

The Sacrament of Penance — Part III

HISTORY of the SACRAMENT of PENANCE

The history of the Church's exercise of the power to forgive sin in the first four centuries is sketchy. The fact of its exercise is clear; the way it was exercised and the limitations placed on it are not quite so clear. One thing we do know: there was a tendency toward rigorism in the practice of the forgiveness of sin. This was evident in the practice of allowing penance to a person only once in his lifetime. It was evident, too, in the attitude of some who claimed that there were certain sins that could not be forgiven.



Eventually this excessive rigorism was to disappear.

From the 4th to the 7th Century

By the 4th century the Church's understanding and practice of the ministry of forgiveness becomes quite clear. The general pattern for the administration of penance took on a clearly defined shape. There were three steps:

(1) A person who was guilty of a major sin would go to the bishop or a priest delegated by the bishop and acknowledge his sin. The bishop would then enroll the sinner among the penitents by means of a public ceremony which involved the laying on of hands. The purpose of this public enrollment in the order of penitent was not to cause humiliation to the sinner, but rather to assure him of the intercessions of the Church and to make him an object of the prayerful concern of the whole community of the Church.

(2) The second step was the expiation of his sins in the order of penitents. The penances required of the penitents were very harsh and in some cases could continue for the rest of their lives. During this stage of the penance rite, the penitents were excluded from full participation in the Eucharist. They could be present for the Liturgy of the Word — though they had to remain together in a special place allotted to them in the church building — but they were required to leave before the Eucharistic Liturgy began. Before they were dismissed, special intercessions were said for them and a special blessing was given to them by the bishop.

(3) Eventually when their repentance

had been sufficiently tested, the third step of the penitential rite took place. This was a solemn reconciliation of the penitents through the imposition of hands, by the bishop — which restored them to full communion with the Church, so that they were once again able to participate fully in the Eucharist. Often this solemn reconciliation of the penitents took place on Holy Thursday and there was a special Mass for this purpose.

Two significant aspects of this solemn rite of penance might be pointed out. First of all, great emphasis was placed on expiation — that is, on the penance that the person did for his sins. Reconciliation to the Church was made only after the penance had been performed. By contrast, in our present practice of the Sacrament of Penance, the expiation has been considerably downgraded in importance (often reduced to a few prayers to be said); and the expiation now takes place after the reconciliation (i.e., after the absolution is given). We perform the penance after the absolution; they did it before.

Secondly, it should be noted that in this solemn penance rite, reconciliation with God takes place in an ecclesial context. The rite is a public ceremony involving the whole community. The person is reconciled to God by first being reconciled to the community of his people.

From the 7th to the 12th Century

The 7th century saw the introduction of a very different practice in the Church's exercise of the ministry of reconciliation. This new practice apparently originated with Irish monks and spread from Ireland to the continent. The sacrament of Penance took place in a much less solemn and public manner. The penitent simply told his sins to a priest. The priest then imposed a satisfaction or "penance" on the penitent. The penance was to be in keeping with the particular sin committed. These penances were all carefully determined beforehand and were written down in so-called Penitential Books, which the confessor consulted.

Two points might be noted about this rather drastic change in the practice of the Sacrament of Penance: (1) Penance, which at one time could be received only once, now became a repeatable sacrament that could

be received frequently; (2) the expiation, much reduced and less severe than formerly, followed rather than preceded the absolution.

From the 12th Century to Vatican II

During this period the Penitential Books gradually disappear and the individual priest becomes the judge of the "penance" to be given to the penitent. This marks the growth of a more juridical understanding of the Sacrament of Penance. The priest takes on more and more the role of a judge, oftentimes conceived after the analogy of the judge in a civil court.

In this period of development, the expiation becomes less harsh and less important. Much greater stress is placed on the confession of sins, which must be described in terms of their nature and species. Indeed this emphasis becomes so strong that the entire sacrament comes to be commonly referred to as "Confession." This emphasis, in turn, leads to prepared examinations of conscience and to the careful cataloging and listing of sins — which becomes for many people the most emphasized part of the sacrament.

In these last two stages of development, the Sacrament of Penance, for all practical purposes ceased to be a liturgical function that involved the whole community. In the early centuries of the Church the penance rite had included the whole Church — each member of the community had its own proper function in this liturgy. In the later developments we have described, the liturgical fullness associated with the sacrament vanished. The priest assumed, together with his own role, the role of the rest of the community. Priest and penitent met alone.

The 17th century saw the introduction into general use of the confessional "box." Priest and penitent continued to meet alone, communicating, not face to face, but through a grille darkly.

The brief history sketched above is sufficient to indicate that the Church's official ministry of reconciliation has undergone dramatic and decisive changes in the course of history. The present needs of God's people may well point to the possibility of equally decisive changes in the future.

(to be continued)

Guest Columnist

Go-Go Dancers, a Book, a Hippie Medal

These are three things that changed my outlook on life, and helped me meet the challenge and changes of our modern world.

Everyone will recall certain people or things that changed their life.

Go-Go Girls changed my outlook on life! I, as many people do, take pictures on vacation. Later I send copies to the hotel or people who work there with a little note. This I did when I returned from Miami in '68.

Two months went by and on Easter there arrived two most beautiful Easter religious cards with long notes attached. Were they from the top-notch comedian? No! From the head waiter or waitress? No! From two Go-Go Girls? Yes! These are the gals who are rejected, looked down on, or whose parents don't want others to know what they do. Yet these are the ones who answered. Perhaps because they felt the need of a friend. Two

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weeks later I answered their notes, and from that day on almost every month a new one asked if she might write. Now there are 20-30 who write.

In January 1969 I was privileged to offer Mass in one of their homes with some 30 guys and gals and children in attendance. Then it was that I learned their motto: Sell your beauty, sell your charm, sell your grace, sell your poise, sell your art, sell your ability, BUT never sell yourself. This is when they became an inspiration to me and an influence in my life. I am sure that their motto could be used by many a young girl today.

A book is a hard thing to read today. Authors vie to conceal the message, express it in the finery of words, confuse most minds. I don't read many books, but when I do I like to get something out of it.

This is what I took from a book on "Commitment."

"Lord, I NEED You! (We all do at times.)

Lord, I WANT You! (Now I'm reaching a little.) Lord, I LOVE You with all my heart! (Now the door, the heart, was opened.) Then came: Lord, please HELP me (and I poured out my heart, I just talked to God.) Lord, not my will, but Thine be done! Lord, I'll do my best, You Lord do the rest!" This has been a tremendous help in this age of conflicting standards.

Then in '69 came My Hippie Medal — at least, that's what I call it. Actually it was a manly heavy medal and chain of Taurus, symbol of February. I liked the medal. But it had to mean something if I was to keep it. So I studied the face of it and found two bulls apparently waging a battle over a heart. There was its meaning for me: the battle of conflicts and contrasts going on in our modern world. I wondered how Christ would have reacted.

I turned the medal over, and there was my answer. Hearts at the ends of a sunburst. My heart must go out to all. It changed my life. I know I fall far short of my goal, but I guess I must say: "Lord, I'll do my best, and You, Lord, do the rest!" It is my hope and prayer that one of these "mottos" will change your life, as it changed mine.