are renewed in fervour,
- strengthened in our resolutions, and
- supported by divine encouragement

Because of what he considered misinformation on this topic, he strongly recommended this practice and warned that those who discourage frequent confession "are lying."

Seal of Confession

For Catholic priests, the confidentiality of all statements made by penitents during the course of confession is absolute. This strict confidentiality is known as the Seal of the Confessional. According to the Code of Canon Law, 983 §1, "The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason." Priests may not reveal what they have learned during confession to anyone, even under the threat of their own death or that of others. A priest who breaks that confidentiality incurs excommunication reserved to the Holy See (Code of Canon Law, 1388 §1). In a criminal matter, a priest may encourage the penitent to surrender to authorities. However, this is the extent of the leverage he wields; he may not directly or indirectly disclose the matter to civil authorities himself.