

Introduction

If through the grace of Baptism and the other sacraments of initiation we received new life in Christ, why do we have to receive forgiveness afterwards? The answer is that the graces conferred do not eradicate human frailty or protect us from an inclination to sin. We are weakened by sin and can even be lost to it. That is why in his earthly ministry Jesus instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation for the conversion of the Baptised who have strayed from God through sin. The Gospels are resplendent with accounts of how Jesus spoke of sin and offered forgiveness to those who asked for it with a sincere heart.

During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact that Jesus receives sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the return to the bosom of the People of God.

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1443]

The previous quotation from Scripture recalls the moment on the day of the Resurrection when Jesus appeared to his apostles and conferred the ministry of reconciliation upon them and their successors. Only God forgive sins but by virtue of his divine authority Jesus has given power to men to exercise it in his name. Thus, priests are the instruments of God's mercy and justice. They forgive sins in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our Lord called people to conversion. The call is a permanent one for the Baptised. This represents a constant challenge to the Church which, though holy, struggles against the weakness of its members in the face of sin. The sacrament is known by a variety of names. Each one communicates something about its nature:

â€” Conversion â€” the sacrament is a call to return to the Father from whom we have strayed through sin.

â€” Penance â€” the sacrament consecrates the sinner's personal steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction.

â€” Confession â€” in this sacrament we disclose our sins to the priest. We also acknowledge the holiness of God and the depth of his mercy.

â€” Forgiveness â€” through absolution God grants the penitent pardon and peace.

â€” Reconciliation â€” the love of the God who reconciles is imparted to us in this sacrament.

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Acknowledging the need for this sacrament requires on our part a humble acceptance that we are tempted to sin. Aware that sin distorts our relationship with God we should be anxious to be reconciled with him â€” as we would with a dear friend whom we have offended. Knowing the greatness of God's love we cannot permit ourselves to be separated from Him through sin. That is why we should avail of the opportunity afforded by this sacrament to restore our relationship with Christ. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.

Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

[Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.1440]

There are two essential elements in the Sacrament of Reconciliation:

1) The Acts of the Penitent

The person asking for the sacrament undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit. This entails a number of steps:

- A serious examination of conscience.

- Contrition (Repentance) â€” the person should feel sorrow of the soul and aversion to the sin committed. He must have

the firm intention not to sin again. Contrition is perfect when it is motivated by a love of God and imperfect when effected otherwise.

- Confession – the admission of all sins to the priest represents an opening up to God and allows us to take responsibility for our actions.

- Satisfaction – the penitent accomplishes certain acts of penance that the confessor imposes as a means of repairing the damage caused by sin. Penance can take many forms including fasting, prayer and almsgiving. We are encouraged to practice forms of penance in our daily lives, especially during Lent and on Fridays (in memory of the death of our Lord).

2) Absolution

The priest, in the name of Christ, grants pardon and prescribes appropriate means of atonement.

What are the effects of receiving this sacrament?

– We are reconciled with God. We are restored to God's grace and join again with him in an intimate friendship.

– We are reconciled with the Church. There is a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which has suffered from the sin of one of her members.

– There is remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins. (Only the sacrament can expunge this effect of mortal sin).

– There is remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin.

– We are filled with peace and serenity of conscience and are spiritually consoled.

– We are spiritually strengthened for the Christian journey ahead.

The uplifting Parable of the Prodigal Son exemplifies the process of conversion and repentance. The wayward son experiences misery and humiliation because he has squandered so much. He reflects on what he has lost. He repents and resolves to reconcile himself with his father. He journeys back and is embraced with joy by his merciful father. This is characteristic of conversion. The beautiful robe, ring and banquet prepared for the son symbolize the joy associated with returning to God and his family, the Church.

This beautiful explanation given by Jesus should encourage all in our parish who hesitate about receiving this enriching sacrament. Aware that there are people who may not have received this sacrament in a long time, the Church in the parish encourages everyone to open their heart to God and experience the grace of his infinite love and mercy. Reconciliation is necessary for us all because each of us struggles with the temptation of sin.