

“The Light Is On For You”

Confession: Penitential Practices in the History of the Church

Carmel Sperti, Diocesan Liturgical Commission, Faith Formation Director, Saint Mary, Oneonta

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...” and a familiar dialogue begins. While for many centuries Catholics have had the opportunity for auricular (spoken and heard) confession, this was not always the practice. Of all the sacraments, Penance, Confession, or Reconciliation, as it has been known, has had one of the most varied of histories in understanding and celebration.

In the Church of the New Testament, Baptism was considered the only sacrament professed to forgive sin. In order to be baptized and received into the Church, a person had to experience over a period of years the Christian way of life, service and worship. Under the tutelage of a sponsor along with the bishop and the community, a candidate learned new patterns of living. With initiation into the Christian community through Baptism, the old person fell away, sins were forgiven, and a person entered into a new life in Christ. Sinful patterns were left behind. A person was often required to take on a new occupation if their former profession was considered immoral (e.g. working in the circus, a gladiator, a soldier, an actor, a priest of the ancient cults). It was expected that this *new person* would not succumb to sin and no provision was made by the Church for a post-baptismal forgiveness of sins.

With the legalization of Christianity in the 4th century and its eventual acceptance as the imperial religion of the Greco-Roman Empire, many people, lest they sin after baptism and be excluded from the Eucharistic table and fellowship of the community, began to put off baptism until late in life or to their deathbeds. Sin was understood to have communal as well as personal consequences. Due to the seriousness of sin and its effect on the community of believers, a person who committed public sin after baptism was left to the mercy of God.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, under the pressure of persecutions, some North African Christian communities questioned how the Church should deal with members who renounced the faith and then desired to return to the community. One such group, called the Donatists, held that the Church must be a Church of “saints” and not “sinners.” This rigorist position was not accepted in the Church catholic. It became evident though that some form of penance was indicated as a way of restoring those who had renounced the Christian faith or sinned after baptism. Sacramental life could be taken up again through a “second baptism,” that is, in what we know as the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In the mediaeval period, an “Order of Penitents” was instituted in the Christian Church through which a baptized person who had publicly sinned and caused scandal was required to confess their transgressions to the bishop before the community. Usually these were grave acts such as apostasy, murder, or adultery that shredded the fabric of communal life. Admitted into the Order of Penitents, the person was often required to carry out several years of penitential acts. These acts could take the form of pilgrimage, fasting, dressing in penitential garb outside the church to request prayers and forgiveness from the community members. They were relegated to a separate place in the church for worship and dismissed after the Liturgy of the Word. During this penitential time they were excluded from Eucharistic Communion; but do note, they were not excluded from the community or the Word of God. When the period of penance was complete, the repentant sinner was welcomed back into the embrace of the community prior to Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum. There is no evidence that this spiritual process was repeatable. The Church continued to take sin and its consequences very seriously .

The modern practice of repeatable, private confession grew from the grassroots need of the now widely-spread Christian communities. By the 6th century, traveling Celtic monks privately began hearing the stories of people’s contrition for their sins and assuring them of God’s forgiveness. The practice became widespread and formed the basis of our contemporary experience of the sacrament. Theologically, the priest came to be understood as making present *both* Jesus, (the “I” of “*I absolve you...*”) and the Christian community (the communal nature of sin and forgiveness).

The reform of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, through the option of a face-to-face experience with the priest and communal celebrations of the sacrament, has tried to restore the communal nature of our sin, its consequences and its healing. A sacrament with a varied history? Yes. The Church must always be translating its beliefs and practices to address present pastoral needs. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and the other sacraments will continue to evolve so as to express more clearly the forgiveness and healing of the Christian message.

Reflections

- Have we lost the communal understanding of sin and forgiveness?
- Do we trivialize sin by our “grocery list” confessions, rather than looking at patterns of sin in our lives?
- A Jewish observer remarked that Catholics have it easy; they just tell their sins to a priest, they never have to confront the people they sinned against.