

Thy Sins Are Forgiven

The Sacrament of Confession, Reconciliation or Penance

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I. THE SACRAMENT OF DIVINE PARDON.

IT was afternoon on the third day following Christ's death and burial. Ten of His disciples were gathered in a house situated in a secluded street in the city of Jerusalem. Of the original twelve one was dead — Judas who had betrayed his Master and gone to his doom at his own hand. Thomas was temporarily absent, probably hiding somewhere. They were still stunned and terrified at the recollection of the harrowing events that had just transpired. Their beloved Leader had been captured and tortured and finally put to death. His power over the forces of nature had once seemed unlimited; yet now He had expired on the cross, apparently unable to help Himself. His cold body had been laid in the silent tomb; His cause seemed hopelessly lost. Today, however, a ray of hope had pierced the darkness. In the early morning the tomb had been discovered empty; an angel had proclaimed to some of the faithful women that Christ had risen from the dead; Mary Magdalen had even come to announce that she had seen the Crucified One living again. The disciples excitedly began to discuss some of the statements they had heard from the lips of their Master. On one occasion, they recalled, He had explicitly predicted that He would be put to death, but that on the third day He would rise again (Luke 18:33). At the time these words made little impression on them; but now they wondered if this promise was meant to be taken literally, and if Christ really lived once more.

Suddenly, their question was answered. Their Master stood in their midst, vigorous and resplendent with glory. And as they knelt around Him, their hearts throbbing with ecstatic joy, He greeted them with the affectionate salutation: "Peace be to you." Then He bade them touch His hands and feet and side to assure themselves from the wounds of the nails, deeply imprinted in His flesh, that this was the same body that had been fastened to the cross and had suffered death only three days before.

But our Lord had an important task to perform, a wondrous power to communicate to His chosen disciples. "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you," He began, implying that He was about to share with them some momentous function of His redemptive mission. Then He breathed on them — a symbol of the transmission into their souls of some power coming from heaven — and said: "Receive, all you, the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John 20: 21-23).

What was the precise nature of the power given by Christ to the apostles on this occasion? Most Protestants contend that it was nothing more than a commission to preach that God will pardon sinners if they turn to Him with confidence. Evidently such an interpretation does violence to the inspired text. Our Lord clearly stated that He was giving the apostles the power to forgive sin

themselves. He prefaced this commission with the assertion that He was sending them as He Himself had been sent by the Father — and undoubtedly, our Savior had been sent to forgive sins actually, not merely to preach that the repentant will be pardoned, for He was the “Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” For the fulfillment of their task He gave them the Holy Ghost, which indicated that the power they were receiving was something transcending all human power, and this cannot apply to the mere right to announce divine pardon. Finally, the Greek verb used for “forgive” by St. John the Evangelist in relating our Lord’s words is the very same that is found in other passages of Scripture where Christ speaks of the remission of sins by Himself (Luke 7:48; Matthew 9: 2) — convincing evidence that the apostles received the same manner of power to forgive sin as He Himself possessed. And since the powers which Christ gave to the apostles as the first priests and bishops of the Church were intended to be transmitted to their successors in the sacred ministry, those men who have received through the sacrament of Holy Orders the priesthood or the bishopric possess the power really to forgive sins.

There is another passage in the New Testament which confirms this interpretation. It relates a promise made by Christ about a year before His passion and death; first to St. Peter in particular, then to all the apostles. “Whatsoever you (Peter) shall bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven” (Matthew 16: 19) — “Amen I say to you (all the apostles), whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). These words are indeed somewhat indefinite, and can be interpreted of many particular functions, such as making laws for the members of the Church and dispensing from them. But the general idea underlying this promise is that the apostles and their successors in the ministry are to receive the power to release men from bonds that hinder their spiritual welfare, and that their exercise of this power will be ratified by God in heaven. Now, surely, if there is any bond from which men need to be released it is the ignominious slavery of sin. Certainly, this promise joined to the words spoken by Christ after His resurrection forms a proof which should convince every fair-minded person that our Lord really gave the priests of His Church in the person of His apostles the power to forgive sin.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that the Catholic Church has always claimed the power to forgive sins through the ministry of her priests and bishops. The early Christian writers often refer to this divinely granted power of the Church.

Thus, St. John Chrysostom wrote:

“Priests have received a power which God has not given either to angels or to archangels. Not only when they regenerate us (by Baptism) but also after regeneration they are able to forgive (by Penance) our sins” (On the Priesthood, Book III, numbers 5 & 6).

St. Leo the Great, a pope of the fifth century, stated:

“Jesus Christ has given to the rulers (priests and bishops) of His Church this power, that they may give to those who confess their sins a penance, and when they are purified by salutary satisfaction they may admit them to the sacraments by the gate of reconciliation” (Letter 108, number 2).

St. Ambrose declared:

“God has given His priests the power of pardoning all sinners without exception” (On Penance, I, chapter 3, number 10).

In ancient times the ceremony of forgiving sins was called “the imposition of hands” or “reconciliation” or “communion.” Nowadays, it is known as “Penance” or “Reconciliation” or more popularly as “confession.” It is rightly classified as one of the sacraments. For a sacrament is an external sign, instituted by Christ and capable of conferring grace. Now, Penance is an external ceremony, since it comprises the penitent’s acts of confession, contrition and the performance of the penance, and also the priest’s imparting of absolution. That it was instituted by Christ is evident from the scriptural texts we have studied. That it is capable of conferring grace follows from the fact that it remits sin, for sin is forgiven only by the infusion of sanctifying grace. It is important to note that not only the Catholic Church but also the Christian churches of the East that are separated from Rome — composed of more than 150 million members [in 1940] — recognize Penance as a sacrament.

Our Lord has decreed that all who sin grievously after Baptism shall seek the pardon of their sins in the sacrament of Penance. For He gave the apostles and their successors the power not only to forgive but also to retain sins; and this latter would be a meaningless power if there were some other means available to the sinner independently of Penance whereby he could be pardoned, in the event that the priest refused him absolution. It is true, a person in mortal sin can always return to the state of grace by making an act of perfect contrition — that is, sorrow for sin based on the love of God. But such a person must have the intention of confessing his grave sins subsequently; for it is only in the sacrament of Penance that he can receive official and judicial forgiveness. Even a non-Catholic who does not believe in this sacrament has the intention of receiving it implicitly when he makes an act of perfect contrition, inasmuch as such an act contains the purpose of doing all that God requires of him. It is in this sense that the Catholic Church teaches that the reception of Penance is necessary for all who have sinned mortally after Baptism.

Christ wished the administration of Penance to be a judicial process, somewhat similar to that which takes place in court when a person is being tried for a crime. For He gave the apostles and their successors a real authority as judges, declaring that God would ratify in heaven their judgments, whether they forgive or retain. Moreover, by imposing the obligation of confession on the penitent — which will be proved in the next chapter — our Lord provided for the manifestation of the evidence, an essential factor in a trial. However, in the tribunal of Penance the penitent is both the accused and the witness, since he alone knows the thoughts and the motives that actuated his sins, and these are more important in the eyes of God than are his external actions.

Our Savior made no restrictions as to the number or the gravity of the sins that can be confessed and forgiven in the sacrament of Penance; and hence the Catholic Church has always held that her power extends even to the most heinous crimes, however numerous they may be, provided the sinner is truly repentant and honestly confesses. In the early ages, it is true, those guilty of certain enormous transgressions of God’s law were sometimes obliged to perform extraordinary penitential practices for a long time before receiving sacramental pardon; and those who fell a second time after having been forgiven once were treated with special severity. But this was a matter of ecclesiastical discipline, intended to inspire the members of the Church with a salutary fear of grave sin. It did not indicate that the Church ever doubted that the divine power she had received from her Founder extended to every type of human transgression.

II. THE PENITENT.

Only a baptized person is capable of receiving the sacrament of Penance. In the case of one who receives Baptism after attaining to the age of reason and has actual sins as well as original sin on his soul, the reception of Baptism remits all these, and in addition cancels all the debt of punishment that may be due him. Of course, he must have contrition for his actual sins in order to obtain their forgiveness. If he lacks this disposition of soul, his sins remain unforgiven, though the Baptism is validly received, provided he had the intention of receiving it. In such a case a person could later obtain the graces of Baptism by supplying the requisite act of contrition. The sins committed before Baptism would never have to be confessed; nor indeed, could they form the matter of the sacrament of Penance. For this sacrament is administered as a judicial process; and it is a general legal principle that judicial power can be exercised only over persons and things subject to the society that possesses it. Now, a person becomes subject to the authority of the Church only when he is baptized.

The recipient of Penance is obliged to perform three Acts — confession, contrition and satisfaction — and that by the law of Christ. That the confession of sins is necessary was not indeed explicitly affirmed by our Lord when He empowered the apostles to forgive and to retain the sins of men. But an examination of His words will show that the obligation to confess is certainly implied. For since He gave His priests a twofold power — either to forgive or to retain — He undoubtedly wished them to use it with due discretion, forgiving those worthy of pardon and refusing forgiveness to those unworthy. But how can a priest know who are worthy and who are unworthy unless each penitent honestly confesses his sins and reveals his attitude of soul toward the past and the future?

Accordingly, the Catholic Church has always insisted on the obligation of confession before one can receive the pardon of his sins in the sacrament of Penance.

St. Basil, in the fourth century, said:

“Confession of sins must be made to those to whom the dispensing of the mysteries of God (the sacraments) has been committed” (Rule, 288).

In early days public confession of public sins before the congregation was not unusual; but since the sixth century private, or auricular confession has been the rule. Even this may entail a certain measure of embarrassment, for every one finds it difficult to manifest his failings to a fellow creature. On the other hand, confession has its consoling features in as far as it affords an opportunity of receiving advice and sympathy with the assurance that no other human being save the priest will ever know what has been confessed. For confessors are forbidden by a most rigorous law ever to reveal what they have heard in confession or to use what they have heard in a way that may be harmful or obnoxious to the penitent. It is well to remember, too, that the strict law of secrecy binds even one who is not a priest but who might chance to overhear a sacramental confession.

The penitent is obliged to confess all mortal sins committed since his last confession and also any mortal sins committed previously to his last confession which he may have forgotten to tell before. Mortal sins inculpably forgotten are forgiven if one is sorry for all mortal sin in general; and even if they are remembered immediately after confession a person can receive Holy Communion without returning to the sacred tribunal, but he must have the intention of telling them in his next confession. Venial sins need not be confessed, for they are forgiven by an act of contrition outside the sacrament. In fact, it is probable that the implicit act of contrition contained in a good deed contrary to a venial sin procures its pardon. Thus, it would seem, a venial sin of uncharitableness is

often pardoned when one afterward performs an act of kindness. However, venial sins can be confessed and forgiven in the sacrament of Penance.

Sometimes a person in need of this sacrament cannot make a complete confession. Thus, if a ship were sinking and hundreds of the passengers wished to receive absolution from a single priest, it would obviously be impossible for all to confess their sins in the normal manner. In such a case it would suffice if they acknowledged in a general way that they have sinned and desire absolution—for example, by reciting aloud the act of contrition. Then the priest could impart sacramental pardon to all in common, because the requisites (confession and contrition) are essentially fulfilled. As is evident, persons who receive this sacrament with such a general form of confession are bound to confess their sins in detail afterward if the opportunity is available.

Mortal sins must be confessed according to their number and their specific nature. For the priest is the judge of the penitent's conduct and a judge must know the nature and the extent of the crimes with which the defendant is charged. If a person cannot remember the exact number of times he has committed some sin, he must declare as nearly as possible the approximate number. One who has been addicted to a habit of grave sin for a long time is advised to state the average frequency of his falls each week or month. In confessing the specific nature of his sins the penitent must mention any circumstances that may have changed their nature — that is, those factors which added to the specific guilt of sins of one kind add another kind of culpability. Thus, to strike a person unjustly is a sin against the fifth commandment, but if a son strikes his father, a sin against the fourth commandment is added, and this constitutes a circumstance changing the nature of his offense, which must be confessed if it be a mortal blow (that is, serious matter, full knowledge and full and deliberate consent). Since venial sins do not have to be confessed at all, it is not necessary to mention how often they have been committed, if one does declare them. Neither is one obliged to confess venial sins in the detailed manner in which mortal sins must be manifested; it suffices to state that they were violations of this or that commandment or virtue.

An even more important factor of Penance than confession is contrition — sorrow for one's sins. As was said above, in certain circumstances the obligation of a detailed confession is suspended; but one can never receive this sacrament without contrition, for God will bestow pardon only on those who are truly sorry that they have offended their Creator. Moreover, this sorrow must be supernatural — that is, it must be based on some motive known through faith, not on some merely natural motive. Thus, one can be sorry for his sins because by them he has merited God's punishment, or because from the teachings of the Christian revelation he recognizes the heinousness of sin, or because sin includes base ingratitude toward our heavenly Father, etc.

To be effective, contrition must extend at least to all mortal sins. One who confesses only venial sins must be sorry for at least one kind of these transgressions. When a person has been guilty of only a few minor failings since his last confession, it is advisable for him to repeat some sins of his past life of a graver character, lest he be not sufficiently contrite for his slight offenses to receive the sacrament. These past sins, even though previously confessed and forgiven, can constitute matter for Penance over and over again.

The noblest motive for contrition is love of God — sorrow arising from the realization that God is the supreme Good and that sin is opposed to His goodness. Such an act is called perfect contrition, and takes away sin even before one actually receives the sacrament of Penance — although, as has been already stated, in conjunction with this act one must have the intention of subsequently

confessing at least his mortal sins. Contrition based on any other supernatural motive is called imperfect contrition or attrition.

It stands to reason that a person cannot be truly sorry for his sins unless he has at least implicitly the intention of not committing them in future. To receive the sacrament of Penance one must have the purpose of avoiding at least all mortal sins. One who confesses only venial sins must also have a purpose of amendment regarding at least one kind. It suffices to have the intention of lessening the frequency of the transgressions of this particular nature. Catholics should be deeply conscious of the necessity of the purpose of amendment, and it is advisable to make it explicitly and to include the resolution to avoid dangerous occasions of sin. Of course, it would be abysmal ignorance to believe that Penance can be worthily received by a person who regards it as a convenient way of getting rid of his sins so that he can go out and commit more. On the other hand, to have a genuine purpose of amendment does not mean that one must be certain that he will not sin in future; for one who has fallen frequently in the past may have a strong apprehension that he will fall again, which, however, does not make him unfit for the reception of the sacrament as long as he now intends to use in future all natural and supernatural means to avoid relapse.

The third act of the penitent — satisfaction or the “penance” as it is called — is generally fulfilled nowadays after one has received absolution; but in the early Church it was performed before the sinner received sacramental pardon. In those days, too, the penance was often very severe, sometimes consisting of austerities practiced for several years. The purpose of the satisfaction is to help the person avoid sin in future and to atone for the debt of temporal punishment which remains even after sins have been forgiven and must be paid either in this life or in purgatory. Since penances nowadays are very light, it is recommended to Catholics to supplement them by voluntary acts of self-denial.

Of the three acts of the penitent, the first two — confession and contrition — are the essential, or necessary, matter of the sacrament; while satisfaction is only integral. Hence, if after a good confession a person does not perform his penance, the chief effect of the sacrament, the removal of his sins, is not thereby vitiated, provided at the time of his confession he intended to fulfill the sacramental satisfaction. However, the deliberate neglect of one’s penance is a new sin, the gravity of which is either mortal or venial according to the measure and the importance of the work enjoined.

III. THE CONFESSOR.

Christ committed the administration of the sacrament of Penance to the apostles explicitly, and implicitly to their successors in the sacred ministry, inasmuch as the powers of the sacred ministry bestowed on the apostles were intended to be transmitted to those who would inherit their office of sanctifying mankind. Some of the ministerial powers of the apostles have been communicated only to bishops, such as the power to ordain priests; while others have been given to priests also, such as the power to consecrate the Holy Eucharist. The best norm of judging which sacred powers belong to bishops and which belong also to priests is the tradition of the Church, since Sacred Scripture is not clear on this matter. Now, from the writings of the early centuries and from the ancient practice of the Church it is evident that the power to absolve from sins in the sacrament of Penance belongs to priests as well as to bishops. It is true, in the first two centuries this sacrament was usually administered by bishops; but from the third century it has been common for priests also to hear confessions and impart sacramental absolution. And indeed, it seems most fitting that those who are

empowered to be ministers of the Holy Eucharist should also administer Penance which is the usual preparation for the Holy Eucharist.

The objection is often raised: “How can a priest, a mere human being, himself subject to human imperfection, have the power to forgive sins?” To this we answer that the priest does not forgive sins by his own power but by the power communicated to him by God. The Almighty uses the priest as an instrument, and as such his own frailties are no impediment to the exercise of his divinely granted power of absolving, any more than the scratches and blotches on an artist’s brush prevent its use as an instrument for the painting of a beautiful picture.

When a man is ordained to the priesthood the basic power to absolve from sins is given him, one part of the ceremony being the imposition of the bishop’s hands with the words: “Receive the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.” However, in addition to this power of orders — as it is called — the priest needs another power, the power of jurisdiction, before he can actually exercise the ministry of forgiveness. For Penance is a judicial sacrament, its administration being like a trial with the priest as judge. Now, in every legal procedure the judge requires jurisdiction over those brought to trial before he can validly exercise his office.

There are two kinds of jurisdiction for the administration of Penance — ordinary and delegated. The former is annexed to the very office which a priest holds. For example, the jurisdiction of a parish priest over his parishioners belongs to him by the very fact that he is their pastor. Similarly, a bishop has ordinary jurisdiction over all those who reside in his diocese. Ordinary jurisdiction can be exercised over one’s subjects even outside the territory over which the priest or bishop presides. Thus, in any part of the world a bishop can hear the confessions of those who live in his diocese, and a pastor can do the same with respect to those who reside in his parish. Of course, the Pope has ordinary jurisdiction over all the faithful and by the ruling of Canon Law the cardinals also can hear the confessions of all the members of the Church (Canon 239). [This refers to the 1917 code.]

Delegated jurisdiction is that which is deputed to a priest by one having ordinary jurisdiction. Thus, a curate receives jurisdiction for hearing confessions from the bishop of the diocese. This kind of jurisdiction is limited to the territory of the one delegating. Accordingly, outside of his own diocese a curate cannot hear the confessions even of those who have a residence in the parish to which he is attached. A priest may have both ordinary and delegated jurisdiction at the same time toward different persons. Thus, a pastor has ordinary jurisdiction over the members of his parish; but he usually has delegated jurisdiction, given by the bishop, over all who reside in the diocese. Moreover, according to Church legislation a priest has sacramental jurisdiction over those from any part of the world who come to confession to him within his own territory.

There is a special ruling of ecclesiastical law regarding the jurisdiction for confessions in the case of a priest traveling on a vessel. Provided he has jurisdiction either from his own bishop or from the bishop of the port of departure or from the bishop of any port on the voyage, he can hear confessions not only on board the ship but also in any port where the vessel may stop — on condition, as regards this last point, that his services are requested (Canon 883 of the 1917 code).

The priest’s chief duty in the confessional is to administer the sacrament of Penance. The essential element of his part of the rite is to pronounce the words of absolution: “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” He prefaces these words by absolving the penitent from any ecclesiastical censures, such as excommunication, into which he

may have fallen. After pronouncing the form of sacramental absolution the priest adds a formula praying that all the good works which the penitent may subsequently perform may benefit him toward the attainment of grace and glory and toward the remission of his sins. It is the view of some theologians that by this prayer the priest can raise all the good deeds which the forgiven sinner subsequently performs to the rank of sacramental satisfaction. In addition, the priest imposes a particular penance, adapted to the gravity of the sins confessed and to the abilities of the penitent. Since the fulfillment of satisfaction is only an integral, not an essential part of the sacrament, the priest may dispense with it entirely in certain circumstances, especially if the penitent is very sick.

A priest may not impart absolution unless he has some assurance that the penitent is truly sorry for his sins and has the firm purpose of amendment. Our Lord made this a matter of conscience for His priests, for He gave them the right and duty not only to forgive but also to retain sins, and at times they are obliged to use this latter phase of their power. A priest finds it very hard to refuse absolution; but there are times when this is the only course open to him. Thus, if the penitent has been committing serious sins habitually for a long time, yet has been going to confession regularly and then returning at once to his sinful ways without any apparent effort to amend, a priest must refuse absolution until he has some reasonable assurance that the person now has a real purpose of amendment. It must be remembered that the words of absolution have no efficacy if pronounced over one who has not true contrition in his heart.

The priest in the tribunal of Penance is not only the minister of a sacrament but he is also a teacher, a physician and a father. As a teacher he instructs the penitent, when necessary, in the truths of religion, especially those pertaining to the moral law. For this purpose those preparing for the priesthood devote several years of their seminary course to the study of the laws of God and of the Church. As a physician, the priest aims at improving the spiritual health of the penitent by pointing out the means he must employ to avoid a relapse into sin. As a father, the priest sympathizes with the penitent and encourages him to overcome obstacles and fight bravely the battle of life.

It sometimes happens that the power to absolve from certain very grave sins is withheld from the ordinary priest, being reserved either to the bishop or even to the ecclesiastical authorities in Rome. Likewise, an ecclesiastical penalty is attached to certain sins, such as abortion or the marriage of a Catholic before a non-Catholic clergyman, which bring with them the censure of excommunication reserved to the bishop. A person who has committed a reserved sin or incurred a reserved censure can receive absolution only from the one to whom the sin or censure is reserved or from a priest who has received from this higher authority the necessary jurisdiction. However, when a person is in danger of death he can be absolved from all sins and censures by any priest. Even a priest who himself has come under the ban of the Church and is deprived of jurisdiction possesses full powers of absolution in such circumstances.

The priest must pronounce the words of absolution audibly. He could not confer the sacrament validly by writing the words and then giving them or sending them to the penitent, or by expressing them in signs. But a penitent who is unable to speak may write out his confession and hand it to the priest. Although the Church has never given a definite pronouncement as to whether confession and absolution can be transmitted by telephone or by radio, it seems very probable that the sacrament could not be administered in this way, because it appears to be a requisite of this sacrament that confessor and penitent be present to each other during its administration.

The priests of the Oriental churches separated from Catholic unity, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, are validly ordained, and accordingly possess the power of orders for the imparting of sacramental absolution. There is some difficulty, however, about the validity of their absolution (outside the danger of death) because they are cut off from the true Church, which would normally deprive them of the requisite power of jurisdiction. However, it is quite commonly held nowadays by Catholic theologians that they are empowered to administer Penance to their people, because the Church, ever zealous for the good of souls, grants them the needed jurisdiction. For undoubtedly the vast majority of these Oriental Christians are not conscious of any guilt in their separation from the Catholic Church; and we have good reason to expect that at some future time they will return to the one fold of Jesus Christ.

IV. THE FRUITS OF PENANCE.

The primary effect of the worthy reception of Penance is the forgiveness of sins. This was the benefit emphasized by our Lord in establishing this sacrament: — “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.” This forgiveness is immediate, not gradual. As long as the penitent has true supernatural sorrow, even though it be based on the least noble motive, fear of God’s punishment, with the pronouncing of the priest’s words of absolution his sins are immediately washed from his soul — all his mortal sins, and also those venial sins which he has confessed and for which he is sorry. Thus, through the mercy of our divine Savior the sins of a long lifetime can be forgiven in a single moment.

Simultaneously with the departure of sin, grace is conferred on the soul. This is primarily sanctifying grace, that beautiful supernatural quality which gives the soul a resemblance to God Himself. With sanctifying grace come the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and also (most probably) the infused moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. How wondrous the sacrament which in an instant can change the soul of the repentant sinner from the abode of wickedness into the temple of the living God!

Penance, worthily received, also gives what is known as sacramental grace — that is, a special spiritual vigor annexed to the sanctifying grace, which enables the forgiven sinner to withstand temptation and to remain faithful to God. Furthermore, as one of the effects of this sacramental grace, the recipient of Penance obtains actual graces when they are needed to help him persevere in the friendship of the Almighty. Among the graces of Penance are also to be counted the spirit of compunction and humility in the realization that sin is an act of deepest ingratitude toward a loving Father, joined to a feeling of confidence that He has forgotten the past and will be bountiful in His help in future. The Council of Trent mentions as fruits of Penance peace and serenity and great consolation of spirit (Denzinger’s *Enchiridion*, number 896).

The measure of grace bestowed by Penance is proportionate to the dispositions of soul with which it is received. Those who approach the sacred tribunal with a deep faith and a profound sense of sorrow, after having examined their conscience carefully, receive far more abundant fruits than those who, while they bring to the sacrament sufficient dispositions to receive it worthily, are somewhat lax in their preparation and tepid in their act of contrition.

Besides remitting the guilt of sin the sacrament of Penance also takes away the eternal punishment due to mortal sin and some measure of the temporal punishment which ordinarily remains after sins, whether mortal or venial, have been forgiven. The performance of the “penance” has the remission

of temporal punishment for its chief object; but doubtless some measure of this punishment is also taken away through the efficacy of the priest's absolution.

One of the most consoling teachings of the Catholic Church is the doctrine of the revival of merits. To understand this doctrine we must bear in mind that whenever a person in the state of grace performs a good action, or even an action which is morally indifferent — such as eating, recreating himself lawfully, etc. — he thereby gains merit, provided he has previously offered it to God out of love for Him. A general offering of this nature — the “good intention” as it is called — suffices to render one's actions meritorious, even though he does not think of it when he performs them. By merit we mean that a person receives an increase of sanctifying grace and a claim to a higher measure of glory in heaven. Evidently, one who remains in sanctifying grace for any length of time and employs the “good intention” amasses an abundance of supernatural treasure, laid away where, as our Lord says, “neither the rust nor moth does consume, and where thieves do not break through and steal” (Matthew 6:20). But even only one mortal sin suffices to deprive a person of this treasure. If a single grave transgression defiles the soul it immediately loses sanctifying grace and all claim to the happiness of heaven, even though it had attained to the highest pinnacles of holiness.

But if the sinner, moved by repentance, returns to God, he receives back again the merits which he forfeited by falling into sin. This holds good of every return to grace, whether through perfect contrition or through the reception of a sacrament. However, since the normal mode of justification for a Catholic is the sacrament of Penance, the revival of merits is classified as one of the fruits of this sacrament. The doctrine of the revival of merits is not explicitly contained in Sacred Scripture; but it is found in the ancient tradition of the Church, proposed frequently by the early Christian writers in their expositions of the parable of the prodigal son. For, they explain, just as the wayward son, on returning to his father, received back the same affection and the same place in the household that he possessed when he left home, so the sinner who returns to God receives back the same merit that he had when he departed from his heavenly Father's household. Some theologians have held that the merits thus restored are not so great as those that were lost; but the most probable theological opinion is that they are given back in their full measure. Great confirmation is given to this view by the statement of Pope Pius XI, in announcing the Jubilee of 1925, when the Holy Father declared that those who would perform the requisites of the Jubilee would receive back in their entirety the merits they had lost by sin (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1924, p. 210).

The benefits of Penance for society as a whole are far greater than most people — especially non-Catholics — realize. Those who are not members of the Catholic Church not infrequently complain of the arrogance of the Church in requiring that Catholics confess their sins; but they do not seem to understand that the world is much better just because of this sacrament. To consider only one point, how many crimes of injustice are righted in the confessional! When a person has plundered another's goods or unjustly injured his reputation he cannot receive absolution until he has promised that as far as possible he will make restitution. In a country which contains a considerable proportion of Catholics the influence exerted in this way toward the promotion of justice cannot but be far reaching.

With the numerous and extensive benefits of Penance as an inducement, Catholics should be eager to make frequent use of this wonderful sacrament. The law of the Church obliges all Catholics to go to confession at least once a year, and also when they are in danger of death.*

Footnote: *The obligation to confess one's sins, in danger of death arises also from the divine law. It is well to note that the duty of going to confession obliges strictly only those who have necessary matter — that is, some mortal sin not yet properly confessed and forgiven. One who has no such sin on his conscience is not absolutely bound to receive Penance after a year or even at the hour of death. Needless to say, it is better to make one's confession on these occasions even though one is not strictly bound to do so.

Of course, practical Catholics do not confine themselves to one confession a year. On the other hand, there is no need for those who are leading a good life to go to confession several times a week, as some good people do, apparently thinking they must receive the sacrament of Penance almost every time they receive Holy Communion.

For one who is a frequent or daily communicant confession every two weeks would seem to be the most practical rule. For certain classes of Catholics, such as members of religious orders, the Church prescribes confession every week.

An even more important consideration than the frequency of confession is the fervor with which one receives Penance. The reception of this sacrament should never become a matter of mere routine. One need not, and should not, make the approach to the sacred tribunal a matter of soul-racking anxiety. Scrupulosity is no help to virtue. But on the other hand, each time a Catholic goes to confession he should strive to be most exact and fervent, for in receiving this sacrament he is coming very close to Christ Himself, who has promised to bestow His forgiveness on the contrite of heart. No matter how grievous a person's sins may be, he should trust in the efficacy of this sacrament, and if he brings to the confessional the required dispositions, he can have the assurance that our divine Redeemer is speaking through the lips of the priest saying: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."
