

Penance provides cleansing

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

The sacrament of penance simply did not exist in the early days of the church.

Baptism was the sacrament of forgiveness.

But baptism was administered only once to each individual, making the forgiveness of sin a one-shot opportunity.

Thus, if a believer committed serious sin — murder or adultery, for example — after baptism, it once was understood that he or she could not be forgiven.

This rigid stand on sin and forgiveness stemmed from the early Christians' conviction that the end of the world was near, noted Father William Graf, pastor of Rochester's Most Precious Blood Church.

Father Graf, who earned a doctorate in theology with a dissertation entitled, *Priest as confessor and spiritual director*, pointed out that baptism then carried a more substantial commitment than it does today.

Individuals received the sacrament as adults, only after years of prayer, education and preparation for renouncing sinfulness. As a result, he added, "People knew what they were getting themselves into (when they were baptized)."

But the end of the world did not come. It eventually became clear that believers would be required to live their faith for many years on earth. The odds increased that baptized Christians would commit serious sins.

At the same time, persecution was leading some Christians to renounce their faith. Some of those individuals later wished for forgiveness and to re-establish their connections with the church.

Gradually, Christian communities began looking for ways to allow reconciliation and to forgive sins. They found scriptural grounds for doing so in such texts as John 20:23. In that passage, the risen Jesus told his disciples: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

By the third century, rites of penance became widespread throughout the Christian world, although practices varied from community to community.

For lesser sins, such acts as prayer, almsgiving and fasting were deemed sufficient to obtain forgiveness without benefit of clergy. The Mass contained — as it does to this day — prayers for forgiveness.

More serious sins, on the other hand, called for lengthy periods of public penance. The procedure, called canonical penance, often required the penitent to engage in fasting, prayer and even sexual abstinence for years — or perhaps for life.

During their periods of penance, the church denied penitents holy Communion. In fact, penitents — like those individuals going through instruction to be baptized — were required had to leave Mass before the Offertory.

When the penitential period finally ended, the penitent gained readmission to the Christian community during a Holy Thursday ceremony officiated by the bishop.

The focus of penance in the early days of the church was on reconciliation with the community and with God, Father Graf said. The community was involved in the process in that it prayed for the penitents, and welcomed them back to the church on Holy Thursday.

The early rite of penance was somewhat more tolerant of human frailty than was the previous understanding. But it also limited Christians to one opportunity for forgiveness. As the rite evolved, moreover, the penances dispensed became longer and more severe.

As a result, Christians began to delay the



o homo surge qui dormis.

This woodcut in an edition of the penitential *Eruditorum poenitentiale*, printed at Paris by Antoine Caillaut, c. 1488-90, depicts a priest hearing confession.

SACRAMENTS

PART V OF A SERIES

rite until late in life. By the fifth century, the practice of penance had fallen into disuse.

In the sixth century, however, Irish monks breathed new life into the rite. The monks develop a practice of pairing younger monks with older monks to receive spiritual guidance. Such sessions often included confessions of sin, after which the older monks sometimes imposed penances. Soon the monasteries began compiling "penitentials," books listing appropriate penances for each sin, as an aid to spiritual advisers.

Through the influence of monasticism, the rite came to focus more on penance than on reconciliation. Monastic practices also caused the focus of penance to shift away from a basis in community and toward a private ritual.

Penitents soon were expected to admit lesser sins as well as major ones, and could seek forgiveness repeatedly. Priests and bishops could both minister penance. A

standard formula for absolution was developed.

By the seventh century, the Irish monks and their penitentiaries were spreading this form of the rite throughout Europe.

Yet priests working with the laity found that the types of penances imposed under the monastic system were unrealistic for those living and working in the world. Eventually they abandoned the penitentiaries and focused less on penances.

Instead, the act of confession itself began to assume greater importance. The humiliation involved in confessing sin came to be regarded as a penance in and of itself.

In 1551, the Council of Trent codified the practices that had developed about the sacrament throughout the previous centuries. The council required Catholics to receive the sacrament at least once a year, and defined the priest's role more as judge than as spiritual adviser. The aspects of confession and absolution took dominance, and the sacrament became known as "confession."

This understanding of the rite remained in effect until the Second Vatican Council. At that time, the council fathers called for a re-evaluation of the rite in light of early church practice and of the sacrament's theological intent.

Although still commonly referred to as "penance" or "confession," the sacrament is now properly called the "sacrament of reconciliation" to emphasize reconciliation with God and the community, Father Graf noted.

The church offers three forms or rites of the sacrament. Individual confession is the first form, but today this rite emphasizes counseling from the priest rather than the judgmental approach of earlier practice.

The second rite includes individual confession and absolution, but adds communal prayer and a general homily. Reserved only for unusual circumstances, the third rite consists of general absolution, with the stipulation that those in serious sin seek individual confession as soon as possible.

Father Graf observed that the second and third rites restore a community focus to the sacrament, which provides an opportunity for mutual forgiveness and for reconciliation with God and the community.

Today, he remarked, the church stresses that the sacrament of reconciliation is "God extending his arms to people who are hurting and bringing them back to the community, which is trying by its actions to make them feel welcome."

NEXT WEEK: Eucharist.