

# Sacrament Of Reconciliation

## (Penance)

Penance is a sacrament of the New Law instituted by Christ in which forgiveness of sins committed after baptism is granted through the priest's absolution to those who with true sorrow confess their sins and promise to satisfy for the same. It is called a "sacrament" not simply a function or ceremony, because it is an outward sign instituted by Christ to impart grace to the soul. As an outward sign it comprises the actions of the penitent in presenting himself to the priest and accusing himself of his sins, and the actions of the priest in pronouncing absolution and imposing satisfaction. This whole procedure is usually called, from one of its parts, "confession", and it is said to take place in the "tribunal of penance", because it is a judicial process in which the penitent is at once the accuser, the person accused, and the witness, while the priest pronounces judgment and sentence. The grace conferred is deliverance from the guilt of sin and, in the case of mortal sin, from its eternal punishment; hence also reconciliation with God, justification. Finally, the confession is made not in the secrecy of the penitent's heart nor to a layman as friend and advocate, nor to a representative of human authority, but to a duly ordained priest with requisite jurisdiction and with the "power of the keys", i.e., the power to forgive sins which Christ granted to His Church.

By way of further explanation it is needful to correct certain erroneous views regarding this sacrament which not only misrepresent the actual practice of the Church but also lead to a false interpretation of theological statement and historical evidence. From what has been said it should be clear:

- that penance is not a mere human invention devised by the Church to secure power over consciences or to relieve the emotional strain of troubled souls; it is the ordinary means appointed by Christ for the remission of sin. Man indeed is free to obey or disobey, but once he has sinned, he must seek pardon not on conditions of his own choosing but on those which God has determined, and these for the Christian are embodied in the Sacrament of Penance.
- No Catholic believes that a priest simply as an individual man, however pious or learned, has power to forgive sins. This power belongs to God alone; but He can and does exercise it through the ministration

of men. Since He has seen fit to exercise it by means of this sacrament, it cannot be said that the Church or the priest interferes between the soul and God; on the contrary, penance is the removal of the one obstacle that keeps the soul away from God.

- It is not true that for the Catholic the mere "telling of one's sins" suffices to obtain their forgiveness. Without sincere sorrow and purpose of amendment, confession avails nothing, the pronouncement of absolution is of no effect, and the guilt of the sinner is greater than before.
- While this sacrament as a dispensation of Divine mercy facilitates the pardoning of sin, it by no means renders sin less hateful or its consequences less dreadful to the Christian mind; much less does it imply permission to commit sin in the future. In paying ordinary debts, as e.g., by monthly settlements, the intention of contracting new debts with the same creditor is perfectly legitimate; a similar intention on the part of him who confesses his sins would not only be wrong in itself but would nullify the sacrament and prevent the forgiveness of sins then and there confessed.
- Strangely enough, the opposite charge is often heard, viz., that the confession of sin is intolerable and hard and therefore alien to the spirit of Christianity and the loving kindness of its Founder. But this view, in the first place, overlooks the fact that Christ, though merciful, is also just and exacting. Furthermore, however painful or humiliating confession may be, it is but a light penalty for the violation of God's law. Finally, those who are in earnest about their salvation count no hardship too great whereby they can win back God's friendship.

Both these accusations, of too great leniency and too great severity, proceed as a rule from those who have no experience with the sacrament and only the vaguest ideas of what the Church teaches or of the power to forgive sins which the Church received from Christ.

### **Teaching of the Church**

The Council of Trent (1551) declares:

*As a means of regaining grace and justice, penance was at all times necessary for those who had defiled their souls with any mortal sin. . . . Before the coming of Christ, penance was not a sacrament, nor is it since His coming a sacrament for those who are not baptized. But the Lord then principally instituted the Sacrament of Penance, when, being raised from the dead, he breathed upon His disciples saying: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven*

*them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained' (John, xx, 22-23). By which action so signal and words so clear the consent of all the Fathers has ever understood that the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the Apostles and to their lawful successors, for the reconciling of the faithful who have fallen after Baptism. (Sess. XIV, c. i)*

Farther on the council expressly states that Christ left priests, His own vicars, as judges (*praesides et judices*), unto whom all the mortal crimes into which the faithful may have fallen should be revealed in order that, in accordance with the power of the keys, they may pronounce the sentence of forgiveness or retention of sins" (Sess. XIV, c. v)

### **Power to Forgive Sins**

It is noteworthy that the fundamental objection so often urged against the Sacrament of Penance was first thought of by the Scribes when Christ said to the sick man of the palsy: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." "And there were some of the scribes sitting there, and thinking in their hearts: Why doth this man speak thus? he blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins but God only?" But Jesus seeing their thoughts, said to them: "Which is easier to say to the sick of the palsy: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, take up thy bed and walk? But that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say to thee: Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house" (Mark, ii, 5-11; Matt., ix, 2-7). Christ wrought a miracle to show that He had power to forgive sins and that this power could be exerted not only in heaven but also on earth. This power, moreover, He transmitted to Peter and the other Apostles. To Peter He says: "And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt., xvi, 19). Later He says to all the Apostles: "Amen I say to you, whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt., xviii, 18). As to the meaning of these texts, it should be noted:

- that the "binding" and "loosing" refers not to physical but to spiritual or moral bonds among which sin is certainly included; the more so because
- the power here granted is unlimited — "whatsoever you shall bind, . . . whatsoever you shall loose";
- the power is judicial, i.e., the Apostles are authorized to *bind* and to *loose*;
- whether they bind or loose, their action is ratified in heaven. In healing the palsied man Christ declared that "the Son of man has power

on earth to forgive sins"; here He promises that what these men, the Apostles, bind or loose on earth, God in heaven will likewise bind or loose. (Cf. also POWER OF THE KEYS.)

But as the Council of Trent declares, Christ principally instituted the Sacrament of Penance after His Resurrection, a miracle greater than that of healing the sick. "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them; and he said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John, xx, 21-23). While the sense of these words is quite obvious, the following points are to be considered:

- Christ here reiterates in the plainest terms — "sins", "forgive", "retain" — what He had previously stated in figurative language, "bind" and "loose", so that this text specifies and distinctly applies to sin the power of loosing and binding.
- He prefaces this grant of power by declaring that the mission of the Apostles is similar to that which He had received from the Father and which He had fulfilled: "As the Father hath sent me". Now it is beyond doubt that He came into the world to destroy sin and that on various occasions He explicitly forgave sin (Matt., ix, 2-8; Luke, v, 20; vii, 47; Apoc., i, 5), hence the forgiving of sin is to be included in the mission of the Apostles.
- Christ not only declared that sins were forgiven, but really and actually forgave them; hence, the Apostles are empowered not merely to announce to the sinner that his sins are forgiven but to grant him forgiveness—"whose sins you shall forgive". If their power were limited to the declaration "God pardons you", they would need a special revelation in each case to make the declaration valid.
- The power is twofold — to forgive or to retain, i.e., the Apostles are not told to grant or withhold forgiveness nondiscriminately; they must act judicially, forgiving or retaining according as the sinner deserves.
- The exercise of this power in either form (forgiving or retaining) is not restricted: no distinction is made or even suggested between one kind of sin and another, or between one class of sinners and all the rest: Christ simply says "whose *sins*".
- The sentence pronounced by the Apostles (remission or retention) is also God's sentence — "they are forgiven . . . they are retained".

It is therefore clear from the words of Christ that the Apostles had power to forgive sins. But this was not a personal prerogative that was to erase at their

death; it was granted to them in their official capacity and hence as a permanent institution in the Church — no less permanent than the mission to teach and baptize all nations. Christ foresaw that even those who received faith and baptism, whether during the lifetime of the Apostles or later, would fall into sin and therefore would need forgiveness in order to be saved. He must, then, have intended that the power to forgive should be transmitted from the Apostles to their successors and be used as long as there would be sinners in the Church, and that means to the end of time. It is true that in baptism also sins are forgiven, but this does not warrant the view that the power to forgive is simply the power to baptize. In the first place, as appears from the texts cited above, the power to forgive is also the power to retain; its exercise involves a judicial action. But no such action is implied in the commission to baptize (Matt., xxviii, 18-20); in fact, as the Council of Trent affirms, the Church does not pass judgment on those who are not yet members of the Church, and membership is obtained through baptism. Furthermore, baptism, because it is a new birth, cannot be repeated, whereas the power to forgive sins (penance) is to be used as often as the sinner may need it. Hence the condemnation, by the same Council, of any one "who, confounding the sacraments, should say that baptism itself is the Sacrament of Penance, as though these two sacraments were not distinct and as though penance were not rightly called the second plank after shipwreck" (Sess. XIV, can. 2 de sac. poen.).

These pronouncements were directed against the Protestant teaching which held that penance was merely a sort of repeated baptism; and as baptism effected no real forgiveness of sin but only an external covering over of sin through faith alone, the same, it was alleged, must be the case with penance. This, then, as a sacrament is superfluous; absolution is only a declaration that sin is forgiven through faith, and satisfaction is needless because Christ has satisfied once for all men. This was the first sweeping and radical denial of the Sacrament of Penance. Some of the earlier sects had claimed that only priests in the state of grace could validly absolve, but they had not denied the existence of the power to forgive. During all the preceding centuries, Catholic belief in this power had been so clear and strong that in order to set it aside Protestantism was obliged to strike at the very constitution of the Church and reject the whole content of Tradition.

### **Belief and Practice of the Early Church**

Among the modernistic propositions condemned by Pius X in the Decree "Lamentabili sane" (3 July, 1907) are the following:

- "In the primitive Church there was no concept of the reconciliation of the Christian sinner by the authority of the Church, but the Church by very slow degrees only grew accustomed to this concept. Moreover,



even after penance came to be recognized as an institution of the Church, it was not called by the name of sacrament, because it was regarded as an odious sacrament." (46)

- "The Lord's words: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain they are retained' (John xx, 22-23), in no way refer to the Sacrament of Penance, whatever the Fathers of Trent may have been pleased to assert." (47)

According to the Council of Trent, the consensus of all the Fathers always understood that by the words of Christ just cited, the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the Apostles and their lawful successors (Sess. XIV, c. i). It is therefore Catholic doctrine that the Church from the earliest times believed in the power to forgive sins as granted by Christ to the Apostles. Such a belief in fact was clearly inculcated by the words with which Christ granted the power, and it would have been inexplicable to the early Christians if any one who professed faith in Christ had questioned the existence of that power in the Church. But if, contrariwise, we suppose that no such belief existed from the beginning, we encounter a still greater difficulty: the first mention of that power would have been regarded as an innovation both needless and intolerable; it would have shown little practical wisdom on the part of those who were endeavouring to draw men to Christ; and it would have raised a protest or led to a schism which would certainly have gone on record as plainly at least as did early divisions on matters of less importance. But no such record is found; even those who sought to limit the power itself presupposed its existence, and their very attempt at limitation put them in opposition to the prevalent Catholic belief.

Turning now to evidence of a positive sort, we have to note that the statements of any Father or orthodox ecclesiastical writer regarding penance present not merely his own personal view, but the commonly accepted belief; and furthermore that the belief which they record was no novelty at the time, but was the traditional doctrine handed down by the regular teaching of the Church and embodied in her practice. In other words, each witness speaks for a past that reaches back to the beginning, even when he does not expressly appeal to tradition.

- St. Augustine (d. 430) warns the faithful: "Let us not listen to those who deny that the Church of God has power to *forgive all sins*" (De agon. Christ., iii).
- St. Ambrose (d. 397) rebukes the Novatianists who "professed to show reverence for the Lord by reserving to Him alone the power of forgiving sins. Greater wrong could not be done than what they do in

seeking to rescind His commands and fling back the office He bestowed. . . . The Church obeys Him in both respects, by binding sin and by loosing it; for the Lord willed that for both the power should be equal" (De poenit., I, ii,6).

- Again he teaches that this power was to be a function of the priesthood. "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance; Christ granted this (power) to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests" (op. cit., II, ii, 12).
- The power to forgive extends to all sins: "God makes no distinction; He promised mercy to all and to His priests He granted the authority to pardon *without any exception*" (op. cit., I, iii, 10).
- Against the same heretics St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona (d. 390), wrote to Sympronianus, one of their leaders: "This (forgiving sins), you say, only God can do. Quite true: but what He does through His priests is the doing of His own power" (Ep. I ad Sympron, 6 in P.L., XIII, 1057).
- In the East during the same period we have the testimony of St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 447): "Men filled with the spirit of God (i.e. priests) forgive sins in two ways, either by admitting to baptism those who are worthy or by pardoning the penitent children of the Church" (In Joan., 1, 12 in P.G., LXXIV, 722).
- St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) after declaring that neither angels nor archangels have received such power, and after showing that earthly rulers can bind only the bodies of men, declares that the priest's power of forgiving sins "penetrates to the soul and reaches up to heaven". Wherefore, he concludes, "it were manifest folly to condemn so great a power without which we can neither obtain heaven nor come to the fulfillment of the promises. . . . Not only when they (the priests) regenerate us (baptism), but also after our new birth, they can forgive us our sins" (De sacred., III, 5 sq.).
- St. Athanasius (d. 373): "As the man whom the priest baptizes is enlightened by the grace of the Holy Ghost, so does he who in penance confesses his sins, receive through the priest forgiveness in virtue of the grace of Christ" (Frag. contra Novat. in P. G., XXVI, 1315).

These extracts show that the Fathers recognized in penance a power and a utility quite distinct from that of baptism. Repeatedly they compare in figurative language the two means of obtaining pardon; or regarding baptism as spiritual

birth, they describe penance as the remedy for the ills of the soul contracted after that birth. But a more important fact is that both in the West and in the East, the Fathers constantly appeal to the words of Christ and given them the same interpretation that was given eleven centuries later by the Council of Trent. In this respect they simply echoed the teachings of the earlier Fathers who had defended Catholic doctrine against the heretics of the third and second centuries. Thus St. Cyprian in his "De lapsis" (A.D. 251) rebukes those who had fallen away in time of persecution, but he also exhorts them to penance: "Let each confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession can be received, while satisfaction and the forgiveness granted by the priests is acceptable to God" (c. xxix). (See LAPSI.) The heretic Novatian, on the contrary, asserted that "it is unlawful to admit apostates to the communion of the Church; their forgiveness must be left with God who alone can grant it" (Socrates, "Hist. eccl.", V, xxviii). Novatian and his party did not at first deny the power of the Church to absolve from sin; they affirmed that apostasy placed the sinner beyond the reach of that power — an error which was condemned by a synod at Rome in 251 (See NOVATIANISM.)

The distinction between sins that could be forgiven and others that could not, originated in the latter half of the second century as the doctrine of the Montanists (q.v.), and especially of Tertullian. While still a Catholic, Tertullian wrote (A.D. 200-6) his "De poenitentia" in which he distinguishes two kinds of penance, one as a preparation for baptism, the other to obtain forgiveness of certain grievous sins committed after baptism, i.e., apostasy, murder, and adultery. For these, however, he allows only one forgiveness: "Foreseeing these poisons of the Evil One, God, although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened up with the bar of baptism, has permitted it still to stand somewhat open. In the vestibule He has stationed a second repentance for opening to such as knock; but now once for all, because now for the second time; but never more, because the last time it had been in vain. . . . However, if any do incur the debt of a second repentance, his spirit is not to be forthwith cut down and undermined by despair. Let it be irksome to sin again, but let it not be irksome to repent again; let it be irksome to imperil oneself again, but let no one be ashamed to be set free again. Repeated sickness must have repeated medicine" (De poen., VII). Tertullian does not deny that the Church can forgive sins; he warns sinners against relapse, yet exhorts them to repent in case they should fall. His attitude at the time was not surprising, since in the early days the sins above mentioned were severely dealt with; this was done for disciplinary reasons, not because the Church lacked power to forgive.



In the minds, however, of some people the idea was developing that not only the exercise of the power but the power itself was limited. Against this false notion Pope Callistus (218-22) published his "peremptory edict" in which he declares: "I forgive the sins both of adultery and of fornication to those who have done penance." Thereupon Tertullian, now become a Montanist, wrote his "De pudicitia" (A. D. 217-22). In this work he rejects without scruple what he had taught as a Catholic: "I blush not at an error which I have cast off because I am delighted at being rid of it . . . one is not ashamed of his own improvement." The "error" which he imputes to Callistus and the Catholics was that the Church could forgive all sins: this, therefore, was the orthodox doctrine which Tertullian the heretic denied. In place of it he sets up the distinction between lighter sins which the bishop could forgive and more grievous sins which God alone could forgive. Though in an earlier treatise, "Scorpiace", he had said (c. x) that "the Lord left here to Peter and through him to the Church the keys of heaven" he now denies that the power granted to Peter had been transmitted to the Church, i.e., to the *numerus episcoporum* or body of bishops. Yet he claims this power for the "spirituals" (*pneumatici*), although these, for prudential reasons, do not make use of it. To the arguments of the "Psychici", as he termed the Catholics, he replies: "But the Church, you say, has the power to forgive sin. This I, even more than you, acknowledge and adjudge. I who in the new prophets have the Paraclete saying: 'The Church can forgive sin, but I will not do that (forgive) lest they (who are forgiven) fall into other sins' (De pud., XXI, vii). Thus Tertullian, by the accusation which he makes against the pope and by the restriction which he places upon the exercise of the power of forgiving sin, bears witness to the existence of that power in the Church which he had abandoned.

Not content with assailing Callistus and his doctrine, Tertullian refers to the "Shepherd" (*Pastor*), a work written A.D. 140-54, and takes its author Hermas (q.v.) to task for favouring the pardon of adulterers. In the days of Hermas there was evidently a school of rigorists who insisted that there was no pardon for sin committed after baptism (Simil. VIII, vi). Against this school the author of the "Pastor" takes a resolute stand. He teaches that by penance the sinner may hope for reconciliation with God and with the Church. "Go and tell all to repent and they shall live unto God. Because the Lord having had compassion, has sent me to give repentance to all men, although some are not worthy of it on account of their works" (Simil. VIII, ii). Hermas, however, seems to give but one opportunity for such reconciliation, for in Mandate IV, i, he seems to state categorically that "there is but one repentance for the servants of God", and further on in c. iii he says the *Lord* has had mercy on the work of his hands and hath set repentance for

them; "and he has entrusted to me the power of this repentance. And therefore I say to you, if any one has sinned . . he has opportunity to repent once". Repentance is therefore possible at least once in virtue of a power vested in the priest of God. That Hermas here intends to say that the sinner could be absolved only once in his whole life is by no means a necessary conclusion. His words may well be understood as referring to public penance (see below) and as thus understood they imply no limitation on the sacramental power itself. The same interpretation applies to the statement of Clement of Alexandria (d. circa A.D. 215): "For God being very merciful has vouchsafed in the case of those who, though in faith, have fallen into transgression, a second repentance, so that should anyone be tempted after his calling, he may still receive a penance not to be repented of" (Stromata, II, xiii). The existence of a regular system of penance is also hinted at in the work of Clement, "Who is the rich man that shall be saved?", where he tells the story of the Apostle John and his journey after the young bandit. John pledged his word that the youthful robber would find forgiveness from the Saviour; but even then a long serious penance was necessary before he could be restored to the Church. And when Clement concludes that "he who welcomes the angel of penance . . will not be ashamed when he sees the Saviour", most commentators think he alludes to the bishop or priest who presided over the ceremony of public penance. Even earlier, Dionysius of Corinth (d. circa A.D. 170), setting himself against certain growing Marcionistic traditions, taught not only that Christ has left to His Church the power of pardon, but that no sin is so great as to be excluded from the exercise of that power. For this we have the authority of Eusebius, who says (Hist. eccl., IV, xxiii): "And writing to the Church which is in Amastris, together with those in Pontus, he commands them to receive those who come back after any fall, whether it be delinquency or heresy".

The "Didache" (q.v.) written at the close of the first century or early in the second, in IV, xiv, and again in XIV, i, commands an individual confession in the congregation: "In the congregation thou shalt confess thy transgressions"; or again: "On the Lord's Day come together and break bread . . having confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure." Clement I (d. 99) in his epistle to the Corinthians not only exhorts to repentance, but begs the seditious to "submit themselves to the presbyters and receive correction so as to repent" (c. lvii), and Ignatius of Antioch at the close of the first century speaks of the mercy of God to sinners, provided they return "with one consent to the unity of Christ and the communion of the bishop". The clause "communion of the bishop" evidently means the bishop with his council of presbyters as assessors. He also says (Ad Philadel,) "that the bishop presides over penance".

The transmission of this power is plainly expressed in the prayer used at the consecration of a bishop as recorded in the Canons of Hippolytus (q.v.): "Grant him, O Lord, the episcopate and the spirit of clemency and the power to forgive sins" (c. xvii). Still more explicit is the formula cited in the "Apostolic Constitutions" (q.v.): "Grant him, O Lord almighty, through Thy Christ, the participation of Thy Holy Spirit, in order that he may have the power to remit sins according to Thy precept and Thy command, and to loosen every bond, whatsoever it be, according to the power which Thou hast granted to the Apostles." (Const. Apost., VIII, 5 in P. (i., 1. 1073). For the meaning of "episcopus", "sacerdos", "presbyter", as used in ancient documents, see BISHOP; HIERARCHY.

### **Exercise of the Power**

The granting by Christ of the power to forgive sins is the first essential of the Sacrament of Penance; in the actual exercise of this power are included the other essentials. The sacrament as such and on its own account has a matter and a form and it produces certain effects; the power of the keys is exercised by a minister (confessor) who must possess the proper qualifications, and the effects are wrought in the soul of the recipient, i.e., the penitent who with the necessary dispositions must perform certain actions (confession, satisfaction).

### **Matter and Form**

According to St. Thomas (Summa, III, lxxiv, a. 2) "the acts of the penitent are the proximate matter of this sacrament". This is also the teaching of Eugenius IV in the "Decretum pro Armenis" (Council of Florence, 1439) which calls the act's "*quasi materia*" of penance and enumerates them as contrition, confession, and satisfaction (Denzinger-Bannwart, "Enchir.", 699). The Thomists in general and other eminent theologians, e.g., Bellarmine, Toletus, Suarez, and De Lugo, hold the same opinion. According to Scotus (In IV Sent., d. 16, q. 1, n. 7) "the Sacrament of Penance is the absolution imparted with certain words" while the acts of the penitent are required for the worthy reception of the sacrament. The absolution as an external ceremony is the matter, and, as possessing significant force, the form. Among the advocates of this theory are St. Bonaventure, Capreolus, Andreas Vega, and Maldonatus. The Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, c. 3) declares: "the acts of the penitent, namely contrition, confession, and satisfaction, are the *quasi materia* of this sacrament". The Roman Catechism used in 1913 (II, v, 13) says: "These actions are called by the Council *quasi materia* not because they have not the nature of true matter, but because they are not the sort of matter which is employed externally as water in baptism and chrism in confirmation". For the theological discussion see Palmieri, op. cit., p. 144 sqq.; Pesch, "Praellectiones dogmaticae", Freiburg, 1897; De San, "De poenitentia", Bruges, 1899; Pohle, "Lehrb.

d. Dogmatik". Regarding the form of the sacrament, both the Council of Florence and the Council of Trent teach that it consists in the words of absolution. "The form of the Sacrament of penance, wherein its force principally consists, is placed in those words of the minister: "I absolve thee, etc."; to these words indeed, in accordance with the usage of Holy Church, certain prayers are laudably added, but they do not pertain to the essence of the form nor are they necessary for the administration of the sacrament" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 3). Concerning these additional prayers, the use of the Eastern and Western Churches, and the question whether the form is deprecatory or indicative and personal, see ABSOLUTION. Cf. also the writers referred to in the preceding paragraph.

### **Effect**

"The effect of this sacrament is deliverance from sin" (Council of Florence). The same definition in somewhat different terms is given by the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, c. 3): "So far as pertains to its force and efficacy, the effect (*res et effectus*) of this sacrament is reconciliation with God, upon which there sometimes follows, in pious and devout recipients, peace and calm of conscience with intense consolation of spirit". This reconciliation implies first of all that the guilt of sin is remitted, and consequently also the eternal punishment due to mortal sin. As the Council of Trent declares, penance requires the performance of satisfaction "not indeed for the eternal penalty which is remitted together with the guilt either by the sacrament or by the desire of receiving the sacrament, but for the temporal penalty which, as the Scriptures teach, is not always forgiven entirely as it is in baptism" (Sess. VI, c. 14). In other words baptism frees the soul not only from all sin but also from all indebtedness to Divine justice, whereas after the reception of absolution in penance, there may and usually does remain some temporal debt to be discharged by works of satisfaction (see below). "Venial sins by which we are not deprived of the grace of God and into which we very frequently fall are rightly and usefully declared in confession; but mention of them may, without any fault, be omitted and they can be expiated by many other remedies" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 3). Thus, an act of contrition suffices to obtain forgiveness of venial sin, and the same effect is produced by the worthy reception of sacraments other than penance, e.g., by Holy Communion.

The reconciliation of the sinner with God has as a further consequence the revival of those merits which he had obtained before committing grievous sin. Good works performed in the state of grace deserve a reward from God, but this is forfeited by mortal sin, so that if the sinner should die unforgiven his good deeds avail him nothing. So long as he remains in sin, he is incapable of meriting: even works which are good in themselves are, in his case, worthless: they cannot revive, because they

never were alive. But once his sin is cancelled by penance, he regains not only the state of grace but also the entire store of merit which had, before his sin, been placed to his credit. On this point theologians are practically unanimous: the only hindrance to obtaining reward is sin, and when this is removed, the former title, so to speak, is revalidated. On the other hand, if there were no such revalidation, the loss of merit once acquired would be equivalent to an eternal punishment, which is incompatible with the forgiveness effected by penance. As to the further question regarding the manner and extent of the revival of merit, various opinions have been proposed; but that which is generally accepted holds with Suarez (*De reviviscentia meritorum*) that the revival is complete, i.e., the forgiven penitent has to his credit as much merit as though he had never sinned. See De Augustinis, "De re sacramentaria", II, Rome, 1887; Pesch, *op. cit.*, VII; Göttler, "Der hl. Thomas v. Aquin u. die vortridentinischen Thomisten über die Wirkungen d. Buss-sakramentes", Freiburg, 1904.

### **The Minister (i.e., the Confessor)**

From the judicial character of this sacrament it follows that not every member of the Church is qualified to forgive sins; the administration of penance is reserved to those who are invested with authority. That this power does not belong to the laity is evident from the Bull of Martin V "Inter cunctas" (1418) which among other questions to be answered by the followers of Wyclif and Huss, has this: "whether he believes that the Christian . . . is bound as a necessary means of salvation to confess to a priest only and not to a layman or to laymen however good and devout" (Denzinger-Bannwart, "Enchir.", 670). Luther's proposition, that "any Christian, even a woman or a child" could in the absence of a priest absolve as well as pope or bishop, was condemned (1520) by Leo X in the Bull "Exurge Domine" (Enchir., 753). The Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, c. 6) condemns as "false and as at variance with the truth of the Gospel all doctrines which extend the ministry of the keys to any others than bishops and priests, imagining that the words of the Lord (Matt., xviii, 18; John, xx, 23) were, contrary to the institution of this sacrament, addressed to all the faithful of Christ in such wise that each and every one has the power of remitting sin". The Catholic doctrine, therefore, is that only bishops and priests can exercise the power.

These decrees moreover put an end, practically, to the usage, which had sprung up and lasted for some time in the Middle Ages, of confessing to a layman in case of necessity. This custom originated in the conviction that he who had sinned was obliged to make known his sin to some one — to a priest if possible, otherwise to a layman. In the work "On true penance and false" (*De vera et falsa poenitentia*), erroneously ascribed to St. Augustine, the counsel is given: "So great is the power



of confession that if a priest be not at hand, let him (the person desiring to confess) confess to his neighbour." But in the same place the explanation is given: "although he to whom the confession is made has no power to absolve, nevertheless he who confesses to his fellow (*socio*) becomes worthy of pardon through his desire of confessing to a priest" (P. L., XL, 1113). Lea, who cites (I, 220) the assertion of the Pseudo-Augustine about confession to one's neighbour, passes over the explanation. He consequently sets in a wrong light a series of incidents illustrating the practice and gives but an imperfect idea of the theological discussion which it aroused. Though Albertus Magnus (In IV Sent., dist. 17, art. 58) regarded as sacramental the absolution granted by a layman while St. Thomas (IV Sent., d. 17, q. 3, a. 3, sol. 2) speaks of it as "quodammodo sacramentalis", other great theologians took a quite different view. Alexander of Hales (Summa, Q. xix, De confessione memb., I, a. 1) says that it is an "imploring of absolution"; St. Bonaventure ("Opera", VII, p. 345, Lyons, 1668) that such a confession even in cases of necessity is not obligatory, but merely a sign of contrition; Scotus (IV Sent., d. 14, q. 4) that there is no precept obliging one to confess to a layman and that this practice may be very detrimental; Durandus of St. Pourcain (IV Sent., d. 17, q. 12) that in the absence of a priest, who alone can absolve in the tribunal of penance, there is no obligation to confess; Prierias (Summa Silv., s.v. Confessor, I, 1) that if absolution is given by a layman, the confession must be repeated whenever possible; this in fact was the general opinion. It is not then surprising that Dominicus Soto, writing in 1564, should find it difficult to believe that such a custom ever existed: "since (in confession to a layman) there was no sacrament . . . it is incredible that men, of their own accord and with no profit to themselves, should reveal to others the secrets of their conscience" (IV Sent., d. 18, q. 4, a. 1). Since, therefore, the weight of theological opinion gradually turned against the practice and since the practice never received the sanction of the Church, it cannot be urged as a proof that the power to forgive sins belonged at any time to the laity. What the practice does show is that both people -and theologians realized keenly the obligation of confessing their sins not to God alone but to some human listener, even though the latter possessed no power to absolve.

The same exaggerated notion appears in the practice of confessing to the deacons in case of necessity. They were naturally preferred to laymen when no priest was accessible because in virtue of their office they administered Holy Communion. Moreover, some of the earlier councils (Elvira, A. D. 300; Toledo, 400) and penitentials (Theodore) seemed to grant the power of penance to the deacon (in the priest's absence). The Council of Tribur (895) declared in regard to bandits that if, when captured or wounded they confessed to a priest or a deacon, they

should not be denied communion; and this expression "presbytero vel diacono" was incorporated in the Decree of Gratian and in many later documents from the tenth century to the thirteenth. The Council of York (1195) decreed that except in the gravest necessity the deacon should not baptize, give communion, or "impose penance on one who confessed". Substantially the same enactments are found in the Councils of London (1200) and Rouen (1231), the constitutions of St. Edmund of Canterbury (1236), and those of Walter of Kirkham, Bishop of Durham (1255). All these enactments, though stringent enough as regards ordinary circumstances, make exception for urgent necessity. No such exception is allowed in the decree of the Synod of Poitiers (1280): "desiring to root out an erroneous abuse which has grown up in our diocese through dangerous ignorance, we forbid deacons to hear confessions or to give absolution in the tribunal of penance: for it is certain and beyond doubt that they cannot absolve, since they have not the keys which are conferred only in the priestly order". This "abuse" probably disappeared in the fourteenth or fifteenth century; at all events no direct mention is made of it by the Council of Trent, though the reservation to bishops and priests of the absolving power shows plainly that the Council excluded deacons.

The authorization which the medieval councils gave the deacon in case of necessity did not confer the power to forgive sins. In some of the decrees it is expressly stated that the deacon has not the keys — *claves non habent*. In other enactments he is forbidden except in cases of necessity to "give" or "impose penance", *poenitentiam dare, imponere*. His function then was limited to the *forum externum*; in the absence of a priest he could "reconcile" the sinner, i.e., restore him to the communion of the Church; but he did not and could not give the sacramental absolution which a priest would have given (Palmieri, Pesch). Another explanation emphasizes the fact that the deacon could faithfully administer the Holy Eucharist. The faithful were under a strict obligation to receive Communion at the approach of death, and on the other hand the reception of this sacrament sufficed to blot out even mortal sin provided the communicant had the requisite dispositions. The deacon could hear their confession simply to assure himself that they were properly disposed, but not for the purpose of giving them absolution. If he went further and "imposed penance" in the stricter, sacramental sense, he exceeded his power, and any authorization to this effect granted by the bishop merely showed that the bishop was in error (Laurain, "De l'intervention des laïques, des diacres et des abbesses dans l'administration de la pénitence", Paris, 1897). In any case, the prohibitory enactments which finally abolished the practice did not deprive the deacon of a power which was his by virtue of his office; but they

brought into clearer light the traditional belief that only bishops and priests can administer the Sacrament of Penance. (See below under *Confession*.)

For valid administration, a twofold power is necessary: the power of order and the power of jurisdiction. The former is conferred by ordination, the latter by ecclesiastical authority (see JURISDICTION). At his ordination a priest receives the power to consecrate the Holy Eucharist, and for valid consecration he needs no jurisdiction. As regards penance, the case is different: "because the nature and character of a judgment requires that sentence be pronounced only on those who are subjects (of the judge) the Church of God has always held, and this Council affirms it to be most true, that the absolution which a priest pronounces upon one over whom he has not either ordinary or delegated jurisdiction, is of no effect" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 7). Ordinary jurisdiction is that which one has by reason of his office as involving the care of souls; the pope has it over the whole Church, the bishop within his diocese, the pastor within his parish. Delegated jurisdiction is that which is granted by an ecclesiastical superior to one who does not possess it by virtue of his office. The need of jurisdiction for administering this sacrament is usually expressed by saying that a priest must have "faculties" to hear confession (see FACULTIES). Hence it is that a priest visiting in a diocese other than his own cannot hear confession without special authorization from the bishop. Every priest, however, can absolve anyone who is at the point of death, because under those circumstances the Church gives all priests jurisdiction. As the bishop grants jurisdiction, he can also limit it by "reserving" certain cases (see RESERVATION) and he can even withdraw it entirely.

### **Recipient (i.e., the Penitent)**

The Sacrament of Penance was instituted by Christ for the remission of Penance was instituted by Christ for the remission of sins committed after baptism. Hence, no unbaptized person, however deep and sincere his sorrow, can be validly absolved. Baptism, in other words, is the first essential requisite on the part of the penitent. This does not imply that in the sins committed by an unbaptized person there is a special enormity or any other element that places them beyond the power of the keys; but that one must first be a member of the Church before he can submit himself and his sins to the judicial process of sacramental Penance.

### **Contrition and Attrition**

Without sorrow for sin there is no forgiveness. Hence the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, c. 4): "Contrition, which holds the first place among the acts of the penitent, is sorrow of heart and detestation for sin committed, with the resolve to sin no more". The Council (*ibid.*) furthermore distinguishes perfect contrition from imperfect contrition, which is called attrition, and which arises from the

consideration of the turpitude of sin or from the fear of [hell](#) and punishment. See ATTRITION; CONTRITION, where these two kinds of sorrow are more fully explained and an account is given of the principal discussions and opinions. See also treatises by Pesch, Palmieri, Pohle. For the present purpose it need only be stated that attrition, with the Sacrament of Penance, suffices to obtain forgiveness of sin. The Council of Trent further teaches (*ibid.*): "though it sometimes happens that this contrition is perfect and that it reconciles man with [God](#) before the actual reception of this sacrament, still the reconciliation is not to be ascribed to the contrition itself apart from the desire of the sacrament which it (contrition) includes". In accordance with this teaching [Pius V](#) condemned (1567) the proposition of Baius asserting that even perfect contrition does not, except in case of necessity or of martyrdom, remit sin without the actual reception of the sacrament (Denzinger-Bannwart, "Enchir.", 1071). It should be noted, however, that the contrition of which the Council speaks is perfect in the sense that it includes the desire (*votum*) to receive the sacrament. Whoever in fact repents of his sin out of love for [God](#) must be willing to comply with the Divine ordinance regarding penance, i.e., he would confess if a confessor were accessible, and he realizes that he is obliged to confess when he has the opportunity. But it does not follow that the penitent is at liberty to choose between two modes of obtaining forgiveness, one by an act of contrition independently of the sacrament, the other by confession and absolution. This view was put forward by Peter Martinez (de Osma) in the proposition: "mortal sins as regards their guilt and their punishment in the other world, are blotted out by contrition alone without any reference to the keys"; and the proposition was condemned by [Sixtus IV](#) in 1479 (Denzinger-Bannwart, "Enchir.", 724). Hence it is clear that not even heartfelt sorrow based on the highest motives, can, in the present order of salvation, dispense with the power of the keys, i.e., with the Sacrament of Penance.

### **Confession (Necessity)**

"For those who after baptism have fallen into sin, the Sacrament of Penance is as necessary unto salvation as is baptism itself for those who have not yet been regenerated" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 2). Penance, therefore, is not an institution the use of which was left to the option of each sinner so that he might, if he preferred, hold aloof from the Church and secure forgiveness by some other means, e. g., by acknowledging his sin in the privacy of his own mind. As already stated, the power granted by [Christ](#) to the Apostles is twofold, to forgive and to retain, in such a way that what they forgive [God](#) forgives and what they retain [God](#) retains. But this grant would be nullified if, in case the Church retained the sins of penitent, he could, as it were, take appeal to [God's](#) tribunal and obtain

pardon. Nor would the power to retain have any meaning if the sinner, passing over the Church, went in the first instance to God, since by the very terms of the grant, God retains sin once committed so long as it is not remitted by the Church. It would indeed have been strangely inconsistent if Christ in conferring this twofold power on the Apostles had intended to provide some other means of forgiveness such as confessing "to God alone". Not only the Apostles, but any one with an elementary knowledge of human nature would have perceived at once that the easier means would be chosen and that the grant of power so formally and solemnly made by Christ had no real significance (Palmieri, op. cit., thesis X). On the other hand, once it is admitted that the grant was effectual and consequently that the sacrament is necessary in order to obtain forgiveness, it plainly follows that the penitent must in some way make known his sin to those who exercise the power. This is conceded even by those who reject the Sacrament of Penance as a Divine institution. "Such remission was manifestly impossible without the declaration of the offences to be forgiven" (Lea, "History etc.", I, p. 182). The Council of Trent., after declaring that Christ left his priests as His vicars unto whom as rulers and judges the faithful must make known their sins, adds: "It is evident that the priests could not have exercised this judgment without knowledge of the cause, nor could they have observed justice in enjoining satisfaction if (the faithful) had declared their sins in a general way only and not specifically and in detail" (Sess. XIV, c. 5).

Since the priest in the pardoning of sin exercises a strict judicial function, Christ must will that such tremendous power be used wisely and prudently. Moreover, in virtue of the grant of Christ the priest can forgive all sins without distinction, *quoecumque solveritis*. How can a wise and prudent judgment be rendered if the priest be in ignorance of the cause on which judgment is pronounced? And how can he obtain the requisite knowledge unless it come from the spontaneous acknowledgment of the sinner? This necessity of manifestation is all the clearer if satisfaction for sin, which from the beginning has been part of the penitential discipline, is to be imposed not only wisely but also justly. That there is a necessary connection between the prudent judgment of the confessor and the detailed confession of sins is evident from the nature of a judicial procedure and especially from a full analysis of the grant of Christ in the light of tradition. No judge may release or condemn without full knowledge of the case. And again the tradition of the earliest time sees in the words of Christ not only the office of the judge sitting in judgment, but the kindness of a father who weeps with the repentant child (Aphraates, "Ep. de Poenitentia", dem. 7) and the skill of the physician who after the manner of Christ heals the wounds of the soul (Origen in



P. G., XII, 418; P.L., XII, 1086). Clearly, therefore, the words of Christ imply the doctrine of the external manifestation of conscience to a priest in order to obtain pardon.

### **Confession (Various Kinds)**

Confession is the avowal of one's own sins made to a duly authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining their forgiveness through the power of the keys. Virtual confession is simply the will to confess even where, owing to circumstances, declaration of sin is impossible; actual confession is any action by which the penitent manifests his sin. It may be made in general terms, e.g., by reciting the "Confiteor", or it may consist in a more or less detailed statement of one's sins; when the statement is complete, the confession is distinct. Public confession, as made in the hearing of a number of people (e.g. a congregation) differs from private, or secret, confession which is made to the priest alone and is often called *auricular*, i.e., spoken into the ear of the confessor. We are here concerned mainly with actual distinct confession which is the usual practice in the Church and which so far as the validity of the sacrament is concerned, may be either public or private. "As regards the method of confessing secretly to the priest alone, though Christ did not forbid that any one, in punishment of his crimes and for his own humiliation as also to give others an example and to edify the Church, should confess his sins publicly, still, this has not been commanded by Divine precept nor would it be prudent to decree by any human law that sins, especially secret sins, should be publicly confessed. Since, then, secret sacramental confession, which from the beginning has been and even now is the usage of the Church, was always commended with great and unanimous consent by the holiest and most ancient Fathers; thereby is plainly refuted the foolish calumny of those who make bold to teach that it (secret confession) is something foreign to the Divine command, a human invention devised by the Fathers assembled in the Lateran Council" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 5). It is therefore Catholic doctrine, first, that Christ did not prescribe public confession, salutary as it might be, nor did He forbid it; second, that secret confession, sacramental in character, has been the practice of the Church from the earliest days.

### **Traditional Belief and Practice**

How firmly rooted in the Catholic mind is the belief in the efficacy and necessity of confession, appears clearly from the fact that the Sacrament of Penance endures in the Church after the countless attacks to which it has been subjected during the last four centuries. If at the Reformation or since the Church could have surrendered a doctrine or abandoned a practice for the sake of peace and to soften a "hard saying", confession would have been the first to disappear. Yet it is

precisely during this period that the Church has defined in the most exact terms the nature of penance and most vigorously insisted on the necessity of confession. It will not of course be denied that at the beginning of the sixteenth century confession was generally practised throughout the [Christian world](#). The Reformers themselves, notably [Calvin](#), admitted that it had been in existence for three centuries when they attributed its origin to the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). At that time, according to Lea (op. cit., I, 228), the necessity of confession "became a new article of faith" and the canon, *omnis utriusque sexus*, "is perhaps the most important legislative act in the history of the Church" (*ibid.*, 230). But, as the Council of Trent affirms, "the Church did not through the Lateran Council prescribe that the [faithful of Christ](#) should confess — a thing which it knew to be by Divine right necessary and established — but that the precept of confessing at least once a year should be complied with by all and every one when they reached the age of discretion" (Sess., XIV, c. 5). The Lateran edict presupposed the necessity of confession as an article of Catholic belief and laid down a law as to the minimum frequency of confession — at least once a year.

### **In the Middle Ages**

In constructing their systems of theology, the [medieval](#) doctors discuss at length the various problems connected with the Sacrament of Penance. They are practically unanimous in holding that confession is obligatory; the only notable exception in the twelfth century is Gratian, who gives the arguments for and against the necessity of confessing to a priest and leaves the question open (Decretum, p. II, De poen., d. 1, in P.L., CLXXXVII, 1519-63). [Peter Lombard](#) (d. about 1150) takes up the authorities cited by Gratian and by means of them proves that "without confession there is no pardon" . . . "no entrance into paradise" (IV Sent., d. XVII, 4, in P.L., CXCII, 880-2). The principal debate, in which Hugh of St. Victor, Abelard, Robert Pullus, and Peter of Poitiers took the leading parts, concerned the origin and sanction of the obligation, and the value of the different Scriptural texts cited to prove the institution of penance. This question passed on to the thirteenth century and received its solution in very plain terms from St. Thomas Aquinas. Treating (Contra Gentes, IV, 72) of the necessity of penance and its parts, he shows that "the institution of confession was necessary in order that the sin of the penitent might be revealed to [Christ's minister](#); hence the minister to whom the confession is made must have judicial power as representing [Christ](#), the Judge of the living and the dead. This power again requires two things: authority of knowledge and power to absolve or to condemn. These are called the two keys of the Church which the Lord entrusted to Peter (Matt., xvi, 19). But they were not given to Peter to be held by him alone, but to be handed on through him to others;

else sufficient provision would not have been made for the salvation of the faithful. These keys derive their efficacy from the passion of Christ whereby He opened to us the gate of the heavenly kingdom". And he adds that as no one can be saved without baptism either by actual reception or by desire, so they who sin after baptism cannot be saved unless they submit to the keys of the Church either by actually confessing or by the resolve to confess when opportunity permits. Furthermore, as the rulers of the Church cannot dispense any one from baptism as a means of salvation neither can they give a dispensation whereby the sinner may be forgiven without confession and absolution. The same explanation and reasoning is given by all the Scholastics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They were in practical agreement as to the necessity of jurisdiction in the confessor. Regarding the time at which confession had to be made, some held with William of Auvergne that one was obliged to confess as soon as possible after sinning; others with Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas that it sufficed to confess within the time limits prescribed by the Church (Paschal Time); and this more lenient view finally prevailed. Further subjects of discussion during this period were the choice of confessor; the obligation of confessing before receiving other sacraments, especially the Eucharist; the integrity of confession; the obligation of secrecy on the part of the confessor, i.e., the seal of confession. The careful and minute treatment of these points and the frank expression of divergent opinions were characteristic of the Schoolmen but they also brought out more clearly the central truths regarding penance and they opened the way to the conciliar pronouncements at Florence and Trent which gave to Catholic doctrine a more precise formulation. See Vacandard and Bernard in "Dict. de theol. cath.", s.v. Confession; Turmel, "Hist. de la theologie positive", Paris, 1904; Cambier, "De divina institutione confessionis sacramentalis", Louvain, 1884.

Not only was the obligation recognized in the Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages, but the schismatic Greeks held the same belief and still hold it. They fell into schism under Photius (q. v.) in 869, but retained confession, which therefore must have been in use for some time previous to the ninth century. The practice, moreover, was regulated in detail by the Penitential Books (q. v.), which prescribed the canonical penance for each sin, and minute questions for the examination of the penitent. The most famous of these books among the Greeks were those attributed to John the Faster (q. v.) and to John the Monk. In the West similar works were written by the Irish monks St. Columbanus (d. 615) and Cumman, and by the Englishmen Ven. Bede (d. 735), Egbert (d. 767), and Theodore of Canterbury (d. 690). Besides the councils mentioned above (*Minister*) decrees pertaining to confession were enacted at Worms (868), Paris (820), Chalons (813,

650), Tours (813), Reims (1113). The Council of Chaleuth (785) says: "if any one (which God forbid) should depart this life without penance or confession he is not to be prayed for". The significant feature about these enactments is that they do not introduce confession as a new practice, but take it for granted and regulate its administration. Hereby they put into practical effect what had been handed down by tradition.

St. Gregory the Great (d. 604) teaches "the affliction of penance is efficacious in blotting out sins when it is enjoined by the sentence of the priest when the burden of it is decided by him in proportion to the offence after weighing the deeds of those who confess" (In I Reg., III, v, n. 13 in P.L., LXXIX, 207); Pope Leo the Great (440-61), who is often credited with the institution of confession, refers to it as an "Apostolic rule". Writing to the bishops of Campania he forbids as an abuse "contrary to the Apostolic rule" (*contra apostolicam regulam*) the reading out in public of a written statement of their sins drawn up by the faithful, because, he declares, "it suffices that the guilt of conscience be manifested to priests alone in secret confession" (Ep. clxviii in P.L., LIV, 1210). In another letter (Ep. cviii in P. L., LIV, 1011), after declaring that by Divine ordinance the mercy of God can be obtained only through the supplications of the priests, he adds: "the mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, gave the rulers of the Church this power that they should impose penance on those who confess and admit them when purified by salutary satisfaction to the communion of the sacraments through the gateway of reconciliation. "The earlier Fathers frequently speak of sin as a disease which needs treatment, something drastic, at the hands of the spiritual physician or surgeon. St. Augustine (d. 450) tells the sinner: "an abscess had formed in your conscience; it tormented you and gave you no rest. . . . confess, and in confession let the pus come out and flow away" (In ps. lxvi, n. 6). St. Jerome (d. 420) comparing the priests of the New Law with those of the Old who decided between leprosy and leprosy, says: "likewise in the New Testament the bishops and the priest bind or loose . . . in virtue of their office", having heard various sorts of sinners, they know who is to be bound and who is to be loosed" . . . (In Matt., xvi, 19); in his "Sermon on Penance" he says: "let no one find it irksome to show his wound *vulnus confiteri*) because without confession it cannot be healed." St. Ambrose (d. 397): "this right (of loosing and binding) has been conferred on priests only" (De pen., I, ii, n. 7); St. Basil (d. 397): "As men do not make known their bodily ailments to anybody and everybody, but only to those who are skilled in healing, so confession of sin ought to be made to those who can cure it" (Reg. brevior., 229). For those who sought to escape the obligation of confession it was natural enough to assert that repentance was the affair of the soul alone with its Maker, and that

no intermediary was needed. It is this pretext that St. Augustine sweeps aside in one of his sermons: "Let no one say I do penance secretly; I perform it in the sight of God, and He who is to pardon me knows that in my heart I repent". Whereupon St. Augustine asks: "Was it then said to no purpose, 'What you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed in heaven?' Was it for nothing that the keys were given to the Church?" (Sermo cccxcii, n. 3, in P.L., XXXIX, 1711). The Fathers, of course, do not deny that sin must be confessed to God; at times, indeed, in exhorting the faithful to confess, they make no mention of the priest; but such passages must be taken in connection with the general teaching of the Fathers and with the traditional belief of the Church. Their real meaning is expressed, e.g., by Anastasius Sinaita (seventh century): "Confess your sins to Christ through the priest" (De sacra synaxi), and by Egbert, Archbishop of York (d. 766): "Let the sinner confess his evil deeds to God, that the priest may know what penance to impose" (Mansi, Coll. Conc., XII, 232). For the passages in St. John Chrysostom, see Hurter, "Theol. dogmat.", III, 454; Pesch, "Praelectiones", VII, 165.

The Fathers, knowing well that one great difficulty which the sinner has to overcome is shame, encourage him in spite of it to confess. "I appeal to you, my brethren", says St. Pacian (d. 391), "... you who are not ashamed to sin and yet are ashamed to confess ... I beseech you, cease to hide your wounded conscience. Sick people who are prudent do not fear the physician, though he cut and burn even the secret parts of the body " (Paraenesis ad poenit., n. 6, 8). St. John Chrysostom (d. 347) pleads eloquently with the sinner: "Be not ashamed to approach (the priest) because you have sinned, nay rather, for this very reason approach. No one says: Because I have an ulcer, I will not go near a physician or take medicine; on the contrary, it is just this that makes it needful to call in physicians and apply remedies. We (priests) know well how to pardon, because we ourselves are liable to sin. This is why God did not give us angels to be our doctors, nor send down Gabriel to rule the flock, but from the fold itself he chooses the shepherds, from among the sheep He appoints the leader, in order that he may be inclined to pardon his followers and, keeping in mind his own fault, may not set himself in hardness against the members of the flock" (Hom. "On Frequent Assembly" in P.G., LXIII, 463).

Tertullian had already used the same argument with those who, for fear of exposing their sins, put off their confession from day to day — "mindful more of their shame than of their salvation, like those who hide from the physician the malady they suffer in the secret parts of the body, and thus perish through bashfulness. . . because we withhold anything from the knowledge of men, do we thereby conceal it from God? . . . Is it better to hide and be damned than to be openly absolved?"



("De poenit.", x). St. Cyprian (d. 258) pleads for greater mildness in the treatment of sinners, "since we find that no one ought to be forbidden to do penance and that to those who implore the mercy of God peace can be granted through His priests. . . . And because in hell there is no confession, nor can *exomologesis* be made there, they who repent with their whole heart and ask for it, should be received into the Church and therein saved unto the Lord" (Ep. lv, "Ad Antonian.", n. 29). Elsewhere he says that many who do not do penance or confess their guilt are filled with unclean spirits; and by contrast he praises the greater faith and more wholesome fear of those who, though not guilty of any idolatrous action, "nevertheless, because they thought of [such action], confess [their thought] in sorrow and simplicity to the priests of God, make the *exomologesis* of their conscience, lay bare the burden of their soul, and seek a salutary remedy even for wounds that are slight" ("De lapsis", xxvi sqq.). Origen (d. 154) compares the sinner to those whose stomachs are overloaded with undigested food or with excess of humours and phlegm if they vomit, they are relieved, "so, too, those who have sinned, if they conceal and keep the sin within, they are distressed and almost choked by its humour or phlegm. But if they accuse themselves and confess, they at the same time vomit the sin and cast off every cause of disease" (Homil. on Ps. xxxvii, n. 6, in P.G., XII, 1386). St. Irenaeus (130-102) relates the case of certain women whom the Gnostic Marcus had led into sin. "Some of them", he says, "perform their *exomologesis* openly also [*etiam in manifesto*], while others, afraid to do this, draw back in silence, despairing to regain the life of God" ("Adv. haer.", I, xiii, 7, in P.G., VII, 591). This *etiam in manifesto* suggests at least that they had confessed privately, but could not bring themselves to make a public confession. The advantage of confession as against the concealment of sin is shown in the words of St. Clement of Rome in his letter to the Corinthians: "It is better for a man to confess his sins than to harden his heart" (Ep. I, "Ad Cor.", li, 1).

This outline of the patristic teaching shows:

- that the Fathers insisted on a manifestation of sin as the necessary means of unburdening the soul and regaining the friendship of God;
- that the confession was to be made not to a layman but to priests;
- that priests exercise the power of absolving in virtue of a Divine commission, i.e., as representatives of Christ;
- that the sinner, if he would be saved, must overcome his shame and repugnance to confession.

And since the series of witnesses goes back to the latter part of the first century, the practice of confession must have existed from the earliest days. St. Leo had good reason for appealing to the "Apostolic rule" which made secret confession to

the priest sufficient without the necessity of a public declaration. Nor is it surprising that Lactantius (d. c. 330) should have pointed to the practice of confession as a characteristic of the true Church: "That is the true Church in which there is confession and penance, which applies a wholesome remedy to the sins and wounds whereunto the weakness of the flesh is subject" ("Div. Inst.", IV, 30).

### **WHAT SINS ARE TO BE CONFESSED**

Among the propositions condemned by the Council of Trent is the following: "That to obtain forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament of Penance, it is not necessary by Divine law to confess each and every mortal sin which is called to mind by due and careful examination, to confess even hidden sins and those that are against the last two precepts of the Decalogue, together with the circumstances that change the specific nature of the sin; such confession is only useful for the instruction and consolation of the penitent, and of old was practised merely in order to impose canonical satisfaction" (Can de poenit., vii). The Catholic teaching consequently is: that all mortal sins must be confessed of which the penitent is conscious, for these are so related that none of them can be remitted until all are remitted. Remission means that the soul is restored to the friendship of God; and this is obviously impossible if there remain unforgiven even a single mortal sin. Hence, the penitent, who in confession willfully conceals a mortal sin, derives no benefit whatever; on the contrary, he makes void the sacrament and thereby incurs the guilt of sacrilege. If, however, the sin be omitted, not through any fault of the penitent, but through forgetfulness, it is forgiven indirectly; but it must be declared at the next confession and thus submitted to the power of the keys.

While mortal sin is the necessary matter of confession, venial sin is sufficient matter, as are also the mortal sins already forgiven in previous confessions. This is the common teaching of theologians, in accord with the condemnation pronounced by Leo X on Luther's assertion, 'By no means presume to confess venial sins . . . in the primitive Church only manifest mortal sins were confessed' (Bull, "Exurge Domine"; Denzinger, "Enchir.", 748). In the constitution "Inter cunctas" (17 Feb., 1304), Benedict XI, after stating that penitents who had confessed to a priest belonging to a religious order are not obliged to reiterate the confession to their own priest, adds: "Though it is not necessary to confess the same sins over again, nevertheless we regard it as salutary to repeat the confession, because of the shame it involves, which is a great part of penance; hence we strictly enjoin the Brothers (Dominicans and Franciscans] to admonish their penitents and in sermons 'exhort them that they confess to their own priests at least once a year, assuring them that this will undoubtedly conduce to their spiritual welfare" (Denzinger, "Enchir.", 470). St.

Thomas gives the same reason for this practice: the oftener one confesses the more is the (temporal) penalty reduced; hence one might confess over and over again until the whole penalty is cancelled, nor would he thereby offer any injury to the sacrament" (IV Sent., d. xvii, q. 3, sol. 5 ad 4).

## **SATISFACTION**

As stated above, the absolution given by the priest to a penitent who confesses his sins with the proper dispositions remits both the guilt and the eternal punishment (of mortal sin). There remains, however, some indebtedness to Divine justice which must be cancelled here or hereafter (see [PURGATORY](#)). In order to have it cancelled here, the penitent receives from his confessor what is usually called his "penance", usually in the form of certain prayers which he is to say, or of certain actions which he is to perform, such as visits to a church, the [Stations of the Cross](#), etc. Alms, deeds, fasting, and prayer are the chief means of satisfaction, but other penitential works may also be enjoined. The quality and extent of the penance is determined by the confessor according to the nature of the sins revealed, the special circumstances of the penitent, his liability to relapse, and the need of eradicating evil habits. Sometimes the penance is such that it may be performed at once; in other cases it may require a more or less considerable period, as, e.g., where it is prescribed for each day during a week or a month. But even then the penitent may receive another sacrament (e.g., Holy Communion) immediately after confession, since absolution restores him to the state of grace. He is nevertheless under obligation to continue the performance of his penance until it is completed. In theological language, this penance is called satisfaction and is defined, in the words of St. Thomas: "The payment of the temporal punishment due on account of the offence committed against [God](#) by sin" (Suppl. to Summa, Q. xii, a. 3). It is an act of justice whereby the injury done to the honour of [God](#) is required, so far at least as the sinner is able to make reparation (*poena vindicativa*) ; it is also a preventive remedy, inasmuch as it is meant to hinder the further commission of sin (*poena medicinalis*). Satisfaction is not, like contrition and confession, an essential part of the sacrament, because the primary effect, i.e., remission of guilt and eternal punishment — is obtained without satisfaction; but it is an integral part, because it is requisite for obtaining the secondary effect — i.e., remission of the temporal punishment. The Catholic doctrine on this point is set forth by the Council of Trent, which condemns the proposition: "That the entire punishment is always remitted by [God](#) together with the guilt, and the satisfaction required of penitents is no other than faith whereby they believe that [Christ](#) has satisfied for them"; and further the proposition: "That the keys were given to the Church for loosing only and not for binding as well; that therefore in enjoining penance on those who

confess, priests act contrary to the purpose of the keys and the institution of Christ; that it is a fiction [to say] that after the eternal punishment has been remitted in virtue of the keys, there usually remains to be paid a temporal penalty" (Can. "de Sac. poenit.", 12, 15; Denzinger, "Enchir.", 922, 925).

As against the errors contained in these statements, the Council (Sess. XIV, c. viii) cites conspicuous examples from Holy Scripture. The most notable of these is the judgment pronounced upon David: "And Nathan said to David: the Lord also hath taken away thy sin: thou shalt not die. Nevertheless, because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing, the child that is born to thee, shall surely die" (II Kings, xii, 13, 14; cf. Gen., iii, 17; Num. xx, 11sq.). David's sin was forgiven and yet he had to suffer punishment in the loss of his child. The same truth is taught by St. Paul (I Cor., xi, 32): "But whilst we are judged, we are chastised by the Lord, that we be not condemned with this world". The chastisement here mentioned is a temporal punishment, but a punishment unto Salvation.

"Of all the parts of penance", says the Council of Trent (loc. cit.), "satisfaction was constantly recommended to the Christian people by our Fathers". This the Reformers themselves admitted. Calvin (Instit., III, iv, 38) says he makes little account of what the ancient writings contain in regard to satisfaction because "nearly all whose books are extant went astray on this point or spoke too severely".

Chemnitius ("Examen C. Trident.", 4) acknowledges that Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine extolled the value of penitential works; and Flacius Illyricus, in the "Centuries", has a long list of Fathers and early writers who, as he admits, bear witness to the doctrine of satisfaction. Some of the texts already cited (Confession) expressly mention satisfaction as a part of sacramental penance. To these may be added St. Augustine, who says that "Man is forced to suffer even after his sins are forgiven, though it was sin that brought down on him this penalty. For the punishment outlasts the guilt, lest the guilt should be thought slight if with its forgiveness the punishment also came to an end" (Tract. cxxiv, "In Joann.", n. 5, in P.L., XXXV, 1972); St. Ambrose: "So efficacious is the medicine of penance that [in view of it] God seems to revoke His sentence" ("De poenit.", 1, 2, c. vi, n. 48, in P.L., XVI, 509); Caesarius of Arles: "If in tribulation we give not thanks to God nor redeem our faults by good works, we shall be detained in the fire of purgatory until our slightest sins are burned away like wood or straw" (Sermo civ, n. 4). Among the motives for doing penance on which the Fathers most frequently insist is this: If you punish your own sin, God will spare you; but in any case the sin will not go unpunished. Or again they declare that God wants us to perform satisfaction in order that we may clear off our indebtedness to His justice. It is therefore with

good reason that the earlier councils — e.g., Laodicaea (A. D. 372) and Carthage IV (397) — teach that satisfaction is to be imposed on penitents; and the Council of Trent but reiterates the traditional belief and practice when it makes the giving of “penance” obligatory on the confessor. Hence, too, the practice of granting indulgences, whereby the Church comes to the penitent’s assistance and places at his disposal the treasury of Christ’s merits. Though closely connected with penance, indulgences are not a part of the sacrament; they presuppose confession and absolution, and are properly called an extra-sacramental remission of the temporal punishment incurred by sin. (See INDULGENCES.)

### **SEAL OF CONFESSION**

Regarding the sins revealed to him in sacramental confession, the priest is bound to inviolable secrecy. From this obligation he cannot be excused either to save his own life or good name, to save the life of another, to further the ends of human justice, or to avert any public calamity. No law can compel him to divulge the sins confessed to him, or any oath which he takes — e.g., as a witness in court. He cannot reveal them either directly — i.e., by repeating them in so many words — or indirectly — i.e., by any sign or action, or by giving information based on what he knows through confession. The only possible release from the obligation of secrecy is the permission to speak of the sins given freely and formally by the penitent himself. Without such permission, the violation of the seal of confession would not only be a grievous sin, but also a sacrilege. It would be contrary to the natural law because it would be an abuse of the penitent’s confidence and an injury, very serious perhaps, to his reputation. It would also violate the Divine law, which, while imposing the obligation to confess, likewise forbids the revelation of that which is confessed. That it would infringe ecclesiastical law is evident from the strict prohibition and the severe penalties enacted in this matter by the Church. “Let him beware of betraying the sinner by word or sign or in any other way whatsoever. . . we decree that he who dares to reveal a sin made known to him in the tribunal of penance shall not only be deposed from the priestly office, but shall moreover be subjected to close confinement in a monastery and the performance of perpetual penance” (Fourth Lateran Council, cap. xxi; Denzinger, “Enchir.”, 438).

Furthermore, by a decree of the Holy Office (18 Nov., 1682), confessors are forbidden, even where there would be no revelation direct or indirect, to make any use of the knowledge obtained in confession that would displease the penitent, even though the non-use would occasion him greater displeasure.

These prohibitions, as well as the general obligation of secrecy, apply only to what the confessor learns through confession made as part of the sacrament. He is not bound by the seal as regards what may be told him by a person who, he is sure, has



no intention of making a sacramental confession but merely speaks to him "in confidence"; prudence, however, may impose silence concerning what he learns in this way. Nor does the obligation of the seal prevent the confessor from speaking of things which he has learned outside confession, though the same things have also been told him in confession; here again, however, other reasons may oblige him to observe secrecy. The same obligation, with the limitations indicated, rests upon all those who in one way or another acquire a knowledge of what is said in confession, e.g., an interpreter who translates for the priest the words of the penitent, a person who either accidentally or intentionally overhears the confession, an ecclesiastical superior (e.g., a bishop) to whom the confessor applies for authorization to absolve the penitent from a reserved case. Even the penitent, according to some theologians, is bound to secrecy; but the more general opinion leaves him free; as he can authorize the confessor to speak of what he has confessed, he can also, of his own accord, speak to others. But he is obliged to take care that what he reveals shall cast no blame or suspicion on the confessor, since the latter cannot defend himself. In a word, it is more in keeping with the intention of the Church and with the reverence due to the sacrament that the penitent himself should refrain from speaking of his confession. Such, undoubtedly, was the motive that prompted St. Leo to condemn the practice of letting the penitent read in public a written statement of his sins (see above); and it needs scarcely be added that the Church, while recognizing the validity of public confession, by no means requires it; as the Council of Trent declares, it would be imprudent to prescribe such a confession by any human enactment. (For provisions of the civil law regarding this matter, see SEAL OF CONFESSION.)

### **PUBLIC PENANCE**

An undeniable proof both of the practice of confession and of the necessity of satisfaction is found in the usage of the early Church according to which severe and often prolonged penance was prescribed and performed. The elaborate system of penance exhibited in the "Penitentials" and conciliar decrees, referred to above, was of course the outcome of a long development; but it simply expressed in greater detail the principles and the general attitude towards sin and satisfaction which had prevailed from the beginning. Frequently enough the latter statutes refer to the earlier practice either in explicit terms or by reiterating what had been enacted long before. At times, also, they allude to documents which were then extant, but which have not yet come down to us, e.g., the *libellus* mentioned in the African synods of 251 and 255 as containing *singula capitum placita*, i.e., the details of previous legislation ([St. Cyprian](#), Ep. xxi). Or again, they point to a system of penance that was already in operation and needed only to be applied to

particular cases, like that of the Corinthians to whom Clement of Rome wrote his First Epistle about A. D. 96, exhorting them: "Be subject in obedience to the priests (*presbyteris*) and receive discipline [*correctionem*] unto penance, bending the knees of your hearts" (Ep. I "Ad Cor.", lvii). At the close, therefore, of the first century, the performance of penance was required, and the nature of that penance was determined, not by the penitent himself, but by ecclesiastical authority. (See [EXCOMMUNICATION.](#))

Three kinds of penance are to be distinguished canonical, prescribed by councils or bishops in the form of "canons" for graver offences. This might be either private, i.e., performed secretly or public i.e., performed in the presence of bishop, clergy and people. When accompanied by certain rites as prescribed in the Canons, it was solemn penance. The public penance was not necessarily canonical; it might be undertaken by the penitent of his own accord. Solemn penance, the most severe of all, was inflicted for the worst offences only, notably for adultery, murder, and idolatry, the "capital sins". The name of *penitent* was applied especially to those who performed public canonical penance. "There is a harder and more grievous penance, the doers of which are properly called in the Church *penitents*; they are excluded from participation in the sacraments of the altar, lest by unworthily receiving they eat and drink judgment unto themselves" (St. Augustine, "De utilitate agenda poenit.", ser. cccxxxii, c. iii).

The penitential process included a series of acts, the first of which was confession. Regarding this, Origen, after speaking of baptism, tells us: "There is a yet more severe and arduous pardon of sins by penance, when the sinner washes his couch with tears, and when he blushes not to disclose his sin to the priest of the Lord and seeks the remedy" (Homil. "In Levit.", ii, 4, in P. G., XII, 418). Again he says: "They who have sinned, if they hide and retain their sin within their breast, are grievously tormented; but if the sinner becomes his own accuser, while he does this, he discharges the cause of all his malady. Only let him carefully consider to whom he should confess his sin; what is the character of the physician; if he be one who will be weak with the weak, who will weep with the sorrowful, and who understands the discipline of condolence and fellow-feeling. So that when his skill shall be known and his pity felt, you may follow what he shall advise. Should he think your disease to be such that it should be declared in the assembly of the faithful-whereby others may be edified, and yourself easily reformed-this must be done with much deliberation and the skillful advice of the physician" (Homil. "In Ps. xxxvii", n. 6, in P. G., XII, 1386). Origen here states quite plainly the relation between confession and public penance. The sinner must first make known his sins to the priest, who will decide whether any further manifestation is called for.

Public penance did not necessarily include a public avowal of sin. As St. Augustine also declares, "If his sin is not only grievous in itself, but involves scandal given to others, and if the bishop [*antistes*] judges that it will be useful to the Church [to have the sin published], let not the sinner refuse to do penance in the sight of many or even of the people at large, let him not resist, nor through shame add to his mortal wound a greater evil" (Sermo cli, n. 3). It was therefore the duty of the confessor to determine how far the process of penance should go beyond sacramental confession. It lay with him also to fix the quality and duration of the penance: "Satisfaction", says Tertullian, "is determined by confession; penance is born of confession, and by penance God is appeased" (De poenit., viii). In the East there existed from the earliest times (Sozomen, H. E., VII, xvi) or at least from the outbreak of the Novatianist schism (Socrates, H. E., V, xix) a functionary known as *presbyter penitentiarius*, i. e., a priest especially appointed on account of his prudence and reserve to hear confessions and impose public penance. If the confessor deemed it necessary, he obliged the penitent to appear before the bishop and his council [*presbyterium*] and these again decided whether the crime was of such a nature that it ought to be confessed in presence of the people. Then followed, usually on Ash Wednesday, the imposition of public penance whereby the sinner was excluded for a longer or shorter period from the communion of the Church and in addition was obliged to perform certain penitential exercises, the *exomologesis*. This term, however, had various meanings: it designated sometimes the entire process of penance (Tertullian), or again the avowal of sin at the beginning or, finally, the public avowal which was made at the end — i.e., after the performance of the penitential exercises.

The nature of these exercises varied according to the sin for which they were prescribed. According to Tertullian (De poenit., IX), "*Exomologesis* is the discipline which obliges a man to prostrate and humiliate himself and to adopt a manner of life that will draw down mercy. As regards dress and food, it prescribes that he shall lie in sackcloth and ashes, clothe his body in rags, plunge his soul in sorrow, correct his faults by harsh treatment of himself, use the plainest meat and drink for the sake of his soul and not of his belly: usually he shall nourish prayer by fasting, whole days and nights together he shall moan, and weep, and wail to the Lord his God, cast himself at the feet of the priests, fall on his knees before those who are dear to God, and beseech them to plead in his behalf". At a very early period, the *exomologesis* was divided into four parts or "stations", and the penitents were grouped in as many different classes according to their progress in penance. The lower class, the *flentes* (weeping) remained outside the church door and besought the intercession of the faithful as these passed into the church.

The *audientes* (hearers) were stationed in the narthex of the church behind the catechumens and were permitted to remain during the Mass of the Catechumens, i.e., until the end of the sermon. The *substrati* (prostrate), or *genuflectentes* (kneeling), occupied the space between the door and the ambo, where they received the imposition of the bishop's hands or his blessing. Finally, the *consistentes* were so called because they were allowed to hear the whole Mass without communicating, or because they remained at their place while the faithful approached the Holy Table. This grouping into stations originated in the East, where at least the three higher groups are mentioned about A. D. 263 by [Gregory Thaumaturgus](#), and the first or lowest group by St. Basil (Ep. cxcix, e. xxii; ccxvii, c. lvi). In the West the classification did not exist, or at any rate the different stations were not so clearly marked; the penitents were treated pretty much as the catechumens.

The *exomologesis* terminated with the reconciliation, a solemn function which took place on Holy Thursday just before Mass. The bishop presided, assisted by his priests and deacons. A consultation (*concilium*) was held to determine which of the penitents deserved readmission; the Penitential Psalms and the litanies were recited at the foot of the altar; the bishop in a brief address reminded the penitents of their obligation to lead henceforth an upright life; the penitents, lighted candles in hand, were then led into the church; prayers, antiphons and responses were said, and, finally, the public absolution was given. (See Schmitz, "Die Bussbücher u. die Bussdisciplin d. Kirche", Mainz, 1883; Funk in "Kirchenlex.", s. v. "Bussdisciplin"; Pohle in "Kirchl. Handlex.", s. v. "Bussdisciplin"; Tixeront, "Hist. des dogmes", Paris, 1905; Eng. tr., St. Louis, 1910.) Regarding the nature of this absolution given by the bishop, various opinions have been put forward. According to one view, it was the remission, not of guilt but of the temporal punishment; the guilt had already been remitted by the absolution which the penitent received in confession before he entered on the public penance. This finds support in the fact that the reconciliation could be effected by a deacon in case of necessity and in the absence of a priest, as appears from [St. Cyprian](#) (Ep. xviii).

Speaking of those who had received *libelli* from the martyrs he says: "If they are overtaken by illness, they need not wait for our coming, but may make the *exomologesis* of their sin before any priest, or, if no priest be at hand, and death is imminent, before a deacon, that thus, by the imposition of his hands unto penance, they may come to the Lord with the peace which the martyrs had besought us by letters to grant." On the other hand, the deacon could not give sacramental absolution; consequently, his function in such cases was to absolve the penitent from punishment; and, as he was authorized herein to do what the bishop

did by the public absolution, this could not have been sacramental. There is the further consideration that the bishop did not necessarily hear the confessions of those whom he absolved at the time of reconciliation, and moreover the ancient formularies prescribe that at this time a priest shall hear the confession, and that the bishop, after that, shall pronounce absolution. But sacramental absolution can be given only by him who hears the confession. And again, the public penance often lasted many years; consequently, if the penitent were not absolved at the beginning, he would have remained during all that time in the state of sin, incapable of meriting anything for heaven by his penitential exercises, and exposed to the danger of sudden death (Pesch, *op. cit.*, p. 110 sq. Cf. Palmieri, *op. cit.*, p. 459; Pignataro, "De disciplina poenitentiali", Rome, 1904, p. 100; Di Dario, "II sacramento della penitenza nei primi secoli del cristianesimo", Naples, 1908, p. 81).

The writers who hold that the final absolution was sacramental, insist that there is no documentary evidence of a secret confession; that if this had been in existence, the harder way of the public penance would have been abandoned; that the argument from prescription loses its force if the sacramental character of public penance be denied; and that this penance contained all that is required in a sacrament. (Boudinhon, "Sur l'histoire de la pénitence" in "Revue d'histoire et de littérature religieuses", II, 1897, p. 306 sq. Cf. Hogan in "Am. Cath. Q. Rev.", July, 1900; Batiffol, "Etudes d'histoire et de théologie positive", Paris, 1902, p. 195 sq.; Vacandard in "Dict. de théol.", s. v. "Absolution", 156-61; O'Donnell, "Penance in the Early Church", Dublin 1907, p. 95 sq.) While this discussion concerns the practice under ordinary circumstances, it is commonly admitted that sacramental absolution was granted at the time of confession to those who were in danger of death. The Church, in fact, did not, in her universal practice, refuse absolution at the last moment even in the case of those who had committed grievous sin. St. Leo, writing in 442 to Theodore, Bishop of Frejus, says: "Neither satisfaction is to be forbidden nor reconciliation denied to those who in time of need and imminent danger implore the aid of penance and then of reconciliation." After pointing out that penance should not be deferred from day to day until the moment "when there is hardly space either for the confession of the penitent or his reconciliation by the priest"; he adds that even in these circumstances "the action of penance and the grace of communion should not be denied if asked for by the penitent" (Ep. cviii, c. iv, in P.L., LIV, 1011). St. Leo states expressly that he was applying the ecclesiastical rule (*ecclesiastica regula*).

Shortly before, St. Celestine (428) had expressed his horror at learning that "penance was refused the dying and that the desire of those was not granted who in the hour of death sought this remedy for their soul"; this, he says, is "adding



death to death and killing with cruelty the soul that is not absolved " (Letter to the bishops of the provinces of Vienne and Narbonne, c. ii). That such a refusal was not in accordance with the earlier practice is evident from the words of the Council of Nicaea (325): "With respect to the dying, the ancient canonical law shall now also be observed, namely, that if any one depart from this life, he shall by no means be deprived of the last and most necessary viaticum" (can. xiii). If the dying person could receive the Eucharist, absolution certainly could not be denied. If at times greater severity seems to be shown, this consisted in the refusal, not of absolution but of communion; such was the penalty prescribed by the Council of Elvira (306) for those who after baptism had fallen into idolatry. The same is true of the canon (22) of the Council of Arles (314) which enacts that communion shall not be given to "those who apostatize, but never appear before the Church, nor even seek to do penance, and yet afterwards, when attacked by illness, request communion". The council lays stress on the lack of proper disposition in such sinners, as does also [St. Cyprian](#) when he forbids that they who "do no penance nor manifest heartfelt sorrow" be admitted to communion and peace if in illness and danger they ask for it; for what prompts them to seek [communion] is, not repentance for their sin, but the fear of approaching death" (Ep. ad Antonianum, n. 23).

A further evidence of the severity with which public penance, and especially its solemn form, was administered is the fact that it could be performed only once. This is evident from some of the texts quoted above ([Tertullian](#), [Hermas](#)). Origen also says: "For the graver crimes, there is only one opportunity of penance" (Hom. xv, "In Levit.", c. ii); and St. Ambrose: "As there is one baptism so there is one penance, which, however, is performed publicly" (De poenit., II, c. x, n. 95). St. Augustine gives the reason: "Although, by a wise and salutary provision, opportunity for performing that humblest kind of penance is granted but once in the Church, lest the remedy, become common, should be less efficacious for the sick . . . yet who will dare to say to [God](#): Wherefore dost thou once more spare this man who after a first penance has again bound himself in the fetters of sin?" (Ep. cliii, "Ad Macedonium"). It may well be admitted that the discipline of the earliest days was rigorous, and that in some Churches or by individual bishops it was carried to extremes. This is plainly stated by [Pope St. Innocent](#) (405) in his letter (Ep. vi, c. ii) to Exuperius, Bishop of Toulouse. The question had been raised as to what should be done with those who, after a lifetime of licentious indulgence, begged at the end for penance and communion. "Regarding these", writes the pope, "the earlier practice was more severe, the later more tempered with mercy. The former custom was that penance should be granted, but communion denied; for in those times persecutions were frequent, hence, lest the easy admission to communion

should fail to bring back from their evil ways men who were sure of reconciliation, very rightly communion was refused, while penance was granted in order that the refusal might not be total. . . . But after [Our Lord](#) had restored peace to his Churches, and terror had ceased, it was judged well that communion be given the dying lest we should seem to follow the harshness and sternness of the heretic Novatian in denying pardon. Communion, therefore, shall be given at the last along with penance, that these men, if only in the supreme moment of death, may, with the permission of [Our Saviour](#), be rescued from eternal destruction."

The mitigation of public penance which this passage indicates continued throughout the subsequent period, especially the [Middle Ages](#). The office of *poenitentiarius* had already (390) been abolished in the East by Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, in consequence of a [scandal](#) that grew out of public confession. Soon afterwards, the four "stations" disappeared, and public penance fell into disuse. In the West it underwent a more gradual transformation. [Excommunication](#) continued in use, and the [interdict](#) was frequently resorted to. The performance of penance was left in large measure to the zeal and good will of the penitent; increasing clemency was shown by allowing the reconciliation to take place somewhat before the prescribed time was completed; and the practice was introduced of commuting the enjoined penance into other exercises or works of piety, such as prayer and almsgiving. According to a decree of the Council of Clermont (1095), those who joined a [crusade](#) were freed from all obligation in the matter of penance. Finally it became customary to let the reconciliation follow immediately after confession. With these modifications the ancient usage had practically disappeared by the middle of the sixteenth century. Some attempts were made to revive it after the Council of Trent, but these were isolated and of short duration. (See [INDULGENCES](#).)

### **IN THE BRITISH AND IRISH CHURCHES**

The penitential system in these countries was established simultaneously with the introduction of [Christianity](#), was rapidly developed by episcopal decrees and synodal enactments, and was reduced to definite form in the Penitentials. These books exerted such an influence on the practice in Continental Europe that, according to one opinion, they "first brought order and unity into ecclesiastical discipline in these matters" (Wasserschleben, "Bussordnungen d. abendlandischen Kirche", Halle, 1851, p. 4. — For a different view see Schmitz, "Die Bussbücher u. die Bussdisciplin d. Kirche", Mainz, 1888, p. 187). In any case, it is beyond question that in their belief and practice the Churches of Ireland, England, and Scotland were at one with Rome. The so-called Synod of St. Patrick decrees that a [Christian](#) who commits any of the capital sins shall perform a year's penance for each offence and at the end shall "come with witnesses and be absolved by the priest" (Wilkins,

"Concilia", I, p. 3). Another synod of St. Patrick ordains that "the Abbot shall decide to whom the power of binding and loosing be committed, but forgiveness is more in keeping with the examples of Scripture; let penance be short, with weeping and lamentation, and a mournful garb, rather than long and tempered with relaxations" (Wilkins, *ibid.*, p. 4). For various opinions regarding the date and origin of the synods, see Haddan and Stubbs, "Councils", II, 331; Bury, "Life of St. Patrick", London, 1905. The confessor was called *anmchara* (*animae carus*), i.e., "soul's friend". St. Columba was *anmchara* to Aidan, Lord of Dalraida, A. D. 574 (Adamnan's "Life of St. Columba", ed. Reeves, p. lxxvi); and Adamnan was "soul's friend" to Finnsnechta, Monarch of Ireland, A. D. 675 (*ibid.*, p. xliii). The "Life of St. Columba" relates the coming of Feachnaus to Iona, where, with weeping and lamentation, he fell at Columba's feet and "before all who were present confessed his sins. Then the Saint weeping with him, said to him: 'Arise, my son and be comforted; thy sins which thou hast committed are forgiven; because, as it is written, a contrite and humble heart God doth not despise,'" (*ibid.*, I, 30). The need and effects of confession are explained in the Leabhar Breac: "Penance frees from all the sins committed after baptism. Every one desirous of a cure for his soul and happiness with the Lord must make an humble and sorrowful confession; and the confession with the prayers of the Church are as baptisms to him. As sickness injures the body, so sin injures the soul; and as there is a cure for the disease of the body, so there is balm for that of the soul. And as the wounds of the body are shown to a physician, so, too, the sores of the soul must be exposed. As he who takes poison is saved by a vomit, so, too, the soul is healed by confession and declaration of his sins with sorrow, and by the prayers of the Church, and a determination henceforth to observe the laws of the Church of God. . . .

Because Christ left to His Apostles and Church, to the end of the world, the power of loosing and binding."

That confession was required before Communion is evident from the penitential ascribed to St. Columbanus, which orders (can. xxx) "that confessions be given with all diligence, especially concerning commotions of the mind, before going to Mass, lest perchance any one approach the altar unworthily, that is, if he have not a clean heart. For it is better to wait till the heart be sound and free from scandal and envy, than daringly to approach the judgment of the tribunal; for the altar is the tribunal of Christ, and His Body, even there with His Blood, judges those who approach unworthily. As, therefore, we must beware of capital sins before communicating, so, also, from the more uncertain defects and diseases of a languid soul, it is necessary for us to abstain and to be cleansed before going to that which is a conjunction with true peace and a joining with eternal salvation". In

the "Life of St. Maedoc of Ferns" it is said of the murdered King Brandubh: "And so he departed without confession and the communication of the Eucharist." But the saint restored him to life for a while, and then, "having made his confession and received absolution and the viaticum of the Body of Christ, King Brandubh went to heaven, and was interred in the city of St. Maedoc which is called Ferns, where the kings of that land are buried" (Acta SS. Hib., col. 482). The metrical "Rule of St. Carthach", translated by Eugene O'Curry, gives this direction to the priest: "If you go to give communion at the awful point of death, you must receive confession without shame, without reserve." In the prayer for giving communion to the sick (Corpus Christi Missal) we read: "O God, who hast willed that sins should be forgiven by the imposition of the hands of the priest . . ." and then follows the absolution: "We absolve thee as representatives of blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, to whom the Lord gave the power of binding and loosing." That confession was regularly a part of the preparation for death is attested by the Council of Cashel (1172) which commands the faithful in case of illness to make their will "in the presence of their confessor and neighbours", and prescribes that to those who die "with a good confession" due tribute shall be paid in the form of Masses and burial (can. vi, vii).

The practice of public penance was regulated in great detail by the Penitentials. That of St. Cummin prescribes that "if any priest refuses penance to the dying, he is guilty of the loss of their souls . . . for there can be true conversion at the last moment, since God has regard not of time alone, but of the heart also, and the thief gained Paradise in the last hour of his confession" (C. xiv, 2). Other Penitentials bear the names of St. Finnian, Sts. David and Gildas, St. Columbanus, Adamnan. The collection of canons known as the "Hibernensis" is especially important, as it cites, under the head of "Penance" (bk. XLVII), the teaching of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and other Fathers, thus showing the continuity of the Irish faith and observance with that of the early Church. (See Lanigan, "Eccl. Hist. of Ireland", Dublin, 1829; Moran, "Essays on the Early Irish Church", Dublin, 1864; Malone, "Church Hist. of Ireland", Dublin, 1880; Warren, "The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church", Oxford, 1881; Salmon, "The Ancient Irish Church", Dublin, 1897.)

## IN THE ANGLO-SAXON CHURCH

In the Anglo-Saxon Church penance was called *behreowsung*, from the verb *hreowan*, whence our word "to rue". The confessor was the *scrift*; confession, *scrift spraec*; and the parish itself was the *scriftscir*, i.e., "confession district" — a term which shows plainly the close relation between confession and the work of religion in general. The practice in England can be traced back to the

times immediately following the country's conversion. Ven. Bede (H. E., IV, 23 [25]) gives the story of Adamnan, an Irish monk of the seventh century, who belonged to the monastery of Coldingham, England. In his youth, having committed some sin, he went to a priest, confessed, and was given a penance to be performed until the priest should return. But the priest went to Ireland and died there, and Adamnan continued his penance to the end of his days. When St. Cuthbert (635-87) on his missionary tours preached to the people, "they all confessed openly what they had done, . . . and what they confessed they expiated; as he commanded them, by worthy fruits of penance" (Bede, op. cit., IV, 25). Alcuin (735-804) declares that "without confession there is no pardon" (P.L., C, 337); that "he who accuses himself of his sins will not have the devil for an accuser in the day of judgment" (P.L., CI, 621); that "he who conceals his sins and is ashamed to make wholesome confession, has God as witness now and will have him again as avenger" (ibid., 622). Lanfranc (1005-89) has a treatise, "De celunda confessione", i.e., on keeping confession secret, in which he rebukes those who give the slightest intimation of what they have heard in confession (P.L., CL, 626).

The penitentials were known as *script bocs*. The one attributed to Archbishop Theodore (602-90) says: "The deacon is not allowed to impose penance on a layman; this should be done by the bishop or priests" (bk. II, 2); and further; "According to the canons, penitents should not receive communion until their penance is completed; but we, for mercy's sake, allow them to receive at the end of a year or six months" (I, 12). An important statement is that "public reconciliation is not established in this province, for the reason that there is no public penance"- which shows that the minute prescriptions contained in the penitential were meant for the guidance of the priest in giving penance privately, i.e., in confession. Among the *excerptiones*, or extracts, from the canons which bear the name of Archbishop Egbert of York (d. 766), canon xlvii says that the bishop shall hear no cause without the presence of his clergy, except in case of confession (Wilkins, "Concilia", I, 104). His Penitential prescribes (IX) that "a bishop or priest shall not refuse confession to those who desire it, though they be guilty of many sins" (ibid., 126). The Council of Chalcutth (A. D. 787): "If any one depart this life without penance or confession, he shall not be prayed for" (can. xx). The canons published under King Edgar (960) have a special section "On Confession which begins: "When one wishes to confess his sins, let him act manfully, and not be ashamed to confess his misdeeds and crimes, accusing himself; because hence comes pardon, and because without confession there is no pardon; confession heals; confession justifies" (ibid., 229). The Council of Eanham (1009): "Let every Christian do as behooves him, strictly keep his Christianity, accustom himself to frequent confession, fearlessly confess his sins,



and carefully make amends according as he is directed" (can. xvii, Wilkins, *ibid.*, 289). Among the ecclesiastical laws enacted (1033) by King Canute, we find this exhortation: "Let us with all diligence turn back from our sins, and let us each confess our sins to our confessor, and ever [after] refrain from evil-doing and mend our ways" (XVIII, Wilkins, *ibid.*, 303).

The Council of Durham (c. 1220): "How necessary is the sacrament of penance, those words of the Gospel prove: Whose sins, etc. . . . But since we obtain the pardon of our sins by true confession, we prescribe in accordance with the canonical statutes that the priest in giving penance shall carefully consider the amount of the penance, the quality of the sin, the place, time, cause, duration and other circumstances of the sin; and especially the devotion of the penitent and the signs of contrition." Similar directions are given by the Council of Oxford (1222), which adds after various admonitions: "Let no priest dare, either out of anger or even through fear of death, to reveal the confession of anyone by word or sign . . . and should he be convicted of doing this he ought deservedly to be degraded without hope of relaxation" (Wilkins, *ibid.*, 595). The Scottish Council (c. 1227) repeats these injunctions and prescribes "that once a year the faithful shall confess all their sins either to their own [parish] priest or, with his permission, to some other priest" (can. lvii). Explicit instructions for the confessor are found in the statutes of Alexander, Bishop of Coventry (1237), especially in regard to the manner of questioning the penitent and enjoining penance. The Council of Lambeth (1261) declares: "Since the sacrament of confession and penance, the second plank after shipwreck, the last part of man's seafaring, the final refuge, is for every sinner most necessary unto salvation, we strictly forbid, under pain of excommunication, that anyone should presume to hinder the free administration of this sacrament to each who asks for it" (Wilkins, *ibid.*, 754).

To give some idea of the ancient discipline, the penalties attached to graver crimes are cited here from the English and Irish Penitentials. For stealing, Cummian prescribes that a layman shall do one year of penance; a cleric, two; a subdeacon three; a deacon, four; a priest, five; a bishop, six. For murder or perjury, the penance lasted three, five, six, seven, ten or twelve years according to the criminal's rank. Theodore commands that if any one leave the Catholic Church, join the heretics, and induce others to do the same, he shall, in case he repent, do penance for twelve years. For the perjurer who swears by the Church, the Gospel, or the relics of the saints, Egbert prescribes seven or eleven years of penance. Usury entailed three years; infanticide, fifteen; idolatry or demon-worship, ten. Violations of the sixth commandment were punished with great severity; the penance varied, according to the nature of the sin, from three to fifteen years,

the extreme penalty being prescribed for incest, i.e., fifteen to twenty-five years. Whatever its duration, the penance included fasting on bread and water, either for the whole period or for a specified portion. Those who could not fast were obliged instead to recite daily a certain number of psalms, to give alms, take the discipline (scourging) or perform some other penitential exercise as determined by the confessor. (See Lingard, "Hist. and Antiq. of the Anglo-Saxon Church", London, 1845; Thurston, "Confession in England before the Conquest" in "The Tablet", February and March, 1905.)

### **CONFESSION IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH**

In the [Anglican Church](#), according to the rule laid down in the "Prayer Book", there is a general confession prescribed for morning and evening Service, also for Holy Communion; this confession is followed by a general absolution like the one in use in the Catholic Church. Also in the "Prayer Book" confession is counselled for the quieting of conscience and for the good that comes from absolution and the peace that arises from the fatherly direction of the minister of [God](#). There is also mention of private confession in the office for the sick: "Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which the priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort: '[Our Lord Jesus Christ](#), who has left the power to his Church' etc." Since the beginning of the Oxford Movement confession after the manner practised in the Catholic Church has become more frequent among those of the High Church party. In 1873 a petition was sent to the Convocation of the Archdiocese of Canterbury asking provision for the education and authorization of priests for the work of the confessional. In the joint letter of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York disapprobation of such course was markedly expressed and the determination not to encourage the practice of private confession openly avowed. The Puseyites replied citing the authority of the "Prayer Book" as given above. In our time among the High Church folk one notices confessionals in the churches and one hears of discourses made to the people enjoining confession as a necessity to pardon. Those who hear confessions make use generally of the rules and directions laid down in Catholic "Manuals", and especially popular is the "Manual" of the Abbe Gaume (A.G. Mortimer "Confession and Absolution", London, 1906).

### **UTILITY OF CONFESSION**

Mr. Lea ("A History of Auricular Confession", Vol. II, p. 456) says: "No one can deny that there is truth in Cardinal Newman's argument: 'How many souls are there in distress, anxiety and loneliness, whose one need is to find a being to whom they can pour out their feelings unheard by the world. They want to tell them and not to

tell them, they wish to tell them to one who is strong enough to hear them, and yet not too strong so as to despise them"; and then Mr. Lea adds: "It is this weakness of humanity on which the Church has speculated, the weakness of those unable to bear their burdens . . . who find comfort in the system built up through the experience of the ages", etc. It has been made clear that the Church has simply carried out the mind of Christ: "Whatever you shall loose shall be loosed"; still we do not hesitate to accept Mr. Lea's reason, that this institution answers in large measure to the needs of men, who morally are indeed weak and in darkness. True, Mr. Lea denies the probability of finding men capable of exercising aright this great ministry, and he prefers to enumerate the rare abuses which the weakness of priests has caused, rather than to listen to the millions who have found in the tribunal of penance a remedy for their anxieties of mind, and a peace and security of conscience the value of which is untold. The very abuses of which he speaks at such length have been the occasion of greater care, greater diligence, on the part of the Church. The few inconveniences arising from the perversity of men, which the Church has met with admirable legislation, should not blind men to the great good that confession has brought, not only to the individual, but even to society. Thinking men even outside the Church have acknowledged the usefulness to society of the tribunal of penance. Amongst these the words of Leibniz are not unknown ("Systema theologicum", Paris, 1819, p. 270): "This whole work of sacramental penance is indeed worthy of the Divine wisdom and if aught else in the Christian dispensation is meritorious of praise, surely this wondrous institution. For the necessity of confessing one's sins deters a man from committing them, and hope is given to him who may have fallen again after expiation. The pious and prudent confessor is in very deed a great instrument in the hands of God for man's regeneration. For the kindly advice of God's priest helps man to control his passions, to know the lurking places of sin, to avoid the occasions of evil doing, to restore ill-gotten goods, to have hope after depression and doubt, to have peace after affliction, in a word, to remove or at least lessen all evil, and if there is no pleasure on earth like unto a faithful friend, what must be the esteem a man must have for him, who is in very deed a friend in the hour of his direst need?"

Nor is Leibniz alone in expressing this feeling of the great benefits that may come from the use of confession. Protestant theologians realize, not only the value of the Catholic theological position, but also the need of the confessional for the spiritual regeneration of their subjects. Dr. Martensen, in his "Christian Dogmatics" (Edinburgh, 1890), p. 443, thus outlines his views: "Absolution in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, derived from the full power of binding and loosing which the church has inherited from the apostles, is not

unconditional, but depends on the same condition on which the gospel itself adjudges the forgiveness of sins, namely, change of heart and faith. If reform is to take place here, it must be effected either by endeavouring to revive private confession, or, as has been proposed, by doing away with the union between confession and the Lord's Supper, omitting, that is, the solemn absolution, because what it presupposes (personal confession of sin) has fallen into disuse, and retaining only the words of preparation, with the exhortation to self-examination, a testifying of the comfortable promises of the gospel, and a wish for a blessing upon the communicants." Under the head of "Observations" he states: "It cannot easily be denied that confession meets a deep need of human nature. There is a great psychological truth in the saying of Pascal, that a man often attains for the first time a true sense of sin, and a true stayedness in his good purpose, when he confesses his sins to his fellow man, as well as to God. Catholicism has often been commended because by confession it affords an opportunity of depositing the confession of his sins in the breast of another man where it remains kept under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, and whence the consolation of the forgiveness of sins is given him in the very name of the Lord."

True, he believes that this great need is met more fully with the kind of confession practised in Lutheranism, but he does not hesitate to add: "It is a matter of regret that private confession, as an institution, meeting as it does this want in a regular manner, has fallen into disuse; and that the objective point of union is wanting for the many, who desire to unburden their souls by confessing not to God only but to a fellowman, and who feel their need of comfort and of forgiveness, which anyone indeed may draw for himself from the gospel, but which in many instances he may desire to hear spoken by a man, who speaks in virtue of the authority of his holy office."