

Catholic

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SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

CELEBRATING THE MERCY OF GOD

BY THOMAS RICHSTATTER, OFM

One Sunday in the 1930s, Father Bernard Häring was conducting the weekly religious instruction. He began by asking the congregation: “What is the most important thing about confession?” A woman in the front pew immediately answered: “Telling your sins to the priest. That’s why we call it confession.” Father Häring said, “Confessing your sins is important, but it’s not the most important thing.”

A man towards the back called out: “Contrition! Being sorry for your sins! The whole thing doesn’t work without contrition.” Father Häring said, “That’s right, it doesn’t ‘work’ without contrition; but I don’t think contrition is the most important thing.”

A man on the left spoke up: “It’s the examination of conscience. Unless you examine your conscience, you don’t know what you have to be sorry for and you don’t know what to confess.” Father Häring wasn’t satisfied with this answer either.

A young woman on the aisle tried: “It’s the penance—giving back the things you stole—unless you do the penance,



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it doesn’t count.” The congregation could tell Father Häring still hadn’t heard the most important thing. An uneasy silence fell over the church.

In the silence, a little girl in the third pew said: “Father, I know what’s most important. It’s what Jesus does!” Father Häring smiled. She had it right. Let’s explore Jesus’ role in reconciliation and the gift he offers us in the sacrament.

Our ritual for reconciliation has grown through the centuries. We've moved from a time when baptism and Eucharist were the only sacramental form of reconciliation to (1) **canonical penance**, modeled on baptism, to (2) **Celtic penance**, modeled on a doctor visit, to (3) **confession**, modeled on a legal trial, to (4) the **sacrament of reconciliation**, modeled on Eucharist.

1. CANONICAL PENANCE

All sins are forgiven when we're plunged into the death and resurrection of Jesus at baptism. In the early Church, sins committed after baptism were forgiven by prayer, almsgiving, fasting, self-denial, and especially by the Eucharist. But there were times when baptized Christians committed such grave, public, and scandalous sins that the community felt it was impossible to share the Eucharist with them.

The Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the reconciling ministry of Jesus, developed sacramental rites to help these sinners repent, convert, and be readmitted to the Eucharist. These rituals, which we now call "canonical penance," were modeled on the rituals for baptism and the catechumenate. They were public, liturgical, and—like baptism—could be celebrated only once in a lifetime.

2. CELTIC PENANCE

In fifth-century Ireland, we find a different type of penance. Celtic monks were accustomed to seeking out a holy person to ask for advice in overcoming their sins—just as today we might go to a doctor to ask for advice in overcoming a physical illness.

The Christian would go to a holy monk, tell their sins, and ask for healing. Celtic penance was for all sins, not just grave, public sins. Unlike canonical penance, the process was repeatable. The emphasis wasn't on "telling the sin" but on performing the penance; just as when we go to the doctor, the main thing isn't "confessing" our illness but doing what the doctor says so that the illness will be healed.



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