

## SIN, FORGIVENESS, & THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE PART 3: THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (John 20:21-23).

Jesus entrusted his own power to forgive sins to the Church through the ministry of the Apostles. That ministry of mercy is exercised today by priests and bishops in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This was not always the case, however, nor was the amazing gift of sacramental confession always available in the Church.

For the earliest Christians, the only sacrament of reconciliation was Baptism. Through it, people were cleansed of all their sins and joined to the Body of Christ, the Church. If someone sinned again after Baptism, there was no other chance for forgiveness and reconciliation. He or she was cut off from the community and from God’s saving grace. The reason that there was no other means to access God’s mercy for sinners after Baptism was because of the early Church’s understanding of that sacrament and of sin. Through Baptism, the old, sinful self was put to death and a person rose to a new life, free of sin. It was inconceivable to early Christians that someone who lived that new, risen life would sin again. Also, the early Christians understood sin as being only what we would call serious sins today, such as murder and adultery. Lesser sins, what we would call venial sins today, were forgiven as part of the community’s celebration of Sunday Eucharist. Since serious sins were so rare in the Christian community, they did not see a need for a second chance at God’s mercy to forgive such sins.

The one serious sin that soon became frighteningly common in the early Church was apostasy. Christianity was outlawed in Rome in 64 AD. To be a Christian was a crime punishable by death. As persecution spread throughout the Roman Empire, many Christians faithfully gave the ultimate witness by shedding their blood for Christ. Many others, however, lacked such deep and courageous faith. When forced by the Romans to renounce Christianity, many Christians did in order to save their lives and their families, thus committing the sin of apostasy.

Later on, many of these same people repented of their sin and sought to return to the Christian community. The Church now saw a widespread need for a second chance to receive God’s saving mercy. Over time, this took the form of what became called canonical penance, a very public and very difficult ordeal in which serious sinners wishing to return to the fold were enrolled in a group within the Christian community called the Order of Penitents. Those in this order had to publicly repent of their sin and do serious acts of penance for a period of months or even years. They were also excluded from participating in Sunday Eucharist until, upon completing their penance, they were welcomed back into communion in a public ritual by the bishop.

For several centuries, this was the only means of sacramental reconciliation after Baptism in the early Church, and, like Baptism, it could only be done once. Around the 5th and

6th centuries, however, a new form of encountering God's mercy after Baptism began taking root in Ireland, one that was done in private and could be repeated. When it was transplanted by Irish missionaries in continental Europe, it would grow and spread into the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation we know today. Tune in next week for that story and more in part four of SIN, FORGIVENESS, AND THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE!