

True confessions: a brief history of the sacrament of reconciliation in the Catholic Church

- **The Catholic faith places great value on history and traditions, established by Jesus**
- **Such as the sacraments, of which Reconciliation is one**
- **2000 years of a practice that “works”**
- **Is an integral part of the Teaching of the Church: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”**
- **Has been an essential practice in the lives of the Saints, whom we revere and seek to imitate**

Sacrament of Penance in the *Catechism*

“Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin... It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification” (CCC, 1446).

“Christ...entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry” (CCC, 1442).

Personal confession

Individual confession and absolution are the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and with the Church, unless there is physical or moral impossibility...

- **Emergencies**
- **Battles**
- **Contagious disease (epidemics)**

How did the Church's practice get there?

- **Divine Revelation in Old and the New Testaments**
- **Jesus' authority and practice to forgive sins**
- **Jesus' commission to the Apostles (transfer authority to them and successors)**
- **The Church's subsequent teachings and practice up to our time**

Confession of sins in the *Old Testament*

“Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the guilt of their fathers.” *Nehemiah 9:2-3*

“If a man [sins] with a woman... they shall not be put to death... But he shall bring a guilt offering for himself to the Lord... And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin which he has committed; and the sin which he has committed shall be forgiven him.” *Leviticus 19:20-22*

Confession in the *New Testament*: John the Baptist

“Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” *Matthew 3:6*

“And there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and (they) were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.” *Mark 1:5*

Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Penance

- **The Son of Man has the power to forgive sins**
(*Mark 2:10*)
- **Jesus gives this power (the “keys”) to Simon at Philipi** (*Matthew 16:13-20*) **(sins loosed or sins are bound)**
- **Jesus solemnly gives this power to all the Apostles on Resurrection Day** (*John 20:22*) **(He breathed on them)**

The practice of confession in the Early Church

- **“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” *James 5:16***
- **“Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.” *Acts 19:18***
- **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
*1 John 1:9***

3 eras of sacramental practice in the Church

- **Early Church (until the 500s)**
- **“Dark”/Middle Ages (500 to 1500s)**
- **Contemporary era (1500s to present)**

Elements of early Church penitential discipline

- **Most serious sins (especially Homicide, Adultery, Idolatry)**
- **Penitents *de facto* form a “special class” in the Church**
- **Prayer for and with penitents**
- **Public penance practices begin**
- **Bishop restores sinners to communion at Holy Week**
- **Laying on hands and prayers of intercession**
- **Private confession still practiced**

Penance in Early Middle Ages (500-1100s)

- **Early practice seen too severe (did not work well)**
- **People would defer baptism (factory reset)**
- **Monks teach (again) that “everyone is a sinner”**
- **No special “bad class” of Christians**
- **Introduction of “tariff” (private, personal) penance, such as prayer, fasting, alms, singing (!)**

High Middle Ages and St. Thomas Aquinas

- **Personal penance becomes recommended practice**
- **“*Ego te absolvo*” becomes form of the sacrament**
- **Private confessions made individually in Church**
- **Sacramental seal of confession is the norm**
- **Though confession is private, still it retains a public character (in public churches, with use of stole)**
- **Penance still a required element of the sacrament**

Fourth Lateran Council (1215) Canon 21

“All the faithful of both sexes shall...faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own priest [dropped later on] and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist...

“[A priest] who dares to reveal a sin confided to him in the tribunal of penance, we decree that he be not only deposed from [his] office but also sent to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life.”

Contemporary era: Council of Trent (1551)

“...the *form* of the sacrament of penance...is set down in these words of the minister: ‘I absolve thee...’ The *matter*...consists in the acts of the penitent himself, namely contrition, confession, and satisfaction [can. 4]. These...are required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament for the full and perfect remission of sins, and are for this reason called the parts of penance.”

Use of “confessional” and “confessional screen”

- **Invented during the Council of Trent**
- **1565, St. Charles Borromeo introduces it in Milan**
- **1614 the *Roman Ritual* commands its use in all churches**
- ***Why?***
- **Confessional with screen protects penitent and priest**
- **Separation and anonymity is maintained**
- **Simplicity and efficiency of conversation is maintained**

Second Vatican Council (ended in 1965)

- **United the sacraments with the community**
- **Maintained the practice of private confession (often reconciliation room and “face to face” confession)**
- ***A new Rite of Penance (1974)***
- **Offered 3 forms of the Rite: Individual, or Several in a service (only ordinary way) General (only in emergency, or with permission of Ordinary)**
- **3 forms not to be used arbitrarily!**

Important points to remember...

- **Confession is one of the 7 Sacraments given to us by Jesus**
- **Confession of sins has been lived since the Church's beginning**
- **We are all sinners, and All sins can be forgiven**
- **Personal confession...practiced since the early Church**
- **Sorrow, confession, and penance for sin are necessary (matter)**
- ***“Ego te Absolvo”* is necessary (Absolution, form)**
- **Frequent confession is a spiritually (even physically) healthy practice: forgiveness and stress, joy, sleep, heart...**
- **PDF notes for this presentation are on sheeptrick.org**