

Questions & Answers on the Rite of Penance and Reconciliation

The following questions on the sacrament of penance and general absolution are excerpts from a series of eleven questions from the USCCB pamphlet (#5-547), Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance: Questions and Answers.

1. Why do we need the Sacrament of Penance?

“Because of human weakness ... Christians ‘turn aside from [their] early love’ (see Rev 2:4) and even break off their friendship with God by sinning. The Lord, therefore, instituted a special sacrament of penance for the pardon of sins committed after baptism, and the Church has faithfully celebrated the sacrament throughout the centuries – in varying ways, but retaining its essential elements.”³

2. What happens in the Sacrament of Penance?

In the Sacrament of Penance, “the sinner who by grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who ‘first loved us’ (1 Jn 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly.”⁴ Likewise, “those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God.”⁵

3. What is the role of the priest in the Sacrament of Penance?

According to the Rite of Penance, “the Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests. By preaching God’s word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins. In the exercise of this ministry priests act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office . . .” (no. 9).

4. What is the role of the community in the sacrament?

According to the Rite of Penance, “the whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors” (no. 8).

5. When should the Sacrament of Penance be scheduled?

The sacrament should be regularly scheduled at times convenient for the faithful.⁶

“The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God has heard the solemn invitation ‘Turn away from sin and believe the good news.’ It is therefore fitting to have several penitential celebrations during Lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbor and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter triduum with renewed hearts.”

– Rite of Penance, no. 13

6. What are the different forms of the Sacrament of Penance?

The Sacrament of Penance takes three forms. Pope Paul VI’s eloquent explanation of each rite is provided below.⁷

- a. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents* – “The first [form] is the reconciliation of an individual ... with a new emphasis on the demand for personal dispositions and on the relationship to the word of God.... This form of reconciliation is the accustomed one but but enriched by a greater awareness, seriousness, listening,, and so to speak, by a new outpouring of divine love and our own inexpressible joy in the knowledge of being restored to divine life. ...”
- b. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents* – “The second way of reconciliation is that of a communal preparation followed by individual confession and absolution. It combines the two values of being a community act and a personal act. It is a preferable form of reconciliation for our people when it is possible but it usually presupposes the presence of many ministers of the sacrament and this is not always easy.”
- c. *The Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Absolution* – “Then there is the third way, a collective form of reconciliation with a single, general absolution. This form, however, is by way of exception, of necessity, in cases sanctioned by the bishops, and with the continuing obligation [confession] of grave sins, that is, mortal sins, at a later time.”

7. When the reconciliation of several penitents is celebrated, is it allowable for each penitent to confess just one sin?

No. In recent years the practice has grown in which, in consideration of a large number of penitents, each penitent is asked to approach a priest and confess only one sin. Such a practice does not allow for an integral confession as required by the *Rite of Penance*. In order for a valid confession to take place, a full and integral confession must be provided for in every instance. Canon 988 §1 refers to the obligation to confess all serious sins in “kind and number.”

8. When the reconciliation of several penitents is celebrated, can a "common penance" be given?

No. *The Rite of Penance* makes clear that “after the Lord’s Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.”⁸

9. When the reconciliation of several penitents is celebrated, can a "common absolution" be given?

No. “Each penitent who makes an individual confession during such services is to receive absolution individually from the confessor involved.”⁹

10. What is “General Absolution”?

The third form of the Sacrament of Penance, “General Absolution,” is designed for extreme situations.

Such absolution is in fact “exceptional in character” and “cannot be imparted in a general manner unless: (1) *the danger of death is imminent* and there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents; [or] (2) *a grave necessity*, exists, that is, when in light of the number of penitents a supply, of confessors is not readily available to hear the confessions of individuals in an appropriate way within an appropriate time, so that the penitents would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time through no fault of their own, it is not considered sufficient necessity if confessors cannot be readily available only because of the great number of penitents, as can occur on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage”

(Code of Canon Law [CIC], c. 961 § 1).¹⁰

11. May general absolution be given simply because not enough confessors show up for confessions?

No. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the CIC specifically address this point: “A large gathering of the faithful [such as] on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity.”¹¹

“Through the sacrament of penance, we, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and, intending to reform our ways, receive God’s forgiveness and become reconciled with God and with the Church.”

– USCCB Committee on Pastoral Practices, *Penitential Practices for Today’s Catholics*

NOTES

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Subcommittee on the Jubilee Year 2000, *Jubilee 2000, A Year of the Lord’s Favor: A Reflection on Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1998), 9.
- 2 Pope John Paul II, Redeemer of Man (*Redemptor Hominis*) (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1979), no. 20
- 3 Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, decree promulgating the *Rite of Penance*.
- 4 *Rite of Penance*, no 5.
- 5 *Rite of Penance*, no 7.
- 6 See Sacred Congregation for Rites, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, no. 35.
- 7 Pope Paul VI, General Audience (April 3, 1974),
- 8 *Rite of Penance*, no. 28.
- 9 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoral Norms on General Absolution (Sacramentum Paenitentiae)* (June 16, 1972).
- 10 Pope John Paul II, *On Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (Misericordia Dei)* (April 7, 2002), no. 4.
- 11 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 2nd ed.(Washington, D.C.: USCCB-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), no. 1483. See also Code of Canon Law (CIC), c. 961 § 1, subsection no. 2.