

RITE OF PENANCE

INTRODUCTION

I	The Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of Salvation	2
II	The Reconciliation of Penitents in the Church's Life	2
	<i>The Church is Holy but always in need of Purification</i>	2
	<i>Penance in the Church's Life and Liturgy</i>	2
	<i>Reconciliation with God and with the Church</i>	3
	<i>The Sacrament of Penance and Its Parts</i>	3
	a) Contrition	3
	b) Confession	3
	c) Act of Penance (Satisfaction)	3
	d) Absolution	3
	<i>The Necessity and Benefit of the Sacrament</i>	4
III	Offices and Ministries in the Reconciliation of Penitents	4
	<i>The Community in the Celebration of Penance</i>	4
	<i>The Minister of the Sacrament of Penance</i>	4
	<i>The Pastoral Exercise of This Ministry</i>	4
	<i>The Penitent</i>	5
IV	The Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance	5
	<i>The Place of Celebration</i>	5
	<i>The Time of Celebration</i>	5
	<i>Liturgical Vestments</i>	5
A	Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents	5
	<i>Preparation of Priest and Penitent</i>	5
	<i>Welcoming the Penitent</i>	5
	<i>Reading the Word of God</i>	6
	<i>Confession of Sins and the Act of Penance</i>	6
	<i>The Prayer of the Penitent and the Absolution by the Priest</i>	6
	<i>Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal of the Penitent</i>	6
	<i>Short Rite</i>	6
B	Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution	6
	<i>Introductory Rites</i>	7
	<i>The Celebration of the Word of God</i>	7
	<i>The Rite of Reconciliation</i>	7
	<i>Dismissal of the People</i>	8
C	Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution	8
	<i>The Discipline of General Absolution</i>	8
	<i>The Rite of General Absolution</i>	8
V	Penitential Celebrations	9
	<i>Nature and Structure</i>	9
	<i>Benefit and Importance</i>	9
VI	Adaptations of the Rite to Various Regions and Circumstances	9
	<i>Adaptations by the Episcopal Conferences</i>	9
	<i>The Competence of the Bishop</i>	10
	<i>Adaptations by the Minister</i>	10
		1

I THE MYSTERY OF RECONCILIATION IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

1 The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross.¹ The Son of God made man lived among men in order to free them from the slavery of sin² and to call them out of darkness into his wonderful light.³ He therefore began his work on earth by preaching repentance and saying: 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news' (Mark 1 :15).

This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by the prophets, prepared the hearts of men for the coming of the Kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist who came 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1 :4).

Jesus, however, not only exhorted men to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord,⁴ but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father.⁵ Moreover, by healing the sick he signified his power to forgive sin.⁶ Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justification.⁷ Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion,⁸ he instituted the sacrifice of the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins.⁹ After his resurrection he sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins¹⁰ and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name.¹¹

2 This victory is first brought to light in baptism where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God.¹³ For this reason the Church proclaims its faith in 'the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins'.

In the sacrifice of the Mass the passion of Christ is made present; his body given for us and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are offered to God again by the Church for the salvation of the world. In the eucharist Christ is present and is offered as 'the sacrifice which has made our peace'¹⁴ with God and in order that 'we may be brought together in unity'¹⁵ by his Holy Spirit.

Furthermore our Saviour Jesus Christ, when he gave to his apostles and their successors power to forgive sins, instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance. Thus the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God and renewed in grace.¹⁶ The Church 'possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of penance'.¹⁷

II. THE RECONCILIATION OF PENITENTS IN THE CHURCH'S LIFE

The Church is Holy but always in need of Purification

3 Christ 'loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy' (Ephesians 5:25-26), and he united the Church to himself as his bride.¹⁸ He filled her with his divine gifts,¹⁹ because she is his body and fullness, and through her he spreads truth and grace to all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and unfortunately often fall into sin. As a result, 'while Christ, "holy, innocent, and unstained" (Hebrews 7 :26), did not know sin (2 Corinthians 5 :21) but came only to atone for the sins of the people (see Hebrews 2: 17), the Church, which includes within itself sinners and is at the same time holy and always in need of purification, constantly pursues repentance and renewal'.²⁰

Penance in the Church's Life and Liturgy

4 The people of God accomplishes and perfects this continual repentance in many different ways. It shares in the sufferings of Christ²¹ by enduring its own difficulties, carries out works of mercy and charity,²² and adopts ever more fully the outlook of the Gospel message. Thus the people of God becomes in the world a sign of conversion to God. All this the Church expresses in its life and celebrates in the liturgy when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. This happens in penitential services, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayer, and in the penitential aspects of the eucharistic celebration.²³

In the sacrament of penance the faithful 'obtain from the mercy of God pardon for their sins against him; at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example, and prayer'.²⁴

Reconciliation with God and with the Church

5 Since every sin is an offence against God which disrupts our friendship with him, 'the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him'.²⁵ Therefore, the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who 'first loved us' (1 John 4: 19), to Christ who gave himself up for us,²⁶ and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly.²⁷

'By the hidden and loving mystery of God's design men are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others'.²⁸ Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins.

In fact, men frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all men of good will for justice and peace in the world.

The Sacrament of Penance and Its Parts

6 The follower of Christ who has sinned but who has been moved by the Holy Spirit to come to the sacrament of penance should above all be converted to God with his whole heart. This inner conversion of heart embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due satisfaction, and amendment of life. God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests.²⁹

a) Contrition

The most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is 'heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more'.³⁰ 'We can only approach the Kingdom of Christ by *metanoia*. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge, and arrange his life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance' (see Hebrews 1 :2; Colossians 1 :19 and *passim*).³¹ The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him and render him continually more like Christ.

b) Confession

The Sacrament of penance includes the confession of sins, which comes from true knowledge of self before God and from contrition for those sins. However, this inner examination of heart and the exterior accusation should be made in the light of God's mercy. Confession requires in the penitent the will to open his heart to the minister of God, and in the minister a spiritual judgment by which, acting in the person of Christ, he pronounces his decision of forgiveness or retention of sins in accord with the power of the keys.³²

c) Act of Penance (Satisfaction)

True conversion is completed by acts of penance or satisfaction for the sins committed, by amendment of conduct, and also by the reparation of injury.³³ The kind and extent of the satisfaction should be suited to the personal condition of each penitent so that each one may restore the order which he disturbed and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which he suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life. Thus the penitent, 'forgetting the things which are behind him' (Philippians 3: 13), again becomes part of the mystery of salvation and turns himself toward the future.

d) Absolution

Through the sign of absolution God grants pardon to the sinner who in sacramental confession manifests his change of heart to the Church's minister, and thus the sacrament of penance is completed. In God's design the humanity and loving kindness of our Saviour have visibly appeared to us,³⁴ and God uses visible signs to give salvation and to renew the broken covenant.

In the sacrament of penance the Father receives the repentant son who comes back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings it back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies this temple of God again or lives more fully within it. This is finally expressed in a renewed and more

fervent sharing of the Lord's table, and there is great joy at the banquet of God's Church over the son who has returned from afar.³⁵

The Necessity and Benefit of the Sacrament

7 Just as the wound of sin is varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing which penance provides is varied. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God.

a) To obtain the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, according to the plan of our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin which they remember upon examination of their conscience.³⁶

b) Moreover, frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly.³⁷ In confession of this kind, penitents who accuse themselves of venial faults should try to conform more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively.

In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among Christ's faithful, it must take root in their whole lives and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbour.

The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free,³⁸ and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God's glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus.

III. OFFICES AND MINISTRIES IN THE RECONCILIATION OF PENITENTS

The Community in the Celebration of Penance

8 The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.³⁹

9 The Minister of the Sacrament of Penance

a) The Church exercise the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and presbyters. By preaching God's word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins.

In the exercise of this ministry presbyters act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office of regulating the penitential discipline.⁴⁰

b) The competent minister of the sacrament is a priest who has the faculty to absolve in accordance with the provisions of the Code of Canon Law, canons 967-975. All priests, however, even though not approved to hear confessions, absolve validly and lawfully any penitents without exception who are in danger of death.

10 The Pastoral Exercise of This Ministry

a) In order to fulfill his ministry properly and faithfully the confessor should understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them. He should fulfill his office of judge widely and should acquire the knowledge and prudence necessary for this task by serious study, guided by the teaching authority of the Church and especially by fervent prayer to God. Discernment of spirits is a deep knowledge of God's action in the hearts of men; it is a gift of the Spirit as well as the fruit of charity.⁴¹

b) The confessor should always be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful when they make a reasonable request of him.⁴²

c) By receiving the repentant sinner and leading him to the light of the truth the confessor fulfills a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who mercifully accomplished the saving work of man's redemption and who is present by his power in the sacraments.⁴³

d) As the minister of God the confessor comes to know the secrets of another's conscience, and he is bound to keep the sacramental seal of confession absolutely inviolate.

The Penitent

11 The acts of the penitent in the celebration of the sacrament are of the greatest importance.

When with proper dispositions he approaches this saving remedy instituted by Christ and confesses his sins, he shares by his actions in the sacrament itself; the sacrament is completed when the words of absolution are spoken by the minister in the name of Christ.

Thus the faithful Christian, as he experiences and proclaims the mercy of God in his life, celebrates with the priest the liturgy by which the Church continually renews itself.

IV. THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

The Place of Celebration

12 The sacrament of penance is ordinarily celebrated in a church or oratory, unless a legitimate reason stands in the way.

The conferences of bishops are to establish the norms pertaining to the confessional, which will include provision for clearly visible confessionals that the faithful who wish may readily use and that are equipped with a fixed screen between the penitent and the confessor.

Except for a legitimate reason, confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional.⁴⁴

The Time of Celebration

13 The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day, but it is desirable that the faithful know the day and time at which the priest is available for this ministry.

They should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated and especially during the scheduled periods.⁴⁵

The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God has heard the solemn invitation 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news.' It is therefore fitting to have several penitential celebrations during Lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbour and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter triduum with renewed hearts.

Liturgical Vestments

14 The regulations laid down by the local Ordinaries for the use of liturgical vestments in the celebration of penance are to be observed.

A. RITE FOR THE RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

Preparation of Priest and Penitent

15 Priest and penitent should first prepare themselves by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity. The penitent should compare his life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of his sins.

Welcoming the Penitent

16 The priest should welcome the penitent with fraternal charity and, if the occasion permits, address him with friendly words. The penitent then makes the sign of the cross, saying: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit Amen'. The priest may also make the sign of the cross with the penitent. Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God. If the penitent is unknown

to the priest, it is proper for him to indicate his state in life, the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

Reading the Word of God

17 Then the priest, or the penitent himself, may read a text of holy Scripture, or this may be done as part of the preparation for the sacrament. Through the word of God the Christian receives light to recognize his sins and is called to conversion and to confidence in God's mercy.

Confession of Sins and the Act of Penance

18 The penitent then confesses his sins, beginning, where customary, with a form of general confession: *I confess to almighty God*. If necessary, the priest should help the penitent to make a complete confession; he should also encourage him to have sincere sorrow for his sins against God. Finally, the priest should offer suitable counsel to help the penitent begin a new life and, where necessary, instruct him in the duties of the Christian way of life.

If the penitent has been the cause of harm or scandal to others, the priest should lead him to resolve that he will make appropriate restitution.

Then the priest imposes an act of penance or satisfaction on the penitent; this should serve not only to make up for the past but also to help him to begin a new life and provide him with an antidote to weakness. As far as possible, the penance should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service of one's neighbour and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect.

The Prayer of the Penitent and the Absolution by the Priest

19 After this the penitent manifests his contrition and resolution to begin a new life by means of a prayer for God's pardon. It is desirable that this prayer should be based on the words of Scripture.

Following this prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution, in which the essential words are: 'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. As he says the final words the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. The form of absolution (see no. 46) indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.

Proclamation of Praise and Dismissal of the Penitent

20 After receiving pardon for his sins the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from scripture. Then the priest tells him to go in peace.

The penitent continues his conversion and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for 'love covers over a multitude of sins' (1 Peter 4:8).

Short Rite

21 When pastoral need dictates it, the priest may omit or shorten some parts of the rite but must always retain in their entirety the confession of sins and the acceptance of the act of penance, the invitation to contrition (no. 44), and the form of absolution and the dismissal. In imminent danger of death, it is sufficient for the priest to say the essential words of the form of absolution, namely, 'I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'.

B. RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

22 When a number of penitents assemble at the same time to receive sacramental reconciliation, it is fitting that they be prepared for the sacrament by a celebration of the word of God.

Those who will receive the sacrament at another time may also take part in the service.

Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time

they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son.

If necessary, several priests should be available in suitable places to hear individual confessions and to reconcile the penitents.

Introductory Rites

23 When the faithful are assembled, a suitable hymn may be sung. Then the priest greets them, and, if necessary, he or another minister gives a brief introduction to the celebration and explains the order of service. Next he invites all to pray and after a period of silence completes the (opening) prayer.

The Celebration of the Word of God

24 The sacrament of penance should begin with a hearing of God's word, because through his word God calls men to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart.

One or more readings may be chosen. If more than one are read, a psalm, another suitable song, or a period of silence should be inserted between them, so that the word of God may be more deeply understood and heartfelt assent may be given to it. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from the gospel.

Readings should be chosen which illustrate the following:

- a) the voice of God calling men back to conversion and ever closer conformity with Christ;
- b) the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit;
- c) the judgment of God about good and evil in men's lives as a help in the examination of conscience.

25 The homily, taking its theme from the scriptural text, should lead the penitents to examine their consciences and to turn away from sin and toward God. It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one's neighbours, and against the sinner himself. Therefore, it would be good to recall:

- a) the infinite mercy of God, greater than all our sins, by which again and again he calls us back to himself;
- b) the need for interior repentance, by which we are genuinely prepared to make reparation for sin;
- c) the social aspect of grace and sin, by which the actions of individuals in some degree affect the whole body of the Church;
- d) the duty to make satisfaction for sin, which is effective because of Christ's work of reparation and requires especially, in addition to works of penance, the exercise of true charity toward God and neighbour.

26 After the homily a suitable period of silence should be allowed for examining one's conscience and awakening true contrition for sin. The priest or a deacon or other minister may help the faithful with brief considerations or a litany, adapted to their background, age, etc.

If it is judged suitable, this communal examination of conscience and awakening of contrition may take the place of the homily. But in this case it should be clearly based on the text of scripture that has just been read.

The Rite of Reconciliation

27 At the invitation of the deacon or other minister, all kneel or bow their heads and say a form of general confession (for example, *I confess to almighty God*). Then they stand and join in a litany or suitable song to express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy. Finally, they say the Lord's Prayer, which is never omitted.

28 After the Lord's Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.

29 When the confessions are over, the priests return to the sanctuary. The priest who presides invites all to make an act of thanksgiving and to praise God for his mercy. This may be done in a psalm or hymn or litany. Finally, the priest concludes

the celebration with prayer, praising God for the great love he has shown us.

Dismissal of the People

30 After the prayer of thanksgiving the priest blesses the faithful. Then the deacon or the priest himself dismisses the congregation.

C. RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF PENITENTS WITH GENERAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

The Discipline of General Absolution

31 An individual, complete confession and the receiving of absolution constitute the sole, ordinary means for a member of the faithful who is conscious of serious sin to be reconciled with God and the Church. Physical or moral impossibility alone excuses from this kind of confession; in the case of such impossibility, reconciliation is possible in other ways.

Absolution without prior, individual confession cannot be given collectively to a number of penitents unless:

- a) the danger of death is imminent and there is no time for a priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;
- b) a serious need is present, namely, given the number of penitents, not enough confessors are available to hear the individual confessions properly within a reasonable time, with the result that through no fault of their own, the faithful would be forced to be for a long time without the grace of the sacrament or without communion. The need in question is not regarded as sufficient when the nonavailability of confessors is based solely on there being a large number of penitents, such as may be the case at some great festival or pilgrimage.⁴⁶

32 To make the judgment on whether the requisite conditions already stated in no. 31 [b] are verified belongs to the diocesan bishop. After considering the criteria agreed on with the other members of the conference of bishops, he can decide which cases involve the need in question.⁴⁷

33 For the valid reception of general sacramental absolution it is required that the faithful not only be properly disposed but at the same time have the resolution to confess in due time each of those serious sins that they cannot at the present time confess in this way.

On the occasion of the reception of general absolution, the faithful, to the extent possible, are to be instructed on the requirements just mentioned; even in the case of danger of death when time allows, the imparting of general absolution is to be preceded by an exhortation that each recipient strive to make an act of contrition.⁴⁸

34 Unless there is a good reason preventing it, those who receive pardon for serious sins through general absolution are to go to individual confession as soon as they have the opportunity before any further reception of general absolution. And unless a moral impossibility stands in the way, they are absolutely bound to go to a confessor within one year. For the precept binding everyone of the faithful binds them as well, namely, to confess individually to a priest at least once a year all those grave sins not hitherto confessed one by one.⁴⁹

The Rite of General Absolution

35 For the reconciliation of penitents by general confession and absolution in the cases provided by law, everything takes place as described above for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, with the following exceptions:

- a) After the homily or during it, the faithful who seek general absolution should be instructed to dispose themselves properly, that is, each one should be sorry for his sins and resolve to avoid committing them again. He should intend to repair any scandal and harm he may have caused and likewise resolve to confess in due time each one of the grave sins which cannot be confessed at present.⁵⁰ Some act of penance should be proposed for all; individuals may add to this penance if they wish.
- b) The deacon, another minister, or the priest then calls upon the penitents who wish to receive absolution to show their intention by some sign (for example, by bowing their heads, kneeling, or giving some other sign determined by the episcopal conferences). They should also say together a form of general

confession (for example, *I confess to almighty God*), which may be followed by a litany or a penitential song. Then the Lord's Prayer is sung or said by all, as indicated in no. 27 above.

c) Then the priest calls upon the grace of the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, proclaims the victory over sin of Christ's death and resurrection, and gives sacramental absolution to the penitents.

d) Finally, the priest invites the people to give thanks, as described in no. 29, above, and, omitting the concluding prayer, he immediately blesses and dismisses them.

V. PENITENTIAL CELEBRATIONS

Nature and Structure

36 Penitential celebrations are gatherings of the people of God to hear the proclamation of God's word. This invites them to conversion and renewal of life and announces our freedom from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. The structure of these services is the same as that usually followed in celebrations of the word of God⁵¹ and given in the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents.

It is appropriate, therefore, that after the introductory rites (song, greeting, and prayer) one or more biblical readings be chosen with songs, psalms, or periods of silence inserted between them. In the homily these readings should be explained and applied to the congregation. Before or after the readings from scripture, readings from the Fathers or other writers may be selected which will help the community and each person to a true awareness of sin and heartfelt sorrow, in other words, to bring about conversion of life.

After the homily and reflection on God's word, it is desirable that the congregation, united in voice and spirit, pray together in a litany or in some other way suited to general participation. At the end the Lord's Prayer is said, asking God our Father 'to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us... and deliver us from evil'. The priest or the minister who presides concludes with a prayer and the dismissal of the people.

Benefit and Importance

37 Care should be taken that the faithful do not confuse these celebrations with the celebration of the sacrament of penance.⁵² Penitential celebrations are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart.⁵³

It is desirable to arrange such services especially for these purposes:

- to foster the spirit of penance within the Christian community;
- to help the faithful to prepare for confession which can be made individually later at a convenient time;
- to help children gradually to form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ.
- to help catechumens during their conversion.

Penitential celebrations, moreover, are very useful in places where no priest is available to give sacramental absolution. They offer help in reaching that perfect contrition which comes from charity and enables the faithful to attain to God's grace through a desire for the sacrament of penance.⁵⁴

VI. ADAPTATIONS OF THE RITE TO VARIOUS REGIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Adaptations by the Episcopal Conferences

38 In preparing particular rituals the conferences of bishops may adapt the rite of penance to the needs of individual regions so that after confirmation by the Apostolic See the rituals may be used in the respective regions. It is the responsibility of the conferences of bishops in this matter.

- a) to establish regulations for the discipline of the sacrament of penance, particularly those affecting the ministry of priests;
- b) to determine more precisely regulations about the confessional for the ordinary celebration of the sacrament of penance (see no. 12) and about the signs of repentance to be shown by the faithful before general absolution (see no. 35);

c) to prepare translations of texts adapted to the character and language of each people and also to compose new texts for the prayers of the faithful and the minister, keeping intact the sacramental form.

The Competence of the Bishop

39 It is for the diocesan bishop:

- a) to regulate the discipline of penance in his diocese,⁵⁵ including adaptations of the rite according to the rules proposed by the conferences of bishops;
- b) to make the decision, after considering the conditions required by the law (see no. 31 [b]) and the criteria agreed on with the other members of the conference of bishops, regarding the cases of need in which general absolution may be permitted.⁵⁶

Adaptations by the Minister

40 It is for priests, and especially parish priests:

- a) in celebrating individuals or the community, to adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents. The essential structure and the entire form of absolution must be kept, but if necessary they may omit some parts for pastoral reasons or enlarge upon them, may select the texts of readings or prayers, and may choose a place more suitable for the celebration according to the regulations of the episcopal conference, so that the entire celebration may be enriching and effective;
- b) to schedule and prepare occasional penitential celebrations during the year, especially in Lent. In order that the texts chosen and the order of the celebration may be adapted to the conditions and circumstances of the community of group (for example, children, sick persons, etc.), they may be assisted by others, including the laity.

Endnotes

¹ See 2 Corinthians 5:18ff; Colossians 1:20.

² See John 8:34-36

³ See 1 Peter 2 :9.

⁴ See Luke 15.

⁵ Luke 5:20, 27-32; 7:48.

⁶ See Matthew 9:2-8.

⁷ See Romans 4:25.

⁸ See Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer III.

⁹ See Matthew 26 :28.

¹⁰ See John 20:19-23.

¹¹ See Luke 24:47.

¹² See Acts 3:19, 26; 17:30.

¹³ See Romans 6:4-10.

¹⁴ Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer III.

¹⁵ Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer II.

¹⁶ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, Chapter I: Denz.-Schön. 1668 and 1670; can. I: Denz.-Schön. 1701.

¹⁷ St Ambrose, Letter 41:12: PL 16, 1116.

¹⁸ See Revelation 19:7.

¹⁹ See Ephesians 1:22-23; Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 7: AAS 57 (1965) 9-11.

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8: *ibid.*, 12.

²¹ See 1 Peter 4:13.

²² See 1 Peter 4:8.

²³ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*: Denz.-Schön. 1638, 1740, 1743; Congregation of Rites, instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium*, May 25, 1967, no. 35: AAS 59 (1967) 560-1; *Roman Missal, General Instruction*, nos. 29, 30, 56 a. b. g.

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. II: AAS 57 (1965) 15-16.

²⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, February 17, 1966: AAS 58 (1966) 179; See Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11: AAS 57 (1965) 15-16.

²⁶ See Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:25

²⁷ See Titus 3 :6.

²⁸ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, January 1, 1967, no. 4: AAS 59 (1967) 9; see Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943: AAS 35 (1943) 213.

²⁹ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, Chapter 1: Denz.-Schön. 1673-5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4: Denz.-Schön. 1676.

- ³¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, February 17, 1966: AAS 58 (1966) 179.
- ³² See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, Chapter 5: Denz.-Schön. 1679.
- ³³ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, Chapter 8: Denz.-Schön. 1690-2; Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, January 1, 1967, nos. 2-3: AAS 59 (1967) 6-8.
- ³⁴ See Titus 3:4-5.
- ³⁵ See Luke 15:7, 10, 32.
- ³⁶ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, can. 7-8: Denz.-Schön. 1707-8.
- ³⁷ See 2 Corinthians 4:10.
- ³⁸ See Galatians 4:31.
- ³⁹ See Matthew 18:18; John 20:23.
- ⁴⁰ See Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 26: AAS 57 (1965) 31-32.
- ⁴¹ See Philippians 1:9-10.
- ⁴² See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Normae pastorales circa absolutionem sacramentalem generali modo impertiendam*, June 16, 1972, no. XII: AAS 64 (1972) 514.
- ⁴³ See Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 7: AAS 56 (1964) 100-1.
- ⁴⁴ See CIC, can. 964.
- ⁴⁵ See Congregation of Rites, Instruction *Eucharisticum mysterium*, May 25, 1967, no. 35: AAS 59 (1967) 560-1.
- ⁴⁶ See CIC, can. 960 and 961, # 1.
- ⁴⁷ See CIC, can. 961, #2.
- ⁴⁸ See CIC, can. 962, #1 and 2.
- ⁴⁹ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoral Norms on General Absolution*, 16 June 1972, Norms VII and VIII: AAS 64 (1972), pp. 512-513, CIC, can. 963, 989.
- ⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, no. VI: loco cit, 512.
- ⁵¹ See Congregation of Rites, Instruction *Inter Oecumenici*, September 26, 1964, nos. 37-39: AAS 56 (1964) 110-11.
- ⁵² See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Normae pastorales circa absolutionem sacramentalem generali modo impertiendam*, June 16, 1972, no. X: AAS 64 (1972) 513-140
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ See Council of Trent, Session XIV, *De sacramento Paenitentiae*, chapter 5: Denz.-Schön. 1677.
- ⁵⁵ See Second Vatican Council, Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 26: AAS 57 (1965) 31-2.
- ⁵⁶ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Pastoral Norms on General Absolution*, 16 June 1972, Norm V: AAS 64 (1972), p. 512. CIC, can. 961, #1 and 2.

Acknowledgements

Excerpts from the *Rite of Penance* © 1974, 1975, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Inc., all rights reserved. Used with permission.

This Introduction may be freely copied for study purposes. This edition was prepared as part of a series of resources supporting the *Rite of Penance* by Liturgy Office 39 Eccleston Square London SW1V 1PL www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources