



## Opening Question:

*Have you ever made resolutions to change? What happened to them?*

Self improvement is big business. Some experts profit from our need to diet and exercise. Some guide us to change bad habits. Some gurus give us tips on how to repair broken relationships. We can find the need for change in a simple desire. We want to become better people.

Yet, we are human. We're imperfect and prone to failure, especially in the area of morality. At one point or another, we've all had to face brutal truths about ourselves and make appropriate changes. We've hurt others and sought to mend fences. We even may have made life altering shifts. To succeed, we can seek out those wiser than us for guidance.

The Church has a sacrament of moral improvement and spiritual direction. It's called Reconciliation.

## Names for Reconciliation

Like the Eucharist, there are many names for the sacrament of Reconciliation. They reveal its different aspects. It's called the Sacrament of Conversion based upon our need to make changes and turn our lives around. It's referred to as Confession based upon our need for self honesty. It's also called Penance based upon the need to act upon our admissions. Finally, it has the name Reconciliation based upon the desired result of the sacrament. We hope to repair our relationships with God and others.

Of course we can't do this by ourselves. Christ is the minister that reconciles us sinners to the Father and the Church. In the sacrament, the bishop or priest represents Christ and speaks for the entire Church. As such, he has the power to forgive sins. Jesus himself gave him that ability.



*Jesus breathed on his disciples. "Take in the Holy Spirit," Jesus said. "If you forgive someone's sins, their sins are and will ever be forgiven. If you don't forgive their sins, their sins are not forgiven."*

*John 20:22-23*

## Reconciliation After Baptism?

Why is there a Sacrament of Reconciliation after Baptism? Why does the sacrament exist? After all, in baptism, we are in a relationship with God. He frees us from Original Sin and forgives our personal sins. But that does not mean we are no longer inclined to selfishness. Our bad habits and failings don't suddenly disappear. In fact, we strive to become better people and get closer to God. Thus, the spiritual life is a life-long struggle. Just as the author of First John stated:

*If we say we have not sinned, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth isn't in our hearts. But if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away.*

*1 John 1:8*

## Interior Penance

The end game of the spiritual life is interior penance. We should desire a change of mind and heart not merely behavior. This change is an ongoing conversion. God constantly calls us to come close to him and others. Our job is to always

heed that call. There are different types of penance that can reveal that interior change. Traditionally, the Church encourages us to pray, to fast from food and other desires, and to focus on the needs of others, especially the poor. We even dedicate a season in the Church to penance called Lent. The Church also calls us to frequently partake in the sacraments that forgive sin, namely Reconciliation and Eucharist.

## Aspects of Reconciliation

### Contrition

There are various steps in the sacrament that reveal aspects of the sacrament. First, we have contrition. It is not only a feeling that something's not quite morally right in us. It is the desire to do something about that feeling.

Contrition shows up in two steps of the sacrament: an Examination of Conscience and an Act of Contrition. An examination of conscience is a time of self reflection. It is the effort to identify the reason we might feel the need for change. Many times, we can use tools to help in this effort like a review of the Ten Commandments. The Act of Contrition is a prayer we say during the sacrament to show our desire to make a moral improvement.

Before we leave the subject of contrition, let's examine what sorts of feelings might spur us to make a moral change. Feelings like shame, guilt, or low self worth are certainly legitimate reasons for change, but they are self centered. They reveal an imperfect contrition. But, feelings of change based purely upon a love for God and others reveal a perfect contrition.

### Confession of Sins

The next aspect of reconciliation is the need for self-honesty. We are really honest with ourselves when we can admit our moral failures to another person. Not only do we open ourselves up completely, we are also open to receive guidance from someone wiser than we are. A spiritual advisor like a bishop or priest.

It's important we admit our serious moral failings that completely end relationships. We call these

mortal sins. The Church insists we confess all mortal sins in order to restore our relationship with Christ and the Church. But, there is another type of sin that injures but does not end relationships. As the author of First John stated:

*If you see a believer commit a sin that isn't deadly, you can pray, and this person will be given eternal life. Everything that is wrong is sin, but not all sins are deadly.*

1 John 5:16ab, 17

We call these venial sins.

Can we confess our sins to God alone? In the case of venial sins the answer is yes. But for mortal sins, the answer is no. We need to confess them in the sacrament to restore our relationship with God. What about a perfect contrition where we turn away from mortal sin for the love of God alone? Yes, that does restore our relationship with the Almighty, but the Church encourages us to confess that sin as soon as reasonably possible.

### Satisfaction or Penance

As we mentioned before, Reconciliation is the sacrament of conversion. We not only seek forgiveness, we want to change our lives. This change might mean simply opening ourselves up to God in prayer. But it also might mean rectifying situations with others or doing some good for the community. This is called "satisfaction for sin" or "penance." In the sacrament, the ordained minister might give us a penance to perform as a proof of our intention to change. Once we agree to the penance, the bishop or priest will absolve us from our sins.

### Ways to Celebrate Reconciliation

There are three ways to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation. First, the most common way is individual confession. We meet with a priest or bishop one-on-one at an assigned time or even spontaneously. Next, there is the Penance Service. At an assigned time, the community gathers with several priests on hand. The service can begin with Bible readings and a sermon. Usually, the congregation shares a common examination of conscience, a common act of contrition, and even a

common prayer as penance. Then, there are individual confessions available for the people. The final option is a general confession and absolution for a group as a whole. This is a rare and only occurs in situations where individual confession is not practical. When circumstances change, the Church encourages those forgiven to seek individual confession.

At some point in life, we all seek to improve some aspect of our lives. In the effort, we search out experts for advice. The popularity of self-help media gives ample proof of this desire. The urge to improve our moral and spiritual lives is no different. The sacrament of Reconciliation gives us the tools to fulfill that need. We have the means to change, to improve, to come closer to God and others. We can admit our failings, receive spiritual and moral advice, then do something about our condition.

The road to conversion beckons us. We just need to follow the path.

### **Closing Question:**

*How do you intend to improve your moral life? How does Reconciliation help you in your quest?*

*Reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraphs CCC 1422-1498.*

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