

How Do We Celebrate God's Unending Forgiveness?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Forgiveness

(1420, 1425, 1426) God forgives us endlessly and the church celebrates this reality through the sacrament of reconciliation. For, even though we are baptized and confirmed, and even though we are steeped in Eucharist, there remains that tendency within us to "miss the mark," to be selfish and unilateral, to fail to love, in a word, a tendency to commit sins. (1421 & 1422) But God never fails to love and the church celebrates this in the sacrament of reconciliation. (1423) **We call it a sacrament of "conversion"** because in celebrating it, we turn our hearts empowered by the Spirit of Love, back to Divine Love through Christ who reveals that Love. **We also refer to it as the sacrament of "penance"** a term which comes from a Latin word: *repere*, which suggests a posture of sorrow and a process of change.

Sorrow for the ways we have sinned is the starting point.

(1424) **It is also called "confession"** because it is here that we are invited to talk out loud about how we have sinned, and in that talking, recognize the mercy of God which is endless. **And it is called the sacrament of "reconciliation,"** because it draws us back to balance, it reconnects us to our journey of faith, and it celebrates God's wonderful love.

Mark's Gospel

(1427) If one of the gospels serves as a reflection on this, it is the Gospel of Mark. Time and again in this Gospel, the writer reminds us that we ourselves, if we wish to follow Christ, must "repent." Indeed, the first words the writer puts on the lips of Jesus are a call to turn our hearts to God, to see how it is that we do indeed fail to love, to repent from that, and to believe in the Good News. All of this is wrapped up in a new understanding which Jesus made the center of his teaching, namely that the reign of God is at hand! This Gospel, written in the earliest communities of Christians, is a call to enter into this new way of living with a profound commitment. It is a call to be baptized with the baptism with which Jesus was baptized: to die and to rise in Christ.

(1428) When we die to ourselves in loving others and continually correct our course in life to keep us on that journey of faith we encounter God who is Divine Love. (1428-9) This course correction is the purpose of this sacrament. It's a time to allow the Spirit of Divine Love to enter us and draw us back to love.

Our Inner Lives

(1430) This isn't about public displays of sorrow but about the condition of our own hearts. It is a deep turning or reorientation of our lives which is then given a visible sign.

and, indeed, a sort of inner painful recognition
that we have hurt ourselves and others
by the things we have done
or the things we have failed to do.

(1431) It is a deep desire to change our lives
and, indeed, a sort of inner painful recognition
that we have hurt ourselves and others
by the things we have done
or the things we have failed to do

(1432) When we pause to admit to the sinful & unloving tendencies
within us,

our hearts are heavy and burdened,
but God gives us a “new heart.”

We start all over again, refreshed by Divine Love,
and ready to take on the world!

We must feel sorrow and contrition for our sins.

Saying We're Sorry

(1433-34) There are many ways to correct our course
and light our interior lamps of love:

fasting,

prayer,

alms giving,

reconciling with others,

caring for those in need,

and dying to ourselves in loving others.

(1435) We can also work for justice and peace,

fight for what is right in our society,

develop a heart for the materially poor,

and set a course for our lives

which results in us being conscious

about how we live and love.

(1436) Perhaps the most effective way to do this

is to celebrate the Eucharist.

(1437) But we can also read Scripture,

pray the liturgy of the hours,

and be mindful of God in all things.

Only God Forgives

(1438-40) The Greek word in the Gospels

which is often translated as “sin”

is better translated as “missing the mark.”

An archer with a bent arrow cannot hit the target.

The arrow will fly off in an errant direction

and the archer will have to chase after it

straighten it out,

and then try again.

We are like that arrow: we are made for love alone

and when we fail to love well,

we miss our mark.

In this sense, we fail our created purpose

but we also fail our companions.

(1441) In the sacrament of reconciliation,

we celebrate a reality which is always there,

but which we sometimes forget:

that God forgives us.

(1442) The church is an instrument of this forgiveness

and seeks to draw us back to God,

who is Divine Love.

Indeed, we are a sign to the world that Divine Love

will never, ever cease loving.

No matter how deep the darkness,

the light of love still shines!

(1443) There is also a certain public dimension to this.

Even though how we miss the mark

seems terribly private to us,

each time we do that,

we also hurt others.

So in reconciliation, we are reunited with each other

and can sit down together at supper again.

Christ repeatedly invited those whom he had forgiven

to dine with him,

which shocked some church authorities.

(1444-46) We all miss the mark sometimes

so this sacrament is aimed at everyone.

The church has only one task:

to express the Divine Love of God
and to help us see that we are set free
to live as we were created,
and to love as we are empowered

(1447-48) In the first step of reconciliation
the Spirit of Love leads us to turn our hearts
see how we miss the mark,
name that clearly,
and take actions to change.
In the second step, the church announces to us
that we are, indeed, forgiven
and it reunites us to the community.

Examining our lives is the first step.

(1449-54) A good way for us to begin this process
is to pause daily in our busy lives,
and review the events of the day.
How have we hit and how have we missed our mark?
Knowing this and admitting it is first.
We can then allow the Spirit of Love
to well up within us
which develops our hearts to be sorry
for the choices we have made
which were selfish and unilateral.
We have called this sense of sorrow by a name:
“contrition.”

(1455) Once we have reached this point
of awareness and sorrow,
it is time for us to reconcile.
As in all things, we humans need some visible,
tangible,
or audible sign to help us see,
touch, and hear God’s love.

It is necessary for us to discuss with a priest how we have sinned.

In this matter, the church has long called us to
discuss our tendencies to sin
with a priest in a private moment,

normally in a reconciliation room
within a church building.

This conversation, however, can occur anywhere
at any time,
and under any circumstances.

(1456) We give a name to this conversation with the priest,
and that name is “confession.”

It is probably rare for most people,
but there are some ways of sinning
which wound us mortally
because they are so entirely selfish,
so entirely unilateral.

They wound us so deeply
that we call them “mortal sins.”

They pass over a certain line of reasonableness
into the territory of deep darkness
even if they are done in secret.

We know that for us to be truly healed,
to be truly reconciled to the Gospels,
to be truly reunited to the community,
and to be truly aware of God’s forgiveness,
we must discuss these incidents
in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Sometimes we are wounded mortally by what we do or fail to do.

(1457) But even more minor incidents,
which we call “venial sins”
can and should be discussed in confession
if we wish to be faithful.

The church asks us to do this at least once a year,
and to refrain from receiving communion
until we have done so in the case
of those “mortal sins”
described above.

Making Amends (1458-59) If we have injured our neighbor,
by gossip, by stealing,
by failing to love,
we must make that up
in order to be truly healed.

(1460) We give a name to the process
of making that up.

We call it “penance.”

In the sacrament, the priest assigns us a form of penance
in order to help make real what we are doing
and deepen our spiritual journey.

(1461-5) We always celebrate this sacrament with a priest
who stands in the place of Christ for us,
offering the same love and the same forgiveness
which Christ himself offers.

(1466) Hence, it is not the priest who forgives us,
but Christ.

(1467) All that the priest hears when we discuss
our tendencies to miss the mark
remains forever a secret
and may never be shared
without exception.

Being Reconciled

(1468) There is mystery in this,
but we know that God never leaves us,
no matter how seriously we miss the mark.
And yet...

we do need a sign of this Divine Love.

Our human heart is healed
and is at peace
and has a sense of well being,
only after we reconcile.

We have a strong sense of being restored,
or being blessed,
by this sacrament.

(1469) Furthermore, we have the experience
of being rejoined to one another as church,

of restoring our bonds of love.

(1470) We set ourselves on a pattern of life:
avoiding the ways we miss the mark
and choosing to live more and more in love...

and this pattern will continue

so that when we die,

the love we have in our hearts will go with us...

(1471-79) God, as it were, indulges us with love,
by drawing us into the Divine Heart
ever more deeply.

By practicing the ways of reconciliation named here,
we keep alive the divine connection
always empowered by the Spirit.

We give this experience of God’s generosity a name:
“indulgence.”

The Liturgy of Reconciliation

(1480) Normally, when we go to celebrate this liturgy,
we begin with a blessing,

followed by reading the Word of God.

Then, in a conversational style, we discuss with the priest
the ways we have missed the mark or sinned
and what the results of that have been.

The priest asks us to make this up by way of a penance,
pronounces the words of absolution,
offers a prayer of thanksgiving,
and gives us a blessing.

The priest stands in the place of Christ for us.

(1481-82) This sacrament can also take place within a communal setting. In these celebrations, we prepare together, pray in common, and receive a common blessing. The discussion of our sins occurs after a liturgy of the word. The communal setting emphasizes our joined lives, and how we travel to Divine Love together. (1483-84) It is also possible when necessary for priests to offer general absolution to an entire community celebrating this sacrament. This is permitted when it is not possible for the priest to discuss personally with each of us how we may have missed the mark, due to a lack of priests or a lack of time.