

SIN, FORGIVENESS, & THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE PART 4: THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE (cont.)

“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful...My brothers, if anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back, he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:16, 19-20).

As discussed in last week’s column, the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation has its roots in Christ’s entrusting the power to forgive sins, and thus also the power to determine how best to do so, to the Church through the ministry of the apostles. The earliest form this took was Baptism, when people would repent of their sins and be washed clean, receiving a new, risen life free of sin. As time went on, it became apparent to the early Church that, though freed from sin in Baptism, Christians were still capable of sinning and in need of the forgiveness of God and reconciliation with the community after Baptism. So the Church developed the rite of canonical penance, a lengthy process involving public confession and penance that could take months or even years until the sinner was forgiven and welcomed back into the community by the bishop, a process that, like Baptism, could only be done once. Canonical penance was the norm in much of the early Church until a new approach to forgiveness and reconciliation began in Ireland around the 5th and 6th centuries.

Early Irish Christianity was unique for a number of reasons, primarily because of its origins in the work of missionary monks. The monks of Ireland practiced a form of fraternal correction within their monasteries in which members of the community would meet privately with wiser, more spiritually gifted members to seek spiritual guidance. These meetings often included a private confession of sins and the assignment of private penance. Unlike other monks of that time, the monks of Ireland did not seek to escape the evil in the world but to confront it head on through missionary work. Their monasteries served as bases of operation from which they preached and taught and converted the pagans around them. Through this interaction between the monks and those they converted to Christianity, lay people also began coming to the monks for spiritual guidance, which again included private confession of sins and the assignment of private penance.

With Ireland converted, the missionary monks sought new souls to save, and so they traveled to continental Europe, much of which, especially in the north, remained pagan. The monks brought their practice of private confession and penance with them, and it soon caught on and spread throughout Europe until, by the 16th century at the Council of Trent, it was officially recognized by the Church as the ordinary way of celebrating the sacrament. With some minor changes throughout the years since, this is the form of the sacrament that we celebrate still today, and what a gift it is. So, as you get out your green and celebrate St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, this weekend, remember one more reason to celebrate and thank God and the Irish monks of old for the modern sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.