

The Beginnings of the Sacrament of Confession

In the first three centuries of the Church, Christians were regularly persecuted, tortured, and put to death by the Roman emperor or his representatives because they would not renounce Christ and worship the pagan Gods of the Roman empire. However some were not able to withstand the threats, and torture and they did renounce Christ. This action in essence separated (excommunicated) them permanently from the Church. By the mid third century there were a number of people who had renounced Christ, experienced regret and remorse for their decision, and sought to be restored to communion with the Church. They confessed their desire to follow Christ once again and regretted their previous renunciation of the Lord. Thus, the practice began of restoring these people to communion in the Church.

For this reconciliation to occur, those who had apostatized (fallen away), had to complete a series of actions to show they were truly sorry for what they had done and show they were ready to be restored to Communion. These actions or "penances" could involve such things as kneeling at the threshold of the church before people as they entered and asking their forgiveness and their prayers. Then they might be allowed into the narthex (where the catechumens stood) but were still not able to [receive communion]. All in all, this time of penance might have lasted five years before the person who had apostatized (renounced Christ) was fully reconciled to the Church and could once again receive the Holy Eucharist. This same approach was also applied to people who had committed adultery or some other sin such as murder. Once the penance was completed, a prayer of absolution was read over the penitent person and he or she was restored to the Eucharist.

In the late fourth century you have evidence of the beginnings of a private practice of Confession. St. Ambrose, Pope Leo and St. Basil, and St Ephrem, all speak to the impropriety of a bishop or priest publicly divulging the confession of a person to the church. They felt it would discourage people from coming forward and expose them to contempt from people if the sin was publicly revealed. [The rise in the number of Christians contributed to] the practice where bishops began appointing priests as confessors to privately hear confessions. Those same appointed priests would then assign penances (things you did to show you were sorry for your sin) for those who confessed to work them out by themselves. Thus you have this shift from a one time public act of reconciliation practiced in the church in the mid third century to a private act of confession and penance starting in the late 4th century.

What we can learn from this early understanding of Confession is that Confession is not just simply a matter of admitting what you do wrong, saying you're sorry, and promising you won't do it again. There seemed to be this understanding that in one's desire to return to Christ and be reconciled to the Church, one had to do something to show they really meant it when they said they regretted what they did. If sin is breaking away from God, then repentance is also doing something to try and fix what you broke (to the extent that is possible). The perfect example of this is found in the gospel story of Zacchaeus that we read as one of the preparation readings for Great Lent. Zacchaeus just didn't say he was sorry for defrauding poor people. He gave half his goods to the poor, and vowed to restore anyone he had defrauded "four fold." That was his penance he did to show he was sorry for his sin; and he did so joyfully! If siblings in a family

fight over possessions and compete over them, it seems the way you show you are sorry is by learning to cooperate and share what God has entrusted you with. Penance is not a punishment, it is an action of healing, an action of reconciliation.

Source: <http://www.stgeorgerossford.org/reflections/understanding-the-mystery-of-repentance/17-the-beginnings-of-the-sacrament-of-confession>.

Answer the Following Questions

1. How does your commitment to the Christian faith (if you're not Christian, then what you observe) compare to that of the early Church? Be honest!

2. What is the relationship between personal reconciliation and receiving Communion in the early Church? How does that compare to the view of a majority of people today?

3. Why do you think the power to forgive sins was reserved to the Bishops? Think Scripture.

4. Why did the Bishops extend the authority to forgive sins to the priests? How did that change the way people satisfied (carried out) their penance?

5. Does the Sacrament of Reconciliation require being sorry for one's sins? What else?

6. In what ways, and to whom, does the Sacrament of Reconciliation heal?
