

SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION 1:

February 7 2021:

“WHO CAN FORGIVE SIN BUT GOD ALONE?”

The Catholic Church and the forgiveness of sins.

Dear Parishioners,

Between now and Palm Sunday, I would like to offer you a series of catecheses on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, commonly known as Confession. There may be more detail than you need, but the detail may be of use to someone. We all have different questions.

A person said to me some time ago: “I would be willing to walk a thousand miles if I believed someone could forgive my sins.”

G.K. Chesterton, one of the most celebrated Twentieth Century writers not only in his native England but throughout the English-speaking world, entered the Catholic Church as an adult. Why did he become a Catholic? He said: “I became a Catholic to have my sins forgiven.”

Jesus was criticised by the Jewish leaders because He said to a sick man: “Your sins are forgiven you.” “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” they responded.

Were they correct when they claimed that only God can forgive sin? In a real sense, surely they were. Jesus is God, of course; and so Jesus can forgive sins.

What about the Catholic Church? What about the sacrament of Penance? Was Chesterton on the right track? Was his action necessary?

EASTER SUNDAY NIGHT:

Jesus rose from the dead, and appeared to His disciples on Easter Sunday evening.

“... the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came

and stood among them. He said to them, ‘Peace be with you,’ and, after saying this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord, and He said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.’

“After saying this, He breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.’” (John 20:19-23).

God the Son was crucified and died, and returned to heaven, to God the Father. Then He returned to earth, to His disciples.

When some of us (older people) were young, overseas travel was uncommon. If you knew someone going overseas, and to Hong Kong en route (as many did), you might say: “Bring me back a transistor radio” or something similar.

It seemed that Hong Kong was about as close to heaven as one could get in this life – at least for those short of a dollar. Hong Kong had all the latest at the cheapest price.

Jesus went to heaven and came back. The treasures of heaven are infinitely superior to those of Hong Kong, or of Silicon Valley. What did He bring back to those He loved?

He brought back the greatest gift God could give to us human beings. Not material goods. Not CD players, not 3D television.

Our Lord’s gift was not just for the apostles, but for the whole Church till the end of time, and for the whole human race till the end of time.

Our Lord gave the one gift that we really needed ... a gift He had paid for – in God’s loving and sometimes incomprehensible plan – by His terrible suffering and death.

Our Lord gave to His Church the authority to forgive sins.

It is an authority entrusted by God to Christ's Church. It is God who forgives, - through the ministry of those who act 'in the Person of Christ', those ordained as His ministers.

He breathed on them – expressing the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God.

Sin bars us from union with God and from heaven itself.

Does the Catholic Church have authority to forgive sins? Yes. Jesus gave that authority to His apostles, and that authority is transmitted to His successors, the bishops. Jesus established His Church to endure, and promised to be with it to the end of time.

Sin and Reconciliation in the Church.

Baptism wipes away all sin committed before baptism. People baptised as adults don't confess any pre-baptismal sin.

Since the beginning of the Church, people have sinned after baptism. In Saint Paul's time there were examples in the Christian communities of serious sin. Saint Paul in his letters pointed it out, and advised the communities how to deal with such situations. People guilty of serious immorality were to be excluded from the life of the Christian community until they came to their senses and repented. When they repented, they were to be re-admitted to the community.

During the Second and Third Centuries AD, the time of the great persecutions, forgiveness of sins was administered by the bishop. In this period the sacrament was permitted only once in one's lifetime. Those who fell once more were entrusted to the mercy of God.

This rigorous attitude was condemned by the Council of Nicea (325 AD), which permitted

reconciliation and Eucharist to such individuals, but only on their deathbed.

From the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries canonical penances became established, producing a uniform Church practice for reconciliation in cases of serious sin (e.g. apostasy, murder, adultery). The penances were by present standards very onerous indeed. Some imposed penitential practices, for example, were lifelong. Absolution came after the completion of penance.

Not surprisingly, the sacrament fell into relative disuse. It became in many places a devotional practice made use of only by those who were preparing themselves for death.

In the period from the Seventh to the Eleventh Centuries AD, a time of considerable dislocation in Europe, the influence of the Irish missionaries brought a radical change. Absolution was given after the confession of sins and the penance was performed after absolution.

Through the influence of Irish monastic practice, the sacrament came to be used more frequently, and not only for serious sin. It was associated in monastic life with regular spiritual direction, and the confession of less serious sin also became regular.

Such, very briefly, is the history of the sacrament of Penance. Essentially, the form has remained since the beginning. Next week we shall start looking at the basic elements of the sacrament; i.e. confession, contrition, satisfaction and absolution. That examination will also answer some possible questions about the Catholic Church's understanding of forgiveness of sin outside the sacrament and outside the Catholic Church.

