

# Penance: The Three Forms

Part I  
By Father Robert J. Kennedy

When the fathers of the Second Vatican Council called for a revision of the Sacrament of Penance, they were concerned that the "rite and formulas of penance be revised in such a way that they may more clearly express the nature and effects of the sacrament."

With that sparsely-sketched guideline to follow, the revision has produced a rite that includes three forms of celebration, forms that seek to re-establish a fuller meaning of the sacrament.

The three forms for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance are the rite for the reconciliation of individual penitents, the rite for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, and the rite for the reconciliation of several penitents with general confession and absolution.

Each form seeks to fit specific needs and situations in the life of the penitent and of the community: there are times when we need a more personal discussion of our sinfulness so as to grow in the Christian life, other times when we need to join our brothers and sisters in prayer for God's mercy. The three styles also try to recapture some of the elements of the celebration of the sacrament that

## INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

we lost over the centuries. We will write more about these next week.

The first form of the new rite begins with a brief but friendly greeting and exchange between priest and penitent so that the priest might become a little more familiar with the penitent's situation in life. ("I am thirty-five years old, a husband and father with three children, and am currently unemployed.") This type of exchange will help the priest exercise his ministry more fully.

Then there is a brief reading from scripture, selected and read by either priest or penitent. The confession of sins follows, and from this is determined an act of penance that will begin to heal the broken areas of one's faith-life. These acts might include prayer, self-denial or works of mercy. The penitent then prays for God's forgiveness and the priest gives the absolution through the laying on of hands. In concluding, priest and penitent give thanks for the gift of God's mercy and reconciliation.

a rhetorical question. He asked, "Would God who did not spare His only Son for us be against us? Would Christ who died for us? Who rose for us? Who intercedes always for us?" The answer is, of course not! This cannot be.

A sacrament never celebrates man's failures. The sacrament of reconciliation is not just a confession of sins, but a celebration of the Father's love and forgiveness; it is not just an admission of guilt, but growth in the Christian life; not just sorrow, but praise and thanks (like the Confessions of St. Augustine) of God's goodness and mercy.

The story of the transfiguration seems to be the climax of two events: (1) the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah of God, and (2) the prediction by Jesus of His coming passion, death, and resurrection. The Transfiguration confirms Peter's confession: "This is my son, my beloved," and Jesus' prediction: "Moses and Elijah spoke of his passage (exodus in Greek, meaning an exodus or passing over) which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:31).

The Transfiguration account points to both baptismal and penitential themes. The whiteness of Jesus' garments represents, in later tradition, the white baptismal robe put on after baptism. The three booths represent the indwelling of the three divine Persons in the tabernacle of the soul at baptism. The Trinity transfigures the very being of the child so that he becomes like God in nature and thus truly His son.

After the transfiguration event, Jesus strictly enjoined the apostles to tell no one till "the Son of Man had risen from the dead." The apostles continued to discuss, said Mark what "to rise from the dead" meant. For Christ it meant resurrection — a new and fuller life.

For us, to rise from the dead can mean to rise to a new and fuller life. Surely, Abraham and Isaac were richer for having listened to God and for having preferred His will to their own. Their subsequent lives, and that of their posterity, were as a result new and fuller.

The sacrament of reconciliation calls each of us to die — to die to our fears of going to confession, to die daily to our selfishness, to prefer His will to ours — so that we can celebrate a transfiguration again, a rising to a new and fuller life!

The second and third forms of the new Rite of Penance are communal celebrations of the sacrament. In such celebrations, we join together with our brothers and sisters in faith, realizing that we have hurt one another by our sin, joined together in doing evil in our world, but also need each other very much in finding support and encouragement to be reconciled.

Both of these forms include a celebration of God's Word: an opening hymn and greeting, an opening prayer, one or several readings from scripture with responses, and a homily. After the homily a suitable period of silence is provided for the examination of conscience; it may be assisted by brief considerations read by a priest or other minister. Then all join in some form of general confession, expressing sinfulness, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy. The Lord's Prayer is then said together.

At this point, the second form allows the opportunity for individual confession of sins and absolution. These are meant to be brief and concise encounters, but complete and unhurried. Here the third form calls for the assignment of an act of penance to be done by all, and, after somehow indicating that they wish to be reconciled in this way, the group of penitents is reconciled through general absolution. (This third form will occur only in particular, occasional circumstances outlined by the bishop.)

Finally, in both forms, all give thanks and praise to God for his gifts of mercy and forgiveness, and are dismissed to live in the peace of Christ.

Next Week: Background and reasons for these forms.

### Congressman Seeks Service Academy Applications

Congressman Frank Horton invited his young constituents this week to apply for appointment to the nation's military service academies. He said he would submit no more than 10 nominations to each institution — the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md., the Military Academy at West Point and the Air Force Academy in Colorado. The academies make final decisions on appointments on the basis of their own tests.

The 34th Congressional District, Rep. Horton's area, comprises Eastern Monroe and Wayne County. Applications will be accepted from young men and women who live in the district and will be between the ages of 17 and 22 on July 1, 1977. Those appointed will begin the four-year college course during the summer of 1977. The application deadline is next Nov. 15.

Candidates for admission to the Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point also should contact the congressman, but those interested in the Coast Guard should write to the Director of Admissions, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, New London, Conn. 06320.

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### Bishops' Meeting Set for March 29

Albany — The bishops of New York State will meet in Buffalo March 29-30 with parishes and parish life as the topic.

exchanges. They are great learning sessions for us bishops."

For the past three years, each of the 12 regions of the National Bishops' Conference has convened in the Spring. Discussions have centered on communications, family life and youth, and the catechetical directory, with various professionals and interested members of the clergy, laity and religious offering their views. At the last meeting, in Rochester, Cardinal Terence Cooke, chairman of the region and archbishop of New York, said, "We must do this again. We must continue these excellent

Planning for the Buffalo conference is being done by Auxiliary Bishops James Mahoney of New York, John Snyder of Brooklyn, and John McGann of Rockville Center.

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**WORD FOR SUNDAY**

Fr. **Albert Shamon**

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mk. 9:2-10 (R1) Gn. 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18; (R2) Rom. 8:31-34

All three readings in the Sunday Lenten liturgy are harmonized; that is, all three zero in on the same theme. Thus in this Sunday's first reading Abraham does not spare his son; in the second reading God the Father does not spare His Son; in the third reading we are told that Jesus is that Son. In the early Church, all three readings helped prepare catechumens for baptism. For baptism is a transfiguration which makes us sons of God and calls us to die daily to self in imitation of Isaac and of Jesus.

The Abraham story supports the continual condemnation in the Old Testament of human and child sacrifice. It confirms the value of complete trust and confidence in God — a trust exemplified not only by Abraham, but also by Isaac who, in later Judaism, is pictured as surrendering his life willingly. The Abraham story also encourages us not to flinch at making sacrifices this Lent, especially receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. Few of us will ever be asked to sacrifice a person dearer to us than Isaac was to Abraham, yet Abraham answered God's awful command with an unhesitating, "Ready!" How ready ought we be to do such little things as Lenten self-denial, as going to confession!

Yet we are human. It is human to err; but to admit it is divine. For some, it takes a lot of courage to go to confession. I suppose this fear is spawned by man's innate reluctance to bare his breast to another. Or because of the past stress on the priest as judge in the confessional. Or because of the dark, forbidding atmosphere of the "confessional box."

Paul, in the second reading, would dissipate such flimsy fear by

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