

***The Acts of the Penitent: 3. Satisfaction*** (Penance)

*Dear Parishioners,*

We resume our consideration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, commonly known to many as 'Confession'.

We now consider the third of the three acts of the penitent, the person going to confession. This third act is called '*satisfaction*'; otherwise commonly known as the '*penance*' given by the confessor to the penitent.

Again, the simplest and most effective way to view this act of the penitent is by looking first at what the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) has to say on the subject. Under the heading "Satisfaction" the Catechism has two paragraphs. We shall examine each in turn.

**1. CCC Paragraph 1459: Why the penance?**

**Many sins wrong our neighbour. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbour. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance".**

In other words, God forgives our sins in the sacrament, but some of the damage caused by that sin remains; damage to others, damage to ourself, and damage to our relationship with Almighty God.

The penance imposed by the confessor is like a medicine given to one who needs healing, and an act of reparation imposed on one who has inflicted an injustice on another.

The *Rite of Penance* in the *Roman Ritual* (c 8 and c 18) presents the sacramental penance this way:

*"True penance is completed by expiation for the sins committed, by amendment of life, and also by rectifying the injuries done. The kind and extent of the expiation must be suited to the personal condition of penitents so that they may restore the order they have upset and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which they have suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life. Thus penitents, "forgetting the things that are behind" (Phil 3:13), again become part of the mystery of salvation and press on to the things that are to come."*

*"A penitent who has been the cause of harm or scandal to others is to be led by the priest to resolve to make due restitution.*

*Next, the priest imposes an act of penance or expiation on the penitent; this should serve not only as atonement for past sins but also as an aid to new life and an antidote for weakness. As far as possible, therefore, the penance should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service to neighbour and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect."*

## **2. CCC Paragraph 1460: The type of penance:**

**The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbour, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him."  
(Rom 8:17 etc)**

***The satisfaction that we make for our sins, however, is not so much ours as though it were not done through Jesus Christ. We who can do nothing ourselves, as if just by ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of "him who strengthens" us. Thus man has nothing of which to boast, but all our boasting is in Christ ... in whom we make satisfaction by bringing forth 'fruits that befit repentance.' These fruits have their efficacy from him, by him they are offered to the Father, and through him they are accepted by the Father.***

(Council of Trent)

When we realise the purpose of our penance, we accept it willingly, knowing that it is fruitful for our own soul, and helps the whole Body of Christ, the Church. We fulfil it as well as we can, knowing that the grace of Christ is attached in a special way to the loving performance of this penance.

The quote from the Council of Trent above reminds us very clearly that this penance is to be considered in the context of the saving grace of Christ. We don't save ourselves; but Christ, in His great respect for us, wants our cooperation in His saving work. "God who willed to create us without our cooperation will not to save us without our cooperation" says Saint Augustine.

This is because He loves us. Love respects the dignity of our personhood.

So our penance is our little contribution, in union with the saving work of Jesus who hung upon the cross to save us.

Is the penitent bound to fulfil his penance? The penitent is obliged to perform the penances personally" states Canon 981 of Canon Law.

"The obligation to fulfil the penance is grave if a grave penance was imposed in confession and if the confessor intended to impose it as grave and if the penance imposed was for necessary matter [mortal sin]. If any of the above conditions is lacking, the obligation to fulfil the penance is not grave." (Thomas Pazhayampallil, Pastoral Guide Vol 2, p212)

One may fulfil one's penance even after the next confession, but it is good to fulfil it as soon as we reasonably can, before we forget. Let us remember that it is a big help to us in our spiritual life.

One may ask the confessor to change the penance if for some reason it would cause undue difficulty. One may also ask another confessor, in confession, to change that same penance imposed by the first confessor.

Remembering that our sins have caused damage, we receive the penance gratefully as a medicine for our soul and as a way to repair damage our sins have done.

This penance, this act of satisfaction, this final act of the penitent, "crowns the sacramental sign of Penance", says Pope John Paul  
(in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n 31)

