

# THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

## BACKGROUND READING



Jesus gave the Church seven Sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Holy Matrimony. The Catholic Church identifies two of these, the Sacraments of Penance and Reconciliation and of the Anointing of the Sick, as the Sacraments of Healing (CCC 1421). These Sacraments address both forms of sickness and death that all people experience – physical and spiritual. Though we all experience them, neither was a part of God’s original plan for us.

### God’s Original Plan

The very first passage of the *Catechism* teaches that “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life” (CCC 1). God created us for incorruption – meaning that we were not meant to experience sickness or decay. And He made us in the image of His own eternity – meaning that we were meant to live forever. God did not make death and does not delight in the death of the living. Death and sickness entered the world only through

the devil’s envy and man’s sin (Wisdom 1:13; 2:23-24; 1 Corinthians 15:21; Romans 5:12). “As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness” (CCC 1707).

### God’s Remedy

But Scripture also tells us that Jesus came into the world to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), to restore us to a full and abundant life (John 10:10), and to set us free from the bondage of sin (Romans 8:21; John 8:34-36). Thus, Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician, came to bring healing to both our bodies and our souls. When He walked this earth, Jesus showed tremendous compassion to those who were sick. “His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: ‘I was sick and you visited me’” (CCC 1503). Jesus gave the two Sacraments of Healing – the Sacraments of Penance and Reconciliation and of the Anointing of the Sick – so that the Church could continue the work of restoration and healing until He comes again.

After Baptism, it is the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation that heals us from both spiritual sickness (by the forgiveness of venial sins) and spiritual death (by the forgiveness of mortal sins). Through it, our relationship with God is restored. Only God can forgive sins, and those to whom He has entrusted the power to do so, in His name. Thankfully, He has made this power readily available to us through His priests (CCC 986-987).

In the Anointing of the Sick we can receive healing for our physical illnesses (if that is what is best for our soul) and strength for our final journey to God. In addition to the anointing we can receive the Eucharist as Viaticum – “food for the journey.” This can be a great spiritual help to us because, “as bodily nourishment restores lost strength, so the Eucharist strengthens our charity, which tends to be weakened in daily life” (CCC 1394). The reception of the Body and Blood of Christ, at the time of one’s passing over to God the Father, is a great source of encouragement as we recall Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54).

### **God’s Love and Compassion**

Jesus’ compassion and love for those who suffer has been the inspiration for Christians

throughout the ages, and they have generously responded to the sick and the dying. One of the Corporal Works of Mercy is to visit the sick, and one of the Spiritual Works of Mercy is to comfort the sorrowing. Many saints have encouraged us to recognize that among the best ways we can help our friends, family, and loved ones is to invite them to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation so that they can experience the same joy, freedom, and healing that we receive through it.

Our God is a God of deep love and unending mercy. He desires that not one of us be lost or far from Him. Through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation He continually reaches out to us with His arms of pardon and peace. Nothing we have done is unforgivable or beyond His mercy. In the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, He offers us healing, forgiveness, and grace for our final journey home.

“Thus, just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called ‘the sacraments of Christian initiation,’ so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as Viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life ‘the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland’ or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage” (CCC 1525). From birth to death Christ comes to us in the power of His Sacraments. His grace is always sufficient for our lives – and for our everlasting life.

# RESTORING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

## BACKGROUND READING



Do you sometimes feel as if you are at odds with everyone – even yourself?

Do you ever wish you could start over with a clean slate?

Would you like to have a more intimate relationship with God?

In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, God enables us to satisfy these longings, which is why the *Catechism* calls it a Sacrament of Healing (CCC1421). After Baptism it is this Sacrament that provides spiritual healing through the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of our relationship with God.

### The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

This Sacrament was instituted by Jesus as a gift of God's mercy. In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we confess our sins to God (through the priest), and the priest assigns us a penance – usually prayers to say or a good deed to perform. To make a good confession, we must have contrition (or sorrow) for our sins, sincerely commit to work at not sinning again, and, as much as possible, avoid the circumstances that tempt us to sin.

In turn, God, through His minister the priest, absolves us of our sins.

Jesus granted His Apostles the authority to hear and forgive sins when He said, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:23). Such a verbal confession is in keeping with the requirements of our human nature, as the *Catechism* explains: “Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance...‘for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know’” (CCC 1456).

### The Fruits of Penance and Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is sometimes called the Sacrament of Joy because of the tremendous benefits it gives us. God's love is imparted to the sinner, who is restored to His grace and strengthened to sin no more. The Sacrament brings about a “spiritual resurrection,” restoring the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God. The sinner gains an intimate friendship with God and is reconciled with the Church,

repairing and restoring his relationships with others. The Sacrament reconciles the sinner with himself in his inmost being, enabling him to regain his true identity as a dearly loved child of God.

### **The Fight against Future Sin**

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation makes us spiritually stronger and enables us to avoid repeating the sins that we have confessed. Is it any wonder that the Church strongly recommends the confession of everyday faults (venial sins) and teaches that regular confession helps form our conscience, fights against evil tendencies, heals us through Christ, and enables us to progress in the spiritual life (CCC 1458)?

### **The Seal of Confession**

“The Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under severe penalties [excommunication] to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him” (CCC 1467). This secret is called the “sacramental seal” and cannot be violated under any circumstances.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that Jesus is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” because He was tempted in every way that we are, yet He did not sin. Therefore, we’re told that we can “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help” (Hebrews 4:14-16). Confession, the Sacrament of Joy, is how we do this.