

If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing... For we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one. He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for those of the whole world (1 Jn. 1:8-9)

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WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE?

"I may have sinned gravely. My conscience would be distressed, but it would not be in turmoil, for I would recall the wounds of the Lord: he was wounded for our iniquities. What sin is there so deadly that it cannot be pardoned by the death of Christ? And so if I bear in mind this strong, effective remedy, I can never again be terrified by the malignancy of sin." (St. Bernard of Clairvaux)

1. You Shall Name Him Jesus

"Which is easier, to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" With these words Jesus, looking up from the paralytic lying on a mat at his feet, addresses the reproach of blasphemy brought by the scribes because he had said to the man, "Courage, child, your sins are forgiven." But Christ in no way backs down from their charge; rather, he embraces it and repeats it now explicitly to assert he forgives sin because he has divine authority. The miracle of physical healing is the sacrament, the sign, of the spiritual healing being granted. And both of these are the sign that Christ is God. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' -- he then said to the paralytic -- 'Rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home.' He rose and went home." (Mt. 9:2-7)

Thus does Jesus display in his healing ministry on this occasion as he shall later and most fully upon the cross, the fulfilment of the destiny and mission of the name "given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." (Lk. 2:21) For, "you are to name him Jesus" -- which means saviour -- "because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt. 1:21)

2. Whose Sins You Forgive Are Forgiven Them

This power to forgive sin is a gift with which Jesus in his divine mercy endowed the Church to distribute throughout the ages. For from the Ascension until he comes again in glory, the Church, his mystical body, remains both sacrament and minister of God's compassionate pardon. He entrusted this authority over sin to all the Twelve (Mt. 18:18) after first having given it personally to Peter, the rock, his vicar, when he said: "I

will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mt. 16:19) So central is the ministry of the forgiveness of sins to the mission of the church once Jesus has returned to the Father, that on Easter night in the joy of reunion with the apostles, Christ's first resurrection gift to them will be to remind them of and to renew for them their authority over sin. "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven the m, and whose sins you retain are retained." (Jn. 20:21-23)

3. Prodigal Son / Prodigal Father

Faithful to her Lord's commission the Church has continued to this day to announce and effect Christ's forgiveness of sins. This she does principally through one of the seven sacraments, the sacrament of penance, known recently too as the sacrament of reconciliation but most usually spoken of by Catholics as simply confession. Confession of sins to a priest is, of course, but one part of the sacramental act of reconciliation in the Church, but this name is understood to stand for the whole in which are also included necessarily sorrow (contrition), penance and absolution.

All these moments or aspects of the sacrament of penance -- sorrow, confession, penance and absolution -- are beautifully foreshadowed in Jesus' great parable about reconciliation found in the gospel of St. Luke. The story of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15: 11-32), perhaps the most beautiful and moving Jesus ever told, stirs our hearts because in terms as direct and as real as a tale of family love, God is revealed as our father who even when we renounce him and disown him through sin, cannot disown us but loves on tenderly and patiently and waits for us to return, his arm extended in the embrace of forgiveness.

4. I Shall Get Up And Go To My Father

In demanding his inheritance and leaving his father's house for a foreign place there to be independent and free to indulge every desire, licit and illicit, the prodigal believed the same lie of Satan as had Adam and Eve and every other sinner before and since: "You shall be like Gods" (Gn. 3:5)

Soon the devil's deception is brutally clear when that alien place becomes for the prodigal as cramped and as disgusting as a pigsty. For the pious Jew no worse

image for the estrangement from God, that sin is, could be imagined than that one should find himself serving pigs and even lusting after their slops.

Yet here, just at the moment when despair seems the inevitable and most bitter fruit of sin, God touches the prodigal's heart with the grace of remembrance. How beautiful that house of his father which he had abandoned, beautiful and hospitable even for the servants. "I shall get up and go to my father and ... say ... I have sinned."

Thus too does God offer the grace of sorrow to every sinner as the first gift of a compassionate mercy that lures him back to forgiveness and reconciliation in the sacrament of penance. I have sinned, the sinner must admit, I have rejected my father and so offended him. I shall leave behind, and for good, this alien land of sin and return to my native land, to my father's house. May he accept my declaration of sorrow and welcome me back on the only grounds to which I can appeal, that is, his compassionate mercy.

5. I Shall Say, Father I Have Sinned Against Heaven And Against You

The sin that the prodigal had now admitted in his heart was the only burden he had to bear as he returned home. But nothing could have been a heavier yoke. He will only be rid of it when in his father's presence he declares himself a sinner, names his sin and takes responsibility for it. Likewise in the sacrament of penance, the sinner goes to the priest and names, that is, confesses his mortal sins as to kind and number, openly submitting them to the Lord's mercy and petitioning his pardon.

6. Treat Me As You Would Treat One Of Your Hired Workers

By his own sinful choice, the prodigal had not just squandered his inheritance but had also renounced his lineage. He had said to his father, I no longer wish to be your son. So deeply disturbed by this sin is the right order of things that a life of anonymous, menial service in his father's house would be not only fitting penance but in fact more grace that he could ever be entitled to. So too, every penitent requests in the sacrament of confession a penance of the priest both as a way to make some reparation for the disorder of his sin and also as a pledge of his resolution to avoid sin in the future.

7. Bring The Finest Robe ... Put A Ring On His Finger

The father, however, cannot treat the son at his return like a servant. He can still see only a son who may have renounced him but whom he had never disowned. "Still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him." The son has scarcely the chance to utter his confession before his father has forgiven him and declared a feast: "Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast." So too in the sacrament of confession the Lord, filled with compassion, rushes in the person of the priest to meet our confession of sins with the loving gift of absolution, the declaration that our sins are taken away.

8. We Must Celebrate And Rejoice

The sinner's acts of sorrow, confession and penance, all enabled by grace, and the Lord's declaration of forgiveness coming to meet them, these all constitute the sacrament of penance. And these are crowned by the fruits of the sacrament: first of all peace and then, very often, joy. And this is not a joy limited to the heart of the penitent restored to sonship, nor does it originate there. It is rather God's own delight at forgiving shared out to those he forgives.

The story of the prodigal son occupies chapter 15 of Luke's gospel with two other shorter parables preceding it which also show Christ's special concern for the lost and God's love for the repentant sinner and his joy in forgiving him. First is the story of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to seek the lost sheep until he finds it. "And when he does find it he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and ... calls together his friends and neighbours and says to them" "Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep (Lk. 15:4-6). And second is the parable of the woman who sweeps the house even by candlelight until she finds the lost coin. And finding it, she too calls friends and neighbours to rejoice with her. "In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:10)

God, like the prodigal's father, catches sight of us sinners "still a long way off" and is moved not to condemnation but to compassion. Should we not then seek his forgiveness when we need it knowing is his delight to grant it? "Let us celebrate with a feast because this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."