

Frequently Asked Questions About the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Is this sacrament called confession, penance or reconciliation? Yes! This sacrament involves all three elements and historically has been called by all three names. Today the Church refers to it as the Sacrament of Penance or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Why do we need a sacrament of Reconciliation? “Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God’s forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church...” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1440). Only God forgives sins. Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be a sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation (CCC 1442). The priest “is not the master of God’s forgiveness, but its servant” (CCC 1466).

What happens in the Sacrament of Penance? “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). “Jesus’ call to conversion and penance... does not aim first at outward works... but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion” (CCC 1430). Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him.

What sins should be confessed? The Church teaches that “all serious (mortal) sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret... for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly” (CCC 1456). At the same time, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) “is strongly recommended... for it helps us to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies (patterns of weakness that can lead us to sin), let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful” (CCC 1458).

What are the effects of this sacrament? “The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being... He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation” (John Paul II). “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship” (CCC 1468), “for those who receive the sacrament with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation” (CCC 1551).

Baptism: the First Sacrament of Forgiveness

The Church Fathers saw a close connection between baptism and penance; in fact, penance was sometimes referred to as “the more difficult baptism.” St. Ambrose said: “There are water and tears; the water of baptism, and the tears of repentance.” Penance is a sacrament celebrating conversion, a basic dynamic of the Christian life. Adults and older children preparing for the sacrament of baptism enter an intense period of purification during the Lent season prior to baptism. The Elect reflect upon the stories of the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Then on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent the Elect celebrate the Scrutinies in the midst of the community. During these celebrations the Church prays the ancient prayers of exorcisms over the Elect, calling upon God to protect them from Satan and the power of evil and surrounding them with the love of God. *(Text prepared by Helen Oesterle, Director of Religious Education, St. James Cathedral; Seattle, WA)*