

SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY: Class 3

Sacraments of Healing: Penance

"Pray for Me: Three years ago Cameron came to the university from a small Catholic high school. He was one of those kids who chose college because he didn't know what else to do, and because college was the one place where his parents would still support him financially. He didn't want to be there and he had no intention of putting in any effort. Early in his freshman year Cameron started hanging around the Catholic Student Center, where he felt comfortable shooting le breeze with one of the staff members. John was a campus minister there. John remembered those days well; most of the staff had tried to avoid Cameron as much as possible because Cameron only liked to talk about one issue - the horrible state of the world in general and how his life "sucked."

Everything was bad now, and it was likely to get worse, according to Cameron. One thing everyone had learned quickly was never to ask Cameron how things were going unless they had the time and the energy to listen to at least half an hour of self-absorbed complaining.

Then something happened. Every spring the Catholic Student Center ran a weekend retreat. One afternoon about a week before the retreat, John was trying to talk several students into attending when Cameron came into the student lounge. John was trapped. He did not really want to invite Cameron to come along, but to do anything else would have been both unprofessional and uncharitable. So he asked and Cameron said he would come.

Cameron rode in John's car on the way to the retreat center. John was sure that by the time they arrived, the other two students who were also in the car were really regretting their decision to come. Cameron had complained about one thing after another for most of the drive.

The retreat began with a series of purposely silly activities aimed at helping students get to know each other. These were followed by the first talk of the weekend. A senior shared her faith story and spoke about listening for God's call. After her talk the students broke into small groups to discuss what it meant to be called by God. Then they all gathered together again for a time of prayer. The

prayer time ended with the song that included lyrics "This is holy ground. You're standing on holy ground." John noticed that Cameron sat quietly for a long time after the song ended.

The following day three more students shared their faith stories. They reflected on faith, love, and forgiveness. In the evening there was a communal service of reconciliation. Father Mark gave a homily on God's promise to break our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. When he finished speaking all of the students were invited to take time to pray in silence. But Cameron just sat down and said, "Pray for me. I need to change. I'm tired of being so negative and uptight." Then, before John could say anything, Cameron stood up again and walked away. A few minutes later he went to talk with Father Mark.

John prayed. He prayed that the Holy Spirit would fill Cameron's heart with faith, hope, and love. He prayed that God would wipe away Cameron's tears. He prayed that Cameron would find the ability to change. And he prayed that God would forgive him, John, for having wanted to leave Cameron behind. John never knew what Cameron said to Father Mark or what Father Mark said to him. But during the last session of the retreat when the students were invited to talk about their experience, Cameron expressed thanks for the chance to "start again."

God has not chosen to remove all pain and sorrow from our world. He has not chosen to eliminate sin and its consequences. But he has refused to allow pain, sorrow, or sin to destroy what he has made. In the midst of negativity, sin, and evil God continually creates a path of love and he invites us to walk that path. Through the gift of the sacrament of Penance God makes it possible for us to recognize and turn away from sin, and draw closer to him in the process. There is an old story which says that each one of us is connected to God by a string. When we sin, we cut the string. When we seek forgiveness, God ties a knot in the string. Each time he ties a knot, the string gets shorter and we are drawn closer to God. i Rather than taking away our freedom to choose, God has made it possible for us' to turn even our worst choices into good.

When Cameron started college he was a selfish, angry, and despairing person. While he was on the student retreat he saw himself as he was and heard God's call to change. He turned toward God, and when he did, God used those things which

had been negative to create something positive. Cameron had developed the habit of responding to everything with negative comments. Over time he replaced those comments with positive ones. In one sense Cameron changed completely, in another he did not change at all; he just found a new focus for his energy.

God did not take away all of the things that formed Cameron's personality. He still liked to talk. But from Cameron's brokenness God focused on Cameron's strengths. It was in talking and sharing that the wheels of forgiveness, were put in motion. It is important to remember that the sacrament of Penance is a sacrament of relationships. Sin wounds or breaks our relationship with God and with one another. When God helps us to overcome sin, he gives us what we need to repair those broken relationships. This has two important implications.

First, the sacrament of Penance involves a conversion process which takes time. Human relationships are not formed or healed in an instant. The sacrament of Penance involves more than a few minutes in a confessional. Second, God does not turn our brokenness into strength for our sake alone.* God uses individual brokenness to create strength within our relationships and strength within our community. God does not necessarily take away the things in our lives that led us to sin in the first place.

While God does not take away our*freedom and force us to change he does continually call us to change. And, God does make it possible for us to change when we turn to him. God remains with us even when the darkness and hopelessness surround us, as the following poem expresses: “even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when feeling it not. I believe in God even when God is silent.

That poem was written on the wall in a cellar in Germany where Jews hid from the Nazis during the Second World War. In the midst of horrible brokenness, God blew a breath of hope which gave strength to the author of this poem. In the same way, the sacrament of Penance is also a breath of hope blown into the midst of a broken world. In the midst of sin, violence, hate, and suffering it can be difficult to see God's presence. The very existence of the sacrament of Penance assures us that no matter what happens in the world, God will not allow sin and evil to have the final word.

Conversion and the Story of the Prodigal Son The term conversion indicates a radical reorientation of your life away from sin and evil, and toward God.

Conversion is the central element of Jesus' preaching: "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:14), he said at the beginning of his ministry. Conversion is also a main element of the Church's ministry of evangelization and of the sacrament of Penance. In fact, the sacrament is called the "sacrament of conversion" because it makes Jesus' call to conversion sacramentally present. The sacrament of Penance can be the first step in returning to God our loving Father when we have strayed from him due to sin.

Conversion is illustrated in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). When the younger son longed for the life that he had forsaken, he began the process of conversion. Reunion with his father became his goal. He said to himself, I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers" (w.18-19). .

The process of conversion begins with a loathing for the place to which our sin has brought us or is bringing us. If we like where we are, if we are attached to the things which our sinfulness gives us, we will find it difficult or impossible to be converted. The prodigal son did not hear the call to conversion when he still had lots of money and lots of friends. He liked where he was and he never took the time to think about where he was going. His choices were taking him to the pig sty; but he didn't notice.

The process of conversion also entails comparing our lives to the life of Christ. We must ask ourselves if our lives are directed toward complete union with God as Jesus' life was, or if our lives are directed toward some other goal. If we answer "some other goal," then we should think about the implications for ourselves and for those around us. What are we losing as we pursue that goal? Are we losing our ability to love and to accept love? Are we losing our ability to hope if things do not go our way? Are we losing our faith that God works good in all things? Are we losing our ability to cope with those things which we cannot control?

St. Paul tells us that there are only three things which really matter in the long run, even when everything else is taken away. Those three things are faith, hope, and

love (1 Cor 13:13). When we direct our lives towards something other than God, we weaken or abandon our faith, our hope, and our love. When time takes away everything else, we will be left with nothing. We will be like the prodigal son on the pig farm: “And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any (Lk 15:16).

When we loathe the emptiness in our lives or the emptiness looming ahead, when we long for the sense of purpose and joy which only God can give, we have taken the first step toward reconciliation. Part of the wonder of the sacrament of Penance is that God meets us in our emptiness and makes even that emptiness holy.

Ongoing Conversion of the Baptized: Two of the effects of the sacrament of Baptism are forgiveness of our sins and the gift of grace that makes us holy. This is also known as our justification. Baptism is the time and place of our first and main conversion. It is Jesus who calls us to this conversion. St. Peter implored the Jews gathered outside the Upper Room at Pentecost to Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Repentance is a change of mind and heart toward God that is reflected by the good words and actions of one's life. And what a gift Baptism is. In Baptism we renounce evil and gain God's gift of salvation, that is, the forgiveness of sins and new and eternal life. In spite of the great gift of new life we receive in Christian initiation, our inclination to sin (called concupiscence) remains. It is the constant struggle of conversion directed towards holiness and eternal life that the Lord continues to call us. This "second conversion" is not only a work of our own lives. Rather, it is the work of our "contrite heart" that is, "drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first" (CCC, 1428).

St. Peter, himself, lived a very public example of a second conversion. After Jesus' arrest, Peter three times denied knowing Jesus. When he realized what he had done, Peter "went out and began to weep bitterly" (Lk 22:62). St. Ambrose described these two conversions of Christians, saying, "there are water and tears: the water of Baptism and the tears of repentance."

Interior Conversion: Jesus preached against performing outward signs of penance absent from sincere interior conversion, or conversion of the heart. He said, “But

take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father (Mt 6:1).

Interior conversion accompanied by interior repentance is a radical change of our whole lives, a return to God, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, and a repulsion of any evil we have already committed. It also involves a commitment to change our lives and sin no more, and a deep trust in God's infinite mercy and grace. This interior conversion is first a gift from the Holy Spirit who gives us the grace to return to the Lord and the courage to begin anew.

Acts of outward penance can and do accompany interior conversion. For example, both scripture and Tradition stress the importance of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving in relation to one's self, to God, and to others. Other ways to express interior conversion include reconciling with and praying for one's neighbors, the intercession of the saints, and works of charity.

Conversion is accomplished by:

- gestures of reconciliation;
- concern for the poor;
- the defense of justice and right;
- admitting one's faults;
- fraternal correction;
- changing the course of one's life;
- examining one's conscience;
- accepting spiritual direction;
- enduring suffering and persecution for the sake of righteousness.

The spirit of conversion is continually nourished by frequent participation in the Eucharist, reading the Bible, praying, and participating in the Church's seasons and days of penance (for example, Lent).

What Is This Sacrament Called? The sacrament which the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to as the sacrament of Penance is known by many names, each of which focuses on a particular dimension of the sacramental mystery.

- It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes Jesus' call to conversion sacramentally present.
- It is called the sacrament of penance because it blesses the repentant sinner's efforts to change through the steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction, and it makes those efforts effective.
- It is called the sacrament of confession because the sinner confesses both his or her own sins and the infinite mercy and forgiveness of God.
- It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, because through this sacrament God forgives even the most serious sins.
- And it is called the sacrament of reconciliation because it fills us with God's reconciling love and restores our relationship with God and with God's people.

Sacramental Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Conversion is a primarily twofold process. First, it entails God's forgiveness of our sins. Only God can forgive sins. Second, our conversion involves reconciliation with the Church. Both of these elements of conversion are expressed and accomplished by the sacrament of Penance. To understand more about this process, we first have to examine the meaning of sin.

As the CCC, "Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him" (1440). Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in our love for God and neighbor due to a misguided attachment to certain goods. Sins are named and classified in several different ways. There are many kinds of sins; for example, the sins of the spirit and sins of the flesh listed in the letter to the Galatians (5:19-21). Another classification labels sins of thought, word, deed, or omission.

Sins are also distinguished between original sin and personal sin. Personal sin, also called "actual" sin, is any free and deliberate action, word, thought, or desire that turns us away from God and his law of love. A personal sin can weaken our relationship with God (venial sin) or destroy our relationship with him (mortal sin).

Venial sins weaken our love and attach us to created goods rather than God. Examples of venial sins are not praying regularly, making a sarcastic remark, or

telling a small lie. While venial sins do not deprive us of sanctifying grace, God's friendship, love, or heaven, they do expose us to more opportunity for mortal sin.

Mortal sin kills our relation to God and others and destroys our capacity for love. Mortal sin results in the loss of love and sanctifying grace. If a person does not repent and receive Christ's forgiveness and dies in the state of mortal sin, he or she will be eternally separated from God, that is, in hell.

For a sin to be considered mortal three conditions must be met:

- The matter of the sin must be serious. For example, murder, adultery, or any violation of the Ten Commandments is serious.
- The sinner must be aware of the sinfulness of the act.
- The decision to sin must be a deliberate and personal choice.

If a person is forced or pressured into doing something which he or she knows is wrong and wishes to avoid, that person is not guilty of a mortal sin. Likewise, if a person sins because of a mental illness, he or she does not bear the same responsibility as a person who is able to avoid sin but chooses not to. Mortal sin sets us in direct opposition to God, the source of love. After the person commits a mortal sin his or her relationship with God needs to be reestablished. The sacrament of Penance is the only sure way of reestablishing our relationship with God.

Who Can Forgive Sins? When Jesus was preaching in a home in Capernaum, a paralytic was lifted down from the roof before Jesus. Jesus' first words to the paralytic were, "Child, your sins are forgiven." This bothered some of the religious leaders who observed the scene. "Who but God alone can forgive sins?" they asked themselves (see Mk 2:1-12).

The leaders were correct in the observation: Only God forgives sins. What they failed to believe, however, was that Jesus is the Son of God and he is able to exercise this divine power. Also, by virtue of the authority given to him by God the Father, Jesus is able to give men the power to forgive sins in his name. The Risen Jesus told his disciples, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained (Jn 21:22-23).

Jesus willed that the whole Church through its life and prayer would continue his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation that he accomplished by his death and

resurrection. But he gave the power of absolution ("to pronounce clear of blame or guilt") to the successors of the apostles, bishops and priests. In the sacrament of Penance, the formula for absolution spoken by the bishop or priest proclaims forgiveness for the sinner. In the Latin rite, it reads as follows: God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Reconciling With One Another: In his ministry, Jesus not only forgave the sinner, but he welcomed back the forgiven sinner into the community of the People of God from which the sin had alienated or excluded him. Jesus' parables of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Prodigal Son (see Lk 15) each describe the rejoicing that accompanies the return to the community of the forgiven sinner.

When Jesus' gave the apostles the power to forgive sins, at the same time he gave them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. He said to St. Peter: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19).

The words bind and loose mean that whomever Peter, the apostles, and now the successors of the apostles, the bishops, include or exclude from communion with the Church is also bound or not bound In communion with God. For Christians, reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God (CCC, 1445).

This does not mean that the Church somehow controls God's love or God's forgiveness. Even though forgiveness is expressed through the Church, recall that God alone can forgive sins. The Church is the body of Christ. Christ is the head. If Christ chooses something, the Church must do it. If Christ reestablishes a relationship with a sinner, then the Church must reestablish that same relationship. The Church is the sign of what God has done, and the-instrument through which God acts. Remember that Jesus said, "Receive the holy Spirit." It is the Spirit of God who makes the decision to forgive. The Church simply acts upon that decision.

When Jesus gave the apostles the power to forgive sins, it was as if he designated them as his arms. Now, Christ, the head, makes the decision to embrace the sinner. In order to embrace the sinner he uses his arms, the successors of the apostles. The arms are the instruments of the embrace and the sign of the decision to embrace, but the arms did not make the decision nor do they have the power to change the decision (see CCC, 1446).

Each time a priest offers sinners God's forgiveness, he also-welcomes them back into the life of the Church. The Church cannot reject anyone whom God has accepted. Thus both the repentant sinner and the Church find new wholeness in the sacrament. Each time the Church celebrates the sacrament of Penance, she becomes more Christ-like. The sacrament makes the Church a loving and forgiving Church. The sacrament also makes the Church truly one as God is one. The Rite of Penance makes it clear that the Church is wounded by sin and that through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation the Church renews itself (nos. 7 and 11). The Church is the instrument of God's healing love and mercy. The Church is also the sign of what that love and mercy can do to restore what has been broken.

Practice of the Sacrament of Penance: The practice of the sacrament of Penance began with Christ's institution of the sacrament, through his ministry of forgiveness and especially in his words recorded in John 20:21-23. Christ instituted the sacrament for all members of the Church, especially those who have committed mortal sin and have lost their baptismal grace and wounded the Church community. For these sinners, the sacrament of Penance offers a new chance at conversion as a way to recover the grace of justification. Church father Tertullian described Penance as "the second plank of salvation after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace". As with all the sacraments, Penance is a liturgical action.

The sacrament may be celebrated in two ways: anonymously or face to face. In either way, typically, the penitent is greeted in a ritual manner by the priest and given a blessing. The penitent is invited to repent. He or she then offers a confession. If necessary the confessor may assist the penitent by asking questions. He then offers some practical advice for beginning a new life, helps the penitent resolve to make restitution in any situation in which harm has been done to someone else, and imposes a penance to atone for sin and to aid the person in starting a new life. When the penitent has accepted the penance and made an Act

of Contrition, the priest extends both hands or his right hand only over the head of the penitent and pronounces absolution .

The priest then makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. This absolution is followed by a prayer of thanksgiving and praise and a dismissal with a blessing. Even if reconciliation involves only the priest and a single penitent it is a celebration of God and the Church and not simply the act of an isolated individual.

While individual confession remains the ordinary way for the sacrament of Penance, the Second Vatican Council also reintroduced a communal celebration of the sacrament in which all of the elements (greeting, blessing, scripture reading, homily) with the exception of the individual confession of sins and the granting of absolution take place in the presence of the whole community. Communal celebrations of the sacrament underscore the fact that reconciliation involves the whole Church and not just the individual and God.

On rare occasions when there is grave necessity for the sacrament and individual confession would not be possible, a communal celebration of the sacrament may include a general prayer of confession and general absolution. Grave necessity may include a situation where a person may die shortly without the opportunity, for confession. Grave necessity can also exist when the ratio of penitents to confessors would deprive the penitents, through no fault of their own, to receive Holy Communion for 3 long time. Those who receive general absolution are still bound to confess their serious sins to a priest as soon as possible. It is up to the diocesan bishop to decide, based on Church law, what constitutes a significant need for general absolution.

Over the centuries, the actual concrete form in which the Church has practiced the sacrament has varied. The feature "Sacrament of Penance in History" offers brief look at some of the historical development of the sacrament. Yet, throughout the changes in the practice of the sacrament over the centuries, the same fundamental structure has always been present. These two equally essential elements have always been present: first, the actions of the person (contrition, confession, and satisfaction) who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit, and second, God's action through the intervention of the Church. The actions of the

penitent and the role of the minister of the sacrament are described in the subsections that follow.

In the first centuries, the reconciliation of Christians who had committed grave sins after Baptism (e.g., idolatry, murder, or adultery) was connected to very rigorous public penance, whereby the persons had to do penance for years before they could receive the sacrament and absolution.

During this time, the process often began with the sinner confessing to the bishop in private. The person was then enrolled into an "order of penitents." Because this process only concerned the gravest of sins, a person was rarely admitted into the order of penitents. In certain regions, a person could be admitted only once in a lifetime. The penitents could only participate in Eucharist through the Liturgy of the Word. Also, they wore sackcloth and ashes and knelt at the rear of the Church. Some of the penances assigned to them included fasting, prayer, abstaining from marriage and sexual intercourse, and the refusal to hold any public office.

A second form of the sacrament was introduced in the seventh century by Irish missionaries who were inspired by the monastic tradition in the Eastern Church. This form involved private, individual, and devotional confession of sins to a priest. It did not require public or long works of penance before reconciliation was offered with God and the Church. This form opened the way for the sacrament to be performed in secret between the penitent and priest and is still celebrated that way today. This practice also opened the possibility that the sacrament of Penance could be repeated often. It also allowed for the opportunity for mortal sins and venial sins to be confessed at one time.

Contrition: While the sacrament of Penance begins with the conversion of the person, conversion requires more than just a focus on a distant God. It requires a movement towards God. This movement begins with contrition. Contrition is defined as "heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more".

When we are contrite we accept responsibility for the things we have done. We also accept responsibility for our failure to love and we make a decision to be more loving. Contrition is not the same thing as shame. Shame directs our energy to ourselves and makes us long for perfection. Contrition focuses our minds and

hearts on God and makes us long to draw closer to God. Contrition is rooted in faith and love for God. It needs the prayer and support of the Church in order to grow.

When we love God above all else we experience what is known as "perfect contrition." We willingly let go of all of those things which pull us away from God. When we experience perfect contrition God forgives all of our venial (lesser) sins. He also forgives our mortal (serious) sins as long as we intend to make a sacramental confession as soon as possible. Sacramental confession is a natural part of perfect contrition. If we love God above all else we will want to be united with Christ by being united with his body on earth - the Church. Imperfect contrition is the result of love mixed with a fear of punishment or a dislike of the consequences of sin. It too can set us on the path to God and lead us to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance, but it is not sufficient to bring about the forgiveness of grave sins.

Also, in preparing for the sacrament of Penance, the penitent must examine his or her conscience in light of the Scriptures. Conscience is defined as a practical judgment of reason that enables us to discern whether an action or attitude is good or evil. Passages best suited to help in examining our conscience can be found in the Ten Commandments, the moral teachings such as the Beatitudes, and apostolic teachings in the Gospels and New Testament letters.

Confession: True contrition results in confession or disclosure of our sins. Confession is the external expression of our sorrow and of our willingness to accept responsibility for our sins. Because we do not live purely interior lives, our contrition cannot remain purely within us. The outward form of contrition is confession. We tell our sins to the priest and we say we are sorry for them. Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance.

Recall that God calls us to change and God will help us change, but God will not force us to change. Although God sees all of our sins, he will only free us from those we ask him to free us from. Confession is a request for such a healing.

Confession is also an expression of faith in God. When we confess our sins to God we are in fact proclaiming our belief in God's love and mercy. Sin is a failure to

recognize God's love and generosity. % Sin is rooted in the belief that we could "do better for ourselves" without God.

When we sin we are acting like the prodigal son, taking what God has given us and trying to make it on our own. When we confess our sins, we are like the prodigal returning. When the prodigal son returned to his father and admitted his sin, he was expressing trust in his father's goodness. His action showed that he finally appreciated who his father was and all the blessings that came from life with his father. When we confess our sins, we are admitting our dependence upon God and our belief that life with God is the best life there is. An honest confession of who we are and of who God is forms the basis of our new life with God.

Confession not only forms the basis of our new life with God, it also forms the basis of our new life with the Church. When we confess our sins to a priest we are admitting the harm that we have caused to other people. We are admitting that our sin affected the entire body of Christ and we are asking that body of Christ to forgive us. When we confess our sins within the Church we are also expressing, our belief in the goodness of the Church. We are looking at the Church through the eyes of God.

All Catholics are expected to confess their serious sins at least once a year. This expectation underscores the fact that there is nothing to be gained from putting off the sacrament, and much to be lost. Furthermore, any Catholic who is aware of having committed a serious sin may not receive communion without first receiving the sacrament of Penance. An exception is allowed if there is a serious reason for receiving communion and there is no possibility of going to confession first. Also, children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time. We cannot celebrate the sacrament of unity (Eucharist) when we have set ourselves apart from God and from God's people.

Finally, without being absolutely necessary, confession of venial sins is strongly recommended by the Church. Regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let us be healed by Christ, and progress in the life of the Spirit (see CCC, 1458).

Satisfaction (Penance): A person who is sorry for his or her sins and who confesses those sins to a priest must then work to build a new life with God and the

Church. It is the effort to correct the mistakes of one's old life and to build a new life which completes the process of conversion. In order to begin building a new life, the repentant sinner must do everything possible to repair the damage which he or she has caused.

Correcting our sins is known as "giving satisfaction" or "doing penance." This means meeting the basic demands of justice: returning anything that has been taken, offering compensation for injuries, working to rebuild reputations which have been destroyed, and completing other like remedies. It also means making an effort to strengthen those things which have been weakened by sin. Our conversion is not complete until we do what we can to rebuild our relationships with God and with other people and to reinforce our own commitment to love.

When we confess our sins to a priest, he offers a penance. The penance may involve prayer, almsgiving, self-denial, or works of service. The purpose of the penance is to help us begin the process of correcting our past mistakes and building a new life with God. The act of penance gives us a starting point, not an eliding point, for our new life.

The Gift of Brokenness: In his book *Suffering*, Father Louis Evely tells the story of a Jesuit friend who was sent to a German concentration camp during World War II. During a long forced march the Jesuit and another man were walking arm in arm, holding each other up, helping each other forward. After a while the Jesuit felt the arm of the other man starting to slip. It slipped once. Then it slipped again and then it was no longer there. The second man fell. Like so many others he could go no further. He would die on the road. The Jesuit stopped for a second, looked back at his fallen companion, and then carried on marching.

Father Evely says that his friend earned that experience with him his whole life. It taught him how weak he really was. It showed him that he could never deserve God's love. God's love was a fabulous gift; it was not something he had earned. That Jesuit was given the soul of a poor man. He learned to claim nothing as his own and to take nothing for granted.

In our brokenness we can see what we may have missed before: life is not something that we have earned or something that we need to earn, but something that God gives to us out of love. When we understand this truth we will be free to

live in joy. We will be able to approach each moment of life with the wonder and exuberance of a young child opening gifts on Christmas morning.

Absolution: The sacrament of Penance begins in the actions of the penitent who seeks conversion. The sacrament is completed in the actions of the priest who grants absolution. The Church assigns such importance to this ministry and has so much respect for the penitent, that every priest who hears confessions is bound to keep absolute secrecy of the sins confessed to him. This secret is known as the "sacramental seal."

When a priest celebrates the sacrament of Penance, he is fulfilling the ministry of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who seeks out lost sheep, the Good Samaritan who heals, the Father who awaits his prodigal son, and the fair and impartial judge whose judgment is just and merciful. When the priest sees that a person's conversion is genuine, he extends his hands on that person and pronounces God's forgiveness. As the Catechism reminds us: "The priest is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner" (1465). Through the imposition of hands he restores the sinner to the community in which the Holy Spirit is active. In the words and gestures of the priest who gives absolution, God renews the broken relationship with the sinner and reconnects the sinner to the Paschal mystery.

The priest is "not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant" (CCC, 1466). The priest unites himself to the intention and love of Christ. To function in his role of confessor, the priest should, have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior; have experience in human affairs; respect and be sensitive toward the sinner; have a love of the truth; be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church; lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity.

The priest must also pray and do penance for the penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy. Priests must take every opportunity to encourage Catholics to confess their sins in the sacrament of Penance and they must offer regularly scheduled times or make themselves reasonably available whenever they are asked for the sacrament.

The Effects of the Sacrament of Penance: When the sins of the penitent are absolved, all the obstacles to a complete union with God and with the Church are removed. The person's own efforts to love will be effective because they are united

to Christ's love. Through the sacrament of Penance we are reconciled with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves, and with all of creation. Those who approach the sacrament of Penance with a contrite heart and an openness to God usually experience peace, serenity of conscience, and a deep sense of God's love after they have completed the sacrament.

The sacrament of Penance reopens the path to complete union with God. The sacrament brings about a true spiritual resurrection and a restoration of the dignity and blessings due to God's children - especially friendship with God. It does not, however, guarantee that we will be faithful or that we will be completely united to God. The sacrament of Penance, like the sacrament of Baptism which precedes it, only achieves its true purpose of uniting us to God if we allow the grace of the sacrament to permeate our entire life. It is only when our efforts at penance move beyond a desire to "get us out of trouble" and move us to more fervent service of God and of our neighbor that we will experience the true wonder of the sacrament.

The sacrament also reconciles us with the Church. Sin damages or breaks our communion with others. The sacrament of Penance repairs or restores that communion. The reconciled sinner is made even stronger by the exchange of "spiritual goods" among all members of the Body of Christ, both those on earth and in heaven.

Finally, because we submit ourselves to God's mercy, the sacrament of Penance anticipates our final judgment when we meet the Lord at death. It helps us to repent and teaches us penance and faith in God's loving mercy. By God's grace, these virtues will help us pass from death to an eternal life of joy in heaven.

The Meaning of Indulgences: The doctrine and practice of indulgences have a close connection with the effects of the sacrament of Penance. Indulgence is defined as, "a partial or total wiping away of punishments due for sins that have been forgiven."

In the sacrament we are forgiven for our sins and welcomed back to communion with God. This does not mean, however, that we are freed from all of the consequences of sin. When a parent forgives a child for something that the child has done, the parent stops being angry with the child, but the parent may not remove all of the consequences which result from the child's behavior. For exam-

ple, the fact that a parent forgives a child for spilling something or breaking something does not imply that the child does not have to clean up what has been spilled or broken. The* same is true in our relationship with God. The fact th^t we have been forgiven does not mean that we do not have to repair the harm which we have caused.

Unfortunately, each sin causes harm that extends far beyond what we can see. If you are unkind to one person, that person may react by being unkind to someone else who may in turn be unkind to someone else, and so on. Even if you repair % your relationship with the person you hurt, you will not be undoing all of the harm that you have done. Sometimes our sins are so great that no matter how sorry we are we cannot even repair the harm that we have done. If we cannot repair the harm that we have done, then we at least have a responsibility to make up for it in some way, that is, to balance it out with good.

The Church teaches that we must make amends for the harm which we have« caused before we die or we will need to make amends after death. We do not know exactly how this is accomplished after death, we simply believe that God expects us to "clean up the mess we have made" and provides us with a way to do it.

This expectation does not fall to us as isolated individuals, however. We are all members of the one body of Christ. Our sins injure the entire body and our acts of love benefit the entire body. It is possible for the other members of the body of Christ to assist us in our efforts to undo or make amends for the harm which | we have done. When we are completely united with the Church we can request that the loving acts of Christ and of his holy people be considered as our own effort to undo the harm of our sin. When the Church grants an indulgence she is effectively saying, "this person is truly united with us and we offer the love of the j body of Christ in payment for his or her sins."

The practice of granting indulgences is part of the Church's understanding of the unity of the Body of Christ. It is the Catholic belief that God does not 11 save us as isolated individuals, but as members of the Church. When we are fully j united to the community of the Church, our actions become the actions of the Church and the actions of other members of the Church become our actions. When we have undergone a sincere conversion and have participated in the sacrament of

reconciliation and in the Eucharist, the Church offers us her assistance in making amends for our sins. We indicate that we wish this assistance by performing specific acts. This process of asking for and receiving the Church's assistance is what is entailed in the granting of indulgences.

There are names for different kinds of indulgences. A partial indulgence frees us from some of the remaining responsibility which we have for our sins. A plenary indulgence frees us from any remaining*responsibility which we have for our sins. In order to receive a plenary indulgence a person must truly love God, detest sin, place their trust in the power of the Paschal mystery, and believe in the mutual assistance which can be given by the communion of saints (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 10). A person must then do four things. He or she must

- make a sacramental confession,
- participate in the Eucharist,
- pray for the intentions of the Holy Father (by saying an Our Father and a Hail Mary or by offering a prayer in His or her own words), and
- perform the specific act to which the indulgence, is attached, for example offer prayers in a specific pilgrimage site.

Indulgences are not about "collecting points." They are about uniting our efforts to love and to be faithful with the efforts of the whole Church, including the faithful who have died and are now in purgatory. By saying prayers and performing actions approved by the church, we can help those now being "purified" to gain indulgences, thus taking away some of the temporal punishment due for the sins they committed while on earth.