

Catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance

Information for this presentation was drawn primarily from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #'s 1420-1498 and from Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

I. Sin

- A. Sin (Definition) – Deliberate thought, word, deed, or omission that is contrary to God's law.
- B. Original Sin – The sin by which the first human beings disobeyed the commandment of God, choosing to follow their own will rather than God's will. As a consequence they lost the grace of original holiness, and became subject to the law of death; sin became universally present in the world (CCC 396-412).

C. Actual Sin

- 1. Venial Sin – This is a sin that does not destroy the divine life in the soul, as does mortal sin, though it diminishes and wounds it. (1855).
- 2. Mortal Sin – A grave infraction of the law of God that destroys the divine life in the soul of the sinner (sanctifying grace), constituting a turn away from God. For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present: grave matter, full knowledge of the evil of the act, and full consent of the will (1855, 1857)

II. Grace

- A. Grace (Definition) – The free and undeserved gift that God gives us to respond to our vocation to become his adopted children.
- B. Actual Grace – God giving us the help to conform our lives to His will. Actual graces are temporary helps.
- C. Sanctifying Grace – God sharing His divine life and friendship with us in a habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that enables the soul to live with God and to act by His love.

III. The Sacrament of Penance

- A. We carry the life of God (grace) “in earthen vessels.” – 2 Cor. 4:7
 - 1. Jesus willed that His Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, His work of healing and salvation.
 - 2. This is why He instituted the Sacrament of Penance.

IV. Names of the sacrament

- a. Sacrament of Conversion
- b. Sacrament of Penance
- c. Sacrament of Confession
- d. Sacrament of Forgiveness
- e. Sacrament of Reconciliation

V. “The Second Plank of Salvation”

- A. New life received in Baptism wipes out our sins, but does not take away our weakness. Concupiscence (inclination to sin) remains after baptism and it remains for us to struggle against it, aided by grace.
- B. The Sacrament of Penance is for all sinful members of the Church, but above all for those who have fallen into grave sin.
- C. Concrete form the sacrament has taken has varied considerably over the centuries

VI. Interior Conversion and Penance

- A. Jesus’ call aims at conversion of the heart
- B. Interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures, and works of penance

VII. Many forms of Penance

- A. Primary expressions of interior penance
 - 1. Prayer
 - 2. Fasting
 - 3. Almsgiving
- B. How conversion is accomplished in daily life
 - 1. Gestures of reconciliation toward other people
 - 2. Concern for the poor
 - 3. Revision of life
 - 4. Examination of conscience
 - 5. Acceptance of suffering
 - 6. Endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness
 - 7. Taking up one’s cross daily and following Jesus

VIII. Only God forgives sin

- A. Jesus, since He is God, has the authority to forgive sin and He exercises His authority to forgive sins.
- B. He gives this power to men (priests and bishops) to forgive sins in His name.

IX. Acts of the Penitent

- A. Contrition – Sorrow and detestation for sin, together with the resolution not to sin again.
 - 1. Perfect contrition (contrition of charity)
 - 2. Imperfect contrition or attrition (contrition of fear) – this one, while imperfect, still works in the sacrament of Penance and can initiate an interior process of conversion. One should neither demean nor discourage imperfect contrition.
- B. Confession – disclosure of sins
 - 1. Essential part of the sacrament of Penance
 - 2. Look squarely at our sins and take responsibility for them
 - 3. To intentionally leave out a mortal sin from one's confession is, itself, another mortal sin.
 - 4. While not required to confess venial sins, the Church strongly encourages us to do so frequently, cf. CCC #1458.
- C. Satisfaction – To do our penance
 - 1. Sin is forgiven when we are absolved, but we still need to make amends for our sins.
 - 2. Penance imposed should take into consideration:
 - a. Penitent's personal situation
 - b. Must correspond, as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed.
 - 3. Penance can consist of:
 - a. Prayer
 - b. Works of mercy or service toward one's neighbor
 - c. Service of neighbor
 - d. Voluntary self-denial or sacrifices
 - e. Above all the patient endurance of the cross we must bear.

- X. Act of the Minister (Priest or Bishop) – Absolution
- A. Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to his apostles. The successors of the apostles, the bishops and their collaborators, ordained priests, continue to exercise this ministry.
 - B. Validly ordained Priests and Bishops (and only Priests and Bishops) have the authority, through ordination to the presbyterate and the episcopacy, to absolve people from their sins .
 - C. Priests must encourage the faithful to come to the sacrament of Penance and must make themselves available to celebrate the sacrament.
 - D. The Priest in the sacrament of Penance:
 - 1. Fulfills the ministry of the Good Shepherd, of the Good Samaritan, and of the Father who welcomes home his prodigal son
 - 2. And of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful.
 - 3. The priest is the sign and instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner.
 - 4. He is not the master of God’s forgiveness, but its servant.
 - 5. He should unite himself to the intention & charity of Christ.
 - E. Qualities that the confessor should possess
 - 1. Proven knowledge of Christian behavior
 - 2. Experience of human affairs
 - 3. Respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen
 - 4. Must love the truth
 - 5. Be faithful to the Magisterium (the Pope and Bishops in union with him)
 - 6. Lead the penitent with patience toward full maturity in Christ
 - 7. Must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord’s mercy
 - G. The Seal
 - 1. Every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins the penitents have confessed to him.
 - 2. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents’ lives.
 - 3. This seal admits of **no exceptions**.

- XI. Effects of the Sacrament
 - A. Reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace and joining with God in intimate friendship
 - B. Reconciliation with the Church
 - C. Remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins
 - D. Remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin
 - E. Peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation
 - F. An increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle

- XII. Celebration of the Sacrament
 - A. Penance, like all sacraments is a liturgical action.
 - B. Elements of the celebration are ordinarily these:
 - 1. A greeting and blessing from the priest; reading the word of God to illuminate the conscience and elicit contrition; exhortation to repentance
 - 2. The confession of sins by the penitent
 - 3. The imposition of and acceptance of penance
 - 4. The priest's absolution
 - 5. A prayer of thanksgiving and praise and dismissal with the blessing of the priest
 - C. Frameworks within which the sacrament of Penance may be celebrated
 - 1. Individually
 - 2. Communal celebration with individual confession and absolution
 - 3. Celebration of the sacrament of Penance with general confession and general absolution (General absolution is restricted to very specific and limited circumstances, cf. Code of Canon Law 961 – 963).

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