

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

by Fr. Antony

Sacrament of Confession (Penance)

The means by which God forgives sins after baptism is confession: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

This sacrament is based on the mission God entrusted to Christ in his capacity as the Son of man to forgive sins on earth (Mathew. 9:2-6). When the crowds saw this, they *"glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings"* (Mathew 9:8).

After his resurrection, Jesus passed on his mission to forgive sins to his ministers, telling them, *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained"* (John 20:21-23). Just as the apostles were to carry Christ's message to the whole world, so they were to carry his forgiveness.

Jesus says, *"Amen I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"* (Matt. 18:18). Paul, in his letter to Corinthians, says, *"So we are ambassadors for Christ"* (2 Cor. 5:20).

Paul is convinced that as ambassadors of Christ, the power to forgive sins is given by God. *"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Cor. 5:18). Clearly, the Apostles were given the authority to remit sins, or to bind them, in the person of Christ. How are they to accomplish this if they do not know what sins to remit or to bind? The sinner is required to confess his sins as shown.

The apostles in turn handed it over to their successors, who are bishops. The bishop authorizes his priests who are in good standing. God uses His priests as His instruments of reconciliation. In many places in the Old Testament, we find reconciliation and atonement being performed by a priest. We have a few examples here: *"...Thus the priest shall make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven"* (Leviticus 4:20). *"Thus the priest shall make atonement for the man's sin, and it will be forgiven"* (Leviticus 4:35). *"This atonement is to be made by the priest who has been anointed and ordained to the priesthood in succession to his father"* (Leviticus 16:32). The priest has been given the ministry of reconciliation. He mediates God's forgiveness to the sinner. The priest is merely an instrument of God; the priest is acting in the person of Christ.

The practice of penance has varied considerably through the centuries. In the early Church, publicly known sins (such as apostasy) were often confessed openly in church, though private confession to a priest was always an option for privately committed sins. As the Didache (A.D. 70) indicates, confession was not just something done in silence to God alone, but something done "in church". Re-

acceptance of the penitent into the Church community normally took place only after completion of the penance imposed.

In the early church, penances also tended to be performed before, rather than after, absolution, and they were much stricter than those of today. But the basics of the sacrament, confession and absolution by a priest, have always been there. *"Whoever . . . eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27).*

"Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . . On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure" (Didache 4:14, 14:1 [A.D. 70]).

It has been called penance, confession, and reconciliation, each word emphasizing one of its aspects. It is called the sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction. It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is called sacrament of reconciliation, since the person here reconciles with God and human beings (the Church which is the Body of Christ). It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin (CCC1423 -24).