

THING AGAIN

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Two of the Sacraments are for healing.

One is the anointing of the sick; the other is the Sacrament of Penance.

The Vatican Council: “Those who approach the Sacrament of Penance

- obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offence committed against him, and
- are at the same time reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins, and which, by charity, by example, and by prayer is labouring for their conversion.”

The Catechism: “It is called the *Sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.

“It is called the *Sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure of sins to a priest is an essential element...it is also a confession - acknowledgement or praise - of the holiness of God and his mercy towards sinful humanity.

God grants the penitent “pardon and peace”.

“It is called the *Sacrament of reconciliation*, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles. “Be reconciled to God”(2Cor 5:20) invites us to live in God’s mercy; and we must be ready to ‘Go, first be reconciled to your brother.’(Mt 5:24).”

Sin ruptures our communion with God, which should naturally bear fruit in a holy life. So the experience of conversion, at its deepest, means a decision to seek the repairing of our damaged communion. Only God can forgive; but Jesus, as son of God, claimed this power, and entrusted it to his Church (Jn 20:21-23). So it is embodied as a Sacrament, not a human procedure.

Sin also destroys our communion with others in the Church. We are interdependent, since salvation comes to us through our membership of the Body of Christ. When one part of the body dysfunctions or “dies”, the whole body suffers and is imperilled. Thus our reconciliation with God cannot be separated from our reconciliation to the Church. We should seek to make good to the full the damage we have done.

So the access to forgiveness is not to be seen as a private contact between me and God, but a genuine approach to God’s Church. When Jesus spoke of the founding of his *ekklesia*, he spoke of entrusting to Peter the keys of the kingdom, and said: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you loose...shall be loosed in heaven”. This gives cardinal importance to the church dimension of forgiveness.

Points to ponder: Do we have a concept of sin as *an offence against God*? How would such offence be weighed? Do we think of our failings as *private*, of no concern to anyone else? What is the rôle of the Church in all this: in what sense does one need a priest? You might read the parable of the two sons (Lk 15:11ff). How can we make good the wrong which flows into the lives of others from our failures and sins? Is there a better way to celebrate this Sacrament?