

Catechetical CORNER

Origins of the Sacrament That Brings Us Healing

by Daniel S. Mulhall

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus healed people from a host of maladies, so much so that people were astonished (Mk 6:2). Often, Jesus forgave the person's sins before healing the body. The Church remembers Jesus' healing touch of body and soul in the sacraments of healing, particularly the Anointing of the Sick and Penance, or Reconciliation.

While the practice of spiritual healing through the forgiveness of sins is a tradition as old as the Church itself, the practice of confessing individual sins and receiving absolution from a priest or bishop developed over time. And this sacramental practice has changed greatly.

In the early Church, the confession of sins was not a common practice. In Baptism, people were washed clean of sin, and no other means of forgiveness was thought needed. People who strayed from the narrow path would return to God through prayer, fasting, and works of mercy and would be forgiven their minor sins in the eucharistic celebration.

Then came the Roman persecution of the second and third centuries when Christians were forced to renounce their faith in order to save their lives. How could this sin be forgiven and people be brought back into the Body of Christ? A formal process for returning people to a full membership in the Church was needed, and so one developed.

These early penitential practices were harsh, reserved as they were for only those people who had sinned egregiously (murder, apostasy, sacrificing to false gods). Tertullian, in "*De Poenitentia*" ("Of Repentance"), wrote that this "second penance" (baptism was first) could be received only once during a lifetime.

When a person who had sinned grievously wished to return to the Church, he or she would be required to come before the entire community and admit sinning. They were required to make a public penance, often standing outside the church wearing sackcloth and ashes, giving alms, with a sign confessing the sinful behavior. This "penance" often occurred during the six weeks of Lent, with the sinner being received back into full communion with the Church during Holy Week services.

For the most severe sin, this penance might last years: The fourth-century Council of Nicaea set a twelve-year penance for those guilty of the gravest sins. A person had to be at least thirty-five years old in order to be admitted to this order of penitents because someone younger was thought more likely to relapse into sin. Only the bishop could release a person from this penance and forgive his or her sins.

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The sacrament began to take on a different form during the fifth century. Now, priests (and not just bishops) could forgive one's sins. Pope St. Leo the Great ended the public confessing of sins, deciding that admitting one's guilt to the priest was enough.

The more lenient "monastic" practice of penance (the predecessor of the form we practice today) was developed by the monks of Ireland during the sixth century. To receive forgiveness one had to privately confess serious sins to a priest, fulfill a required penance needed to bring one to spiritual wholeness, and accept the forgiveness of the priest on behalf of the community.

Over a period of centuries the monks developed penitentials, books that listed the common sins people confessed and the penance required for forgiveness. This type of forgiveness could happen multiple times during one's life and was no longer connected to Lent.

As a result of this changed practice, the focus of the sacrament came to be seen as more about punishment and retribution, and less about healing or helping people to amend their lives and return to the Church.

What started out as a way to encourage people to seek forgiveness frequently for their sinfulness soon came to be seen as so harsh that people seldom took advantage of it.

During the next 600 years, the structure of the sacrament changed little. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) ordered that anyone who had reached the age of reason should once a year "individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest." This council also instituted the seal of confession (what was revealed in confession had to be kept a secret) and determined that regular confession and absolution were necessary for a "proper Christian life."

Two hundred years later, in 1439, the Council of Florence finally defined the Sacrament of Penance. To be forgiven, the penitent must be contrite for his or her actions and determine not to sin again, confess aloud all sins (to the best of one's memory), complete the penance given by the priest (prayer, fasting, giving alms), and be forgiven by the priest who uses these words: "I absolve you."

Pushed by the Reformation, the bishops at the Council of Trent (1551) reaffirmed the requirements of and need for the sacrament. All mortal sins had to be confessed yearly.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) called for the reform of all the sacraments, including penance. The reform of penance focused on a return to spiritual healing, the reconciliation of the person with the Church and to God, and less on punishment for sins. In 1973, Pope Paul VI formally gave the sacrament the name "reconciliation."

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This article was originally published in CNS's Faith Alive!