



A Brief History
of Confession

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Not everyone realizes that the sacraments have not always been practiced in the form in which we are familiar with them. Sacraments have undergone a development, a development influenced not only by the Church's understanding of what Jesus intended, but also influenced by the society in which the Church has flourished and by the needs and hopes of the People of God.

In the pages that follow a very condensed history of the sacrament of reconciliation is presented. Perhaps you might be able to recognize, not only the details of the sacrament as it has developed over time, but even more important, the gentle prodding of the Holy Spirit, constantly present in the Church and in each of us. It is this same Holy Spirit that is present to each and every one of us today—guiding, directing, and forming each of us into the people that will be the “Lord's own” (Deuteronomy 7: 6).

I also hope that as you read this history of confession, you will recognize that God's love and mercy in what has been a consistent way in which the Church has asked for and celebrated that mercy and love. I hope that, as you let this truth grow in your hearts and influence your appreciation of the sacrament, it may help each of you feel a little more at peace, especially in those moments when you feel that you have made a mistake in your confession or perhaps omitted some detail or explanation. It seems that God has found a way to forgive his people throughout time, and that is what is the most important.

JESUS AND SINNERS

Even people who do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God are nevertheless left with the impression that he was a person with an unusual capacity for forgiveness. Not only was he able to forgive sinners, he was also able to forgive those who had sinned against him (Luke 23: 34). The gospels are filled with illustrations of his forgiveness in action; the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11– 32), the story of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15: 3– 7), and the story of the Woman caught in adultery (John 8: 3– 11) are some obvious examples.

The message that Jesus preached, a message preached by John the Baptist (repent and believe) but completed by Jesus (because the Kingdom of God is among you), was a message that called people to metanoia, the Greek word that means to change your life and your heart. It was more than a message of calling people to repentance, which means to be sorry for what you have done; Jesus wanted people to be sorry, but he also desired that they be fundamentally changed by their sorrow and their personal experience of forgiveness. This fundamental change, the reordering of their life and their decisions was to be understood as gospel (good news) because it would usher in a new way of life and a new way of living, which he called the kingdom of God.

Jesus was so insistent on metanoia and the ramifications of this life-changing decision that when his apostles asked him for further clarification, “How much more do we have to forgive?” he answered them, “not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18: 22). In other words, in the kingdom of God there was no limit to what could be forgiven and no limit to what needed to be forgiven: “Forgive us our sins, / for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11: 4).

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples, and spoke to them in the words that have traditionally been understood as the words that instituted the sacrament of penance and reconciliation: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20: 23). Within the context of his life and ministry it can be understood that, although the power to “bind someone” is certainly a prerogative, the intention of Jesus was to not bind but rather to loose, to free people from that which held them fast and set them firmly on the path to the kingdom of God.

THE PRACTICE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The primary sacrament of forgiveness in the early Church was baptism. The apostles preached the gospel as it had been given to them by Jesus and invited people to turn away from their lives of sin and to embrace the good news. It was understood by all that baptism reconciled a person to God and forgave all their sins, but it was also understood that it could be received only once. There was a problem with those people who had already been baptized and who did not live up to their baptismal promises. What could be done on their behalf?

The early Christian community looked first, as might well be expected, to their Jewish roots and heritage for an answer. Jewish rabbis had a practice that was known as “binding and loosing.” If a member of the community somehow offended the community the rabbis would bar them from the community, and if they later repented of their offense, the rabbis would welcome them back. This practice was a practical application of the admonition of Jesus, if all else fails between you and a brother and a sister, “take it to the Church” (Matthew 18: 15–18) for judgment. Saint Paul may well have been referring to

this practice when he instructed the community in Corinth that they should have done this when a certain member of the community had violated the marriage laws by “living with his Father’s wife” (Leviticus 18: 8; 1 Corinthians 5: 1– 13). Paul expected that the community would expel the man, and then later accepts him back into the community if he reformed his life (see 2 Corinthians 2: 5– 11).

The practice of binding and loosing was useful, but by the second century the Church had developed a practice by which a person, who had fallen into serious sin (that is, murder, adultery, idolatry), could become a penitent (from the Latin *paenitentia*, which means repentance). Penitents formed a special group within the community who would spend an extended period of time in fasting, prayer, and giving alms, all the while asking for the strength to be faithful to their baptismal promises. The Christian community would join them in prayer during the period of penitence. When the bishop of the community determined that they had indeed reformed their lives he would welcome them back in the name of the community, lay his hands on their head as a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness, and invite them once again to join the community in the celebration of the Eucharist. A person was permitted to become a penitent only once in their lifetime; to be admitted more than once, in the words of Clement of Alexandria, “Would make a mockery of God’s mercy.”

The group of penitents was very small, because most people did not commit the kind of sins that were considered serious enough for this type of public penance. Others, aware of the fact that they could seek public forgiveness and reconciliation only once in their life, postponed entrance into the group of penitents for as long as possible. For most people, however,

forgiveness was something that they routinely asked for, and received, from their brothers and sisters in the community or something they asked God for at the beginning of the Eucharistic liturgy. As long as the Christian community was small, this form of public penance and reconciliation worked well; but as the community grew larger and larger, the practice became more and more strained and seemed not to fit the needs of the community.

A further strain was put on this particular form of the practice of sacramental reconciliation by the persecutions suffered by the Christian community in the third century. Some members of the community went to their death as martyrs, while others chose not to accept martyrdom. Those who did not become martyrs performed the required sacrifices to the gods and renounced Jesus, and then later, when the furor of persecution had settled down, asked to be readmitted to the Christian community. Some bishops freely accepted these returning apostates but other bishops and communities were not so inclined. Apostasy, according to one bishop of the time, was the “unforgivable sin” (Matthew 12: 31) and could not be forgiven. A consistent and pastoral approach to this situation was never agreed upon.

Eventually, the practice of public penance and reconciliation slowly died out. It was replaced by a different practice, a practice with roots in the burgeoning monasteries and monasticism that were beginning to flourish throughout the Mediterranean and across much of Europe, into England and Ireland.

BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

Monastic training often included the concept of what today might be called a “mentor.” A new recruit in the monastery would be assigned an older monk who was entrusted with the task of teaching him all about being a monk (from the Greek meaning, “to live alone”). The younger man would visit the older man once a week. In their conversations the younger monk would often confess his faults and failings to the older monk, and ask for the direction and the advice that might be helpful in overcoming them. At the end of their session, they would pray together and ask for the forgiveness of any sins that they may have committed.

In the fifth century, at the direct request of the papacy, the monks, who up until this moment were centered in their monastic compounds, were entrusted with the task of converting to the Christian faith the Germanic tribes that were migrating into former territory of the Roman Empire. These monks, particularly the monks from Ireland, brought with them the practice of confessing their sins to another and they urged their new converts to do the same. The monks understood the practice as a way of keeping the new Christian faith alive and vibrant in the lives of their new converts. The practice seemed to be well accepted and popular among the people because it spread very quickly.

When this new penitential practice reached the parts of the former empire in southern Europe, the first reaction of the bishops of that place was to condemn it, but eventually the practice took root, even in those places where it was vigorously opposed. People wanted some assurance that they were loved and forgiven by God and the traditional practice of public penance did not fulfill their needs. They also preferred to

confess their sins directly to the priest, which this new practice permitted, and not to the bishop, which was required in the more traditional practice. By the seventh century private confession of sins had taken root in most places and within a few centuries it was accepted throughout the Church.

During the Middle Ages the practice of private confession of sins continued to be both practiced and developed. For example, the penance assigned for the remission of sins at first needed to be completed before a person was accepted back into Communion, perhaps a concept adopted from the old practice of public penance. Eventually, however, it was understood that the penance could be performed and the person could return to Communion at the same time. The penances themselves also changed. Originally the assigned penance would be closely related to the sin; if a person stole one goat, they would have to return two goats to the aggrieved party, but eventually the recitation of certain prayers were all that was normally required, as long as proper restitution was made.

The other development was that the role of the priest evolved more and more into the role of a judge, and the keeper of God's mercy. This was a distinct development because it seemed, in the original format popularized by the monks, that the priest would simply assure the penitent that their sins had been forgiven by God, but eventually this evolved into the practice where the priest would absolve the penitent from their sins. The absolution was given in the name of God but it could be surmised, and at least for some people it was assumed, that the forgiveness was dependent on the priest and not on God. This became the primary "fuel" that powered the Protestant Reformation's insistence that people seek forgiveness directly from God, and not from a priest.

Other developments during this period of time impacted the Church's understanding of the sacrament even more profoundly. These developments included the distinction between mortal sin and venial sin, perfect and imperfect contrition, and the punishment of sins.

Mortal Sin and Venial Sin:

There had been a long tradition in the Church that distinguished between serious sin (sins which required public penance) and less serious sins (which were forgiven in the Eucharist). Serious sin was understood as sin that was so grievous (murder, adultery, idolatry) that it was "deadly" to the soul and to the life of grace within a person. It was understood that if a person died in this state that he or she would be denied heaven. Other sins were considered less serious and very pardonable. In the Middle Ages a listing of mortal (serious) sin and venial (pardonable) sin was never detailed, but there was agreement among theologians of the time that it was possible for a person to deliberately reject God through their choices and actions. It was understood that such a rejection of God and the law of God would bring a person to the everlasting fires of hell for all eternity.

Perfect and Imperfect Contrition:

Sorrow for sin that is motivated by fear of punishment is understood as imperfect contrition; it is considered imperfect because even the most hardened criminals might regret that they will be punished but might not regret their choices and actions. Perfect contrition, on the other hand, is contrition that is based on the recognition within a person that the life of sin has no place in their life if they are trying to live their

baptismal promises; this kind of contrition is necessary for a life of conversion and repentance.

Punishment of Sin: Sin, because it was understood as an offense against God, needed to be punished. People understood the consequences of breaking the civil law, for example, and recognized that even if forgiven, there were still consequences as a result of their actions. Sin was understood in much the same way; God would forgive sin, if the sins were confessed and absolution was received and the penance was performed, but there was still the consequence of sin. Theologians of the time differentiated between the temporal punishment due (punishment for sin after death, but for a set period of time) and the eternal punishment due (forgiven in the sacrament, but if not forgiven, punishment that would last for all eternity). The place where temporal punishment was experienced was purgatory and the place where eternal punishment was experienced was hell.

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

The Council of Trent, in direct response to the Protestant Reformers who saw little need for the confession of sins to anyone except directly to God, issued strong directives and teachings about the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. The complaints and challenges issued by Martin Luther were particularly signaled out, and in his excommunication by Pope Leo X in 1520, twelve of his ideas concerning penance were condemned.

The Council reaffirmed that it was the will of the Lord and the constant tradition of the Church that the “integral confession of sins” was necessary after baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The Council understood that this integral confession would

include the specifics and the particulars of all mortal sins committed; venial sins could be confessed, but it was not necessary to do so since they were forgiven in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This integral confession of sins was necessary so that the priest could judge the severity of the sins committed and assign the necessary penance.

The end result of the teaching of the Council of Trent was that most Catholics continued their practice of going to confession once a year, in preparation for their annual reception of holy Communion. This remained the common practice in the Church until early in the twentieth century when Pope Pius X encouraged the frequent reception of holy Communion. Catholics responded to his request, but because of their training and understanding also assumed that it was necessary to go to confession before the reception of Communion. As a result of this assumption, practically unchallenged and perhaps even encouraged by the clergy, Catholics would go to confession once a month or once a week, depending on how often they went to holy Communion.

CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

By the time of the Second Vatican Council, it could be argued that there was general agreement and understanding that the sacrament of penance and reconciliation needed reform. Although for some Catholics the celebration of the sacrament was certainly an opportunity to deepen their relationship with the Lord and experience the Lord's abundant mercy, for many others confession was an obligation, a rule or requirement that needed to be fulfilled so that they would meet the minimal requirements of the law. It was for this reason that the Council emphasized that the purpose of the sacrament was an

opportunity for conversion, confession, and forgiveness (CCC 1423– 1424) and not a test of discipline.

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed two basic principles about sacramental confession and reconciliation, principles that were considered as essential to the fundamental structure of the sacrament. The first principle is that contrition, confession, and satisfaction are the graced action of the Holy Spirit, calling the individual person to ongoing conversion of life. The second principle is that the action of God is manifested through the ministry of the bishops and priests, through which the person is healed and restored to ecclesial communion with the Church (CCC 1448). The Church affirmed that it is only God who can forgive sins, but also reaffirmed that the Church is a sign and an instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation of God (CCC 1441– 1442).

The contemporary practice of the sacrament begins with the premise that the celebration of the sacrament is primarily a liturgical action that contains the following elements: a greeting and blessing, proclamation of the word of God, exhortation to repentance, the confession of sins, the imposition and acceptance of penance, and finally, absolution along with a prayer of thanksgiving and praise (CCC 1480). Understanding of the sacrament reaffirms the necessity for individual and integral confession and absolution (Council of Trent) but also introduces two new forms of the sacrament: communal celebration of the sacrament (with individual confession and absolution) and a communal celebration of the sacrament with general confession and general absolution (in cases of grave necessity) (CCC 1482– 1483).

