

PENANCE

The sacrament of Penance (confession) is a sacrament of healing and reconciliation. It is a moment when we can experience salvation because it restores the unity -- the right relationships, the peace -- which sin destroys. In the celebration of Penance peace is restored in this sense: the unifying power of God's gracious presence brings the sinner back to spiritual health, communion with God, communion with the Church, and in a sense with all humanity.

Like all the other sacraments, Penance operates on the level of personal relationships -- God becomes present through the signs of His Word and His minister, while the sinner accepts reconciliation through a sincere act of repentance as expressed in the rite of Penance. Penance does not work in a magical way. It is a two-way street of personal relationship. Certainly, God is always there to accept and heal, but without the free response of repentance on the part of the sinner there can be no reconciliation or healing. To speak poetically, God's hand is always extended, but we must put our hand in His.

History of the Sacrament

The historical evolution of the sacrament is long and complex. The following is a brief outline of some of this process. The history of the sacrament of Penance can be divided into four parts: 1) Old Testament roots 2) New Testament sources, 3) ancient "public" Penance and 4) "private" Penance. .

1) Old Testament Roots

The history of the sacrament properly begins with the New Testament. However, we do find throughout the Old Testament a constant reminder that it is sin which alienates one from God and thus the need we have to be freed from sin and restored to unity with God. Failure to live up to the Covenant and its Law is the recurring sin of the people of Israel which the prophets constantly cite as the cause of all the troubles of the nation. We can also recall the inspired insight contained in the creation accounts of Genesis, that the Paradise condition of peace for which mankind was created is shattered by sin and that mankind by its own efforts cannot restore the peace.

It is interesting to note that the sacrificial system of the OT, while it had numerous sacrifices to unite the people with God, did not contain a rite specifically for the forgiveness of what we understand as personal sins (theft, lying etc.). The Priestly Code prescribed various "sin offerings" or "guilt offerings", but these were for unwitting, accidental or ritual sins, sins that made one unclean and unable to approach God (touching the dead or an unclean animal). But for deliberate sins, described in the OT as sins "with a high hand" (Num. 15:27-31), there was no remedy except that the sinner be cut off from among the people.

While it is true that there were no sacrificial rites for the forgiveness of personal sins, there are in the OT various confessions of personal and community sins and the assurance

of God's forgiveness. There are individual confessions like that of King David for adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 12:13). David's sins are not only forgiven, but the prophet Nathan delivers the divine promise of a perpetual Davidic dynasty. Thus David, the repentant adulterer and murderer, becomes the ideal king (anointed-one or messiah) of Israel and originator of the messianic hope of his people.

There are also group confessions of sins expressed in the laying of hands on a scapegoat to be driven out into the desert as commanded by Aaron (Leviticus 16:21) and continued by the high priest on the annual Day of Atonement. There are various penitential prayers (Daniel 9:4-19) and the so-named Seven Penitential Psalms (6,32,38,51,102,130,143).

These expressions of internal sorrow for sins are often accompanied by external signs such as fasting, abstinence, use of sackcloth and ashes, tearing of garments, weeping, sleeping on the ground, plucking the hair of the head and beard and almsgiving. However, the prophets warned that external signs without true internal sorrow were an abomination to God and that true internal sorrow for sins should express itself, not most importantly in the ritual acts of fasting and sacrifices, but in a change of heart. Speaking for the Lord, the prophet Amos condemns hollow religious rituals and pleads: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Righteousness meant conforming one's life to the will of God. Repentance without a change of heart and a dedication to justice means nothing.

2) New Testament Sources

Early in the Gospels, an attitude of repentance and change of heart is noted as the requirement for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven as preached by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and Jesus (Mt. 4:17, Mk 1:15). In the Apostolic church repentance is the first requirement for Baptism from the day of Pentecost onward (Acts 2:38).

For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was the rule of God over the minds and hearts of His people. To enter the Kingdom people needed not just to repent, but to "change their minds" to be one with the will of God. It was the same righteousness of which Amos spoke - the practice of justice. The good news was that this call of Jesus for repentance was linked with a promise of unlimited forgiveness. Here we see the dual activity -- the sinner's repentance and God's forgiveness -- which is ritually acted out in the modern Sacrament of Penance.

Perhaps the most beautiful parable recorded of Jesus is that which has come to be called the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). This parable expresses the unchanging love of the heavenly Father for sinners and the unlimited possibility of repentance. We shall return to this parable at a later time. Here we merely want to emphasize that Jesus revealed the unconditional love of the Father for all, sinners or not. Even the "sin against the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 12:31-32) results from the sinner hardening his/her heart against Spirit, rather than God's unwillingness to accept the sinner.

Jesus not only called for repentance and revealed God's constant love and forgiveness, He also made the startling claim that He had the power to forgive sins, as seen in the story of the paralytic at Capernaum: "take heart my son your sins are forgiven...the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mt. 9:1-10). All this was to the amazement of the people while some of the scribes said "This man is blaspheming" for certainly only God could forgive sins.

The question of whether or not Jesus conferred this power of forgiveness of sins on His disciples has been answered in the affirmative in traditional Roman Catholic teaching since the Middle Ages. Certainly it was taught that God and God alone forgives, but Catholic tradition holds that this forgiveness can be announced or mediated through the priest, the minister of the sacrament of Penance.

The support for this position is understood first of all in a general way. In Matthew 18:15-17, a process for reconciliation in the early Church is put in the mouth of Jesus. The question concerns the case of one "brother" sinning against another: "If your brother sins against you"(v.15). Jesus instructs the injured party to meet with the person individually, then, if necessary, with two or three witness. If that fails the case is presented to the "church". This instruction is immediately followed by the formula "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven". (v.18). This power is given to the apostles or the Church. This is the same power of binding and loosing that was given to Peter in an earlier discourse (Mt. 16:19) in the context of giving Peter the "keys of the kingdom of heaven".

Scholars have long discussed the ambiguity about the meaning of the expression "bind" and "loose". Jewish tradition used these terms to indicate the casting and breaking of spells, interpretations and decisions about what is permitted or forbidden by the Law (the Torah) and finally, the juridical power of judging and excommunicating an individual and later reconciling him to the community.

In the passages from Matthew quoted above there is no mention of the forgiveness of personal sin. Most scholars agree (see Raymond Brown, "The Churches the Apostles Left Behind" p. 135), that the terms "binding" and "loosing" refer to making decisions in the name of Jesus that bind Christians in conscience (Mt. 16:19) and/or the power to legislate and settle disputes in the Church using excommunication from the community if necessary (Mt. 18:18). That St. Paul actually did "excommunicate" is hinted at in 1Cor. 5 and perhaps 1Tim 1:18-20.

However, a clearer statement is found in a post resurrection appearance of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel of John (20:22-23), Jesus tells His disciples (not just apostles) that as the Father sent Him, so He is sending them. Next Jesus is quoted as saying: "...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained". It has been noted, however, that in this early stage in the life of the Church there is no mention of any process or rite used by the apostles to forgive sins, other than in connection with Baptism. Thus this saying of Jesus probably refers to the forgiveness of sin as announced to converts in the baptismal rituals of the

early Church, again by disciples – ordinary Christian missionaries – not just apostles.

However, in Chapter 5 of the Letter of James we do find a reference to the elders anointing the sick with oil and are told that a prayer offered in faith will raise the sick from their bed and “any sins he may have committed will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15). The next verse (16) reads: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and then you will be healed.” This verse is probably a summary of the previous verses. It stresses the notion of healing and not the forgiveness of sins. There is also an indication that ordinary lay people confessed their sins to one another and looked to each other’s shared faith for assurance that God indeed accepts their repentance. In this way members of the Church became “sacraments” or signs of God’s steadfast acceptance of those who repent. However, there is no indication of any specific rite of Penance like we have today. Only much later (the 3rd century) are there any clear indications that the Church ritually addressed the problem of serious sin after Baptism.

3) Ancient “Public” Penance

As in all historical development, clear lines cannot usually be drawn. Yet by the second and third centuries there is some mention of deathbed prayers for those who sinned seriously after Baptism. The early Church expected the newly baptized to take conversion seriously. Serious sin was not expected after converts had taken on the new life of Jesus (1John 3:6-9). Yet people did sin as clearly indicated in 1John 1:8-10 and the Church had to deal with the issue. The result was the development of a specific ritual, the Sacrament of Penance.

During the first six centuries of the Church, this development took the form of a public rite that was available for serious sin, but *only once in a lifetime*. Early on, the list of transgressions identified as *serious sins* was generally restricted to apostasy, murder, heresy and adultery.

The First Three Centuries -- The development was gradual and there is little direct evidence of any specific sacramental rite until the middle of the third century. This lack of evidence strongly suggests that no rite of Penance, as such, existed in the Apostolic Church. However, an early Christian document “The Didache” (“the teaching”, 75-90 AD?) mentions a confession of sins in the assembly and before participation in the Eucharist, but no details are given. Also the Epistle of St. Clement (96 AD) recommends submission to the presbyters for those guilty of causing dissension. Only scattered references can be found in this early period.

One important second century source, entitled “The Shepherd of Hermas”, alludes to a strict theory of repentance held by some in the years 100-140 AD. This position held that the single rite of forgiveness of sins was Baptism. After Baptism, the Church demanded a holy life with no further forgiveness of serious sin by the Church. This theory claimed support from the Epistle to the Hebrews 4:6 and 1John 3:6-9. The writer of “The Shepherd of Hermas”, however, disagrees with this stricter view and declares that sins after Baptism can be forgiven through penance, but it is available only once in a lifetime.

During the persecutions on the middle of the third century, many denied their faith. Later these Christians asked for pardon. This was finally granted with the requirement of severe penitential practices. Those holding the stricter view of repentance would not accept such clemency and broke with the Church to form the Novatian and Montanist sects. They held that the sins of apostasy (denial of faith), adultery and murder were unforgivable.

In all this it is well to keep in mind that the question was not that God would not forgive these offenses, but rather that the Church did not have the power to forgive, so that the serious sinner would have to wait in uncertainty for the judgment of God and wait outside the community of the Church. This was the general view of the entire Church, the only difference being that those with the less strict view held for a single act of post-baptismal repentance after which no Church pardon for serious sin was available. This less strict view was adopted by the Church when the Council of Nicea condemned the stricter view in 325 AD.

We have indulged in this brief accounting of the state of Penance in the early church to remind us of the evolutionary nature of the sacraments and of the variety of theological opinions even in the early days of Christianity. A further detailed historical study is not necessary for our purposes, but perhaps an outline of what we know of the content of these early rites of Penance would be helpful.

The Rite of Penance - From the Third Century to the Sixth Century -- By the year 250 AD we do have evidence that a once-in-a-lifetime rite of Penance was available. While the rite of Penance was public in nature, the detailed confession of sins was normally made in secret to the bishop or a priest appointed by him. There are some accounts that indicate a public confession of sins to the assembled local church community was also practiced in certain localities. The public nature of Penance was not intended to humiliate the penitent, but to elicit the help of fellow Christians who gave support with advice and prayers.

While certainly a simplification, it can generally be stated that from the third to the sixth centuries the Sacrament of Penance was celebrated in the Western Church in the following manner.

1. Confession of serious sins (adultery, apostasy, murder) to a bishop or his priest.
2. A "liturgical excommunication" from the community - leaving before communion.
3. Enrollment in the order of penitents, corresponding to that of the catechumens. As such they were excluded from full participation in the Eucharist and instructed to wear coarse clothing and ashes on their heads.
4. The public acting out of a prescribed the penance was joined with private prayers, fasting and almsgiving.
5. Prayers by the community and blessings by the bishop from time to time.
6. After judgment of sincere repentance, full reconciliation with the community on Holy Thursday symbolized by full participation in the Eucharistic banquet.

7. After reconciliation further strictures were imposed: not being able to marry; if married no marital relations; no engagement in public commerce and restrictions against the bearing of arms and entering military service.

The special characteristics of this rite are worthy of some consideration. The most striking feature of ancient Penance is its once-in-a-lifetime feature. Penance was also restricted to the most serious of sins -- murder, adultery and apostasy. The theory was that if these sins are committed after Baptism, then the baptismal conversion was in all probability not sincere. The early church took the Christian life very seriously.

The fact that Penance was public stressed the intimate link between the members of the Church and the destructive power of sin for the entire community. As St. Paul had remarked, when one member of the Body is sick the entire Body suffers. It is well to remember that in these early days the Church consisted of very small, close knit, sometimes persecuted communities and any betrayal of the Christian life on the part of one member was keenly felt by the rest. And so the early rites made the entire community the principle focus. The rite of "liturgical excommunication" visibly dramatized what happens in serious sin, the sinner cuts himself/herself off, not only from God, but also from the life of the community of faith. But the excommunication was only from full participation in the Eucharist, the sinner was still a member of the community in virtue of Baptism, but was sick and in need of healing.

Another special feature was the requirement that the penitential acts imposed by the bishop be accomplished *before* full reconciliation and full participation in the Eucharist was effected. The performance of the penitential rites was taken as a sign of a true change of heart. When this was judged to have taken place by the authorities, readmittance to full participation in the community through the reception of the Eucharist again visibly communicated the spiritual unity which had been reestablished. Thus the whole community was involved in the reconciliation of the sinner.

Ancient Penance was, as we have seen, quite harsh. The long and difficult public penance was followed by very strict regulations, which could last a lifetime. This, plus the "one-time-only" feature, finally brought about many unhealthy effects. One such effect was that many put off Baptism till very late in life and those who were already baptized likewise delayed Penance. Penance became something only a minority received and then only as a preparation for death.

The Rite of Penance - From the Sixth Century to the Present -- By the sixth century, the very success of Christianity in converting nearly all of Europe enlarged the problems of the ancient rite of Penance. By this time more sins had been added to the original list of three or four and thus many more "qualified" for the sacrament. But, needless to say, the rigors of the rite and the strict demands afterwards made all but a few reluctant to celebrate the sacrament. It finally died away because it was no longer practical.

Furthermore, the deep feeling of a tightly intertwined community of heroic faithful no longer was present for practically everyone in Europe was Christian. To be a Christian in

the sixth century did not elicit heroic and radical commitment that it did in the second or third centuries, not only because persecutions had ended, but also because most had entered the Church not through the adult commitment of Baptism, but as infants. It was during this sixth century that a new form or rite of Penance spread throughout Europe. It came primarily from the Church in Ireland, which, under the influence of St. Patrick, practiced a different form of the sacrament - *private Penance*.

As the Irish missionaries came to Europe (to Christianize the Christians), they brought their new rite of Penance with them. It was much simpler in form and could be repeated often. It could be celebrated one-on-one with the priest and the penitent. It contained the same basic elements as the ancient rite, but included no public penance nor lasting obligations after reconciliation. The bishop was not needed, a priest was sufficient.

At first, as in the ancient rite, the penance imposed had to be completed before full participation in the Eucharist, but gradually it developed that the penance could be fulfilled later and full communion was immediately reestablished. This Irish form of private, repeatable penance gradually replaced the public form of penance, which could only be received once in a lifetime. In 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, in an indirect way, the Church adopted the Irish form of the sacrament. This was accomplished through a decree of the Council requiring all baptized Christians to confess sins and receive the Eucharist once each year. And so by the eleventh and twelfth centuries the old form of public penance disappeared and the new private penance had become the norm and generally speaking, this form survived, with minor changes, to the present time.

Note: Notice the shift in emphasis. While the ancient rite focused on a *penance* to be preformed, the new rite stressed the *confession* of sins. Thus it Sacrament of Penance came to be known “confession” to the faithful in the pew.

The Theology of the Sacrament

While the rite of Penance changed throughout history, the theological message remained the same. Sin is the opposite of salvation. Salvation is the unity of self and self with God and others, while sin is alienation and disunity. Sin is a sickness for both the individual and the community, because true, healthy human life is found through unity with God, self and others. Therefore in the Sacrament of Penance the saving power of Jesus Christ draws the sinner back to God and others and thus restores life and health.

As in all the acts of salvation and in all the Sacraments the initiative is on the part of God. The revelation of God in Jesus contained in the Gospel message comes first. It not only announces the Good News that we are loved and accepted by God, but also passes judgment on the evils of human existence. Thus the sinner is “convicted” of sin by the message of Jesus, not for the purposes of punishment, but to warn of the deadliness of sin -- “the wages of sin are death”. To be convicted of sin opens the door to life. After this divine initiative comes the free response of internal repentance on the part of the believer. From the ritual acting out in the sacrament of this internal repentance comes the reconciliation of the sinner with God and with the community. To be more precise, at

the moment of repentance the sinner is at one with God, for God's attitude of acceptance is constant. This fact is then ratified in the sacrament and at the same time reconciliation with the Church is established. This is a central point, for many believe that the "forgiveness" of God is conditioned by the sacrament. It would seem for some that we come to the sacrament to change God's attitude, not our own. Who is transformed here, God or us? More of this later.

The Parable of Penance - The Prodigal Son

We noted earlier that the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son vividly reveals the theological dimensions of the Sacrament of Penance (read Lk. 15:11-32). The father in the story represents God. The story opens with a well-to-do father providing a home for his sons, symbolic of God creating all mankind for the fullness of life. The sons live in freedom as seen when the youngest decides to take his inheritance (the fullness of life or life itself) and leave the home and loving his father. And so it is the sinner who separates himself from God, not God from the sinner. As the son journeys in his sinful life, he finds that this leads him not to a fuller life, but to the point of death, deserted by all his so-called friends and at the point of starvation. Here sin is revealed as that which is anti-life for, by definition, sin destroys our true humanity which is a life characterized by a love of self, others, the world and God. Finally, admitting his sin to himself, the son decides to return to the father, admit his sin to him and beg to be accepted back as one of the hired servants.

Note, it was the son's free decision to return, meaning that repentance must take place within the sinner, it cannot be forced. The initiative of God is seen in the son recalling the goodness of the father and thus the possibility of the return to the father's house (way of life).

As he is returning home, he finds that the father has been looking for him and his father runs to greet him with a kiss. With the confession of sin, the father turns not to punishment or even reprimand his, but orders new clothes and a feast in honor of his returned son. The older brother cannot understand the father's attitude so the father explains that the older brother has always received the live giving love of his fathers, but now rejoicing is in order because the *brother who was dead is now alive*, the lost is found.

This last part of the story is especially significant. In it Jesus reveals that God is not the author of punishment and death, but of acceptance and life. The father had always loved the sinful son. He had to wait for his son to decide to come home, but his love was constant and unchanging. Sin then is its own punishment. God is never angry, but longs for the return of the lost one. In a life of sin the son was dying, but in returning to the home of the father he regains the fullness of life. God rejoices when we turn from sin and accept the full, human life for which we were created. St. Irenaeus put it this way: "The glory of God is man fully alive" (the Heresies).

This parable is instructive to us, especially in coming to some understanding of the term "forgiveness of sins" as it relates to God, the individual and the Church. The following

remarks reflect *only one* theological opinion and cannot simply be equated with *the* Roman Catholic tradition, although they seem to fit comfortably within that tradition.

Given the message of Jesus in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it seems to me perhaps somewhat misleading to say that “God forgives sins”. Because to say that God “forgives” risks identifying God’s “forgiveness” with the way we humans usually forgive - only when someone says they are sorry. It can imply that God is in opposition to the unrepentant sinner and only on the occasion of repentance and with that as a condition, does He then “forgive”. More accurately, in light of this Parable, perhaps it is more accurate to say that God always *accepts* the sinner. In other words, the love and acceptance of God is for all and without condition. It is not dependent on the goodness or badness of the individual. God loves saints. God equally loves sinners. That is the “Good News” of Jesus. In fact, it is almost too good to believe.

Given the above, it is also true that the word “forgive” is linked to God 15 times in the NT and the word “forgiveness” is also linked to God 19 times in the NT. It is obviously an acceptable term to use of God in view of the repentance of sinners, just as long as it reflects what humans experience when they turn their hearts to a God who always accepts them and awaits their “coming home” through repentance so as to experience “forgiveness”.

If this is true, perhaps it is more accurate to say that in the Sacrament of Penance the sinner returns to the God who has always accepted him. The Sacrament of Penance is not about changing God’s attitude toward us, but about us changing our hearts, “coming home” and having our lives renewed through reconciliation with God and the Church. It is we who must change our minds and hearts so that the power (grace) of God can transform us.

In Catholic tradition the priest in the confessional has been referred to as a representative of Christ, *alter Christus*. Perhaps, then, the function of the minister in the Sacrament is to imitate Jesus in announcing the Good News of our constant acceptance by God, sinner or not, rather than to imply that in the sacrament God’s “forgiveness” is somehow activated by our act of repentance and the absolution of the priest.

This may not reflect a common opinion in the Church and it is certainly not expressed explicitly in the rite, but it certainly seems to flow from the Gospel message, especially in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. God’s love is without condition. From this it follows that God does not punish either in this life or the next, but that sin is its own punishment, for in sin it is the sinner who departs from God and others and thus from the path of life to the path of death and destruction. God never abandons us.

The Two Dimensions of Sin

Before examining the steps in the process of the Sacrament of Penance, it is helpful to recall that we spoke of two important dimensions of sin - the objective and subjective. Looking at sin objectively we often speak of “telling a lie” or of “stealing something”. The effects of the lie and the theft are considered as outside of ourselves. We lied about our income and our lie went to the IRS or we stole fifty dollars and someone else was deprived of their money. So we may “go to confession”, admit our responsibility, try to make amends, etc. and thus consider our slate wiped clean. Seen from this dimension sin appears to be understood simply as something we have *done* whose destructive effects are largely outside ourselves.

However important this objective dimension may be, there is a subjective dimension that is equally important, which we often ignore. Subjectively when we lie or steal it is not just that we have *done* something, but also that we have *become* something or someone, i.e. we have become a liar or we have become a thief.

This is most important for we are always in the process of becoming, becoming some kind of a person. Our human decisions for good and evil set off a dynamic within us. For example, through repeated acts of kindness we become a kind person, we come to react “instinctively” in an open, helping, loving way to others. We call this virtue.

On the other hand, when we lie and do so repeatedly we become liars. Now when we want to avoid responsibility or gain something we want our first instinct is to lie, if we deem it “necessary”. We lose our conscience. We become known as chronic liars.

Also imagine the first time we steal something. There is usually fear of discovery, guilt, fear of punishment, or embarrassment if others know. These feelings may help us to decide to never steal again. However, if we do decide to steal again, the second theft is not so bad. We have less fear, less guilt, etc. and if we continue on we can become expert thieves. We may no longer feel guilty. We can lose our conscience. We no longer instinctively judge stealing to be wrong. We call this a vice.

Of course, our Christian faith tells us that God did not create us to be liars and thieves. We do not find happiness or fulfillment as liars and thieves. In terms of the Prodigal Son when we sin we are leaving home, leaving life and are on the road to destruction and death. That is why Jesus admonished us to pray for those who harm us, because they need healing. Each person, sinner or saint, is created and loved by God. Jesus said that He came not to condemn but to give life.

In Catholic tradition, the Sacrament of Penance is seen as a moment of salvation, because it heals us and restores our lives. We are “home again” where there is life and love. There are various steps in the celebration of Penance that help open us up psychologically to the healing grace of God. We shall consider them now.

The Psychology of Penance

Penance is not simply a psychological experience. Penance is a moment of salvation made possible *only* by the grace of God. It is a moment of salvation in which the sinner becomes reconciled with self, God and the Church. It is a place where we can find peace.

However, the experience of salvation is a profoundly human experience and certainly has a psychological dimension. Grace does build on nature and God always addresses us in our full humanity. In fact, we profess that God became most powerfully present to us in the full humanity of Jesus.

I believe it was the great psychologist, Carl Jung, who commented on the psychologically healthy effects of Penance. In any event, let us now turn briefly to look at the steps in the process of celebrating the Sacrament of Penance.

1. The examination of conscience -- This traditional phrase “examination of conscience” means taking time out to consider what is going on in our lives, to consider the question “what am I becoming”. One way to assess what we are becoming is to look at how we have been acting or reacting to life over the past weeks or months. If we try to “step back” and view ourselves as objectively as we can, what do we discover about ourselves? Do we see any patterns of behavior that reveal what kind of a person we are becoming? Are we thoughtful of others, forgiving, honest, fair with friends, fellow workers, and employees? How about the things we have failed to do? Have we failed to communicate with our relatives, spend time with the children, care for our community, take time to pray, take care of our health etc.?

Without taking time to examine our lives, we may discover to our dismay that we are well on the road to becoming the kind of person we ourselves would not care to ask out to lunch. St. Thomas made the simple statement: “A thing acts as it is.” Pretty fundamental. Our task is to examine our “acts” so that we might come to know our “is”, or, better put, what we are becoming.

2. Admission of Guilt and Taking Responsibility -- These two must go together. First we admit that we have done something wrong, that we have sinned against self and others and next we must take responsibility. Taking responsibility is so important because we humans have an enormous capacity to rationalize our behavior. How many time have we heard or said ourselves -- “everybody is doing it”, “I needed it worse than they did”, “they would do the same to me”, “how bad is it anyway?” etc.. We have heard all that before. We would rather make a thousand excuses, than admit one fault.

But we must not fool ourselves. We cannot be healed if we cannot admit responsibility. The Alcoholics Anonymous program zeros in on our need to admit responsibility. Until a person can stand up in an AA meeting and say: “I am John and I am an alcoholic”, no healing can take place. We are not yet open to change.

3. Confession of Sins to the Priest -- We may feel that we have accomplished quite a bit in the first two steps -- looking at our lives, admitting our faults and taking responsibility for them. However, to say all of this “out loud” to another human being is asking a great

deal. It is embarrassing and it is risky. It is embarrassing because we naturally want to present ourselves to others in the best light possible. We have our pride. It is also risky because we might be rejected.

While this step may be a most difficult one, it is important in order for the power of God's healing and transforming grace to be effective in us. It is not that God needs our confession of sins, for He always loves and accepts us, but we need to do so in order to "come home". We need to say it: "I have sinned and I am sorry". Our relationships to God are always personal and the sacraments are "personal encounters" with God through the sacramental signs. In Penance the sacramental signs are the person of the priest and the words he speaks to us. The priest is not only the sacramental sign of our loving Father he is also a representative of the local and universal Church whom we have also offended and weakened by our conduct.

4. Absolution - Hearing The Words of Acceptance

The priest announces to the repentant sinner the acceptance of God and the acceptance of the Church. So while there may be some embarrassment, there is no risk, for the repentant sinner who "comes home" is always forgiven, always accepted – given true sorrow and repentance. We need have no fear of rejection. Jesus said something to the effect that there is more rejoicing over one repentant sinner than over a multitude who need no forgiveness.

Something very important can happen when we acknowledge our faults and yet hear that we are accepted. This acceptance allows us the psychological "space" to forgive ourselves. This is often very hard to do. It has been noted that both Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus. Peter was able to forgive himself, and Judas was not. One became a saint, the other destroyed his life. There is a lesson there for us.

While the Church calls on the priest to judge the true repentance of the sinner for full admittance into the Eucharist, the role of the priest is better understood as a doctor rather than a judge. If we are sinners we need to be healed.

5. The Penance

The purpose of the penance imposed by the priest in the Sacrament has been somewhat ambiguous in modern times. Certainly the ancient penance was too harsh. However, an appropriate penance is very important. So important, I would argue, that if we are not given an appropriate penance by the priest, we should design one for ourselves.

To be part of the healing process, the penance should relate to the sin. Above we noted that a sinful act sets off within us a dynamic impulse. Our lives become directed in a certain way. If we steal something, we have taken the first step on the road to becoming a thief. One act of thievery does not change us into hardened criminals, but continual acts of thievery over time certainly can.

And so if our lives have been set in the wrong direction, we need some kind of activity that will reverse the process. For example, if we are becoming a thief, then a good penance for us may be to give something - time, money - to charity. If we have been unkind to our spouse, maybe a good penance would be some special act of kindness - a meal, flowers, a trip.

The purpose here is to set our lives in another direction. Repeated acts of goodness which are opposite to our sinful acts will help the healing process more than reciting a few prayers. These prayers are certainly good in themselves, but we need to direct our attention to our specific failings and weaknesses. An appropriate penance can be a powerful tool in the healing process.

In Summary

The Sacrament of Penance is a beautiful and powerful sacrament. The Risen Lord and His message of love and acceptance by the Father is made present, really present through the signs of the sacrament - the person and words of the priest. Rightly understood, the Sacrament of Penance should be seen as a gift - a gift of healing - rather than a quasi-legal process.

We have options now in how we celebrate this sacrament. We can either remain anonymous or meet with our confessor face to face. The Church has redesigned the sacrament so that the Word of God is more readily available for us. To celebrate this sacrament is truly to enter into the presence of our loving Father and experience salvation.