

# History of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

## The Early Church

- The Didache spoke of confessing your sins.
- Clement of Rome in an epistle spoke of asking God to have mercy and be reconciled to us.
- Early Christians distinguished between lesser, daily sins and greater, death-dealing sins.
- Lesser sins could be forgiven through prayer, fasting, works of mercy, and the Eucharistic celebration. Greater sins required a process of reconciliation.
- Tertullian, in *De Poenitentia*, called it the “second penitence” (baptism being the first) and said it could be received only once.

## The Third Century

In this century, the sacrament of penance as reconciliation first emerged in a recognizable form.

- It involved the whole community
- Penitents:
  - Confessed their sins to the whole community.
  - Were temporarily ex-communicated from the community worship for the length of their penance.
  - Ate plain food and wore “squalid” clothes.
  - Participated in almsgiving and contrite prayer.
  - Asked members of the community for prayer especially widows and presbyters since they were seen as dedicated to God.
- When the bishop decided their repentance was adequate he restored them to full communion by the laying on of hands.

During the third century, Christians were persecuted by Decius. They were ordered to offer sacrifice to the gods of Rome. Christians generally responded in three ways:

1. They denied their faith by publicly worshipping the Roman gods.
2. They produced false certification that they had offered sacrifice to Roman gods.
3. They surrendered their sacred books to government agents.

Those who provided false certification or surrendered their books were readmitted to communion after repentance and suitable penance. Those who had denied their faith, had life-long penance and were only readmitted on their deathbed.

## Fourth Century

- The **Council of Nicaea (325 AD)** put the forgiveness of grave sins under the authority of the bishops.
- The Council of Nicaea also spelled out a penance for those who had “fallen without compulsion.” They had to:

“As many as were communicants, if they heartily repent, shall pass three years among the hearers; for seven years they shall be prostrators; and for two years they shall communicate with the people in prayers, but without oblation.” (Nicaea Canon XI)

**Hearers** were those who listened to the readings during the liturgy usually just inside the door.

**Prostrators** were those who heard the readings and homily, prostrated themselves in front of the celebrant, and then was dismissed with a blessing.

**Without oblation** means they did not participate in the whole of the Eucharist. They could take part in divine worship but not actively.

- The period of conversion was looked at as an opportunity to grow in renewed faith, not as a punishment.
- Process ended with the bishop reconciling them on Holy Thursday and readmitting them to the Eucharistic table.
- The reconciliation process was still available only once in a lifetime. Sinners under the age of 35 were not admitted into the order of penitents since it was possible they would lapse into sin again.

In summary, the sacrament in the fourth century was a public, communal action of reconciliation that led to a lasting change of heart, involved the whole community, and was presided over by the bishop.

## Fifth Century

In the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine (around 408 AD) distinguished three kinds of reconciliation with God through the Church:

1. The remission of all previous sin through baptism.
2. The daily remission through prayer and fasting of “light and small sins.”
3. The formal one-time remission of deadly and serious sin through public penance.

Later in the century, changes to the sacrament were being made even before Augustine died in 430.

- Presbyters were delegated to be administrators of the Sacrament, not just bishops.
- Leo the Great objected to a public confession and said, “it is enough that the guilt of conscience be revealed to priests alone in secret confession.” (ND 1606)

There were two factors that contributed to the breakdown of the administration of penance at this time:

1. There was a large increase in the numbers of Christians

2. The development of restrictions in the post-reconciliation life of penitents became more extensive (they could not hold office and had to live with their spouse as brother and sister, for example.)

## Sixth Century

**Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks** (who had not known the older system of public penance) spread what came to be known as the “monastic” practice of penance through their missionary work. It involved:

- Private confession to a spiritual father (or mother.)
- Reception of an appropriate penance with the goal of restoring the balance of the “moral universe” instead of reconciliation with the community.
- Private prayer of pardon or blessing after the penance was completed.

The monk missionaries brought *penitentials*, handbooks for hearing confessions, with them. They were composed over a period of three centuries and were written in Latin and Old Irish. Early penitentials were mostly a list of sins and the penance appropriate to balance the sin. The penance was adjusted according to the rank of the sinner, the rank of the person offended against, and the objective seriousness of the sin. Later penitentials drew on the Bible and early Christian writers.

The monks put an end to the practice of once-only reconciliation for grave sins and any penance connected to Lent and Easter. Penance became more punitive and less about the persons renewal of faith. There was more of an attitude of “the punishment fitting the crime.”

### **Third Council of Toledo (589 AD)**

This council tried to maintain the old system of reconciliation and remain with once-only reconciliation and rejected the Celtic monastic practice.

### **Council of Chalons-sur-Saône (650 AD)**

This council approved the Celtic monastic practice and tried to establish Episcopal control over it.

The severity of penances led to fewer Christians practicing sacramental penance. Some found other persons who would take on the penance and prayers for them.

### **Later Years**

#### **Fourth Lateran Council (1215 AD)**

- They prescribed that all who had “reached the age of discretion should at least once a year faithfully confess all their sins in secret to their own priest” and receive communion.
- Sanctions were imposed for breaking the secrecy (seal) of confession. A priest who revealed a sin was deposed from his priestly office and “consigned to a closed monastery for perpetual penance.”(DH814; ND 1609)
- Repeated absolution of sins was officially accepted and deemed necessary for proper Christian life.

#### **Council of Florence (1439)**

Defined what the sacrament of penance involved:

- The acts of the penitent should be:
  1. Contrition of heart including sorrow for committing the sin and resolve not to sin again.
  2. Oral confession of all sins that are remembered.
  3. Satisfaction for sins assigned by the priest ordinarily done by prayer, fasting and almsgiving.
- The form of the sacrament are the words of absolution- “I absolve you.”
- The minister of the sacrament is a priest with authority to absolve.

## Council of Trent (1551)

- In response to the Reformers claim that sinners should renew baptismal justification by interior conversion, they pushed an extreme non-communal, individualistic approach to the sacramental rite of penance to effect reconciliation with God.
- Distinguished two kinds of contrition: “perfect” or “sorrow of the soul and detestation of the sin committed together with the resolve to sin no more” motivated by love of God and “imperfect” which “arises either from the consideration of the heinousness of sin or from the fear of hell and of punishment.”
- Distinguished between what the sacrament required of the faithful and what it did not.
  - “All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious” had to be confessed “specifically and in particular.”
  - Venial sins, while “right and profitable” to do so, did not have to be confessed.
  - Absolution does not merely consist of proclaiming the Gospel and declaring that sins were forgiven. Absolution “has the pattern of a judicial act in which the priest pronounces sentence as a judge.” Encouraged Catholics to call it “the tribunal of penance.”
  - Satisfactions imposed were “meant not merely as a safeguard for the new life and as a remedy to weakness, but also as a vindictory punishment for former sins.”

## 20<sup>th</sup> century

Many centuries of Catholics ignored the relevance of penance to the community. They considered “confession” a private event and a way to personal grace.

The Vatican II (1964) document *Lumen Gentium* emphasized that in addition to receiving pardon for their sins, penitents are reconciled with the Church which they have “wounded by their sins.”

There became a renewed sense that sacramental penance reconciles sinners with God and with the Church community

In 1973, Pope Paul VI in his document *Ordo Paenitentiae* (Order of Penance), introduced the new name “Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

The formula for absolution is:

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Offers three rites for celebrating the sacrament:

1. Reconciliation of individual penitents.
2. Reconciliation of many penitents who are absolved individually.
3. Reconciliation of many penitents who make a public confession of sins and together receive a general absolution. (grave sins still need to be confessed individually.)

Today, the sacrament involves encountering Christ who is present in:

- the assembly (“two or more gathered in my name”)
- in the proclamation of the Word
- in the imposition of hands
- and in the person of the minister.

# Sacrament of Reconciliation

## Scriptural References:

- **Divine pardon:** (Lk 7: 47-50) So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. 13 But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The others at table said to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."
- **Divine Physician:** (Mk 2:17) Jesus heard this and said to them (that), "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."
- **Forgiveness of sins:** (Jn 20:22-23) 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." (Acts 2:38-39) Peter (said) to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call."
- **For "Brother who does wrong":** (Mt 18: 15-18) "If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. 13 If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."
- **Reconciliation with the Community:** (2Cor 2:5-8) If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure (not to exaggerate) to all of you. This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person, so that on the contrary you should forgive and encourage him instead, or else the person may be overwhelmed by excessive pain. Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.



## Clement of Rome (*Epistle to the Corinthians* 47-48)

“Let us then quickly put a end to this; and let us fall down before the Master and beseech him with tears that he may have mercy on us, be reconciled to us, and restore us to our seemly and holy practice of brotherly love.”

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## *Didache* 14. 1

“On the Lord’s own day, gather together, break bread, and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure.”

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## Tertullian *De Poenitentia* (written before 202-203):

“These poisons of his, therefore, God foreseeing, although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened up with the bar of baptism, has permitted *it* still to stand somewhat open. In the vestibule He has stationed the second repentance for opening to such as knock: but now *once for all*, because now for the second time; but never more because the last time it had been in vain. For is not even this *once* enough? You have what you now deserved not, for you had lost what you had received. If the Lord’s indulgence grants you the means of *restoring* what you had lost, be thankful for the benefit renewed, not to say amplified; for restoring is a greater thing than *giving*, inasmuch as *having lost* is more miserable than never having *received* at all. However, if any do incur the debt of a second repentance, his spirit is not to be forthwith cut down and undermined by despair. Let it by all means be irksome to *sin* again, but let not to *repent* again be irksome: irksome to imperil one’s self again, but not to be again set free. Let none be ashamed. Repeated sickness must have repeated medicine. You will show your gratitude to the Lord by not refusing what the Lord offers you. You have offended, but can still be reconciled. You have One whom you may satisfy, and Him willing.” (VII)

“The narrower, then, the sphere of action of this second and only (remaining) repentance, the more laborious is its probation; in order that it may not be exhibited in the conscience alone, but may likewise be carried out in some (external) act. This act, which is more usually expressed and commonly spoken of under a Greek name, is *εὐνομολογῆσις*, whereby we confess our sins to the Lord, not indeed as if He were ignorant of them, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession repentance is born; by repentance God is appeased. And thus exomologesis is a

discipline for man's prostration and humiliation, enjoining a demeanor calculated to move mercy. With regard also to the very dress and food, [it commands (the penitent) to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning, to lay his spirit low in sorrows, to exchange for severe treatment the sins which he has committed; moreover, to know no food and drink but such as is plain,----not for the stomach's sake, to wit, but the soul's; for the most part, however, to feed prayers on fastings, to groan, to weep and make outcries unto the Lord your God; to bow before the feet of the presbyters, and kneel to God's dear ones; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear his deprecatory supplication (before God). All this exomologesis (does), that it may enhance repentance; may honour God by its fear of the (incurred) danger; may, by itself pronouncing against the sinner, stand in the stead of God's indignation, and by temporal mortification (I will not say frustrate, but) expunge eternal punishments. Therefore, while it abases the man, it raises him; while it covers him with squalor, it renders him more clean; while it accuses, it excuses; while it condemns, it absolves. The less quarter you give yourself, the more (believe me) will God give you." (IX)

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## The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

### Canon XI.

Concerning those who have fallen without compulsion, without the spoiling of their property, without danger or the like, as happened during the tyranny of Licinius, the Synod declares that, though they have deserved no clemency, they shall be dealt with mercifully. As many as were communicants, if they heartily repent, shall pass three years among the hearers; for seven years they shall be prostrators; and for two years they shall communicate with the people in prayers, but without oblation.

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## The Council of Trent (1551)

### Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance.

The sacred and holy, oecumenical and general Synod of Trent, -lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same Legate and Nuncios of the holy Apostolic See presiding therein, --although, in the decree concerning Justification, there has been, through a certain kind of necessity, on account of the affinity of the subjects, much discourse introduced touching the sacrament of Penance; nevertheless, so great, in these our days, is the multitude of various errors relative to this sacrament, that it will be of no small public utility to have given thereof a more exact and full definition, wherein, all

errors having been, under the protection of the Holy Ghost, pointed out and extirpated, Catholic truth may be made clear and resplendent; which (Catholic truth) this holy Synod now sets before all Christians to be perpetually retained.

#### CHAPTER I.

On the necessity, and on the institution of the Sacrament of Penance.

If such, in all the regenerate, were their gratitude towards God, as that they constantly preserved the justice received in baptism by His bounty and grace; there would not have been need for another sacrament, besides that of baptism itself, to be instituted for the remission of sins. But because God, rich in mercy, knows our frame, He hath bestowed a remedy of life even on those who may, after baptism, have delivered themselves up to the servitude of sin and the power of the devil, --the sacrament to wit of Penance, by which the benefit of the death of Christ is applied to those who have fallen after baptism. Penitence was in deed at all times necessary, in order to attain to grace and justice, for all men who had defiled themselves by any mortal sin, even for those who begged to be washed by the sacrament of Baptism; that so, their perverseness renounced and amended, they might, with a hatred of sin and a godly sorrow of mind, detest so great an offence of God. Wherefore the prophet says; Be converted and do penance for all your iniquities, and iniquity shall not be your ruin. The Lord also said; Except you do penance, you shall also likewise perish; and Peter, the prince of the apostles, recommending penitence to sinners who were about to be initiated by baptism, said; Do penance, and be baptized every one you. Nevertheless, neither before the coming of Christ was penitence a sacrament, nor is it such, since His coming, to any previously to baptism. But the Lord then principally instituted the sacrament of penance, when, being raised from the dead, He breathed upon His disciples, saying Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained. By which action so signal, and words so clear, the consent of all the Fathers has ever understood, that the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the apostles and their lawful successors, for the reconciling of the faithful who have fallen after baptism. And the Catholic Church with great reason repudiated and condemned as heretics, the Novatians, who of old obstinately denied that power of forgiving. Wherefore, this holy Synod, approving of and receiving as most true this meaning of those words of our Lord, condemns the fanciful interpretations of those who, in opposition to the institution of this sacrament, falsely wrest those words to the power of preaching the word of God, and of announcing the Gospel of Christ.

#### CHAPTER II.

On the difference between the Sacrament of Penance and that of Baptism

For the rest, this sacrament is clearly seen to be different from baptism in many respects: for besides that it is very widely different indeed in matter and form, which constitute the essence of a sacrament, it is beyond doubt certain that the minister of baptism need not be a judge, seeing that the Church exercises judgment on no one who has not entered therein through the gate of baptism. For, what have I, saith the

apostle, to do to judge them that are without? It is otherwise with those who are of the household of the faith, whom Christ our Lord has once, by the laver of baptism, made the members of His own body; for such, if they should afterwards have defiled themselves by any crime, He would no longer have them cleansed by a repetition of baptism--that being nowise lawful in the Catholic Church--but be placed as criminals before this tribunal; that, by the sentence of the priests, they might be freed, not once, but as often as, being penitent, they should, from their sins committed, flee thereunto. Furthermore, one is the fruit of baptism, and another that of penance. For, by baptism putting on Christ, we are made therein entirely a new creature, obtaining a full and entire remission of all sins: unto which newness and entireness, however, we are no ways able to arrive by the sacrament of Penance, without many tears and great labours on our parts, the divine justice demanding this; so that penance has justly been called by holy Fathers a laborious kind of baptism. And this sacrament of Penance is, for those who have fallen after baptism, necessary unto salvation; as baptism itself is for those who have not as yet been regenerated.

### CHAPTER III.

#### On the parts, and on the fruit of this Sacrament.

The holy synod doth furthermore teach, that the form of the sacrament of penance, wherein its force principally consists, is placed in those words of the minister, I absolve thee, &c: to which words indeed certain prayers are, according to the custom of holy Church, laudably joined, which nevertheless by no means regard the essence of that form, neither are they necessary for the administration of the sacrament itself. But the acts of the penitent himself, to wit, contrition, confession and satisfaction, are as it were the matter of this sacrament. Which acts, inasmuch as they are, by God's institution, required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament, and for the full and perfect remission of sins, are for this reason called the parts of penance. But the thing signified indeed and the effect of this sacrament, as far as regards its force and efficacy, is reconciliation with God, which sometimes, in persons who are pious and who receive this sacrament with devotion, is wont to be followed by peace and serenity of conscience, with exceeding consolation of spirit. The holy Synod, whilst delivering these things touching the parts and the effect of this sacrament, condemns at the same time the opinions of those who contend, that the terrors which agitate the conscience, and faith, are the parts of penance.

### CHAPTER IV.

#### On Contrition.

Contrition, which holds the first place amongst the aforesaid acts of the penitent, is a sorrow of mind, and a detestation for sin committed, with the purpose of not sinning for the future. This movement of contrition was at all times necessary for obtaining the pardon of sins; and, in one who has fallen after baptism, it then at length prepares for the remissions of sins, when it is united with confidence in the divine mercy, and with the desire of performing the other things which are required for rightly receiving this sacrament. Wherefore the holy Synod declares, that this

contrition contains not only a cessation from sin, and the purpose and the beginning of a new life, but also a hatred of the old, agreeably to that saying; Cast away from you all your iniquities, wherein you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. And assuredly he who has considered those cries of the saints; To thee only have I sinned, and have done evil before thee, I have laboured in my groaning, every night I will wash my bed, I will recount to thee all my years, in the bitterness of my soul, and others of this kind, will easily understand that they flowed from a certain vehement hatred of their past life, and from an exceeding detestation of sins. The Synod teaches moreover, that, although it sometimes happen that this contrition is perfect through charity, and reconciles man with God before this sacrament be actually received, the said reconciliation, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to that contrition, independently of the desire of the sacrament which is included therein. And as to that imperfect contrition, which is called attrition, because that it is commonly conceived either from the consideration of the turpitude of sin, or from the fear of hell and of punishment, It declares that if, with the hope of pardon, it exclude the wish to sin, it not only does not make a man a hypocrite, and a greater sinner, but that it is even a gift of God, and an impulse of the Holy Ghost, -- who does not indeed as yet dwell in the penitent, but only moves him, --whereby the penitent being assisted prepares a way for himself unto justice. And although this (attrition) cannot of itself, without the sacrament of penance, conduct the sinner to justification, yet does it dispose him to obtain the grace of God in the sacrament of Penance. For, smitten profitably with this fear, the Ninivites, at the preaching of Jonas, did fearful penance and obtained mercy from the Lord. Wherefore falsely do some caluminate Catholic writers, as if they had maintained that the sacrament of Penance confers grace without any good motion on the part of those who receive it: a thing which the Church of God never taught, or thought: and falsely also do they assert that contrition is extorted and forced, not free and voluntary.

#### CHAPTER V. On Confession.

From the institution of the sacrament of Penance as already explained, the universal Church has always understood, that the entire confession of sins was also instituted by the Lord, and is of divine right necessary for all who have fallen after baptism; because that our Lord Jesus Christ, when about to ascend from earth to heaven, left priests His own vicars, as presidents and judges, unto whom all the mortal crimes, into which the faithful of Christ may have fallen, should be carried, in order that, in accordance with the power of the keys, they may pronounce the sentence of forgiveness or retention of sins. For it is manifest, that priests could not have exercised this judgment without knowledge of the cause; neither indeed could they have observed equity in enjoining punishments, if the said faithful should have declared their sins in general only, and not rather specifically, and one by one. Whence it is gathered that all the mortal sins, of which, after a diligent examination of themselves, they are conscious, must needs be by penitents enumerated in confession, even though those sins be most hidden, and committed only against the two last precepts of the decalogue, --sins which sometimes wound the soul more

grievously, and are more dangerous, than those which are committed outwardly. For venial sins, whereby we are not excluded from the grace of God, and into which we fall more frequently, although they be rightly and profitably, and without any presumption declared in confession, as the custom of pious persons demonstrates, yet may they be omitted without guilt, and be expiated by many other remedies. But, whereas all mortal sins, even those of thought, render men children of wrath, and enemies of God, it is necessary to seek also for the pardon of them all from God, with an open and modest confession. Wherefore, while the faithful of Christ are careful to confess all the sins which occur to their memory, they without doubt lay them all bare before the mercy of God to be pardoned: whereas they who act otherwise, and knowingly keep back certain sins, such set nothing before the divine bounty to be forgiven through the priest: for if the sick be ashamed to show his wound to the physician, his medical art cures not that which it knows not of. We gather furthermore, that those circumstances which change the species of the sin are also to be explained in confession, because that, without them, the sins themselves are neither entirely set forth by the penitents, nor are they known clearly to the judges; and it cannot be that they can estimate rightly the grievousness of the crimes, and impose on the penitents, the punishment which ought to be inflicted, on account of them. Whence it is unreasonable to teach, that these circumstances have been invented by idle men; or, that one circumstance only is to be confessed, to wit, that one has sinned against a brother. But it is also impious to assert, that confession, enjoined to be made in this manner, is impossible, or to call it a slaughter-house of consciences: for it is certain, that in the Church nothing else is required of penitents, but that, after each has examined himself diligently, and searched all the folds and recesses of his conscience, he confess those sins by which he shall remember that he has mortally offended his Lord and God: whilst the other sins, which do not occur to him after diligent thought, are understood to be included as a whole in that same confession; for which sins we confidently say with the prophet; From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord. Now, the very difficulty of a confession like this, and the shame of making known one's sins, might indeed seem a grievous thing, were it not alleviated by the so many and so great advantages and consolations, which are most assuredly bestowed by absolution upon all who worthily approach to this sacrament. For the rest, as to the manner of confessing secretly to a priest alone, although Christ has not forbidden that a person may, --in punishment of his sins, and for his own humiliation, as well for an example to others as for the edification of the Church that has been scandalized,--confess his sins publicly, nevertheless this is not commanded by a divine precept; neither would it very prudent to enjoin by any human law, that sins, especially such as are secret, should be made known by a public confession. Wherefore, whereas the secret sacramental confession, which was in use from the beginning in holy Church, and is still also in use, has always been commended by the most holy and the most ancient Fathers with a great and unanimous consent, the vain calumny of those is manifestly refuted, who are not ashamed to teach, that confession is alien from the divine command, and is a human invention, and that it took its rise from the Fathers assembled in the Council of Lateran: for the Church did not, through the Council of Lateran, ordain that the faithful of Christ should confess, --a thing which it knew to be necessary, and to be instituted of divine right,--but that

the precept of confession should be complied with, at least once a year, by all and each, when they have attained to years of discretion. Whence, throughout the whole Church, the salutary custom is, to the great benefit of the souls of the faithful, now observed, of confessing at that most sacred and most acceptable time of Lent,--a custom which this holy Synod most highly approves of and embraces, as pious and worthy of being retained.

#### CHAPTER VI.

On the ministry of this Sacrament, and on Absolution.

But, as regards the minister of this sacrament, the holy Synod declares all these doctrines to be false, and utterly alien from the truth of the Gospel, which perniciously extend the ministry of the keys to any others soever besides bishops and priests; imagining, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, that those words of our Lord, Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven, and, Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained, were in such wise addressed to all the faithful of Christ indifferently and indiscriminately, as that every one has the power of forgiving sins, -public sins to wit by rebuke, provided he that is rebuked shall acquiesce, and secret sins by a voluntary confession made to any individual whatsoever. It also teaches, that even priests, who are in mortal sin, exercise, through the virtue of the Holy Ghost which was bestowed in ordination, the office of forgiving sins, as the ministers of Christ; and that their sentiment is erroneous who contend that this power exists not in bad priests. But although the absolution of the priest is the dispensation of another's bounty, yet is it not a bare ministry only, whether of announcing the Gospel, or of declaring that sins are forgiven, but is after the manner of a judicial act, whereby sentence is pronounced by the priest as by a judge: and therefore the penitent ought not so to confide in his own personal faith, as to think that,--even though there be no contrition on his part, or no intention on the part of the priest of acting seriously and absolving truly,--he is nevertheless truly and in God's sight absolved, on account of his faith alone. For neither would faith without penance bestow any remission of sins; nor would he be otherwise than most careless of his own salvation, who, knowing that a priest but absolved him in jest, should not carefully seek for another who would act in earnest.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### INDULGENCES

Can. 992 An indulgence is the remission before God of temporal punishment for sins whose guilt is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful gains under certain and defined conditions by the assistance of the Church which as minister of redemption dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

Can. 993 An indulgence is partial or plenary insofar as it partially or totally frees from the temporal punishment due to sins.

Can. 994 Any member of the faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences for oneself or apply them to the dead by way of suffrage.

Can. 995 §1. In addition to the supreme authority of the Church, only those to whom this power is acknowledged in the law or granted by the Roman Pontiff can bestow indulgences.

§2. No authority below the Roman Pontiff can entrust the power of granting indulgences to others unless the Apostolic See has given this expressly to the person.

Can. 996 §1. To be capable of gaining indulgences, a person must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the end of the prescribed works.

§2. To gain indulgences, however, a capable subject must have at least the general intention of acquiring them and must fulfill the enjoined works in the established time and the proper method, according to the tenor of the grant.

Can. 997 As regards the granting and use of indulgences, the other prescripts contained in the special laws of the Church must also be observed.

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## The Code of Canon Law

### TITLE IV.

#### THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE (Cann. 959 - 997)

Can. 959 In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a legitimate minister, are sorry for them, and intend to reform themselves obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism and, at the same, time are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning.

#### CHAPTER I.

#### THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

Can. 960 Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled

with God and the Church. Only physical or moral impossibility excuses from confession of this type; in such a case reconciliation can be obtained by other means.

Can. 961 §1. Absolution cannot be imparted in a general manner to many penitents at once without previous individual confession unless:

1/ danger of death is imminent and there is insufficient time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;

2/ there is grave necessity, that is, when in view of the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors available to hear the confessions of individuals properly within a suitable period of time in such a way that the penitents are forced to be deprived for a long while of sacramental grace or holy communion through no fault of their own. Sufficient necessity is not considered to exist when confessors cannot be present due only to the large number of penitents such as can occur on some great feast or pilgrimage.

§2. It belongs to the diocesan bishop to judge whether the conditions required according to the norm of §1, n. 2 are present. He can determine the cases of such necessity, attentive to the criteria agreed upon with the other members of the conference of bishops.

Can. 962 §1. For a member of the Christian faithful validly to receive sacramental absolution given to many at one time, it is required not only that the person is properly disposed but also at the same time intends to confess within a suitable period of time each grave sin which at the present time cannot be so confessed.

§2. Insofar as it can be done even on the occasion of the reception of general absolution, the Christian faithful are to be instructed about the requirements of the norm of §1. An exhortation that each person take care to make an act of contrition is to precede general absolution even in the case of danger of death, if there is time.

Can. 963 Without prejudice to the obligation mentioned in can. 989, a person whose grave sins are remitted by general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as possible, given the opportunity, before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes.

Can. 964 §1. The proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or oratory.

§2. The conference of bishops is to establish norms regarding the confessional; it is to take care, however, that there are always confessionals with a fixed grate between the penitent and the confessor in an open place so that the faithful who wish to can use them freely.

§3. Confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional without a just cause.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE MINISTER OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Can. 965 A priest alone is the minister of the sacrament of penance.

Can. 966 §1. The valid absolution of sins requires that the minister have, in addition to the power of orders, the faculty of exercising it for the faithful to whom he imparts absolution.

§2. A priest can be given this faculty either by the law itself or by a grant made by the competent authority according to the norm of can. 969.

Can. 967 §1. In addition to the Roman Pontiff, cardinals have the faculty of hearing the confessions of the Christian faithful everywhere in the world by the law itself. Bishops likewise have this faculty and use it licitly everywhere unless the diocesan bishop has denied it in a particular case.

§2. Those who possess the faculty of hearing confessions habitually whether by virtue of office or by virtue of the grant of an ordinary of the place of incardination or of the place in which they have a domicile can exercise that faculty everywhere unless the local ordinary has denied it in a particular case, without prejudice to the prescripts of can. 974, §2 and 3.

§3. Those who are provided with the faculty of hearing confessions by reason of office or grant of a competent superior according to the norm of cann. 968, §2 and 969, §2 possess the same faculty everywhere by the law itself as regards members and others living day and night in the house of the institute or society; they also use the faculty licitly unless some major superior has denied it in a particular case as regards his own subjects.

Can. 968 §1. In virtue of office, a local ordinary, canon penitentiary, a pastor, and those who take the place of a pastor possess the faculty of hearing confessions, each within his jurisdiction.

§2. In virtue of their office, superiors of religious institutes or societies of apostolic life that are clerical and of pontifical right, who have executive power of governance according to the norm of their constitutions, possess the faculty of hearing the confessions of their subjects and of others living day and night in the house, without prejudice to the prescript of can. 630, §4.

Can. 969 §1. The local ordinary alone is competent to confer upon any presbyters whatsoever the faculty to hear the confessions of any of the faithful. Presbyters who are members of religious institutes, however, are not to use the faculty without at least the presumed permission of their superior.

§2. The superior of a religious institute or society of apostolic life mentioned in can. 968, §2 is competent to confer upon any presbyters whatsoever the faculty to hear the confessions of their subjects and of others living day and night in the house.

Can. 970 The faculty to hear confessions is not to be granted except to presbyters who are found to be suitable through an examination or whose suitability is otherwise evident.

Can. 971 The local ordinary is not to grant the faculty of hearing confessions habitually to a presbyter, even one having a domicile or quasi-domicile in his jurisdiction, unless he has first heard the ordinary of the same presbyter insofar as possible.

Can. 972 The competent authority mentioned in can. 969 can grant the faculty to hear confessions for either an indefinite or a definite period of time.

Can. 973 The faculty to hear confessions habitually is to be granted in writing.

Can. 974 §1. The local ordinary and the competent superior are not to revoke the faculty to hear confessions habitually except for a grave cause.

§2. When the faculty to hear confessions has been revoked by the local ordinary who granted it as mentioned in can. 967, §2, a presbyter loses the faculty everywhere. If some other local ordinary has revoked the faculty, the presbyter loses it only in the territory of the one who revokes it.

§3. Any local ordinary who has revoked the faculty of some presbyter to hear confessions is to inform the proper ordinary of incardination of the presbyter or, if he is a member of a religious institute, his competent superior.

§4. If the proper major superior of a presbyter has revoked the faculty to hear confessions, the presbyter loses the faculty to hear the confessions of members of the institute everywhere. If some other competent superior has revoked the faculty, however, the presbyter loses it only with regard to the subjects in the jurisdiction of that superior.

Can. 975 Besides by revocation, the faculty mentioned in can. 967, §2 ceases by loss of office, excommunication, or loss of domicile.

Can. 976 Even though a priest lacks the faculty to hear confessions, he absolves validly and licitly any penitents whatsoever in danger of death from any censures and sins, even if an approved priest is present.

Can. 977 The absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is invalid except in danger of death.

Can. 978 §1. In hearing confessions the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honor and the salvation of souls.

§2. In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority.

Can. 979 In posing questions, the priest is to proceed with prudence and discretion, attentive to the condition and age of the penitent, and is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice.

Can. 980 If the confessor has no doubt about the disposition of the penitent, and the penitent seeks absolution, absolution is to be neither refused nor deferred.

Can. 981 The confessor is to impose salutary and suitable penances in accord with the quality and number of sins, taking into account the condition of the penitent. The penitent is obliged to fulfill these personally.

Can. 982 Whoever confesses to have denounced falsely an innocent confessor to ecclesiastical authority concerning the crime of solicitation to sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is not to be absolved unless the person has first formally retracted the false denunciation and is prepared to repair damages if there are any.

Can. 983 §1. The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.

§2. The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession are also obliged to observe secrecy.

Can. 984 §1. A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded.

§2. A person who has been placed in authority cannot use in any manner for external governance the knowledge about sins which he has received in confession at any time.

Can. 985 The director of novices and his associate and the rector of a seminary or other institute of education are not to hear the sacramental confessions of their students residing in the same house unless the students freely request it in particular cases.

Can. 986 §1. All to whom the care of souls has been entrusted in virtue of some function are obliged to make provision so that the confessions of the faithful

entrusted to them are heard when they reasonably seek to be heard and that they have the opportunity to approach individual confession on days and at times established for their convenience.

§2. In urgent necessity, any confessor is obliged to hear the confessions of the Christian faithful, and in danger of death, any priest is so obliged.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE PENITENT

Can. 987 To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.

Can. 988 §1. A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

§2. It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.

Can. 989 After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.

Can. 990 No one is prohibited from confessing through an interpreter as long as abuses and scandals are avoided and without prejudice to the prescript of can. 983, §2.

Can. 991 Every member of the Christian faithful is free to confess sins to a legitimately approved confessor of his or her choice, even to one of another rite.

### CHAPTER IV.

#### INDULGENCES

Can. 992 An indulgence is the remission before God of temporal punishment for sins whose guilt is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful gains under certain and defined conditions by the assistance of the Church which as minister of redemption dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

Can. 993 An indulgence is partial or plenary insofar as it partially or totally frees from the temporal punishment due to sins.

Can. 994 Any member of the faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences for oneself or apply them to the dead by way of suffrage.

Can. 995 §1. In addition to the supreme authority of the Church, only those to whom this power is acknowledged in the law or granted by the Roman Pontiff can bestow indulgences.

§2. No authority below the Roman Pontiff can entrust the power of granting indulgences to others unless the Apostolic See has given this expressly to the person.

Can. 996 §1. To be capable of gaining indulgences, a person must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the end of the prescribed works.

§2. To gain indulgences, however, a capable subject must have at least the general intention of acquiring them and must fulfill the enjoined works in the established time and the proper method, according to the tenor of the grant.

Can. 997 As regards the granting and use of indulgences, the other precepts contained in the special laws of the Church must also be observed.

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## Other Documents You Can Find Online:

**Reconciliation and Penance** by Pope John Paul II, December 2, 1984:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html)

**MISERICORDIA DEI** Apostolic Letter on Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance by Pope John Paul II, April 7, 2002:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_motu-proprio\\_20020502\\_misericordia-dei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_20020502_misericordia-dei_en.html)

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Farrugia, Gerald O'Collins and Mario. Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

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The First Ecumenical Council- The Council of Nicaea. "Canon XI." 325 AD. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. 28 December 2007 <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.vii.vi.xvi.html>>.