

Reconciliation

The sacrament of reconciliation (also called penance or confession) seems to have developed from belief in God's power of forgiveness as it was extended to so many by Jesus of Nazareth. As mentioned earlier, his was a call to repent for sin, and to all those willing to do this, he preached the good news of a loving and forgiving God. Jesus' Abba was not a person of vengeance and punishment, but a person of mercy and pardon. In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus portrays his Father as one who runs down the road to celebrate the return of a sinner. Jesus also portrays himself as the good shepherd, rejoicing at finding a lost sheep.

In the early communities, the Jewish practices for atonement were observed: fasting, wearing sackcloth, prayers, and sacrifices at the Temple. As Christians separated from the Jews, they began to develop new rituals. Matthew's gospel tells of the practice of first confronting the sinner. If that failed, the person offended took one or two others along and tried again. If there was still no result, the community was informed and the sinner was set aside until he or she was willing to adopt new behavior (Mt 18:15–20).

Public penance first appeared in the second century. This ritual was for those who had committed serious sins like adultery, apostasy, or murder. Usually the sinner was set aside, excluded from Eucharist, and required to do public penance outside the Church for several years until the community believed that the sinner had reformed. Only then could the penitent be re-admitted to the community. Private confession seems to have appeared in the Celtic churches in Ireland in the sixth century. Here sinners told their sins to priests and nuns, received counseling, and were given penance appropriate for the sin. This practice soon became popular and spread to the continent. At first it was condemned by Rome, but by the thirteenth century, private confession was approved and declared to be a sacrament. By now there were formulas to be used and only a priest could "hear" confessions. This form was made juridical by Trent, responding to the Protestant reformers, most of whom rejected penance as a sacrament.

Vatican II proposed a reform of reconciliation and in the mid 1970s a new rite appeared. The dark confessionals were replaced with comfortable and friendly reconciliation rooms, where the priest could be talked to face-to-face or behind a screen. The priest, rather than being a judge, now represented the healing and forgiving Jesus. Scripture is read, spiritual advice is offered, a meaningful penance is given, and the priest prays with the penitent for forgiveness. Three modes were suggested: private in the reconciliation room, at penance services, or a general absolution given to large groups without individual confession.

At first there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the new rite of reconciliation, especially for the great celebrations with general absolution. Soon narrow restrictions were placed on general absolution and it is now seldom celebrated. Penance services, especially at times near important feasts, are still popular. Individual confession is not widely celebrated, except at retreats and renewal sessions.

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