

“Those who were once in the light .. received a share of the Holy Spirit .. yet in spite of this have fallen away, it is impossible for them to be brought to the freshness of repentance” (Hb.6, with parallel text at 10:26 and at 12:17 the comparison with Esau in the O.T. .)



In the life of the Church in the 3rd and early 4th centuries there were serious disputes, leading to schisms, or the separation of groups from the Church. These centred on how to treat those who had given up their faith in the face of persecution under the Emperors Decius and, later, Diocletian. The main body of the Church was prepared to forgive those who repented and wanted to re-enter the Church, but there were others who opposed this. The outcome was the view that all sins could be forgiven by the Sacrament of Penance. This was based on a better understanding of the meaning behind Jesus' words concerning the 'unforgivable sin'. Jesus was really referring to that attitude of mind and heart that some people adopt whereby in their own pride **they** refuse to repent, **they** refuse that grace given them by the Holy Spirit and thereby **condemn themselves**.

The practice of confession in secret began in monasteries from the 6th century onwards and this practice became widespread by the 8th century. The current form of the sacrament, using a confessional box, originates from the 16th century. The Council of Trent in 1551 decreed that all **Mortal sins** (see below) must be confessed. There is no requirement to confess lesser, venial sins, as these can be forgiven by good works, prayer and the reception of the Eucharist, but it is recommended that some venial sins be mentioned because this will be an act of humility that helps purify our conscience and strengthen our will.

What is Meant by Mortal Sin?

All sin hurts God and is an offence against his goodness. But Mortal sin **destroys** our relationship with God and separates us from him **in an absolute way**. It is not so much the act itself that causes this separation from God but the attitude of mind of the sinner behind it. The Church lays down **3 conditions** for a sin to be Mortal: it must be over a **serious** matter (e.g. murder, adultery), the sinner must have **full knowledge** of its seriousness, and must give **full consent** to it. In reality, what is required is for the sinner to make a **deliberate** decision to satisfy self, to reject God, to deliberately **favour and prefer something else**.

But, would anyone ever be able to do this in reality? Apparitions of Our Blessed Lady indicate that many are in Hell and so must have done so. But, still, we should all be very careful about being judgemental about anyone else **“Do not look for the splinter in your brother's eye and miss the log in your own eye”** (Mtt.7), although it may well be proper to judge and hate an **action itself** as being evil.

Our Catholic Faith

22. The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

- Bringing Us Back to God



Questions for Reflection

1. What are the key components needed for the proper administration of the sacrament? What do you think is the most important component?
2. What are the most important New Testament texts for saying that Jesus directly instituted this sacrament?
3. How would you describe the concept of Mortal Sin?

What Does the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation Involve?

This sacrament is the special means given us to re-establish a more perfect relationship with God after that relationship has become tarnished, or even completely broken, by sin. Sin makes us lonely people. It is a disease inside us, gnawing away at our very being, driving us further and further from God and separating us slowly but surely from the Christian Community. This sacrament ensures our perfect **reconciliation** with Christ and his body, the Church.



There are **four essential stages** in this process of our restoration to a full and once more loving relationship with God.:

1. **Contrition** - this is when, through the grace of God, we become aware of our sins and have 'a change of heart' and deep sorrow for committing them. It also consists of a genuine intention not to commit those sins again.
2. **Confession** - the actual confessing of our sins to a priest and asking for their forgiveness. This is an act of humility whereby we open our hearts to the priest as Christ's representative. We know that no matter how holy the priest may be, he has weaknesses like us, but the priest represents the Church as the Body of Christ, and personal sin affects the community and Christ's body as much as it harms the individual sinner. That is why the role of the priest is essential; it is not just a question of saying, as many Christians do, that their sin is just a matter between themselves and God. The sinner once forgiven is brought back into the community; the branch that is the former sinner is re-invigorated on **the vine that is Christ** (Jn.15). That is one of the reasons why there is a seal of secrecy placed on what is said to the priest.
3. **Satisfaction** - is the way we demonstrate our sorrow. Apart from seeking forgiveness for any acts of sin, we need also to **make reparation** for the effects those sins have on our relationship with God, with others, and within our own being. Therefore, we need **prayer** to prove our genuine intention to cement our friendship with God, we need to undertake **acts of charity** to restore our love for others, we need to make **acts of personal sacrifice** to bring our own bodies into a state of submission to the will of God.
4. **Absolution** - This is the act by which Christ, through the priest, **forgives sin**. It replicates Christ's promise not to condemn the repentant sinner, and in the same way tells us **not to sin again** (Jn.8:11). The authority to forgive sins, because only God can forgive sin, was given to the apostles by Jesus - Mtt.16 (to Peter), Mtt.18 and Jn.20 (to all the Apostles).

The Sacrament's Historic Place

Because this Sacrament restores our relationship with God, it is appropriately also known as a **Sacrament of Healing** (along with The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick). The Gospels stress the general importance of forgiveness for spiritual well-being, because it restores the health of the **forgiven**, is a sign of the blessedness of the **forgiver**, and restores their **mutual relationship**:



- Jesus forgave sins, earning the animosity of the Pharisees for so doing as they believed he was committing blasphemy, as only God could forgive sins (Mtt.9)
- Jesus stressed the importance of forgiveness in several ways: in the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor (Mtt.18) and the Prodigal Son (Lk.15), by his answer to Peter about how often we should be expected to forgive someone (Mtt.18:21), in his giving of the Lord's Prayer where he qualifies our forgiveness by God by relating it to the forgiveness we are prepared to give to others, and by his attitude to repentant sinners (Lk.23 and Jn.5 and 8).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, it is clear that sinners were forgiven and welcomed back into the Church community **"You should forgive and encourage him more .. if you forgive anybody then I too forgive them"** (2 Cor.2) and **"Bear with one another, forgive one another .. The Lord has forgiven you now you must do the same"** (Col.3, paralleled in Eph.4:32).

The Church has always attached great importance to the confession of sins, and an influential early Church document, the Didache, which recorded many of the Church's liturgical practices, notes that before the 'Breaking of Bread' (the Eucharist) many people would confess their sins. Confession here is public. Later, however, confession for serious sins required a long period of penance before a public confession could be sought, usually on Holy Thursday.

However, parts of the early Church seemed to think that there were some sins that could not be forgiven because of these powerful words of Jesus:

"Every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven .. no-one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven in this world or the next" (Mtt.12:31-32)

These words came to be understood to refer to **apostasy**, where someone initially embraces the Gospel truth and becomes a Christian but later abandons the Faith. It is this sin that is described as unforgivable in the Letter to the Hebrews: