RECONCILIATION AND FORGIVENESS
This Bulletin is primarily pastoral in scope, and is prepared for members of parish liturgy committees, readers, musicians, singers, teachers, religious and clergy, and all who are involved in preparing and celebrating the community liturgy.

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New rites of penance? Perhaps it is better to talk about new attitudes toward this sacrament.

This issue of the Bulletin looks at the Church's varying approach to the forgiveness of sin:

- **In history:** As the Christian approach developed and varied according to different needs and circumstances.

- **In ritual:** The Church expresses its work and worship by various signs and actions.

- **In today's Church:** Some practical ideas on changing our attitudes and style of celebration.

This issue of the Bulletin is written for laity, religious and clergy. Teachers, catechists, liturgy committee members, and parents can use it during the changeover to the revised rites of reconciliation. In the years to come, moreover, this issue will be a useful aid to deepening our understanding and celebration of this sacramental sign of God's love for his people.
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LOVED AND FORGIVEN

Reconciliation is God's action first of all. We are forgiven because God has first loved us. In his mercy, he gives us his grace to turn around and begin the journey back to his love. He gives us his Spirit to strengthen us, and lights our way with his word. Our Father reconciles us with himself and with one another, and restores us to our place at the eucharistic banquet.

In the past, we have tended to become engrossed with our actions and words during the sacrament of penance. While we never forgot God's action, we did seem to put it in the background.

Now the Church is calling us to a more wholesome celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, to a new spirit and approach:

- **In community:** The sacrament will be seen as a part of the Church's work of reconciling sinners to God. Members of the Church will need to become more concerned for sinners, and work for their conversion by prayer, penance, example and personal contact. We will become more aware of the fact that our personal good actions and our sins affect the whole Church and the rest of humanity.

- **In thanksgiving and praise:** The Christian community praises God, because he has saved us from sin. Our eucharist is thanksgiving and praise for salvation. Every sacrament gives him such praise. The elements of glory and thanks are more evident in the revised rites for the sacrament of reconciliation.

- **In paschal joy:** Jesus died on the cross for us, to save us from sin by his obedience to the Father's will. The Father raised him up, and declared him Lord of all, our leader and our brother. In baptism, we are brought into Christ's saving death and rising: with him we die to sin and rise to new life for God. Whenever this life is restored and deepened through God's forgiveness, we should rejoice.

Through the current renewal of the sacrament of penance, may God continue to bring his people back to him. Loved and forgiven, may we be helped to continue the work of the Lord Jesus, offering God's reconciliation to all.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

TWENTY CENTURIES OF DEVELOPMENT

It is necessary to know where we came from in order to understand where we are. This is particularly true in regard to the sacrament of reconciliation. Only when we see the various ways the Christian community has celebrated (or tolerated) repentance are we able to grasp the gradual development that has taken place up to our day; we can also begin to see the direction in which the Church is moving in the years to come.

Over the centuries, the Christian people have gradually refined their consciences in the light of the gospel, and in this way have grown to value the forgiving mercy of God more fully. The history of the sacrament of penance is the story of the Christian community as it explores the unlimited compassion of the Father for his sinful children. Since the sacrament of reconciliation is for the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, this history must be seen in the light and context of the process of Christian initiation.¹

Some problems: In studying the history of the sacrament of penance in the early Church, we are hampered by the fact that we have only occasional glimpses of early practices. We have to be careful not to jump too far on scanty evidence, nor to read modern thinking into early custom or terminology. Another point that we may find difficult to grasp is that different rites and practices were taking place in various parts of the Christian Church at the same time: there was little uniformity in practice, and new developments overlapped old customs, and co-existed with them for decades or even centuries.

New Testament

Before Christ, the Old Testament presents a gradual maturing in the understanding of sin and forgiveness. David's psalm of repentance (Ps. 51) can still be prayed profitably today by Christians, as can all the penitential² psalms (Ps. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). Many other psalms refer to sin and pray for forgiveness: as always, the Spirit is teaching us to pray by expressing what we cannot put into words by ourselves (see Rom. 8:26-27). Throughout the Old Testament books we read of sacrifices for sin, of the scapegoat, of the day of atonement for sins.³

God welcomes penitents, and grants them forgiveness in his mercy, as long as they are prepared to turn their backs on their sin. Gradually the prophets taught a more spiritual message, pointing out that God judges the heart, and can not be deceived by lip service or external actions. During the lenten season particularly,

¹ See Bulletin 51, Christian initiation. As noted in the rite of penance, no. 2, baptism and eucharist are sacraments for the forgiveness of sins; penance is mentioned there in third place.
² See Penitential psalms, Bulletin 48, pages 103-107, on practical ways of restoring these psalms to personal and community prayer today.
³ The spirit of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement near the beginning of the Jewish new year, is preserved by the Church in Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent: see Guidelines for Pastoral Liturgy — 1976 Liturgical Calendar, pastoral note 26.
the Church chooses Old Testament readings which help us to deepen our understanding of sin and of God's willingness to forgive us.

John the Baptist bridged the Old and New Testaments. Chosen as a prophet, he came to tell his people that God would forgive them and save them. John urged them to prepare the way of the Lord, telling them to turn away from their sins and to be baptized as a sign of open repentance. (See Lk. 1:76-79; Mk. 1:1-5.) The Church places emphasis on John during the Advent season, but his message is also heard at other times in the Church year. His role is remembered daily in the gospel canticle at morning prayer.

Jesus Christ: The infancy narratives sum up the work of Jesus: he is to save his people from their sins (Mt. 1:21), and therefore his coming is to be a source of great joy for all (Lk. 2:10-11). The Church reminds us of these themes throughout the Christmas season: God's Son has become man, one of us, in order to free us from the slavery of sin, and to lead us into the kingdom of light.

The first preaching of Jesus (see Mk. 1:15; Lk. 4:17) is the Good News: we can be saved! God will help us to turn away from our sins. The Ash Wednesday liturgy continues this message, and it is prolonged throughout Lent as a time of renewal for those who have been baptized, a time of preparation for those seeking the sacraments of Christian initiation.

In the gospels, Jesus is presented to believers as the gentle shepherd, seeking the lost and the outcast. Like us in all things but sin, he is far more understanding and sympathetic toward sinners than we are. He came to call sinners to repentance (Mt. 9:13). He forgives sinners (see Jn. 8:1-11; Lk. 7:36-50). He tells parables of the lost sheep, of the forgiving father, of the unforgiving servant, and of the two men in the temple. He taught us to pray the Our Father and to forgive one another (Mt. 5:14-15; 18:15-17).

Having learned obedience, he chose the Father's will, even when it led him as the innocent and suffering servant to the slaughter of Calvary. Even there, he forgave the repentant thief, and prayed for God to forgive his executioners. Jesus obeyed his Father, and set us free from the bonds of sin. His Father raised him, and enabled us to rise with him to newness of life. By the death and rising of Jesus Christ, we are freed from sin and transferred into his kingdom.

His Easter gift to his Church is the Spirit of forgiveness (Jn. 20:21-23), in order that his saving work may be continued throughout history.

Apostles: The message of "metanoia" or change of heart was continued in the apostles' preaching. The New Testament books continue Jesus' theme that God is ready to forgive us and make us his children, his people: he is ready to reconcile us, to welcome us into the bosom of his family, the Church.

Like Christ, the apostles and the first generation of Christians continued to preach the message of repentance and forgiveness, for God wants all people to be saved.
Christian Antiquity

Post-apostolic age: In the first and second centuries of the Christian era, we have various communities seeking to carry out the gospel principles under the guidance of their bishop. There was no uniform practice, but most sought to maintain a balance between God's willingness to forgive sinners and man's tendency to be severe toward them. Repentance and conversion were part of Christian initiation from the first Christian Pentecost.

The confession of sins — most likely in the sense of admission of sinfulness and guilt — was a part of early Christian life. The Didache speaks of confessing one's sins on the Lord's day before giving thanks in the breaking of bread (Sunday eucharist), in order that the sacrifice may be pure (XIV, 1: see Bulletin 43, pages 80-81). In the first few centuries, light or daily sins were considered forgiven by daily prayers for pardon and forgiveness (such as the "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" of the Lord's prayer): these sins are not to be considered the equivalent of venial sins today. At the beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius of Antioch noted that God forgives all who are repentant, and who return to union with God and communion with their bishop.

During this period, there were three great sins (adultery, murder, apostasy); some doubted that they could be forgiven, but the Church maintained that it had the full power of the keys, and was able to bind or loose all things.

Only one chance: Entrance into the early Church was normally by adult baptism, with personal rejection of sin and profession of faith in Christ. But in the middle of the second century, Hermas of Rome wrote his book, The Shepherd, which suggested that a person who fell into serious sin after baptism could be forgiven only once. This 'second baptism' was indeed a serious affair, and was often reserved for the deathbed. Hermas' thinking influenced the Church for a long time. Two centuries later, St. Ambrose was to note that there is only one opportunity for penance, just as there is only occasion for baptism.

Third century (200-300 A.D.): This thinking continued in Tertullian, who suggested that young persons should not be baptized until they had married or settled down in life. When he joined the Montanists, a harsh and rigoristic sect, he condemned the Church for its laxity in forgiving sinners and allowing them to be reconciled and restored to the eucharistic table. The extremes of Gnostics and other rigorists led the Church to react against their teaching.

The Church of that time continued — as indeed it must do in every age — to explore the meaning of Jesus' gospel message. It sought to avoid harshness, and to receive all who repented after their fall.

While Hippolytus and Tertullian decried the forgiveness of sins of adultery, this became a normal part of the Church's reconciling role to lead sinners back to God, just as Christ had done. This was followed some decades later by forgiveness granted to apostates and others who fell away in varying degrees in times of persecution. Martyrs and confessors (those who survived torture or imprisonment for the faith) practised their 'prerogative' and dispensed some from the requirement of public penance. This led to great discussions and then to mitigations of the old penitential practices. By the end of the third century, on the eve of the final Roman persecution and the peace of Constantine, the Church had regained a balanced view of forgiveness according to the mind of Christ and his apostles.
Public penance and reconciliation: From the third to the fifth centuries, we find a discipline which required external actions as well as interior repentance. These practices were known as exomologesis, and consisted of several steps: confession, penance or satisfaction, and then reconciliation at the end of the process.

More serious sins involved this more formal approach. When a person was ready to return to the eucharistic fellowship of the Church, he would normally admit his sin privately to the bishop or his representative. The bishop would help the person to see his action more clearly in the light of the gospel, and would encourage him to full repentance and conversion. (In the case of public sins, the bishop was to go to the person and invite him to repent and return to the Church in penance.) The penitent was admitted to the order of penitents and did public penance for a determined time. When this was completed, it was normally the bishop who reconciled him with the people of God: this was accomplished in the eucharist.

Fourth to Sixth Centuries

This is the period from 300 to 600 (from Constantine, through the barbarian invasions, to Gregory the Great). Once the Church was able to live openly, it became fashionable to become a member: large numbers entered the Church. Various councils were held to establish and regulate the penitential discipline. Many saints and leaders of the Church spoke and wrote about penance in this period.

Various distinctions between serious and light sins were current, and different writers prepared lists of sins which could be considered as serious. Light sins were forgiven by daily good works and witness, especially prayer, fasting and almsgiving, which purified a person sufficiently to take full part in the Mass. Augustine considered that pardon could be obtained for daily sins by praying the Our Father, and called it "your daily baptism." For serious sins, the discipline of doing public penance continued, and the penitent was excommunicated, cut off from offering his gift and from communion; he could still benefit from the prayers which the Church offered for his conversion and reconciliation.

As in earlier ages, public penance consisted of confession of sin to the bishop (or to a presbyter delegated by him), penitential exercises, and reconciliation.

Order of penitents: When a person was admitted to the order of penitents, he received the imposition of hands and of ashes on his head, and was assigned to the place of the penitents. The Church prayed that God would reconcile the penitent after his time of penance and reform. In the fifth to seventh centuries, this rite took place on the first weekday of Lent, the Monday after the first Sunday of Lent (its gospel still speaks of separating the sheep and the goats — Mt. 25: 31-46: lectionary, no. 225). Several centuries later, this rite was transferred to the previous Wednesday, the day we now call Ash Wednesday.

Penances were severe, with restrictions in dress, in food, in marital relations. Because of its severity, and because of growing moral laxness through abandonment of the full discipline of the catechumenate, sinners began to wait for their deathbed

4 Miscell, Agost., I, 448; Enchiridion, 27; De civitate Dei, xxii, 27.
5 See Bulletin 47, pages 31-33, on the development of Lent from the reconciliation of penitents and other elements of the Church's life at that time.
before entering the order of penitents, a fact noted by Gregory the Great (590-604). In order to revive the practice of penance the Church, even from the fourth century, began moving toward developing the period before Easter that we know as Lent.

Occasionally pastoral practice allowed a person to undergo public penance a second time, but the tradition against it was still strong. Many still felt that there was only one baptism and one reconciliation after baptism.

**Reconciliation:** When the penitent had completed his public penance, he was admitted back into the fellowship of the Church before the assembled community. The bishop (and sometimes his presbyters also) prayed over them, asking the Spirit to come upon them, and laid hands on them. Then they were able to bring their gifts and receive communion once more.

In the late fourth century, Rome and Milan were reconciling sinners on the Thursday before Easter. When the period of public penance was later limited to the period of Lent, this day (our Holy Thursday) continued as the day of solemn reconciliation. Our current practice of penance celebrations and extra efforts to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation before Easter come from this early custom of the Church.

**Gradual Change to Private Penance**

**Forerunners:** Even in the ages of public penance, there were elements that led eventually to private penance. A sinner told his sins to the bishop or his delegate, and was counselled in private, before entering the order of penitents. Deathbed penance was rather simple in comparison to the public discipline. When persons baptized in heresy were received into full communion with the Catholic Church, the bishop laid hands on them in penance, and allowed them to receive communion. From the third century among the monks, and in the whole Church from the fourth century, the practice of spiritual direction or "spiritual therapy" existed: a person could talk over his sins and problems with his spiritual doctor, a person endowed with the gifts of the Spirit for giving such direction and guidance. Such a person need not be a presbyter.

**Failure of public penance:** In the early middle ages, the practice of public penance was gradually dropped for several reasons:

- **Severity:** Because it was too severe, it was often postponed and then replaced by deathbed reconciliation.
- **Devotion:** A growing realization that all are sinners led many to take on additional penances of their own accord. This was one of the factors that led to the development of Lent (see Bulletin 47, pages 31-33).
- **Private penance:** The development of private penance, which began in the fifth century in Ireland.

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6 One of the results of this practice was to cloud over the nature of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. Because sinners were not reconciled until their deathbed, they were reconciled, given viaticum and anointed in one service; eventually, the anointing of the sick was seen as the last anointing, extreme unction, for the dying. This state remained until the Vatican Council in this century (Liturgy constitution, nos. 73-75), and the present revised rite in 1972.

7 In Spain during the seventh and eighth centuries, the practice of the Indulgentia or prayers for pardon was used on Good Friday for the reconciliation of sinners. This is described in Bulletin 47, page 43.
A new discipline develops: Far away from Rome, the Irish Church developed a new approach to penitential practices. St. Patrick came to preach the faith in Ireland around the middle of the fifth century. Gradually a new penitential practice developed. While the bishop retained the full power of the keys, lay persons and clerics could go to presbyters to tell their hidden sins in private.

Severe penitential works were imposed by the confessor, according to the penitential books, but some of this penance could be made up for by payment of money. When the penance was completed, the penitent could return for reconciliation (absolution). The whole process was not limited to once in a lifetime, but could be repeated. Abuses could take place, and one could pay others to do the fasting or other good works. The penitential books, which listed sins and suitable penances, spread throughout England, Scotland and Gaul.

Origin: The origin of the Irish discipline is disputed. Was it because Patrick saw the failure of public penance in Gaul, and sought to revive it in a more vigorous manner? Was it a development of the spiritual therapy of the earlier centuries, now linked with reconciliation? Was it because of the sixth century organization of the Irish Church, which was more monastic than diocesan in its set up? Others point out that many of the individual points of the Irish penitential system come from the Eastern Church. The Irish genius was to organize all these elements into a practical form that was suited to the needs and circumstances of their day.

Spread to the continent: From 550 on, Irish and British monasticism flourished, and sent many missionaries to plant or revive the faith — a thrust evident again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Wherever they went, they brought their liturgy, their liturgical books, and their practices, including their rite of penance. By the eighth century, Boniface was spreading the new penitential discipline in Germany, and penitential books spread throughout Gaul. In 745, the Council of Ratisbon told priests to catechize their people to confess all their sins to the priest in church.

Rome did not seem to react against this new practice, but it was rejected in Spain (Council of Toledo, 589), and in 813 in Gaul, where councils held by Charlemagne condemned the penitential books and called for a return to the old practices. Eventually the penitential books became a means of harmonizing the old and the new, when Rabanus Maurus, Alcuin’s disciple, said that public penance should be done for public sins, and hidden penance for hidden sins.

Terminology: Until this period, the common term for this sacrament was penance, which showed where the emphasis was placed in the minds of the people. In the early seventh century, however, just after the time of Gregory I, we find St. Columban using the term confession to refer to the entire sacramental rite: this term has lasted until the recent reform. Now the word reconciliation seems to show the important element.

Private confession prevails: The question of the necessity of confession to a priest was discussed thoroughly from 800 to 1200. All agreed that it was better to blush before a man than to be put to shame before Christ in judgment. Gradually the idea of contrition developed. The confession of venial sins (see new rite of penance, no. 7b) moved from the monastery to the life of the ordinary Christian. Gradually the confessor became a spiritual director.
Immediate absolution: While the earlier Irish practice was to wait until the severe penance was done (or paid for), gradually the custom began of giving absolution immediately after the sins were confessed. By the year 1000, this was the general rule.

Frequency: The first mention of the frequency of confession was in 760 in Metz, where clerics were commanded to confess to their bishop twice a year (at the beginning of Lent, and sometime between August and the feast of All Saints). By this time, the whole Church was considered to enter into a penitential state during Lent, leading up to the solemn reconciliation on Holy Thursday, in preparation for the Easter solemnities.

Around 900, confession was suggested before the three popular times for communion, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council commanded every believer who had reached the age of reason to confess all his sins in private confession at least once a year to his own priest. To go to another priest, the penitent had to have permission from his own pastor!

Medieval Rites of Penance

Imposing public penance: In various books between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, we find the following rite for imposing solemn penance on Ash Wednesday. Wearing sack-cloth, barefoot and prostrate, the penitents presented themselves to the bishop at the church door. He led them into the church, and all the clergy joined him in singing the seven penitential psalms for their forgiveness. He laid hands on them, sprinkled them with holy water, placed blessed ashes on their heads, covered their heads with haircloth (goat skin). Then the clergy brought them outside the church and closed the doors. The penitents remained there with lighted candles. They were urged to spend the time of Lent in fasting, prayer, pilgrimage, almsgiving and other good works. From the eighth century, the ashes were also given to all members of the Church who wished to spend Lent in a penitential way.

Solemn reconciliation: On Holy Thursday, Rome had three solemn Masses: one for blessing the oils, one for reconciling penitents, and the Mass of the day. By 900, however, one Mass covered everything, with the rite of reconciliation taking place after the gospel. Before the Mass, the lenten conduct of the penitents was carefully examined.

The ceremony of reconciliation included the litany of the saints, silent prayer, prayers by the bishop, laying on of hands by the presbyters in the name of the bishop. Then the penitents stood up and the choir began the offertory hymn. The penitents received communion, and after Mass they were invited to share in a feast with the pope.

Later pontifical books elaborated these rites further, and later still they were simplified.

Private penance: Around 830 in Gaul we find the rite of private penance being celebrated in this way: prayers, litanies and psalms; confession of sins and
acceptance of penance; psalms; absolution (in the form of a collect); anointing; with imposition of hands, and blessing; when possible, Mass and communion concluded the rite.

Formulas of absolution: Varying formulas have been used in the Church. From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, the change was gradually from the earlier form (may God absolve you) to an indicative or judicial form (I absolve you); the latter form began to appear in the tenth or eleventh century. The Council of Trent fixed the essential formula of absolution in the Western Church: I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit. To this the penitent responded: Amen. Other petitions were added to it, and were included in the first Roman Ritual in 1614. The imposition of hands was included as a concomitant rite, but the confessional boxes, introduced shortly after Trent by St. Charles Borromeo, reduced this to an atrophied gesture.

From Fourth Lateran to Trent

Age: The Lateran Council's "age of discretion" received various interpretations: from seven to nine years of age, or from twelve to fourteen (age of puberty). In 1450, for example, it was considered a good pastoral practice to have children receive the sacrament from about the age of five or seven.

To one's own pastor: This was an ancient practice, centuries before the Lateran Council, which imposed it under pain of excommunication. But the mendicant orders (Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, Hermits of St. Augustine) spread their missionary apostolate throughout Europe, and this led to squabbles over jurisdiction. The mendicants, responsible directly to the pope, encouraged many people to a more frequent use of the sacrament. The Council of Trent ended the disputes by stating that every priest with faculties from the local bishop could absolve from sin.

Seal of confession: While the Lateran Council passed the first legislation on the seal, it is mentioned in Syria about 350, and in the life of St. Ambrose, who died in 397. The Lateran Council forbade any direct violation of the seal, and later generations extended this to forbid any use of confessional knowledge which would harm the penitent. St. John Nepomucene was martyred at Prague in 1393 rather than break the seal.

Scholastic teaching: A number of trends may be pointed out in the middle ages:

- Confession: Alcuin considered that sorrow was a substitute for public penance; the embarrassment of confession was like a sacrifice asking for God's merciful pardon. Others followed him in seeing confession as the principal part of the sacrament: sorrow is a necessary disposition for this act. Satisfaction, earlier the central act of sacramental reconciliation, was now reduced to a minimum.

- Absolution: Another problem arose: if true contrition wipes out sin, of what value are absolution and the power of the keys? Thomas Aquinas showed that in absolution, Christ forgives our sins. Without absolution, the other elements

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8 The anointing of penitents began in the Eastern Churches, and was practised around 400. It was known in the Church of Spain and Gaul by the end of the sixth century.
are incomplete. At this same period, the use of indicative forms of absolution became prevalent in the Western Church.

Reformation: The sixteenth century Reformers accepted God's power to forgive sin, but accepted or rejected in varying ways the practice of sacramental confession. Today, most Churches are taking a fresh look at this part of the Christian tradition.

From Trent to Vatican II

From pre-Tridentine laxity, the Catholic Church in Europe was led into a deeper fervor in response to the challenges and questions of the Reformers. By the end of the century, the sacrament of penance was considered a profitable rite for all. In the following century, the rigorism of Jansenism led to the idea that repentance was only for those predestined by God; the Jansenists sought a return to the severe penitential practices of the early Church. The effects of this way of thinking lasting until the end of the eighteenth century. St. Alphonsus Liguori, who died in 1782, was one of the strong leaders toward a more balanced view.

Place for confession: Originally confession was made in the priest's house, with the rite concluding in the church before the altar. One exception to this is noted by the Council of Paris in 829, stating that nuns' confessions are to be heard only in church before the altar, with several witnesses standing by: by 1000, this was the general rule.

The priest was seated, and the penitent knelt at his feet. In this way, he could easily impose his hands in the act of absolution, and make the sign of the cross on the penitent's forehead. From the thirteenth century, the stole was required as a sign of the priest's jurisdiction. He would lay it on the penitent's shoulder, and the penitent would kiss the stole during the rite of dismissal.

The first confessional seats were fixed in the churches at Pisa during the 1400s; they were open, not closed in as we have known them. A century later, in 1565, Charles Borromeo introduced them in parish churches in Milan, and from there they spread throughout Italy. He gave details for their construction, including a perforated metal screen between the priest and penitent. This was continued by the Roman Ritual (1614), by the decrees given for the missionaries going from Europe to the rest of the world, and in the Code of Canon Law (1917).

Gradual renewal: In the past century, devotion to the Sacred Heart and other similar movements led people back to monthly confession and communion. The work of St. Pius X and his successors in promoting frequent communion as a regular part of Christian living was picked up by the liturgical movement and by simple folk as well, leading to a more frequent and regular celebration of the sacrament of penance.

Beginning a New Era

Vatican II: In speaking of this sacrament (Liturgy constitution, no. 72), the Council pointed out that its ceremonies and formulas were to be revised, in order to speak more clearly of the sacrament's nature and effects. Other Council documents mentioned its important place in the life of the Christian community.
Since the Council, we have been through a number of rapid and disconcerting experiences: a falling away from frequent confession, and on the other hand, an increase in the frequency of communion; a deepening awareness of the meaning of Church, community, sacraments, sin, social responsibilities, social effects of sin, and reconciliation; a better hearing of the word, especially since the coming of the vernacular and the new lectionary; penance celebrations, particularly during Lent and Advent; a renewed penitential rite at Mass, and in the anointing and communion of the sick (in strong contrast to the medieval apologies); the first possibilities of general absolution and communal celebrations of the sacrament.

Penitential practices: A growing awareness and an increasing call to penance in all its meanings has been more evident in the Church. Today the stress is on conversion, contrition, *metanoia*, a change of heart in response to God’s love, proclaimed especially in his word.

New rite of penance: This rite is studied in detail in this issue of the Bulletin. Some further points may be summarized here:

- *Why was it revised?*
  - To show its relationship with Jesus’ paschal mystery (Liturgy constitution, nos. 5, 61).
  - To point out its ecclesial dimensions (Constitution, nos. 6-7, 26-27).
  - To give proper place to God’s word (Constitution, nos. 24, 35).
  - To make the rite more expressive, understandable, and to increase participation (Constitution, nos. 33-35).
  - To be a celebration of faith (Constitution, no. 9).
  - To leave room for adaptation to various cultures and situations (Constitution, nos. 37-40).
  - To bring out the nature and effects of this sacrament more clearly (Constitution, no. 72).

- *Some important changes:* Among the changes we have already witnessed are these:
  - The growing use of scripture in the celebration of the sacrament: it is God who calls us to repentance and renewal.
  - The strong development of community penance celebrations over the past ten years.
  - The growing awareness that the communal form of the celebration is the most perfect (Liturgy constitution, nos. 26-27; Pope Paul, general audience, April 3, 1974).

- *A bright future:* We are only beginning! It may take us a generation, twenty-five years, until the renewed sacrament becomes a normal part of our Christian living once more. But God’s Spirit has set us upon the road, and it is up to us to follow his lead.

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In response to the Canadian bishops’ request, Bulletin 42, *Call to Penance*, takes a full view of the field of penitential practices and their place in the life of the Christian community and its individual members. Ten years ago, Bulletin 10 presented the statement of the bishops on the same topic — a statement that still needs serious response in our lives.
Our understanding of some basic truths of our faith will affect our approach to the sacrament of penance and its renewal. The Second Vatican Council pointed in this direction, and the Spirit continues to lead his Church along this path.

**Christ**

We believe that the Son of God became man. Jesus Christ our Lord is God and man. In various periods of history, however, some Christians have tended to overemphasize one of his natures, or have even gone to extremes, into heresy; people have feared Christ as the dread judge, or have made him into a good man and nothing more.

Jesus Christ is both Son of God and Son of Man. If we lose this balanced perspective, if we overemphasize one nature and underemphasize the other, we warp and distort the truth. Jesus is Lord and judge, and he is brother and savior. A man like us in all things but sin, he is God's only begotten Son. He died to save us from sin: he redeemed the whole world. He came to serve, and to save what is lost (Mt. 20:28); one day he will come to judge us all.

The Lord Jesus is present and acting among us in his word, in the liturgy, in our gatherings (Liturgy constitution, no. 7). He leads us by his Spirit. Jesus is alive and interceding for us with the Father.

God loved us so much that he sent his Son to be one of us, to save us, to lead us back to God (see Jn. 3:16). Jesus, our good shepherd, came that we might have life in abundance (Jn. 10:10-18). The human nature of Jesus, his humanness, is the original sacrament, the sign of God’s love for us.

All other sacraments have to be seen in the light of this unique sign of the Father's love for his people.

**Church and Sacraments**

The Church is the people of God, the basic and abiding sign (sacrament) of God’s love in Christ. We need to remember the strong emphasis of Vatican II on the people of God, as well as the other traditional images of the Church. (It would be helpful for us to reread these documents this year, and compare where we are in regard to them in the understanding of our faith.)

Sacraments: Remembering that Christ is the original sacrament or sign of God’s love for us, and that his Church is an abiding sign or sacrament of this love, we are able to see the seven sacraments in perspective. These sacraments are signs which signify and cause the Church to be the abiding community of love in Christ. Through the sacraments, Christ builds up the faith community and makes it one: he enables it to be the light of the nations. The sacraments are for the people of God, so that we will be the true abiding sacrament to mankind, a sign and light for all.
Thus the eucharist is not proclaimed to the world: it is celebrated to make us a more effective sacrament to the world. The sacrament of penance celebrates God's forgiveness of our sins, so that we may be converted from sin, and reflect God's love and forgiveness more fully in our lives. In this way we help to bring his Good News of reconciliation to mankind.

As a Church, we are a community of sinners, saved by the death and rising of Christ (see “paschal mystery,” below), called the walk in holiness. We thank and praise God for his goodness, and celebrate this in the eucharist.

A clear understanding of the Church as the people of God is the background and setting for understanding reconciliation and forgiveness, since reconciliation with the Church is the sign of reconciliation with God. Each community of faith should welcome penitent sinners to share in their community of love — a community first entered by the sacraments of initiation. The celebration of community reconciliation is a sign of God’s forgiveness of sinners, by which he brings them back fully into this Christian community and into the community of the Trinity (see Jn. 14:23).

Sin

In all these basic truths, those who are leaders in prayer, worship and teaching need to deepen their own faith before they can guide others.

Gospel attitudes: While the gospel condemns sin, it is first of all the gospel or Good News of our salvation from sin. The gospel proclaims that God has overcome sin and Satan through the obedient death and the rising of his Son. Christianity proclaims the glad tidings of great joy for all the people: Jesus is our savior; he has triumphed over sin; he has made it possible for us to join him in this salvation. He has opened the gates to eternal life for us.

In the light of this offer of salvation, the gospel presents firm attitudes toward sin — that is, toward persons who reject Christ. The parable of the vine and branches (Jn. 15:1-10) and the attempt to serve without obedience (“Lord, Lord,” in Mt. 7:21-23) illustrate this. Sin is darkness, hatred, enmity, death. It is alienation from God and his people. Sin is slavery, not freedom. Salvation means simply that our savior saves us from the power of this slavery, and makes us free with the freedom of God’s children.

Personal and community sin: In baptism, Christ enabled us to die with him to sin, and to rise with him into the beginning of a new life for God. This Christian life involves a continuing commitment to die to sin and live for God, until we reach our full measure in Christ and are called by him to enter eternal life.

What is sin? It is my personal choice, my rejection of God’s will for my own. It is my reversal of my baptismal vows: I put God’s will out of my life and prefer to live for myself. I reject Christ and accept the rule of Satan. By my deliberate sin I am withdrawn from the communion of love with God. I reject his presence in my life (Jn. 14:23). And yet, the marvel of God’s love is still to be seen: despite my personal revolt, he invites me to come back, to be reconciled with him and his family, and to share once more in the eucharistic banquet of converted sinners.
There are lesser sins, by which I let my love for God cool. I may ignore or stifle the Spirit's appeal to do better. Hardening of the heart can take place gradually. God is always ready to forgive such sins, and to welcome us back to greater fervor in our life as his beloved sons and daughters.

Sin is also a community act. We cannot ignore the sins of governments, large corporations, or of the Churches. We cannot divorce ourselves from our share in these, at least by our silence or by turning a blind eye to such crimes. (Some serious thoughts on the social aspects of the gospel are presented in Preaching the social gospel, Bulletin 40, pages 244-251.)

Solidarity: Jesus, who is like us in all things but sin, took on the sins of all. By his obedience to the Father, he redeemed the results of our disobedience. He conquered Satan and his kingdom of darkness, and gives us power to overcome him. This is the triumph and the glory of Christ.

We are called to be God's holy people who carry on Christ's campaign against sin: in our own lives, in our family and community life, in our Church, in our country, in the world. As well as striving against sin, we must pray and do penance for sinners (beginning of course with ourselves), asking God to have mercy on us all.

Prayer: The Church has the task of praying always. Especially during Lent, we are called to pray for sinners. We should pray for them in our Sunday and weekday prayer of the faithful. Have we encouraged elderly or sick people and shut-ins to become men and women of special prayer for sinners and for the other needs of the Church and the world? (See Bulletin 33, pages 70-73; no. 35, pages 222-223; see also no. 48, pages 130-133.) What about other parishioners?

Penance: Do we take the question of penance seriously? The heart of the virtue of penance is hatred for sin as an offence against God (Liturgy constitution, no. 109b). How do we observe Friday? Lent? What about the daily carrying of our cross with Christ? Are we still limited to juvenile notions about penance? (A positive approach to penance in today's Church is the subject of Bulletin 42, Call to Penance; see also Guidelines for Pastoral Liturgy — 1976 Liturgical Calendar, pastoral note 25 on penitential discipline.)

Attitudes toward sinners: The gospels reveal examples of the wrong and the right attitudes toward sinners: we are not to condemn them or despise them (Lk. 7:36-50; Lk. 15:11-32) — in doing so, we condemn ourselves. We are to forgive them as freely and generously as God has forgiven us (see Mt. 18:21-35). In the Lord's prayer, we ask God to forgive us in exactly the same way that we forgive (or refuse to forgive) other people (Mt. 6:12, 14-15).

Admit the truth: In order to have a Christian attitude toward sinners, we need to acknowledge individually and with others that we too are sinners. This is the reason behind the penitential rite in the eucharist. Though its position, emphasis and wording have varied through the centuries, it expresses a sound religious need: we must admit our sinfulness if we are to be able to want and

1 The Didache, an early document on the Church's life and liturgy, specifically mentions confessing sins before the Lord's day liturgy (XIV:1; see Bulletin 43, pages 80-81). Bulletin 54, The Story of the Mass, describes the development of individual parts of the present Sunday eucharist in the Roman rite.
request God's merciful help. The parable of the two men in the temple is a clear illustration of this: see Lk. 18:9-14. As the scriptures constantly remind us, God puts down the proud and self-sufficient, and raises up the lowly from their misery (see Lk. 1:50-53).

The role of the Church, like that of John the Baptist, is to go ahead of the Lord, telling his people the Good News of his salvation; God is ready to forgive their sins because he is merciful to all, especially those living in the shadow of death. He wants to lead us into the path of peace (see Lk. 1:76-79).

If God's people do share this message of forgiveness and reconciliation, we will come into his eternal kingdom. There we will be liberated from "the corruption of sin and death," and we will join every creature in singing God's glory through our Lord Jesus Christ (see eucharistic prayer IV).

Forgiveness

The gospels assure us that God is ready to forgive us our sins, but several conditions are laid down: we must forgive others (see Mt. 18:33-35), and we must be ready to turn away from our own sins (see Mk. 1:4, 15). The baptismal responsibility of dying to sin and living for God remains in force.

Attitudes: A change of heart is demanded. Jesus gives us the beatitudes as attitudes we should strive to have in our lives, even to the extent of doing good to those who hate us and persecute us (see Lk. 6:27-36; Mt. 5:38-48). He gives us his Spirit to soften hard hearts and straighten crooked wills.

Peace: In the early centuries of the Church's life, the kiss of peace was a sign of union with Christ and his people. It was given to newly baptized members (see Bulletin 51) and to those being reconciled with the Church. So strong a sign was it that one who could not give it could not receive communion. (See Bulletin 48, pages 122-124.)

The whole Church is called to bring about the conversion of sinners by penance, prayer and by the pastoral concern of priests and people. In penance celebrations, we thank God for forgiving us; we renew our sorrow and make a fresh start; we pray for sinners; we join all in praising God and celebrating our reconciliation with him and his Church. The eucharist is our community act of praising and thanking our Father for forgiving us through the suffering, death and rising of Jesus Christ.

Covenant

In the Old Testament, God promised the people of Israel to be their God: they would be his people and keep his commandments, and he would protect them. This theme is frequently referred to in the lenten Masses. The promise of a new covenant, a universal one, was also made to the people of God.

At the last supper, Jesus made this new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins: we repeat his words in each celebration of the eucharist. The commandment which accompanied this covenant was a new one: to love one another as Jesus has loved us (Jn. 13:34), for the new people of God, as the old, are called to be people of holiness before the Lord (Eph. 1:4-5). Jesus gave us his Spirit to that we would be able to live for him, not for ourselves; his
Spirit is the first gift he gives to those who believe (see eucharistic prayer IV). The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee that we are his people (Eph. 1:13-14).

The new rite of penance mentions that this covenant is broken by sin, and renewed when we are forgiven (Introduction, no. 6d). Though we may withdraw from God's promise by our sins, we cannot rescind his promise. It remains, and God can always draw us back to benefit from it. Though we may be faithless, Christ remains faithful (see 2 Tim. 2:11-13). God brings this renewal into our lives through baptism, the eucharist (see Liturgy constitution, no. 10), and through the sacrament of penance (rite, no. 2).

Bible

The bible is important in the life of the Church. Though most of us grew up in an age when we neglected the direct reading of God's word, the Vatican Council has called us back to our tradition of a "warm and living love" for the scriptures (Liturgy constitution, no. 24). In the bible God reveals his forgiving love in Christ, and the Spirit makes these words live in those who hear with faith.

In its document on revelation, the Council speaks of revelation in tradition and scripture, and describes the firm place of the scriptures in the life and prayer of the Christian community. The relationship of scripture and liturgy is mentioned often in the Liturgy constitution (see especially nos. 24, 51, 109, 121). Biblical imagery has strongly influenced the Vatican II documents, and will continue to direct the present and future life of the Church (see, for example, Church constitution, no. 6; Liturgy constitution, no. 6).

The public proclamation of the scriptures is part of each liturgical celebration now. For this to be truly fruitful, however, congregation, readers, religious and clergy need to be people of the book. Daily reading from the scriptures — is there one of us who is truly too busy to read a chapter from the gospels each day? — forms the basis for our prayer and Christian living. If we open our hearts to hear the Spirit and to follow his guidance, we can be more confident that we are following Christ.

Prayer

The prayer life of the family and the parish community is one of the continuing concerns of the National Bulletin on Liturgy. Our personal and family prayer should model itself on the Church's prayer: praising God for his mighty acts, asking for the coming of the kingdom, and praying for the achievement of his saving will. Honest prayer is a sign of our love and trust in God, and of our

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2 Dogmatic constitution on revelation, November 18, 1965. The text is contained in The Documents of Vatican II (1966, Guild/America/Association, New York), pages 111-128. It is worth rereading this constitution annually, and to consider the liturgy's increased and varied use of scripture in the light of this document.

3 Bulletin 50, Proclaiming God's Word: the Lectionary, explores the meaning of this proclamation in the liturgy of the word. On the full use of the scriptures in the rite of penance, see Bulletin 46, pages 305-306.

4 On the liturgy committee's responsibility for the prayer life of the parish, see Bulletin 35, pages 194-196. Bulletin 44, People of prayer, is devoted to individual and community prayerfulness. In Bulletin 49, the berakah prayer of praise is developed for family use, and the return of blessings and celebrations of praise is encouraged.
willingness to work with his people to carry out the work of salvation and reconciliation in our daily lives.\(^6\)

God's people are intercessors: we are people of prayer. In a special way we need to pray for sinners (beginning, of course, with ourselves). We ask God to touch their hearts with his mercy, to give them the grace to listen to his word and respond to his invitation to repent and return. We need to remember that others' image of God's forgiving love will be found only in the forgiveness and friendship they see in us. It is not enough to pray the *Our Father* — we have to live it too.

In the celebration of reconciliation, it is the people of God who intercede with the Father for all his children. We pray for his mercy, and we celebrate it. We pray for forgiveness and we praise him for it. We pray for reconciliation, and we thank him for it.

The new rite of penance demands a more prayerful approach by penitents, priests and community (see Bulletin 46, pages 301-309).

**Paschal Mystery**

The story of our salvation results from God's love for us: he loved us so much that he sent his Son to be one of us and to save us (Jn. 3:16). In obedience to the Father's will, Jesus accepted his death on the cross for our salvation: his obedience made up for our disobedience.

The death of our Lord is not to be seen as an isolated act. God saved us by one saving act: Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit, and his second coming. This is the paschal mystery by which God has brought us salvation. Since the time of the apostles, the Church has continued to come together in order to celebrate this paschal mystery (see Liturgy constitution, no. 6).

In the eucharistic prayer, the anamnesis (prayer of recalling) praises God as we remember the various moments of the paschal mystery, including the Lord's second coming at the end of time. We recall these events and thank God for his loving mercy, for saving us in this way. We praise the Father because he sent his Son to be our savior and brother:

*By his obedience, he destroyed disobedience.*

*By his death, he destroyed death,*

*By his rising, he restored eternal life.*

* * *

Each of these eight basic truths needs to be reflected on with care, since they are all involved in the renewal and celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.

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\(^6\) These thoughts are developed further by Jean-Jacques von Allmen, "The theological meaning of common prayer," in *Studia Liturgica*, vol. 10, nos. 3-4, pages 125-136.
Reconciliation may be described as the process by which God restores us to peace with himself and his people.

God our Father reconciles us to himself through Christ. In other words, God no longer holds our sins against us. In his mercy he wipes away our enmity with him: he makes peace with us by restoring us to his love.

Our Father does this through Christ's death for all (his paschal mystery). In this way he reconciles us to one another, making us one body, united by his Spirit in love. (See 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:20; Eph. 2:11-18; see also rite of penance, no. 1.)

The Church has taken this concept, and has applied it to the process by which Christ's reconciliation is brought into the lives of his people. While baptism, eucharist and penance may be called sacraments of reconciliation, (rite of penance, no. 2), the term is generally reserved today for the sacrament of penance.

Today the Church reconciles us to the Church (the people of God), and therefore brings us into peace once more with our Father. Our reconciliation with the Church and our restoration to the eucharistic meal are a sign of pardon by God: the Church assures us of forgiveness in his name. The sacrament of penance brings us reconciliation with God and with his Church (rite, no. 5).

Both for the individual penitent and for the Church community, the celebration of reconciliation is a time of grace. It is a moment in salvation's history, as God frees us from our sin and brings us from darkness into his kingdom of light.

By prayer and example, by penance and preaching, the people of God seek to lead sinners to repent and to turn back to God and his Church. Normally this conversion is gradual — it takes time. At the end of this process when the penitents are ready to be reconciled officially, the liturgy of reconciliation is celebrated.

God's Church now expresses this sacramental ritual of forgiveness in three ways:

- Reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and general absolution;
- Reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and individual absolution;
- Reconciliation of individual penitents with individual confession and individual absolution.

These three methods are described in more detail in Revised rites of reconciliation, in this issue.

A Reconciling Church

Holy — yet needing purification: Christ has made his Church holy, called to walk with him and to be blameless in the sight of the Father (Eph. 1:4-5; 5:25-27). Though we are God's sons and daughters who have died to sin, we are still weak and tempted. Personal experience is only too clear a witness to
how we have faltered, failed and fallen. We are a Church of sinners, and in his mercy God continues to call us to repentance. We need purification, and for this reason the Church on earth will always stand in need of repentance and renewal (see Constitution on the Church, nos. 8, 39-42; rite of penance, no. 3).

Penance in the Church: For this reason, the Church is continually called to penance: see Bulletin 42, Call to Penance, which explains this aspect of the Church's life. In order to become a sign of conversion in the world, the people of God suffer with Christ, do deeds of love and mercy, and work to live out the gospel message. The Church celebrates this in prayer, in the eucharist, in penitential celebrations, in proclaiming God's word, and in the sacrament of penance (rite, no. 4).

Editor's note: Notitiae is the international review published by the worship section of the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship. In August-September 1976 (nos. 121-122), pages 334-354, it reprinted four articles from Bulletin 52, pages 14-29.

FURTHER COURSES IN LITURGY

As promised in Bulletin 51, other courses available in liturgy are:

Berkeley, California (near San Francisco): The Institute for Spirituality and Worship, of the Jesuit School of Theology, offers a two-year course (no summer school) leading to an MA with a major in liturgy. Other courses and degrees are available. For further information contact:

Institute for Spirituality and Worship
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
1735 Le Roy Avenue
Berkeley, Calif. 94709
U.S.A. (415) 841-8804

Washington, D.C. — Several programs are offered: Master of Arts in liturgical studies, and Doctor of ministry, with specialization in liturgy. For further information, contact:

School of Religious Studies
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C. 20064
U.S.A. (202) 635-5683

In October 1975, the University opened a Center for Pastoral Liturgy, which will offer various programs. Contact:

Rev. Richard J. Butler
Center for Pastoral Liturgy
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C. 20064
U.S.A. (202) 635-5230
SACRAMENT OF Penance

Reconciliation is a gradual process by which the Holy Spirit calls sinners back to God and his Church. In his mercy, our Father sends his Spirit to move us to conversion. When this has taken place, then we are able to celebrate this reconciliation with the Church in a sacramental way.

A comparison may be made between two sacraments:

- **Marriage**: A wedding celebrates and seals the love shared in a special way between one man and one woman. For a long time, perhaps long before a wedding is even thought of, their love begins to grow and blossom. Their sacramental celebration blesses what is there already, and elevates it to a public sign of Christ's love for his Church. After the wedding, the love of husband and wife should continue to grow, thus leading them closer to the Lord and his people.

- **Penance**: The sacrament of penance celebrates and seals the love of God experienced by a penitent. For a period of time, God's Spirit encourages and invites him to come back; gradually the person's love and his longing for God begin to grow, and he begins to turn away from sin. The sacramental celebration seals and blesses the love which is there already, and raises it to a public sign of Christ's love and forgiveness. Then the forgiven person is restored to full union with the Church at the eucharistic table; from then on, his life is to bear great fruit by his love, prayer, worship, penance and other good works.

**Acts of the Penitent**

In the celebration of reconciliation, the three acts of the penitent are most important. These acts are contrition (or conversion), confession, and satisfaction. When the priest says the words of absolution in the name of the Lord Jesus, the sacrament is made complete (rite, no. 11).

**Contrition** (no. 6a): Many people raised in the post-Tridentine era seemed to think that contrition was sparked by one's personal efforts, somewhat like striking sparks with a reluctant flint. The Holy Spirit was needed, of course, but with his help, we did it all.

Perhaps we can see contrition more clearly when we see it as conversion, metanoia, a deep change of heart. Conversion is not primarily our work: God calls us back, his Spirit leads and guides and encourages us to respond to this invitation. Conversion is the fruit of God's merciful love, not a product of our remorse or disgust. We are led to judge our life according to God's love, and to rearrange it according to his will. Our sorrow for our sin must be real, and lead us to turn away from sin. As the Vatican Council reminds us, hatred for sin as an offence against our heavenly Father is the real nature of the virtue of penance (Liturgy constitution, no. 109b). Conversion is progressive, gradually making us more and more like our Lord. (See rite, no. 6a.) It is a renewal of our baptismal commitment to die to sin and to live in Christ for God.

**Confession** (no. 6b) is the manifestation of one's sins to the Church, working through the ministry of a priest of God. In order to confess, a person needs to know himself as the Father of all mercy sees him. Personal examination of his heart, based on prayer and trust in God's love, leads the penitent to open his heart, revealing his life to the priest as God's minister.
Guided by Christ the shepherd and savior, priests need to help their people to be sorry for their sins and to submit themselves to the Church for reconciliation (see Ministry and life of priests, no. 5).

**Satisfaction or act of penance** (nos. 6c, 18): This act helps the penitent to make up for his past actions and to start a new way of life; it also gives him strength against his weaknesses. (It must never be seen as a punishment or act of revenge by God or his Church!) This act of penance for our sins completes our conversion by leading us to make reparation for injury, damage or scandal, and helps us to improve our life for God.

- **Proportionate**: The nature and extent of the penance given should be proportionate to the nature and gravity of the sins being forgiven. In this way, the penitent person is working to restore the harmony he has upset by his sins. In a case of general absolution, a common penance is given, but individuals are encouraged to add to it (nos. 35a, 60). When individual confession takes place within a communal rite, a suitable penance is given individually, and not to all together (nos. 28, 55).

- **Remedy for sin**: The penance is also to be a remedy for sin, helping the penitent to overcome his weakness and spiritual sickness. It is also a step forward for him in renewing his life according to the pattern of Christ.

- **Variety of forms**: Today the Church tells us that suitable forms of penance include prayer and self-denial, and above all, works of mercy and service for our neighbor. Some penances to be considered are explored and described in more detail in Bulletin 42: see *The top ten*, pages 20-33. These are traditional penitential practices for the Christian people:

  - Giving up sin
  - Duties of state and condition
  - Prayer
  - Meditative reading and contemplation
  - Fasting
  - Controlling our possessions
  - Doing good works
  - Abstinence
  - Giving alms
  - Controlling our desire for entertainment

Such acts of penance help us to realize that our sin and our reconciliation have social implications. Christ frees us from sin so that we may work with all to establish his kingdom of justice and peace in our world (no. 5; see also Liturgy constitution, no. 110, on external and social acts of penance during Lent). God sent us our savior to rescue us, so that we might be his holy people, eager to do good works (Titus 2:11-14). We are to bear everlasting fruit (Jn. 15:1-17).

By these acts of contrition, confession and satisfaction, the penitent shows his change of heart to the priest, and asks for absolution.

**Prayer of Absolution**

During the celebration of reconciliation, the priest performs other acts, such as advising, encouraging and instructing the penitent. These are described under *Revised rites of reconciliation*.

When the priest pronounces absolution, God grants forgiveness. The words of absolution are a visible sign proclaiming that God has renewed the broken covenant with his repentant son or daughter in the body of his Church.
By absolution, the penitent is brought back into the community of God's family, the Church. The unity once broken by the person's sin is restored by the Lord's mercy. Once more, the penitent is an effective and active member of the communion of saints.

**Salvation history:** When the rite of reconciliation is celebrated, God is intervening in the life of the individual and of the community. We believe that our Father is saving us by giving us forgiveness and by bringing us back home into the full life and love of his people. Through hearing God's work in faith and responding to it with acceptance, another Christian renews his baptismal commitment to Christ, and becomes worthy once more of the dignified name he bears.

**Scriptural images:** At times the gospels present Jesus as forgiving sins where we would tend to expect a physical cure alone (see Mk. 2:1-12). Yet there are images in scripture that show us God's love for sinners and his willingness to reconcile us with him. The forgiving father of the prodigal son represents our heavenly Father (Lk. 15:11-32). Jesus is the good shepherd who seeks out the one who is lost (Jn. 10:11-18; see also Ps. 23); he has come to call and save the outcasts (Mt. 9:15-17).

**Penance Leads to Eucharist**

The parable of the merciful father and prodigal son shows God's willingness to forgive his repentant children (Lk. 15:11-32). Like the two preceding parables of seeking and finding the lost sheep (Lk. 15:4-7) and the lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10), it is told to those who grumbled because Jesus welcomed outcasts and even ate with them (Lk. 15:1-3). Each of the three stories ends with a celebration; in the case of the return of the lost son, this takes the form of a feast. In response to the elder son's sulky objections, the father simply proclaimed, "We have to have a feast, because your brother has been found!" (See Lk. 15:32.)

This is the Church's attitude toward reconciliation. The process of Christian initiation leads through baptism and confirmation to the full welcome in prayer, peace and eucharist. In the same way, the process of reconciliation with the Church culminates in the restoration of the penitent to the eucharistic banquet in the midst of his forgiven brothers and sisters. The eucharist is our celebration of thanks to God for saving us all through Christ from the power of Satan and sin. The restored unity of the body of Christ, the Church, is marked by restoration to communion in the body of Christ in the eucharist. We pray in the third eucharistic prayer that God's Spirit will make us one body and one spirit in Christ, in order that our restored unity may shine before those who are not Christians, and lead them to Christ.

Jesus' meals with outcasts, like his meals after the resurrection with the apostles who deserted him in his passion, are two of the main areas of scriptural background to the eucharist. He came to save all, especially those most in need of his help (see Mk. 2:15-17).

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1 The rites of initiation are studied in detail in Bulletin 51, *Christian Initiation* ($1.50 in Canada; $1.75 outside). See also *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (CCC study edition, $2.00). These may be obtained from Publications Service, at the address on the inside front cover.

2 The other two are the accounts of the multiplication of loaves, and the various accounts of the last supper at the time of the Passover.
What has the eucharist to do with sinners? It is the victory banquet of those whom God has forgiven. It is the feast — repeated at least every Sunday — which the Father gives to celebrate the return of his prodigal sons and daughters. Perhaps we fail to notice the words said in each celebration of the Mass: over the cup the priest points out that Christ's blood was shed to forgive the sins of all — including the sins of this community.

In the early middle ages, the Church celebrated the reconciliation of sinners by a dramatic restoration to the eucharist. On Ash Wednesday, the bishop sent the penitents out of the church. The community would continue to pray and do penance during Lent for their conversion (see Liturgy constitution, nos. 109-110: we still have similar lenten concerns). On Holy Thursday, the penitents were led back into the midst of the assembled community. After prayers, the bishop embraced them with the kiss of peace, and welcomed them to full communion by giving them the body and blood of Christ once more during the Mass: this was their reconciliation (see Bulletin 47, pages 32-33 and 37-38).

Even today, the Mass texts make frequent mention of God’s forgiveness of our sins. The penitential rite at the beginning acknowledges our sinfulness and weakness, and asks God's mercy. The proper prayers and readings often mention sin and our salvation from its power. In the eucharistic prayer, we give thanks to our Father who has rescued us from sin and restored us to his love by the death and rising of his Son.

The relationship between peace with God and our rescue from the power of sin is particularly noticed in the Mass prayers between the Lord's prayer and communion. In the Our Father, we ask to be forgiven our personal sins in the same way that we forgive others; we also pray for help in time of trial and temptation. The following prayer requests deliverance from sin, anxiety and worry, through the power of our Father, while we continue as a Church to wait with joy for the final coming of his beloved Son, our brother and savior.

Before the kiss of peace, we pray to Jesus, asking him to look at the faith of the people of God, instead of our sins. The kiss of peace itself is a sign of reconciliation and love, of being in harmony with God and his Church. (The kiss of peace is explored in Bulletin 48, pages 122-124.) In the Lamb of God (echoing Jn. 1:29), and in the priest’s private prayer before communion, we pray once more for forgiveness of our sins through the power of our Lord’s paschal mystery.

The eucharist is the center and summit of Christian life. Reconciliation with the Christian community — those who celebrate the eucharist fully — is accomplished by the grace of the Spirit, and celebrated in the sacrament of reconciliation.

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*These prayers, marked as “private prayers of the priest” in the sacramentary are just that: see General Introduction of the Roman Missal, nos. 13, 93, 103-104, 106, 113-114, 116, 120. Like certain other prayers in the Mass, these are private, and are not intended to be proclaimed aloud or even muttered audibly: they are quiet — in Latin, secreto (see Bulletin 46, page 288). Those who insist on proclaiming the prayer before the gospel, most of the prayers during the preparation of the gifts, and the priest's private prayers before communion lessen rather than improve the people's understanding of the eucharistic celebration.
NEW ATTITUDES

Sometimes one hears the comment: “There’s really nothing new about the new rites — some different prayers here and there, a reading, a change in location — but it is just the same as it always was.” In reality, the new rite of penance is quite different. While the rites and ceremonies have been changed slightly, a new set of attitudes is needed by priests, penitents and all members of the community if we are to appreciate the gift we have received in the revised rites of reconciliation. Some of these attitudes are examined here.

Praise and Thanksgiving

Christian worship is primarily directed toward giving God our thanks and our praise. Through Christ, he has saved us from sin — and we thank him. Through Christ he has called us to be his Church and his children — and we praise him. The eucharist is the basic act of this praise and thanksgiving offered to God by the Christian community, the family of redeemed sinners.

In the sacrament of penance, this attitude is expressed in several ways. “Confession” is seen first of all in its earlier meaning, giving praise to God by our words and especially by our life. The celebration closes with a proclamation of praise: we glorify God for his mercy, and thank him in a brief scriptural phrase (see Ps. 136:1). It may be a good idea to incorporate such a phrase in our daily prayer, or in family prayer, or in family grace at mealtime — at least on the Lord’s day.

What are we praising God for? We can thank him for giving us Christ as our savior (see Jn. 3:16), for calling us to share in his wonderful plan (see Eph. 1:3-15), for allowing us to recognize him as our Father (see Rom. 8:14-17). We praise him because he has sent his Spirit to rededicate his temple, restoring his son or daughter to grace; or we thank him because his Spirit is now living more fully within his beloved child (see rite of penance, no. 6d). We praise God for his mercy and his love.

Benefits of this sacrament: We praise our Father also because of the spiritual benefits he gives us through the sacrament of reconciliation:

- **Serious sins forgiven**: By these sins we banish the Spirit of God from the temple of our hearts (see rite, no. 7; Jn. 14:23). Our heavenly Father continues to invite us to come back to the communion of his love, and to celebrate this reconciliation with him and with his people in the sacrament of penance. There are many discussions today among pastors, catechists, theologians, psychologists, parents, and others about the nature of these serious sins.

All Christians have the responsibility to pray for sinners, asking God to bring them back in his mercy. Such prayers are included in the penance celebration in this issue.

**Venial sins forgiven**: St. Thomas Aquinas describes these as actions which cool our love for God and neighbor. The Church recommends “frequent and careful celebration” of the sacrament of reconciliation in order that we may seek help against venial sins. Seen as a real effort to obtain the fullness of baptismal grace, such use of the sacrament is a continuation of our baptismal commitment: to die to sin, and to live with Christ for God. We seek to root out even the slightest faults in order that we may be more like Christ, who was like us in all
things but sin. By listening to the Spirit and allowing him to dwell in us more fully, we are enabled to walk more perfectly in imitating the Lord Jesus. (See rite, nos. 6d, 7.)

Positive view: The Church now presents us with a more positive and social view of this sacrament than formerly. Each time the Church celebrates God's reconciliation of one of his children, another prodigal son or daughter has returned to the family circle around the Lord's banquet table. Every time we celebrate this sacrament of forgiveness, the entire Church is proclaiming its faith, and is thanking God for freeing us from the bonds of sin. Once more God's people are able to become renewed along with the individual penitent; the whole Church rejoices over the return of one sinner to God; our spiritual offering to God in the eucharist is that much more pleasing to God, since his Church is that much closer to his will. (See rite, no. 7.)

Role of the Community

For too long we have considered this sacrament as a private little celebration (a few years ago, we wouldn't have dreamed of calling it a "celebration" in any way!) between the penitent and the priest. Now the Church calls us toward a much more communal view of sin and its forgiveness.

The celebration of this sacrament of faith (see Liturgy constitution, no. 9) is an act of public worship, offered by Christ and his entire Church to the Father. This sacrament is a public act of praise just as much as the eucharist, in which all sacraments find their center. The communal celebration of all the sacraments is stressed in the Liturgy constitution, nos. 26-27.

In this sacrament of penance, the people of God exercise their priestly role of intercession (praying for sinners), of calling them to repentance, of consoling and guiding those who are on the path toward reconciliation. The Church, entrusted with the ministry of forgiveness, carries it out by the ministry of bishops and their co-workers, the presbyters. (See rite, nos. 8-9a; Liturgy constitution, nos. 109-110.)

At a parish level, we must realize our responsibility for the Church's ongoing and unending work of reconciliation. The Lord Jesus has shared his great work with us. With him we are to give perfect praise to our heavenly Father, and we are to work so that he may make men and women holy and blameless in his sight (see Liturgy constitution, no. 7). What are we doing to bring this about?

Minister of Reconciliation

In the early Church, the reconciliation of sinners was normally the role of the bishop, assisted by his deacons and presbyters. As dioceses grew from one small community around one altar to a large community spread over a wide area, bishops sent presbyters to celebrate the eucharist and to be shepherds in their name (see Liturgy constitution, nos. 41-42; General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 74). In the same way, presbyters came to celebrate the reconciliation of sinners: acting in the name of the bishop who sent them, as Christ sent his apostles, the presbyter welcomes the sinners back into the bosom of the Church, and nourishes them at the eucharistic banquet.

"Faculties" — This has been the common term for the bishop's permission to a presbyter to reconcile sinners to God and the Church. Sometimes a few individual priests have acted as though their power to reconcile were their own
personal right, to wield according to their personal whims — whereas in fact, it is the bishop who holds the ministry of reconciliation from Christ, and who shares it with his co-workers, the presbyters. It is the bishop, not the presbyter, whom the Spirit places in charge of the flock; the presbyter is sent by the bishop. This is not a new idea: St. Ignatius of Antioch was emphasizing this around the year 110.

The bishop or presbyter does not have an easy task in this sacrament of healing: he needs to be a good shepherd, as Jesus was. The confessor’s wisdom, prudence and availability are discussed in the introduction to the rite (no. 10). It is important to note the emphasis there on prayer and charity, for the Spirit alone can guide the minister of reconciliation in his work.

“Saving souls?" — God calls us to share in his life and love with our whole being. This is the victory won for us by Christ when he died and was raised to new life. (See Vatican II, Church in the modern world, no. 18.) The Council notes quite clearly in no. 3 of the same document that it is speaking of man as the pivotal point: “man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will.” As mentioned in Bulletin 40 (pages 249-250), there is no dichotomy between theology and social action: God loves the entire person, not just his soul; all creation is in God’s hands.

In the sacrament of reconciliation, therefore, the minister cannot exercise his role as effectively if he has only an anonymous and generic person before him. Pastoral liturgy is concerned with real people: sitting across the table from Mrs. Murphy, who has four young children, a sick and unemployed husband, and unpaid rent — and helping her in her concrete situation. It is for this reason that the new ritual emphasizes warmth and friendliness, and presumes that the presbyter will know the penitent (see no. 16). Ceremony and ritual actions cannot replace pastoral care and service.

**Advise, Encourage, Instruct**

The rite points out three specific roles or acts of the minister of reconciliation (nos. 18, 44). He is to:

**Advise:** The bishop or presbyter who acts as the minister of reconciliation is to advise and counsel the penitent so that he is able to change his way of life and begin once more to follow the way of the Lord (see Acts 9:2): he encourages a return to and renewal of the person’s baptismal commitment, dying with Christ to sin and Satan, living with Christ for God.

The minister’s counsel should go far beyond pat answers: frank and serious questions need responsible answers. Sometimes it takes time — no one should be rushed in the celebration of this sacrament, nor feel that a lineup is pressuring him into a quick and profitless contact with the ministry of Christ’s reconciliation. The minister’s counsel needs to be firm, sensitive, Christlike and positive. Prayer and love are necessary in the life of the minister if he is to expect the Spirit to help him to discern spirits (see rite, no. 10a).

**Encourage:** A sinner is often a discouraged person: he has rejected God, his Church, his people; he has turned away from God’s gifts of grace. It seems that he is beyond salvation. Yet God, in the unfathomable mystery of his love, continues to seek us out, to call us back, to go searching for us as a shepherd looks for his lost sheep. By his warm understanding, the minister — who is a fellow
sinner, and who has also experienced the Father's love and forgiveness — stands beside the penitent. He helps him, gives him courage, holds his hand, helps him to make the leap of faith and trust into God's merciful forgiveness. When sin or its consequences seem overwhelming, the minister helps the repentant sinner to grasp the still greater love of Jesus, who died to free us from the bonds and terrors and tentacles of sin and Satan. When the priest backs up his words by his personal prayer and fasting, they will carry a greater ring of truth.

**Instruct:** The minister is to teach the penitent about Christ's way of life. As a fellow Christian (see Constitution on the Church, nos. 40-41), the bishop or presbyter has had to struggle to follow Christ. As a minister of the Church's reconciliation, he has been taught the wisdom gleaned by the Christian people through twenty centuries. This he is to share with the penitents who come to him seeking God's forgiveness.

It is evident that the minister and penitent cannot live in a vacuum: they need to be part of a Christian community — members of a believing, loving, worshipping family of people who are striving to follow the way of Christ. Not only as a minister of reconciliation but as a celebrant of the eucharist and teacher of the word of God, the bishop or presbyter instructs, teaches, guides, enlightens, leads, and helps this part of God's family. The role of the minister in the sacrament of reconciliation is an integral part of all his pastoral efforts in leading the people of God in this diocese or parish.

**Paschal mystery:** The meaning of Christian life — as the meaning of Christ's life — is explained by the paschal mystery: the glorious fact that God, in his unbounding love, saved us by the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. In baptism and the other sacraments, we share this mystery of grace with Jesus: we are enabled to die with him to sin, and to live with him for God (see Liturgy constitution, no. 7). This truth is brought out again in the words of absolution (Rite, nos. 46, 18-19).

* * *

All praise to you, Lord God,
Father of all creation:
you have loved us so deeply
that you gave your only Son, our savior,
to give us faith and eternal life.

Father,
we confess that we are sinners:
forgive us, and make us clean.
Listen to the pleading of your Son,
and forgive our sins and the sins of all humanity.
Help us to obey your commands
so that we may live in you,
and love and forgive others
as you have loved and forgiven us.

Father of love,
we bless your name
through Christ your Son
in the communion and love of your Spirit,
now and for evermore. Amen!
REVISED RITES OF RECONCILIATION

In analyzing the new rites of reconciliation, it is important to remember what they have in common. Each of the three forms of the rite, as described in the following pages, is a public celebration of the reconciliation of sinners to the Church and to God. The rite is not the entire act, but rather the culmination and celebration of a long process of reconciliation, a process in which God, his Church, individual persons and the penitent have important roles to fulfill. The sacrament of reconciliation may be compared to graduation: it marks the end of a long period of growth and development, of prayer and work by many people. The celebration of reconciliation closes this process, and leads the penitent into a new way of living.

Communal Reconciliation

The Vatican Council has stressed that the communal celebration of a rite is to be preferred, especially in the celebration of the eucharist and the other sacraments (Liturgy constitution, no. 27). The communal rite of celebrating reconciliation is preferred to the individual rite.

The most important change of the past few centuries has been the recent development of the communal celebration of reconciliation. This is a return to some of the practices of the early Church, but with some drastic modifications: no longer do we have but one chance in our lifetime for reconciliation after baptism; the severe exterior penances are not prescribed or practised now.

In adjusting our thinking to the Church’s revised approach in the celebration of this sacrament, we have to keep in mind that communal reconciliation, not the individual rite, is the norm, the best and most proper way — the way to which the Church is gradually leading us back.

This movement back to communal celebration was proposed by the Vatican Council as one of the fundamental principles of its renewal of the liturgy and life of the Christian people: see Liturgy constitution, nos. 1, 26-27. Similar changes have already taken place in the other sacraments. Now it is the turn of the sacrament of penance. The communal form of celebration demonstrates more clearly the ecclesial nature of this sacrament (see rite, no. 22).

Another example will show the necessity to adjust our perspectives here: we grew up in a Church where — in practice — the daily low Mass was the norm, and all other forms (Sunday, sung, solemn, pontifical, papal) were merely the low Mass with frills. In reality — and thank God, the Council has restored this balanced vision to us — the bishop’s public celebration on Sunday is the norm; parish Masses and other celebrations are to be modelled on this form (see Liturgy constitution, no. 41; General Instruction of the Roman Missal, no. 74).

The same is true of the sacrament of repentance. The norm for every celebration is the public act of reconciliation celebrated by the bishop. All other forms, communal or individual, are modelled on this.

a) General absolution (nos. 31-35, 60-66): The present name for this rite is “reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution.” An outline of the rite is given in Table 1.

The ritual presents this rite in a rather truncated form, noting that it follows the format of the second rite (reconciliation of several penitents with individual
# Table 1: Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution

<table>
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<td></td>
<td>Litany or song</td>
<td>35b, 27</td>
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<td>— encourage to good works</td>
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<td>— hymn</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Obligation to individual confession</td>
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<td>60, 66</td>
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## Short Rite: Case of Necessity
- Reading: 24, 64
- Instruction: 33, 35a, 64, 60
- Giving act of penance: 33, 35a, 64
- General confession: 35b, 27, 64
- Absolution: 35c, 64, 62
- (Obligation): 34, 66

## Imminent Danger of Death
- Absolution (short form): —, 65
- (Obligation): —, 66
confession and absolution — see Table 2), but with several exceptions, given in nos. 35, 60. These changes are indicated in the outline by an arrow, and are described below:

- **Instruction and penance** (rite, nos. 33, 35a, 60): The priest is to instruct the people to be disposed properly (see also Liturgy constitution, nos. 9, 11, 14, 19): this involves sorrow for our sins, and the resolution to turn away from them, to make up for scandal and harm, and to make an individual confession at a later time (described below).

Some act of satisfaction or penance is suggested for everyone. This involves everything said above in *Sacrament of penance*; see also notes in the rite, nos. 6c, 18, 28, 44, 55. The penitent may also choose to add something further to this penance, if he wishes: such generosity is to be encouraged in response to God’s forgiving love. It is to be noted that this is the only case in which a universal penance is given, and for one reason only — there is no way of giving individually tailored penances; in all other cases, a personal penance is given by the priest.

- **Sign of desiring absolution** (nos. 35b, 61): A public indication of wanting to be reconciled with the Church is made by all. This can be done by kneeling or by bowing the head, or by another sign appropriate in a particular culture. This public act is continued by a general admission of sin, such as *I confess to almighty God* from the order of Mass.

- **General absolution** (nos. 35c, 62): The priest extends his hands over the penitents (a form of imposition of hands), and says the prayer of absolution. He may use the regular form (as in no. 46), or the longer three-part formula, similar in style to the solemn blessings.

- **Obligation to individual confession** (nos. 34, 35a, 60): During the instruction, the priest points out the obligation of confessing each serious sin now being forgiven. This should be done before receiving general absolution again (unless “a just reason” prevents them), and certainly within the space of a year (unless this is seen as “morally impossible”). The two *unless* clauses are added in no. 34, and should not be interpreted narrowly.

The first reaction of many to this obligation to full confession of serious sins has been to ask: “Why bother about general absolution?” In answer to this, we need to see that the Church has made a rather extensive change in returning to the communal celebration. It will take us all some time, probably some years, to adjust our attitudes and approaches. During this interim period, it is good to continue with the Tridentine insistence on complete confession; at this point, it helps us to avoid misunderstanding or misuse of the communal rite (see no. 6b).

A similar approach helps us to understand the present restrictions on the use of general absolution (nos. 31-32).

*Necessity, danger of death*: In cases of necessity, a brief form of the rite is provided. When there is imminent danger of death, the rite is limited to the priest's absolution. These are described more fully in the references given in Table 1.

*What of the future?* One cannot be certain, but perhaps we will see some gradual developments in the next twenty-five years. Rather than an abrupt about face, the Church tends to move slowly, one step at a time. We have seen this over
the past two decades in the changing of the communion fast. Perhaps it will be the same with the celebration of communal reconciliation with general confession and absolution. When the attitudes and understanding of priests and people are ready, one can see the bishops of a country asking for general absolution at penance celebrations during Lent and Advent. After a few more years, this could be extended, as the local Church matures in its celebration of reconciliation.

Before this can come about, however, we have to grow much more fully in our understanding of the Christian life and its liturgy.

b) Communal rite with individual confession and absolution (nos. 22-30, 48-59): An outline of this rite is given in Table 2. Some points for consideration:

- **For all** (no. 22): Persons who intend to be reconciled some other time are also invited to take part in the service. This celebration may form a valuable step on their way back to full reconciliation.

- **Benefits of communal celebration**: These are discussed in no. 22. This form combines the advantages of the communal and the individual rites: the penitent has time for some personal contact with the minister, and can receive personal advice, and yet the rite is more obviously ecclesial in its nature.

- **Opening rites** (nos. 22, 48-50): As in any modern liturgy, these rites help the people present to become one assembly, and prepare them to be more disposed to take part in the two major sections of the rite, the service of the word and the liturgy of the sacrament. Silent prayer before the opening prayer is important (nos. 23, 50; see also Liturgy constitution, no. 30).

- **Liturgy of the word** (rite, nos. 22, 24-26, 51-53): God calls us through his word to examine our lives, to repent, to change our hearts. The number and type of readings are discussed in no. 24, and several examples of the word service are given in no. 51; a full selection of scripture passages is provided in nos. 101-201. If there is only one reading proclaimed, a gospel text is to be preferred (nos. 24, 51).

  *The homily* (nos. 25, 52) is to be built on the readings already proclaimed. Some of the points it should contain are described in no. 25. By the homily the celebrant should lead the congregation to a period of silent reflection, so that each person may examine his conscience, and with the help of the Spirit, be moved to sorrow and conversion (see nos. 6, 6a, 26, 52). Various forms for the examination of conscience are included in the Canadian edition of the rite, pages 155-159, and twice a year in the Bulletin (see Bulletins 32, 36, 37, 41, 42, 46, 47, 51, as well as the penance celebration in this issue).

- **Rite of reconciliation** (nos. 27-29, 54-57): After kneeling or bowing during a general confession of sin, the people stand for a litany or hymn admitting their sinfulness and sorrow, their confidence in their merciful Father, and asking for forgiveness. Sample formulas of these prayers, litanies and intercessions are provided in no. 54 (Canadian edition, pages 49-63). This part always ends with the *Our Father*: this is an important connection with the early Church, which considered that forgiveness of lesser sins took place when this prayer was said sincerely, especially in community. St. Thomas Aquinas also mentions its fervent use as a way to forgiveness of venial sins.

  — Individual confession (nos. 28, 55): The rite encourages a choice of priests for the penitents (nos. 28, 22). In Table 2, the box indicates what should take
place in each individual encounter between penitent and priest. It is important that each of these should be included in every confession, without haste and without pressure on presbyter or penitent. (This feeling of pressure inclines many priests to prefer to celebrate the sacramental reconciliation at the end of a penance service, as outlined for example in the lenten penance celebration in this issue.)

*Individual confession* (see nos. 6b, 7, 28, 55): Confessors would do well to review the notes on this from the introduction, especially no. 6b (confession of sins) and no. 7 (7a, confession of serious sins; 7b, on the value of frequent use of this sacrament for the forgiveness and remedy of venial sin). A good celebration of the liturgy of the word helps people to examine their lives, and leads them to a good examination of conscience, and thus to a better confession (see no. 22). The priest may help the penitent to make his confession complete (no. 44).

*Advice* (nos. 18, 44, 55): This is expanded in no. 18 to include counsel, encouragement, and instruction. The priest encourages or invites the penitent to be sorry for his sins: in the communal rite this invitation will usually have been achieved in the readings and the homily. Counsel or advice should not be neglected. It will help the penitent to overcome his usual sins and thus lead him to serve God and his neighbor more fervently (see no. 7).

*Satisfaction* (nos. 6c, 18, 28, 55): The purpose of the act of penance or satisfaction and the varieties of forms it may take have already been discussed in this issue in *Sacrament of penance*. In the second form of reconciliation, it is important to note that a general penance is not given: it is to be an individual act appropriate to the personal needs and situation of the individual penitent. Parishes which have had the practice of assigning such a general penance should return to the Church’s current practice.

*Absolution* (nos. 6d, 11, 19, 28, 55): While imposing hands (see below), the priest welcomes this penitent back in the name of God and his Church. The reconciliation is complete when the penitent takes full part in the eucharist once more.

*Imposition of hands* (nos. 19, 46, 55): The meaning and importance of this ritual act are discussed in *Other notes of importance* in this issue.

— *Proclamation of praise* (nos. 29, 56-57): The celebration ends on a note of thanksgiving and praise. This strong ending echoes the basic Christian note of gratitude in response to the wonderful works and saving love of God for his people. As in the eucharist, we join Christ in praising the Father for saving us, and we offer our prayer in communion with the Spirit within our hearts.

Many suggestions for the psalm, canticle, hymn, or litany are contained in the ritual, no. 56. The priest concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving: seven examples are given in no. 57.

○ *Concluding rite* (nos. 30, 58-59): After the priest blesses the assembled community, the deacon or other minister dismisses them in the peace of Jesus.

○ *Before and after*: Ideas for prayer and action before and after the rite of reconciliation are discussed below in connection with the reconciliation of individual penitents.
### TABLE 2: RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction No.</th>
<th>Rite No.</th>
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<td>15, 22</td>
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</table>

#### 1. Before

- **Introductory rites**
  - Song: 23, 48
  - Greeting: 23, 49
  - Importance and meaning: 23, 49
  - Opening prayer: 23, 50

#### 2. Celebration of the word of God

- Readings: 24, 51
  - separated by psalm, song, silence
  - if only one reading: from gospel
- Homily: 25, 52
- Examination of conscience: 26, 53

#### 3. Rite of reconciliation

- General confession of sins: 27, 54
- Litany or hymn: 27, 54
- Lord's prayer: 27, 54
- Concluding prayer: —, 54
  - Individual confession
    - advice
    - satisfaction
    - absolution
    - imposition of hands
  - Proclamation of praise:
    - Invite to offer thanks and praise: 29, 56
    - Encourage to good works: —, 56
    - Psalm, hymn, litany: 29, 56
    - Prayer of thanksgiving: 29, 57

#### 4. Concluding rite

- Blessing: 30, 58
- Dismissal: 30, 59

#### 5. After

- 20, —
Individual Reconciliation

It must be realized that the rite for individual reconciliation is still a celebration of the whole Church. The communal rite is to be preferred (Liturgy constitution, nos. 26-27). While the present rite does point out that individual confession with individual absolution remains "the only ordinary way" for reconciliation (rite, no. 31), it is the task of our generation to move from the total privacy of the past rite and to combine the benefits that come from both individual and communal forms.

The rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents is outlined in Table 3.

Preparation (no. 15): Both priest and penitents need to pray in preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. The priest asks for the help of the Spirit (see also no. 10a). The penitent is to look at his life in the light of Christ's teaching and example. This is done mainly through the scripture readings; the various forms of examination of conscience should be supplementary, and should never replace the biblical texts. The scriptures should move the penitent to pray for conversion and forgiveness.

Opening rite (nos. 16, 41-42): These initial steps prepare for the liturgy of the word. Though brief, they are important, and should not be performed hastily or routinely.

- Welcome (nos. 16, 41): The priest's welcome is to be warm, kind, friendly, personal. A routine greeting is not satisfactory.

- Sign of the cross (nos. 16, 42): The penitent makes the sign of the cross as the formal beginning of the rite, and the priest may accompany him, if he wishes. It is with this sign that the priest will accompany the words of absolution later. The rite makes no provision for a blessing by the priest at the beginning.

- Invitation to trust (nos. 16, 42): Using a brief formula — the rite provides six models or examples — the minister invites the penitent to trust God's mercy. Since it is God alone who can lead us to sorrow and who can forgive us, we are being invited to rely on Christ our savior, who died that we might be freed from sin. We are invited to rely on his paschal mystery and not on ourselves. (A similar spirit should pervade the penitential rite at Mass: it is a throwing of ourselves on God's mercy, rather than reliance on our own resources, for only he can save us.)

- Revelation of state of life (no. 16): The rite notes that when the priest does not know him, the penitent should tell something about himself:
  — his vocation or state in life;
  — how long it is since he celebrated this sacrament;
  — his problems in living as a follower of Christ;
  — other points which may assist the minister to help him in this celebration.

Presumably, if the priest knows the penitent, these indications are not necessary; normally, however, knowing the length of time since the last celebration would be of help to the minister.

Liturgy of the word (nos. 17, 43): The rubric in no. 43 is incomplete. As the introduction notes in no. 17, either the priest or the penitent reads a scripture text. This is God's gift of light, his call to conversion. Further thoughts on scripture
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3: Reconciliation of Individual Penitents</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction No.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Before</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Opening rite</td>
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<tr>
<td>• welcome</td>
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<tr>
<td>• sign of cross</td>
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<tr>
<td>• invitation to trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>• revelation of state of life, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Liturgy of the word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Text on mercy, call to conversion</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Rite of reconciliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• (general confession)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• complete confession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• advice, encouragement, instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• act of penance or satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• prayer of penitent (expressing contrition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• absolution, imposition of hands</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Concluding rite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• praise</td>
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<tr>
<td>• dismissal</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. After</td>
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**SHORT RITE:**
- Minimum — confession of sins 21 44
- acceptance of act of penance 21 44
- invitation to contrition 21 44
- absolution 21 46
- dismissal 21 47

**IMMINENT DANGER OF DEATH**
- essential words of absolution 21 46
reading are contained in Other notes of importance in this issue, and in Bulletin 46, pages 305-306. The rite, no. 43 (Canadian edition, pages 32-36), provides 13 texts, and others are suggested in nos. 101-201.

**Rite of reconciliation** (nos. 18-19, 44-46): This involves a number of steps:

- **General confession** (nos. 18, 44): If it is the custom, the penitent begins with a general confession, such as *I confess to almighty God*, from the order of Mass. This is an echo of the general confession in the communal forms of the rite.

- **Complete confession** (nos. 18, 44): The priest is to be ready to help the penitent to do this.

- **Advice, encouragement, instruction** (nos. 18, 44): This is discussed above, under “Communal rite with individual confession.”

- **Act of penance or satisfaction** (nos. 6c, 18, 44): See notes under Sacrament of penance.

- **Prayer of penitent** (nos. 19, 45, 6a): The purpose of this prayer is to express the penitent's sorrow and his intention to start a new life (a restatement of his baptismal commitment); he asks God to forgive him. The introduction recommends that the prayer should be built on scriptural expressions (compare this with Liturgy constitution, nos. 24, 121). Ten formulas are provided in the rite.

  The priest should remain silent while the penitent says this prayer. When the penitent has finished, then the minister goes ahead with his prayer of absolution, and the penitent listens. This is in accord with the distinction of roles (Liturgy constitution, no. 28): when one speaks, the other listens.

- **Absolution and imposition of hands** (nos. 19, 46): Several factors are involved simultaneously in this action:
  
  — **Hands**: During the words of absolution, the minister extends both hands (or at least his right hand) over the penitent's head. This imposition of hands is discussed in more detail in Other notes of importance in this issue.
  
  — **Formula of absolution**: The form, given in no. 46, is Trinitarian and ecclesial in its references. It recalls the paschal mystery (compare the rubric in no. 44, and see Bulletin 46, page 303, “Call to sorrow”). The minister says this formula aloud and clearly, while the penitent listens.
  
  — **Sign of cross**: The minister makes the sign of the cross over the penitent during the final words of the formula of absolution: *I absolve you...*
  
  — **Essential formula**: The concluding words of the formula of absolution are used alone in cases of imminent danger of death (see rite, nos. 21, 46, 65). Under normal circumstances, these words form the conclusion of the absolution.
  
  — **Acclamation**: At the end of the formula of absolution, the penitent responds with his Amen of consent and agreement. It can be compared with the great Amen at the end of the eucharistic prayer: it is a sign of assent to the wonderful works of God proclaimed during the prayer.

**Concluding rite** (nos. 20, 47): Two distinct rites are provided:

- **Praise and dismissal** (nos. 20, 47): The first rite of dismissal has the priest and penitent praise and thank God for his mercy by a brief verse and response (Ps. 136:1); then the minister dismisses the penitent in the Lord's peace. As we say
at the conclusion of the fourth eucharistic prayer, it is when we are freed from sin that we can sing God's glory with all creation, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

o Prayer (nos. 47, 93): The alternative ending omits the prayer of praise and the dismissal. Instead, the priest says a brief prayer. Four examples are given in no. 93.

Some pastors have expressed concern that confusion may arise from having two such distinct ways of ending the rite. Even in the second alternative, there is a further distinction, with only one of the four prayers expecting the penitent's Amen. Other pastors have suggested that there should be an opening here for the penitent to make a personal prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps in the berakah form (see Bulletin 49); this would not be beyond the ability of many Christians.

Short rite (nos. 21, 44, 46-47): “Pastoral need” may sometimes demand a shorter rite. The minimum for such a shortened rite is given in Table 3. It is to be hoped that ministers do not seek to multiply occasions for the use of such a stripped down rite: minimalism inevitably leads to poor celebration, and to lack of respect both for the rite and for its minister.

In imminent danger of death, the minister uses the essential words from the absolution formula (no. 21).

---

TWO PRAYERS

_Blessed are you, O God,_
_Lord of all the universe:_
you have chosen us as your children
and have forgiven all our sins
through the obedient death and glorious resurrection
of your beloved Son, our Lord and savior.

_We praise you, Father of love,_
_through Jesus your Son_
in the communion of your Holy Spirit,
_now and always and for ever. Amen! Alleluia!_

_All praise to you, Father in heaven,_
_for leading us out of the darkness of sin_ into the light of your kingdom.
_We bless you for sending us your Son to save us,_ to die for us that we might die to sin, to be raised that we might share your life.
_We thank you for giving us your Spirit of love,_ to live in our hearts and lead us to you.

_All glory, praise and honor be yours,_
_Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,_ now and evermore. Amen!_
FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

In order to provide guidance to the Church in Canada in the important area of formation of conscience, the Canadian bishops issued a statement on December 1, 1973. It is reprinted in this issue as a further aid to those who are concerned with this question — parents, teachers, pastors. Now that the revised rites for the sacrament of reconciliation have appeared, the statement should be read once more in the light of the new insights which the Church is sharing with us all.

Prologue

1. In all creation man alone of the visible world is called by God to accept the responsibility of his actions. Yet God did not desert him in a world of mystery where good and evil are often interwoven and frequently filled with complexities. We who are Christians believe that not only did God give us his guidance “engraved on their hearts” (Rom. 2:15), showing us in the very depth of our being the things which are for our good; he also intervened in history to reveal himself in his Son, our Lord Jesus. Henceforth, Jesus and the Spirit he was to send from the Father would be the focal point of our life and of our doing: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6).

2. Man, then, has God’s clear teaching to guide him, found in scripture and tradition, protected and authenticated by the teaching Church. God speaks to us also through concrete situations, the providential framework of our existence, our times, our vicissitudes, events, happenings, circumstances. “The people of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the earth” (Church in the modern world, no. 11).

3. Above all, we believe that we live now in the time of the fullness of Christ, the law of love. The responsibility of the Christian is not only to fight against his sinful nature in which he is assisted by his obedience to all legitimate laws. It is also to respond to God’s call to conversion in a movement toward Christ and his Spirit. It is the realization of what it means to be a Christian, a son or daughter of God. “Christian, acknowledge your dignity. Become what you are, another Christ” (St. Leo the Great, First Christmas Sermon).

4. It is in this context that we wish to present these considerations on conscience. We must of necessity at times leave this high ground because man is frail and loses himself readily. But we do so always with the serenity and joy of those who know that we have already triumphed in our risen Lord.

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Part One

Meaning of conscience

ο The basic concept:

5. The signs of our times have much to say to us even when they point to negative and harmful dimensions. The most optimistic person could hardly deny that our times are characterized by a frightening confusion in regard to man's moral life and the understanding of values which for many centuries were taken for granted. It is to this confusion of mind that we would like to address ourselves at the present moment in order to provide certain pastoral guidelines which are meant primarily for our Catholic people, but to which we invite the attention of all people of good will interested in preserving the best elements of our civilization and culture. We appeal in a special manner to those who share with us our faith in Christ as redeemer and as guide of our lives.

6. To be consistent, since we openly admit the existence of confusion, we cannot even take the idea of "conscience" for granted. It has always been a somewhat ambiguous term and has frequently been presented with more poetry than clarity. Conscience is not simply some "still small voice" which is evoked by some mysterious mechanism within us when we are faced with a practical decision as to whether a given course of action is acceptable or not. Conscience is that ultimate judgment that every man is called to make as to whether this or that action is acceptable to him without violating the principles which he is prepared to admit as governing his life. If he goes against those principles, he is said to be acting "against his conscience."

ο Different connotations:

7. It follows that conscience has different connotations for different persons. We will develop this concept further in the following section on the formation of conscience. For the moment it suffices to point out that for some people, the very existence of a conscience will be denied. These are the men and women who refuse to accept that man is subject to any laws outside himself; in a word, they maintain that he is his own lord and master. In a strict logical sense these people are consistent, even though it is hard to digest their premises that man is supreme in a universe which he has not made.

8. For anyone to accept the idea of conscience, as we here present it, he must begin by agreeing that man is not lord of the universe and that man is subject to a lawgiver who is greater than he is. In a word, we must begin with that very first basis of any moral life and of any question of responsible judgment in our actions, the acceptance of God. And not a God who is remote and unconcerned, but a God who is our Father, who made the universe, who made each one of us, and who has lovingly cast our lives in a certain framework (Gen. 1:26-27).

9. In that same love, he has made us not automata who are led by the blind forces of the universe, but free intelligent beings and his adoptive sons and daughters, to whom the challenge has come to adapt our conduct to our dignity. Man, as a consequence, must search out what is that dignity and what are the results of it in terms of how he must accept the responsibility that stems from it.
Formation of conscience:

10. This never-ending search which every man must undertake for himself in order to find out what is worthy of a man and what is not worthy of a man is what we call the formation of his conscience. And this too will be qualified by the various assumptions which he makes at any period in his life. For example, the formation of conscience in a person who simply believes in God will be different from the formation of conscience in a man who accepts that God did intervene in history and did send us a savior in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who as our brother was to rehabilitate mankind, give it a new life, and lay down for us certain revealed principles showing the way in which God expects us to act (Jn. 3:16; 8:12).

11. Further, a Christian who is also an adherent of the Catholic faith and a member of the Catholic Church must probe deeper in the refinement of what God has revealed as our norm of conduct. As Catholics we accept that Jesus committed to his disciples his own power, saying: "As the Father has sent me, now also I send you" (Jn. 20:21); "Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven" (Mt. 18:18). We believe that this power transmitted to his disciples was meant to endure in the Church, and now resides in the college of bishops under the presiding direction of the successor of Peter. This is what we call the magisterium or teaching service of the Church and in matters of guiding our conduct, a binding rule for those who call themselves Catholic. (See also Mt. 28:18-20 and Jn. 14:25-26.)

12. Nor must this be considered as some sort of inhibition or limiting force. It would be wrong to think that the persons most free are those who do not believe at all, and that we go in a descending scale of freedom till we meet the Catholic. We believe that the reverse is true. We believe that knowing what God has established for the fulfillment of man is a freeing principle, not a principle of enslavement. The more we know about God's will for us, the more fulfilled we are, the surer we are that we will not destroy ourselves and wander into paths which will not enhance our liberty but take it away entirely. "The truth will make you free" (Jn. 8:32; Ps. 1).

13. This is the basic context in which we would like to talk about some of the problems of our times.

Part Two

Problems of our times:

○ Confusion in the Church:

14. Although we admit that it would be fallacious to postulate that the changes within the Church during the past quarter century have been unrelated to the even greater upheavals in the world, for the sake of clarity we distinguish between the two areas.

15. The faithful Catholic has been disturbed and sometimes confused during the past years by a multiplicity of changes which have been unparalleled in modern history. These changes have often had implications which relate to his day-by-day actions and conduct, and consequently, at least to him, appear to affect the very norms of that conduct. A few years ago, the Catholic was distinguished by external
practices such as abstinence on Fridays, fasting and various penitential disciplines, a number of holy days of obligation, etc. The liturgy was an unchanging structure which had remained the same for hundreds of years. Devotions of various sorts seemed also to be immovable and irreplaceable and a necessary part of the practice of the faithful. The priest appeared as the conscience of the community and interpreted the teaching of the Church with a voice that was considered authoritative and usually unchallengeable.

16. Today much of this has changed. Many of the penitential disciplines such as fasting and abstinence are left to the judgment of the individual, the emphasis on the liturgy is one of participation and commitment, and a biblical renewal has pushed a certain number of traditional devotions into the background. As far as the priest is concerned, his role is not less important but it is less overwhelming. He still has the duty of teaching his community the way of God and of morality, but he understands better that this judgment must ultimately be made by the person himself, as we will try to describe later.

Confusion in the world:

17. It is rare that changes take place in the world without influencing the Church or that changes take place in the Church without influencing the world. During this period of confusion, popular morality has been shaken to the roots. There is a general attitude that "I can do anything which doesn't hurt somebody else." A permissiveness sweeps our society. Practices which would previously have been repudiated as absolutely unacceptable are becoming the general rule of conduct. We have only to look at the practice of abortion, at a growing pressure for euthanasia, and the other manifestations against life itself to see the truth of the statement. In the midst of this, legislators are making the distinction between that which is legal and that which may or may not be evil in the mind of an individual. Even Catholic legislators frequently take the attitudes that the law should not be guided by principles that derive from religious conviction. Many Christians are influenced by this and fall into the trap of thinking that if a thing is legal, it must be morally acceptable.

18. Another factor is the widespread propaganda which makes all aspects of family planning and sexual permissiveness a matter of private concern and individualistic ethics (Church in the modern world, no. 30). The idea has been abroad that "everybody is doing it," and that if everybody is doing it, it must be acceptable. Finally, the economic and political conditions of our society are tending to bring down our moral sense. The calm acceptance by some of economic inequality, by which some have so much and so many have so little, is combined with the depersonalizing of society and the exploitation of man. All of these and other factors have tended to bring about a reversal of traditional morality or, at the least, a great questioning of moral values.

Reaction to confusion — types of conscience:

19. From these factors has stemmed the confusion of conscience to which we alluded in the first lines of this statement. Although it may represent some species of oversimplification, we feel that something can be gained by placing the types of reaction to the general situation in three categories. These are not totally exclusive categories but they do sum up, pretty well, the general possible attitudes of the Catholic today.
20. (a) In the first category are those who have developed a static or complacent conscience. These persons have not accepted the dynamics behind the changes in the Church and in society, and have not seen the positive value which can come from personal acceptance of moral responsibility. They insist that the Church must spell out for them every obligation down to the last detail. This attitude of conscience is of course a denial of responsibility and can result in negating the whole positive value of the movement of the Spirit at the present time.

21. (b) At the opposite extreme we have the excessively dynamic and revolutionary conscience. This characterizes the person who has totally misread the idea that everyone must ultimately be the judge, before God, of his actions and that in the ultimate decision he must make up his own mind. The persons in this category have distorted an appeal to intelligent decision into a destruction of law, objective structures, and have arrived at the conclusion that no one can tell them what to do, including the Church. It is seldom stated this way but it is where this type of exaggerated subjectivism necessarily leads.

22. (c) In the middle position is the conscience which we consider to be the proper attitude of any human being in today's society, and particularly of the Catholic Christian. We can qualify this as the dynamic Christian conscience. This is the conscience which leads us to have a responsible attitude to someone, to Jesus, to the community, to the Church, etc. Every person who fits into this category feels a responsibility for a progressive search and striving to live out a life ideal according to the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5).

Part Three

Fundamental basis for mature conscience:

23. In support of this type of conscience, we offer the following considerations:

- Human dignity:

24. In the first place, this category represents a truly acceptable and dignified human position. The Second Vatican Council has clearly placed great emphasis upon the basic dignity and value of the human being and upon his responsibility as the ultimate judge under God of the value of his action. "Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man be left 'in the hand of his own counsel' (Sirach 15:14) so that he can seek his creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him. Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from more external pressure" (Church in the modern world, no. 17). Consequently, it is the proper dignity of every human being to feel the responsibility which is postulated by God himself in the manner in which he has created us. This is the basis for the argument which St. Paul presented in his letter to the Romans, where he so clearly enunciates the fact that every human being, in coming into the world, has God's law in his heart. By this he means two things. First, that man is responsible for his acts, and secondly, that he cannot take it upon himself to act according to the whims of the moment without reference to his creator, to his fellowmen and to himself (Rom. 2:14-16).
25. In our times we welcome the growing maturity of our people who understand this first element, but we remind them that so to judge does not dispense them from the second element of referring to God's presence, variously but truly manifested in their lives and guiding their judgments.

26. "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged" (Church in the modern world, no. 16).

27. We feel that this type of mature conscience will be the greatest antidote to the growing attack, both explicit and implicit, upon the concept of man's sinfulness. The exaggerated and pseudo-autonomy of man has led us into a frame of mind in which we have played down the concept of sin and redemption, and have deliberately turned our backs upon the clear teaching of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ that while God is a loving Father, he cannot be mocked. This does not postulate the ancient erroneous idea that God is some sort of a tyrant who is looking for an opportunity to punish us. On the other hand, the very gift of our freedom indicates that when we misuse it, we ourselves will suffer. In this sense, possible punishment is the necessary concomitant of the law of love. Love cannot be forced upon anyone, but as a modern writer has put it, "He who rejects love is in turn rejected by it, and lies howling at the threshold."

The "howling at the threshold" could hardly be blamed upon the person who has offered love and has been rejected. The suffering of those who reject God's norms of life is of their own doing. Hence, we feel that dynamic Christian conscience is one which recognizes all of these facts and is freed by it. It is therefore freed from the necessity of pretending that sin is not there and that the eventual result of sin is not there.

28. We have already pointed out that the basic responsibility of every human being lies in the fact that he is God's creature and that, as a result, he must assume responsibility for his actions, over which God has given him direct stewardship. But, we have also pointed out that for the Christian, and for the Catholic Christian in particular, there are guides which he has freely accepted and which are meant to help him to discover that light of God's guidance within him.

29. In this context, we necessarily insist first and foremost upon the working of the Spirit in the hearts of men (Jn. 15:26; 16:7-13). Vatican II brought us from a somewhat widespread opinion that the Catholic Church constituted a monolithic arrangement in which the very voice of the Spirit was controlled and channelled. Everything was supposed to come from above, with the faithful, as it were, the ultimate recipients of the straining of the Spirit through the upper echelons. It is obvious that nothing so crass was ever officially taught by the Church, but impressions are sometimes more lasting and more universal than teachings. The insistence of the Council on the importance of the people of God
and of their personal and direct relationship to the Spirit is a clarification which must never be lost to sight (Constitution on the Church, nos. 4, 12).

30. It is under this heading that we recognize the need of the personal conversion and acceptance of salvation by every human being. The Council (Constitution on the Church, nos. 13, 48) has explicitly upheld the scriptural teaching that God wills the salvation of all men, but there is always the second movement to this symphony of love, and that is that man cannot be saved without himself. Every man must turn freely to God. For us who believe in an order over and above that of the temporal and the temporary, this turning to God and the acceptance of his loving will for man, even though he has revealed himself in an obscure fashion, is called an act of faith. It is the free decision of a man to accept as true that God has spoken to us "in former times... in fragmentary and varied fashions through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in the Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). The guidance of the Church is a part of that revelation.

Part Four

Guides for Christian conscience:

31. We are now in a position where we can lay down certain norms for the guidance of the conscience of the Catholic Christian. If our positions up to this point have been accepted, it follows that an act of conscience is an individual thing but must be based upon certain accepted principles and positions. It becomes, therefore, the duty of the individual to acquire the necessary information and attitude in order to make the right decision.

   - Human balance:

32. Certain human conditions undoubtedly aid in the balanced performance which one requires from a Christian. Emotional stability, a cultivation of self-knowledge and clear objective judgment, even education itself, will undoubtedly help, although we must not postulate a certain elitism which would expect only the educated to have sound conscience. The assistance of sound communal attitudes and of cultural and social influences — all these things are good human contributions to the acquisition of knowledge and, above all, of proper attitude.

33. But these fall far short of the total necessary conditions for the formation of conscience and their ultimate application in life.

   - Presence of Christ:

34. For the man who has made his act of faith, the prime factor in the formation of his conscience and in his moral judgment is to be found in the existence and the role of Christ in his life (Jn. 14:6-8; 12:46). A person who wishes to have a true Christian conscience must be faithfully in communication with his Lord in all of his life, particularly through his own prayer and the prayer of the Church. Indeed, properly understood, the presence of Christ in his life is all-pervasive and all-embracing. All the other aspects of conscience formation are based on this one and stem from it. This does not make them unnecessary or superfluous, but simply puts them in their place (1 Jn. 4:1).
35. With this in mind, the man of faith draws his inspiration from the scripture, the very word of God in which he finds revealed not only the designs of the Father in the historical context of the world, but a refined series of ideals, precepts and examples given to us by the same Lord Jesus. This is communicated to him not only in the words of the scripture but in the Spirit of Jesus who continues to live with us and who makes us “a chosen race and a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation and a people set apart” (1 Pet. 2:9).

36. It is in this context that the teaching of the Church finds its full force. We have seen through sad historical example, the kind of confusion that can arise from an unguided and overly subjective reading of the scriptures and interpretation of tradition. The Church has been given to us to make sure that the word of God contained in the scripture and illustrated to us in the Spirit can be authenticated in the community of believers.

37. In this one Spirit of which we speak, we have the service of the apostles and of their successors, the college of bishops, united with their head, the pope. The role of the apostles and their successors was and is to bear witness to Christ, the revealer of the Father’s will. It was and is their duty to transmit the testimony of the original apostles concerning Christ, to celebrate the new covenant, and to guide the people of God in the living of the new creation of Christ (Mt. 28:18-20, Mk. 16:15-16). Guided by the Spirit, the Church has sought to do precisely this in the past, and continues to do so in the present world while turned toward the second coming of Christ. The doctrinal service of the successors of the apostles includes the scriptures and tradition as described above. In the fulfillment of this task, they do not seek to suppress the other gifts of the Spirit, but encourage all to test the gifts according to the criteria found in scripture and tradition.

38. For a believer, this teaching of the magisterium as outlined above cannot be just one element among others in the formation of his conscience. It is the definitive cornerstone upon which the whole edifice of conscientious judgment must be built. “You are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the foundation stone” (Eph. 2:20). “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church” (Mt. 16:18). What must be kept in mind is that we are in the dimension of faith. And we should be encouraged and hopeful because we can count on the continued assistance of the Holy Spirit in a manner pure reason could never give.

39. The responsible person, as defined above, must weigh the facts before acting. This is far removed from saying that he may act in accordance with his whims and wishes. A believer has the absolute obligation of conforming his conduct first and foremost to what the Church teaches, because first and foremost for the believer is the fact that Christ, through his Spirit, is ever present in his Church, in the whole Church to be sure, but particularly with those who exercise services within the Church and for the Church, the first of which services is that of the apostles.

40. Furthermore, even in matters which have not been defined ex cathedra, i.e., infallibly, the believer has the obligation to give full priority to the teaching of the Church in favor of a given position, to pray for the the light of the Spirit,
to refer to scripture and tradition, and to maintain a dialogue with the whole Church, which he can do only through the source of unity which is the collectivity of the bishops. The reality itself, for example, sex, marriage, economics, politics, war, must be studied in detail. In this study, he should make an effort to become aware of his own inevitable presuppositions as well as his cultural background which lead him to act for or react against any given position. If his ultimate practical judgment to do this or avoid that does not take into full account the teaching of the Church, an account based not only on reason but on the faith dimension, he is deceiving himself in pretending that he is acting as a true Catholic must.

41. For a Catholic "to follow one's conscience" is not, then, simply to act as his unguided reason dictates. "To follow one's conscience" and to remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the *magisterium*. When doubt arises due to a conflict of "my" views and those of the *magisterium*, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the *magisterium*. "In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent of soul. This religious submission of will and of mind must be shown in a special way to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*" (Constitution on the Church, no. 25). And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive.

**Part Five**

**Law and Conscience:**

42. These positions bring us now to the delicate question of law, which is a regulating force in human and Christian action. The word itself is frequently used in various senses, and we recognize the complexity of the subject.

- *Distinction of law as spirit and as precept:*

43. Any Christian reflection on law must take into consideration the crucial distinction between law as precept and law as the dynamic structure of personal being.

44. With regard to the latter concept of law, the passage of St. Paul to the Romans quoted above (Rom. 2:12-15) illustrates this distinction by contrasting the impotence of the precepts of the Mosaic law with the fundamental belief of Christians that sinful rebellion has been radically — though not completely — healed. All forms of preceptive law stand under the Spirit of love released when Christ, by suffering in himself the consequences of the law, passed from death to life. As we have already stated (Rom. 8:1-5), any law is ultimately subject to that influx of the Spirit by which the redeemed are transformed into brothers and sisters of Christ, enjoying the freedom of the children of God in his Spirit (Rom. 8:15-17). This operation of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, this conformity of our nature to Christ's word in our hearts, is the new law. It is discipleship to this word which makes us free (Jn. 8:31-32).

45. This note of the freedom of the sons and daughters of God is crucial because it establishes the ultimate priority of personal conscience informed by the Spirit of Christ in the case of possible conflict with extrinsic law. God had promised
that the new law would be written in the person's heart, not on tablets of stone (Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 36:25). Jesus teaches that the spirit of God's laws takes priority over the letter (Mt. 5:20-48).

The great teachers of the Christian tradition have re-echoed this centrality of the interior law of grace. "There on Sinai the finger of God wrote on stone tablets, here in the hearts of men with the sending of the Spirit on Pentecost" (Augustine, De Spiritu et Littera, XVII). "The whole strength of the new law and its specifically Christian meaning consists in its being written in the heart of man by the Spirit which is given through faith in Christ" (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, 106, 1 and 2; Gal. 3:21-22). In our day the supremacy of the voice of God making himself heard in the depths of the personal conscience has been reaffirmed, as already stated, by the Second Vatican Council (Church in the modern world, no. 16; Declaration on religious freedom, no. 3).

- **Preceptive law:**

  46. Having established this as a fundamental principle, we can ask how preceptive laws are to be judged by the conscience conformed to the indwelling Spirit which gives life. The new life of Christ in us is not yet fully accomplished. The preceptive law of legitimate authority must be taken into account in every moral decision because it has the right to command our assent and stands as a constant reminder of our sinfulness and of our dependence upon a source of life which transcends our individual selves. Moreover, it would be unthinkable that the Spirit, speaking in the heart of the redeemed Christian, would be in opposition to himself when teaching in the authority established by Jesus.

  47. It is in this context that we offer some considerations on preceptive law in our lives.

  48. In a society which finds it extremely difficult to accept any limitations upon even the grossest perversions of freedom, law has become a sort of whipping boy. Yet it can be said that the law is nothing more or less than the expression of conditions which must exist if man is to be free. Scripture has told us, "The truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32). This idea could be extended to law when it is a good law since we are thus led to our best and liberating interests.

  49. In particular, the presence of evil within us and the ability we have to explain away our most bizarre actions easily incline us to ignore facts and assume a false sense of values. It is precisely as an antidote to this soft deception that laws have been formulated. In a statement of limited scope, it is impossible for us to make all the necessary distinctions between divine law and natural law, civil and ecclesiastical law. We limit ourselves to saying that any law set up by legitimate authority and in conformity with divine law must be taken into account in every moral action.

  50. Some laws, set by God in the very manner in which he has created us and the universe, are immutable and not subject to any exception. Such are the prohibitions against killing the innocent, adultery, theft, etc. Nor has basic morality changed over the years. The fundamental points of the ten commandments are as valid today as they were when Moses received them on Mount Sinai. Others are established by legitimate human authority to regulate and regularize our human relationships and to govern society whether civil or ecclesiastical. These presume the great laws of God and take them for granted as a basis for this obligatory nature.
51. In the same context, laws made for the proper government of the Church are required for the interrelationships of the people of God and for the guidance of believers. In every case, they should postulate the law of love and be designed to assist us in its realization. A totally mature and saintly people would require a minimum of laws. But the Church is a pilgrim Church and a Church sent precisely to redeem sinners. The laws it promulgates are specifically to guide our feet away from the traps set by our sinfulness and our own tendencies to sin.

o The use of exceptions:

52. In particular, we warn our faithful people about the misuse of exceptions to the law in particular cases,* a misuse which has now become so widespread as to threaten the whole structure of our moral lives. This misuse is very akin to the condition described above where some feel exempt from being told anything by anybody, an exaggeration and flagrant abuse of “I must form my own conscience.”

53. It is understood that every law is for a general condition, and that there may be situations in which a person not only is not bound to respond to the law but may not be able to do so. (We refer, of course, to matters which are covered by ecclesiastical law, by positive law, not to the great moral laws that have been given to us by God and, as stated, are without exception.) In exceptional circumstances, the true believer, understanding the law of love, has no feelings of guilt, but a certain regret in not being able to fulfill the law in this particular instance.

54. But the use of exceptions (epikeia) has its requirements. And, as we have already intimated, the truly sincere person uses such a device only when absolutely necessary and regrets the need to be an exception in the community in this particular regard. One who understands that he has been commanded in love will respond in love and will not be a seeker of exceptions.

Conclusion

55. Such, we feel to be the major points upon which our present concern would bear. There is, of course, a great deal more that could be said about the conscience of man. Much, indeed, has been said and we refer our faithful people to the various pronouncements of the pope, particularly in recent years, to the statements of a number of national hierarchies, and to the teaching of reliable theologians. In the present text we have striven only to place the problem of the formation of conscience in the contemporary situation and to deal with the major problems facing our people here.

56. We have tried to avoid legalism and to make, as basis of our considerations, the person of Christ, his teachings and his Spirit. Hence, the true Christian will far transcend these minimal observations and go deep into that country whose guide is the Spirit and whose sole law is love. But he will not go there against the mind of the Catholic Church, but only in accordance with it and after he has been freed by it for the journey ahead (1 Jn. 4:16).

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*Moralists call this epikeia.
OTHER NOTES OF IMPORTANCE

In the Light of His Word

During the past few years, we have become accustomed to the reading of the scriptures as an important part of penance celebrations, especially in Lent and Advent. With the renewal of the Roman rite of penance, the Church now proposes that the individual rite of reconciliation should follow the norm of the communal rites, and include the word of God as a regular part of each celebration.

These notes describe the use of the scriptures in the rite of individual reconciliation.

Why hear the word? The scriptures are read in the renewed rite of penance in order to call God's people to conversion, and to let them see their lives in the light of the gospel teaching. The Spirit is ready to stir up our hearts; when we listen to God's word in faith, it is God himself speaking to us, inviting us to turn back and live our lives wholly for him. The penitent who hears the word of God is given light to see his sins in the light of the gospel, and is called to conversion; he also receives a sense of confidence in God's love and mercy.

As the Vatican Council reminds us, the Church is hoping for a new and stronger vitality from a greater use of and respect for God's word (Revelation, no. 26).

Effects of the word: When God's word is proclaimed, it is his living word. It awakens our faith, and helps enlighten our conscience by pointing out our sins and the ideals of the new law. At the same time, Jesus is inviting us to repent, and promises us his forgiveness. As we hear his word, our hope and our confidence in him are made stronger. Our desire to pray is aroused, and we are called to respond in faith and action, in conversion and repentance, to God's merciful call.

For these reasons, the Church has restored the reading of scripture at the beginning of the rite. This also makes it more evident that conversion and repentance are primarily the action of God's Spirit (rite, no. 6).

Who reads the word? The priest or penitent may read a suitable text from the bible (rite, no. 17; this is broader than no. 43). A penitent may wish to choose a passage that calls him to conversion, and use it in prayer in the days preceding the sacramental celebration. The priest will need to be ready to find and proclaim an appropriate selection for each penitent: he should be ready to choose this from among a number of texts that enlighten and call to repentance.

Proclaimed in faith: Whether priest or penitent proclaims the reading, both listen to it: it is Christ who is speaking to them (Liturgy constitution, no. 7). This is not merely an inspiring message, but the Lord Jesus who is present by his power in this celebration, speaking to the penitent and to the priest, as well as to the Church of today. It is Jesus who is calling us to conversion, and who is reassuring us of his mercy. The message of repentance that began his public life is repeated once more in our hearing.

Abundance of texts: The rite of penance provides a wealth of appropriate texts, and priest or penitent may choose others. In nos. 72-84 (pages 32-36 in the Canadian edition), twelve short passages are provided for individual celebrations. Both in communal and individual celebrations, a further 101 texts are
suggested (rite, nos. 101-201): 32 from the Old Testament, 15 psalms, 28 New Testament readings, 26 gospels. These are a beginning: other texts may be chosen according to the liturgical season, the theme of the celebration, or the needs of the penitent.

During the celebration: It is desirable to have the bible enthroned in the reconciliation room. The priest uses this to read a passage if the penitent leaves this to him. Instead of having a number of slips of paper to mark the various passages, perhaps a list of passages and page references could be typed out and put in the inside cover. Hopefully this list could be revised and increased from time to time.

What about the practice, sometimes seen, where the priest reads from another book? It would seem to negate the sign value of the enthroned book, and leave it as an empty symbol.

When the penitent chooses the passage in advance, he often brings in a bible with the place marked. In religious communities at least, perhaps some effort could be made to find out the page reference in the enthroned book ahead of time, so that it may be used for the proclamation. This would be simplified, for instance, if a Jerusalem Bible were in the room of reconciliation and other copies available to the persons who are preparing for the celebration.

What about the use of paperbacks, pamphlets, leaflets? These may be helpful to penitents during the time of preparation, but as far as possible, people should be encouraged to find and read their text from a more dignified book.

The sign value of a proper book reflects and builds faith: this aspect of the celebration should not be neglected.

Other scriptural elements: Many parts of the celebration — both communal and individual — of this sacrament are related to the scriptures. As well as the reading(s), psalms or psalm verses, we find that the homily or advice, prayers, hymns and formulas are based on scripture. The act of contrition is preferably to be based on scriptural words (rite, no. 19). The gestures and signs find their meaning in the word of God (Liturgy constitution, no. 24). Each element of the rite is rooted in the bible.

Need of growth: In order to achieve a full and faith-filled celebration of the word of God, we need to learn how to read and hear the scriptures, to regain our lost heritage from obscurity and restore it to daily life and prayer. As the Council points out so clearly, it is the responsibility of the bishops (and under them, of pastors and teachers and others who share the bishop's duty of teaching) to instruct their people in the proper use of the bible, "especially the New Testament and above all the gospels" (Revelation, no. 25). This involves not only the provision or endorsement of good translations, but the example, guidance and encouragement to use scripture in daily prayer and devotion. Each of us should reread the final pages of the decree on revelation (nos. 21-26), and see how we can promote the use of scripture in the life of the Church.

Children who are following the Canadian Catechism program are being helped to know the scriptures. We need to extend their regular use to every family in every parish.
Bad effects of omission: The Church has deliberately restored the proclamation of scriptures to the rite of individual and communal reconciliation. Though the reading is called “optional” (some would describe this as a rather unfortunate term here), its deliberate omission most of the time would demonstrate and cause attitudes not conducive to better celebration.

On the other hand, a good use of the scriptures emphasizes that it is God, not ourselves, who calls us to conversion; it is his Spirit who helps us to recognize good and evil in our lives by the light of the gospel. Proclaimed and heard in faith, God's word penetrates our lives and leads us back to him.

* * *

We will never plumb the depths of the scriptures, but we can continue to grow in God's word. Each year, we can grow in our understanding of the bible: the challenge is before us in our parishes and communities. The more we open ourselves to the Spirit's guidance, the more he will lead us into greater faith and love in his service.

Laying On of Hands

Another of the elements of the revised rite which may appear new to some is the imposition or laying on of hands. This biblical gesture, rich in meaning, has been restored to a more evident position in the celebration. Up to now, the priest raised his right hand toward the penitent as he said the words of absolution. Now the gesture has been placed in greater prominence.

Meanings: The gesture of imposition of hands comes to us from the scriptures, and has many meanings. Most of these are reflected when the gesture is used in the rite of penance:

- Blessing (Mk. 10:16; Gen. 48:9, 13)
- Communicating the Spirit
- Solidarity between the one imposing hands and the one who receives the imposition
- Healing (Mk. 6:5)
- Conferring grace (1 Tim. 4:14; 1 Tim. 5:22)
- Setting apart or consecrating
- Commissioning
- Absolving
- Declaring
- Confirming
- Ordaining (Num. 27:18-23; Deut. 34:9; 1 Tim. 4:14).

At Mass, the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine at the epiclesis, as he calls on the Father to send his Spirit on these offerings and make them the body and blood of Christ.

The most common use of this gesture in recent centuries has been in the ordination rite, where the solemnity of the action has always been prominent. The same care, solemnity and emphasis needs to be incorporated in its use in the sacrament of penance.
In communal celebrations: When giving general absolution, the priest extends his hands over the group of penitents as he says the words of absolution (rite, no. 62). This gesture is also used in giving a solemn blessing at the end of Mass.

In the second form of the rite, the communal service with individual reconciliation, the laying on of hands is done as in the individual rite.

Individual rite: When the rite is celebrated with one penitent, the priest imposes hands while he is saying the form of absolution. He may extend his hands over the person's head, or lay them upon the head; he may use two hands or one. Many priests prefer to stand for this part of the rite, thus emphasizing its solemnity. If the person remains behind the screen, however, the priest will be restricted to extending his hand(s) toward the person, and much of its sign value will be lost to the penitent.

Introducing this gesture: When a parish begins to celebrate penance with the full richness of the new rite, it is desirable to explain the meaning and tradition of the laying on of hands, its vestigial retention until recently, and the value of its restoration now. A more frequent use of the solemn blessing at the end of Mass will help people to see this gesture in action. Perhaps the value of laying on hands will be grasped a little more fully if parents are encouraged to use this gesture in blessing their children: see Bulletin 49, pages 163, 173-174.

* * *

The laying on of hands, if done and received with faith, deepens our sense of contact with God's Spirit, and signifies the many blessings he gives us in absolution and in reconciliation with God and his people.

HELPFUL READING


The Savior's Healing, by Emeric Lawrence, O.S.B. Sermons for the new rites of penance and the anointing of the sick. 1974, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn.


A ROOM FOR RECONCILIATION

A study of the rite of reconciliation for an individual penitent shows the need for a much more personal approach to the celebration of this sacrament.

The priest needs to be able to greet the penitent warmly and personally. The rite presumes that the priest and penitent will be known to each other (see no. 16). The imposition of hands is hardly a credible sign when done behind a screen.

In the past few years, the practice of face-to-face celebration of penance has become more common. These pages present a few practical thoughts for discussion with your liturgy committee; these suggestions are based on the experience of communities which have set up a room for reconciliation.

**Place:** The best place is in church, preferably near the font and the entrance: this helps to relate the rite of reconciliation with Christian initiation (see rite, no. 2), and to evoke the earlier practice of the reconciliation of those in the order of penitents. The placing of the room will depend however on the structure of the church. The use of the president's chair might be considered as a traditional place for this celebration. Some thoughts on creating sacred space with banners are given in Bulletin 48, pages 108-113: might some of these ideas be applied when the sacrament of reconciliation is being celebrated outside the church building?

One example of a room for reconciliation
Reconciliation room
Mount St. Joseph
London, Ontario
Reconciliation room
Mount St. Joseph
London, Ontario
Some religious communities have set aside a room as a permanent prayer room, suitable for celebrations of individual reconciliation. Some parishes have rebuilt a confessional into a room for reconciliation, at least as a first step toward a more suitable arrangement. The photographs with this article illustrate these two different approaches.

Atmosphere: The room should not be dark and gloomy, but bright; a number of lamps around the room will contribute a more pleasant outlook. A cross or crucifix could be in sight of both penitent and priest. Other images, illustrating the parable of the prodigal son or other appropriate gospel passages, may be helpful; a banner may be suitable at times. The use of soft colors — some have used blue and green, others beige — in the curtains, carpet and other parts of the room decor, will promote a peaceful atmosphere. Adequate ventilation is desirable. Some penitents feel more at ease in a room with an outside window, in contrast to an inside, windowless room.

Possible arrangements: The diagram with this article shows one design that has proven practical. It provides the penitent with the choice of face-to-face celebration, or allows the person to sit or kneel at the screen. The open book of the word is placed on a table, possibly on a small bookstand.

Technical terms: In moving toward a fresh approach to the celebration of the sacrament of penance, we need to make sure that our vocabulary does not continue to reinforce old attitudes. Perhaps it would be better to say reconciliation room, instead of "confessional room" or similar terms. And from now on we should celebrate sacraments rather than administer them.

* * *

Only priests and people can bring the proper attitudes needed to make the renewed rite effective, under the guidance and help of the Spirit of God. Rooms designed for individual reconciliation can help us to make our celebration better, leading us to a deeper growth in faith and love.

Photographs on these pages provided through the courtesy of the Liturgical Commission, Diocese of London.

FATHER, FORGIVE US

Father,
lead us to return to your law.
Our king, bring us near to your service,
and cause us to return to your presence
in complete repentance.

Forgive us, Father, for we have sinned.
Pardon us, our king, for we have disobeyed,
and you pardon and forgive.
Blessed are you, O Lord:
you are gracious and grant abundant forgiveness.

This prayer is based on the fourth and fifth benedictions of the daily synagogue prayer, in use around the time of our Lord.
CELEBRATION OUTLINE

Theme
“Dying to sin, living for God.” The theme may be explained in a few sentences before the service begins, after the greeting, or in any leaflet distributed to the congregation.

Entrance rite
1. Song
   Lord, who throughout CBW, no. 278
   Forgive our sins no. 276
   Psalm 51 (50) no. 235 or 176
   or another seasonal hymn

2. Enthroning the word of God

3. Celebrant's greeting

4. Opening prayer
   The celebrant may choose a suitable prayer from the lenten liturgy; he is encouraged to compose his own, based on the theme as developed in the readings chosen for this celebration.

Liturgy of the Word
   God's word invites us to conversion and renewal of our life by proclaiming that Christ's death and rising have freed us from slavery to sin.

5. First reading
   A suitable text, referring to the theme or to conversion, may be chosen from the Fathers of the Church, from the Second Vatican Council, or from a spiritual author; or Rom. 6: 3-11 (lectionary, no. 42, page 134).

6. Response
   Silence: A few moments of silence should follow the reading, allowing all to reflect and pray in response to the word they have heard in faith.
   Psalm: After silent prayer a psalm or hymn may be sung.
7. Second Reading
1 Jn. 1:5-2:2 (lectionary, no. 698); or 1 Jn. 2: 1-5 (no. 48); or Rom. 6: 3-11 (no. 42), if not already proclaimed. Other suitable readings may be chosen from the lenten lectionary. A moment of silent prayer follows the reading.

8. Responsory
Leader If we have died with Christ, we shall also live with him.
All If we have died with Christ, we shall also live with him.
Leader Our old self has been put to death with Christ on the cross. ¶
The power of sin is destroyed so that we should no longer be slaves of sin. ¶
In union with Jesus Christ, we are to die to sin and to live for God our Father. ¶

Or a gospel acclamation may be sung: see CBW, no. 208, 226 (refrain).

9. Gospel reading
The deacon (or another priest, but not the president) takes the gospel book and prays for God's help. After receiving the celebrant's blessing, he goes in solemn procession with candles and incense to the lectern. He incenses the book solemnly, and then proclaims the gospel.

A suitable text may be chosen from the sermon on the mount (Mt. 5-7; see parallels in Lk.).

10. Homily
The celebrant proclaims the wonderful works and mercy of God as revealed in the scripture texts, and leads the assembly to prayer for sinners, to a reflective examination of conscience, and to repentance.

11. Prayer for sinners
The priest invites the community to pray for sinners, and to ask God to have mercy on them and bring them to conversion and love.

Examination of Our Christian Living
The points below are suggestions: the liturgy committee may work on developing others. Care should be taken, however, not to omit the ones that disturb you or the community: these are probably the questions that most need to be asked. (Other forms of the examination are given in past issues of the Bulletin: nos. 32, 36, 37, 41, 42, 46, 47, and 51. See also Canadian edition of Rite of penance, Appendix III, pages 153-159.)
A pause is to be made for reflection after each consideration. The examination of conscience is the heart of the penance service; unless suitable time is given for reflection during it, it becomes a waste of everyone's time.

12. **Examination of conscience**

**Celebrant**  
Let us turn to God our Father,  
and ask his mercy,  
that we may repent of our sins,  
follow Christ more closely,  
and turn back to God in love.

**Reader**  
As an individual,  
do I let God guide my life by his commandments?  
How many minutes a day  
do I spend in reading the word of God?  
How much time do I give to prayer each day?  
*All pause for silent prayer.*

**Reader**  
Do I develop the talents and graces God gives me,  
and use them for the good of other people?  
Do I accept the world's standards of right and wrong?  
Do I know Christ's standards of good and evil,  
and stand up for his teaching?  
*All pause for silent prayer.*

**Reader**  
Am I generous in seeking to help other people?  
Do I try to understand them,  
and look for their good points and virtues?  
In what ways can I improve my attitudes and approach toward my family, neighbors, friends?  
*All pause for silent prayer.*

**Reader**  
How seriously do I work with Christ to die to sin?  
Am I honestly trying to live with Christ for God?  
*All pause for silent prayer.*

**Reader**  
Our parish is a believing community,  
called by God to carry on the work of Christ:  
do we seek to see Jesus present among us?  
Are we listening to the Spirit he gives us as our guide?  
As a (parish) (community),  
do we work for God's interests or for our own?  
*All pause for silent prayer.*

**Reader**  
Have we taken any positive action  
as a (parish) (community) this year  
to show we are a family of faith, love and prayer?  
Does our record show that our (parish) (community)  
is self-centered, spending most of our efforts on ourselves?
What does Jesus think of our activities during the past year?

All pause for silent prayer.

Reader In the area where we live, is our (parish) (community) an example of faith and love? a model of concern for the sick, the suffering, the friendless? a source of light and courage for those in darkness and despair? Do we bring Christ's truth and love to community needs? Are we concerned for peace and development, for missions and vocations and peace? Do we spend our energy, time and resources for God, for others, or mainly for ourselves?

All pause for silent prayer.

Reader How seriously are we working with Christ to die to sin? Are we honestly trying to live with Christ for God?

All pause for silent prayer.

Celebrant People of God, put sin out of your lives. Die to sin, and with Christ, live for God. Let his Spirit lead you and guide you, so that you may truly be his holy people.

13. Silent prayer

For about five minutes all remain in silence. Sitting or kneeling as they wish, they discuss their way of life with the Lord. For those who wish it, the sacrament of reconciliation will be celebrated after this bible service.* A community act of sorrow may be sung or prayed (see Bulletin 51, page 322).

Conclusion of the Rite

14. Lord's Prayer

This prayer is best sung by all, as at Mass (CBW, nos. 221-223). The celebrant may prepare an introduction to this prayer, based on the theme of the service. For example:

Jesus has invited us to live as the children of God. Let us join our savior as we pray:

All sing: Our Father . . .

* The act of satisfaction (formerly known as “the penance”) is to be personal, and must be given individually, in a way that is fitting to each person's sins and sorrow. It is contrary to the mind of the Church to impose a general or universal act of satisfaction on all members of the congregation before or after the individual celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation (see rite, no. 55).
15. Invitation
The celebrant invites the congregation to celebrate the sacrament of penance after the bible service has ended. The various places for a personal encounter with Christ through the priest as the Lord's minister should be mentioned in a positive way. (They could also be described in the parish bulletin on the previous Sunday, with a strong mention of the spiritual opportunities being offered on this occasion of grace.)

16. Blessing
The usual blessing may be given, or one of the prayers over the people (sacramentary, pages 636-640) may be said. The celebrant may invite all priests in the sanctuary to join him in giving the final blessing.

17. Dismissal
The dismissal may be based on the words of Jesus (from gospel passages such as Lk. 7:50; Jn. 8:11; Mk. 6:50 and 12:34; Mk. 5:34).

18. Closing hymn
As the priests move toward the places for individual encounters in the sacrament of penance, all sing a seasonal hymn or a song of praise:

Into your hands CBW, no. 280
Help us to help each other no. 281
O merciful redeemer no. 283

Sacrament of Penance
Those who wish to receive individual guidance and sacramental absolution are encouraged to take the opportunity provided by the presence of a number of confessors. The choir might sing meditative or seasonal hymns or psalms in a quiet manner for the first five or ten minutes after the service.

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An outline of this year’s Bulletins shows their practical nature:

- No. 52 Reconciliation and forgiveness
- No. 53 Ministries and liturgy
- No. 54 Story of the Mass
- No. 55 Advent-Christmas
- No. 56 Training readers

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