

# *A New* Penance Book



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*ISBN 978 1 86082 186 8*

Front cover: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1823 (oil on canvas) by M.S. Stapleaux (1799-1881) and David, J.-L. (1748-1825), Private Collection/Phillips, The International Fine Art Auctioneers/Bridgeman Art Library.

*A New*  
**PENANCE BOOK**

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### Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with thanks, material written for the CTS by Fr J Webb, and Robert Tylerson and reproduced here. Scriptural passages from the Jerusalem Bible (DLT), and translations of text and prayers in Rites authorised by ICEL.

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## WHY GO TO CONFESSION?

### **Being reconciled**

Many people find the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or penance, or confession - keep to the old names if you like), difficult. It is for some a rather neglected sacrament, approached out of duty rather than with joy. There is a feeling that one is not getting the best out of it, if indeed there is anything to be got out of it, over and above confession and absolution.

Our understanding of the benefits to be gained from the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be heightened if we pause to consider how necessary reconciliation is. On the ordinary human level we know only too well the need to be reconciled with each other when, through our own fault, we have fallen out. We know that being reconciled is not just a matter of saying, 'Sorry', putting the quarrel behind us; we want and need to be accepted back, to be given another chance, to be thought no less of; we want to make up and to know our sorrow is accepted.

### **The mystery of God's love**

If we need to convince ourselves of the need for reconciliation, let us not think of our sins and failings, let

us rather stand by the cross with Mary our mother and the disciple whom Jesus loved and let it sink into our heart that all his pain and agony was joyfully undergone to save each of us - you and me - from our sins.

### **Meeting Christ himself**

What he gained for us on the cross he distributes - if that is the right word - through the sacraments. A sacrament is not just a rite or a ceremony, it is a meeting with Our Lord himself. We receive not a thing nor a quality but a person, Christ himself. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we receive the same Jesus whom we receive in Communion. He comes now as the physician of our souls, as the physician who longs to heal, to bind up our wounds and restore us to full spiritual health. Our need for forgiveness is far outmatched by his longing to impart it. He comes to heal the soul he has already died for and he comes to heal it in his own way: in the sacrament he instituted for that very purpose.

### **Hope for the prodigal son**

First of all, what happens when we are reconciled in the words of absolution? Put simply, Christ unites himself with us by grace. He floods our soul with his presence. Absolution is not just a judicial act, an acquittal or pardon from guilt - it has elements of all these, of course, but only because it is so much more. We receive Christ himself

who comes to heal, restore and forgive the soul he has already ransomed. What happens can only be described in the language of human love or under the figure of homecoming, as in that perfect example of reconciliation, the father and his prodigal son. Imagine yourself as the prodigal son and see what hope reconciliation gives. Indeed, it might well be described as the sacrament of hope. For in it we have, if we are truly sorry, the certainty - not just the possibility - of forgiveness and the chance of a completely new start every time. And as if all this were not enough, we have the hope of attaining that measure of perfection Our Lord wills for us, through the positive graces he offers in this sacrament.

### **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is accomplished by the gift of Jesus Christ to the soul; his very presence casts out sin and guilt. Just as the father threw his arms around the prodigal son and kissed him, Our Lord receives us eagerly and takes us back to himself, makes us one with him and at one with him - that's what the word 'reconcile' means. And it is he who does the reconciling, not ourselves. Our sorrow alone would be ineffective - what makes the reconciliation, is his acceptance of our sorrow and the free gift of himself. We would do well to remind ourselves that our sins have truly been cast out, and that we have been given a fresh start.

### **Healing and consolation**

The healing aspect of reconciliation is an unending source of consolation. Even the briefest treatment of it is enough to make one realise that here we have a sacrament tailor-made as it were for the soul's deepest needs. In short, his life-giving presence within us restores our lost integrity. In other words, we are restored to wholeness, to health, to spiritual vigour. We regain the real self that sin (which proceeds from and goes on to create a false self) had marred and blotched.

### **Good that comes from confession**

The manifold graces here made available to us by the Light and Lover of our souls would provide food for daily meditation for weeks. You can fill out the list for yourselves, but here are the more obvious ones: our weakness is strengthened, our inclination to sin diminished, the bonds or clinging quality of sinful tendencies are loosened, the grace we have lost is restored - and more than restored; we receive encouragement, the great encouragement of knowing that his strength can and will transform our weakness; we receive the assurance that he accepts and deals with us as we are. It would not be too fanciful surely to suggest that Our Lord coaxes us towards virtue as a mother coaxes her child to do what it cannot see is for its own good - enlightening our minds to see his will more

clearly and giving us the motivation to love him more dearly, giving us a deeper insight into our sinfulness, but at the same time - in case that insight sets us back - giving us a deeper awareness that his grace is abounding and to be had for the asking.

### **Practical suggestions**

Naturally, the more you realise what there is to be gained from the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the more you will want to take care that you make the most of it.

Obviously, as in every other sacrament, Christ unfailingly gives of himself and it is always the same self. However, your own disposition determines to a considerable extent just how effectively he is received. Hence the need for a proper preparation, a simple method of confessing, and adequate follow-up. As this is just what many people find difficult, here are a few practical suggestions.

### **Looking forward to confession**

An important part of preparation is looking forward to going to confession. Yes, looking forward. The more we look forward to an event the more we are likely to benefit from it - that's the point of Lent and Advent - and is not being restored to wholeness and soundness of soul worth looking forward to? What God works in us is cause for deep spiritual joy, and therefore well worth looking forward to.

### **Ask for true sorrow**

The essential ingredient of the sacrament is, from our point of view, sorrow. But we tend to forget, perhaps, that sorrow is not something we can manufacture by ourselves; it is a gift from God - so the best way to achieve sorrow is to ask for it, knowing it will never be refused. Note that we must be sorry, not feel sorry. Our feelings are only imperfectly under our control and are not always a safe guide. Real sorrow consists in acknowledging that through our own fault we have offended our maker and redeemer by going against his will. We acknowledge this in humbly asking pardon, in intending to turn away from sin and in a willingness to do our best to make up.

### **Examining your conscience**

Having resolutely asked God to give us the grace to be sorry, let us set about deciding what to say to the priest in the confessional. It is well to have a method of examining your conscience - the simpler the better, and one that suits you. If you are happy as you are, do not change for the sake of the experiment.

If you are not too satisfied, try using the ten commandments as a framework; or think of your failings under the headings of thought, word, deed and omission; or in the different parts of your life - work, home, family, friends. Whichever way you choose, spend no more than fifteen minutes in the actual

examination - aim to be thorough without being scrupulous. And examine your conscience in the presence of God, asking him to reveal to you those areas of your life that are in need of his healing; ask him to help you to see yourself through his eyes.

### **Making your confession**

Once you are with the priest and have started your confession, take your time. It is an important time for you and rushing will only spoil it. Remember, too, that you are not accounting to the priest for your sins, you are expressing sorrow for them to your heavenly Father. Direct your mind and heart to him. Since it is your Father in heaven you are primarily addressing, you need have no fear about expressing yourself. Do not worry if words fail you - honest sorrow is more important than accurate description. Anyhow, God knows what you have done better than you know yourself.

Some people find the actual process of confessing to another human being things they may not properly voice even to themselves difficult and embarrassing. The priest understands this - after all he goes to confession himself - and will make allowances. It might help, or at least break the ice, if you said at the beginning that you find things awkward.

### **What to do after confession**

After you have received absolution, there is still more to be done. It is important to spend five to ten minutes

in prayer afterwards; this will ensure that, having had the experience of reconciliation, you will more fully appreciate its meaning. Kneel in silence and dwell upon the fact that God has made you one with him again, and thank him with all your heart. Then think ahead, think of the opportunities that you know will arise for doing good, the temptations that you are likely to meet, and ask for the grace to tackle them better. If you need to make it up with anyone, decide how and when to do so. Then say your penance. And so the process is complete.

### **A closer relationship with God**

It must be obvious by now, having considered the effects of reconciliation, that we have in this sacrament a wonderful means of spiritual development. But it will not help us very far on the road to perfection if we only go when we are in dire need, or if we confine ourselves to an annual Easter confession. Spiritual development or striving for perfection is nothing else than seeking a closer relationship with Our Lord, and there can be no relationship with anybody without regular personal contact.

### **Regular confession**

What Christ offers in this sacrament is the very thing we need in order to avoid what is wrong and be better enabled to do what is good. It stands to reason that we

need it as regularly as we need to pray. Note, as regularly, not as frequently. We need to pray more often than we need confession, but both should be done as a regular practice. We have more cups of tea than we have warm baths, but hopefully we have both regularly.

It is not necessary to go to confession every time we wish to receive Communion. We are only obliged to go if we are conscious of having sinned grievously - in case anyone still labours under misunderstanding this and, as a consequence, receives Communion far less often than they might.

### **How often should I go to confession?**

Well, how often should we approach the Sacrament? Certainly more than once a year. Once every six months, every quarter, every month, fortnight or week - any of these patterns, or any other you wish, as long as it suits you and, most important, so long as you stick to it. You will soon find, if you have not been going regularly up to now, that once you have stuck to a definite pattern for a year, you will know whether that pattern is the right one for you and, if it is not, you will make adjustments. You will also find that regular confession creates an appetite for itself, that once you have come to experience its value, you will, genuinely and unaffectedly, look forward to confession. Once regular confession has taken root, it is rarely abandoned.

### **Knowing God's mercy**

Good habits do away with - and regular confession does, in a general way, gradually free us from - our sinfulness, in much the same way that our bodies, our clothes and our homes are much easier to keep clean if they are washed and cleaned regularly. Once dirt has been left to get ingrained, its a different matter. Among its other effects is a deeper awareness of our own sinfulness and failings, but this will not cause depression and despondency because the other side of the coin will be a greater sense of God's mercy and of what his will for us is, together with the realisation that he asks nothing of us without first giving us ample grace to achieve it.

Of course you are not to expect to feel any different, or to be able to plot progress - that is not how grace works. Whatever progress you make is unlikely to be apparent to yourself. You might very well come to feel that you are more of a sinner than you realised - but that, in itself, would be a sign of progress!

### **Patience and freedom**

Be patient; there is no such thing as instant improvement, and the results of being regularly reconciled to God will be gradual and cumulative. There is, however, one thing you can be sure about: the regular practice of expressing sorrow and receiving certain forgiveness will put your

sins in their place and remove any false sense of enduring guilt you may have been plagued by, as you come to realise that the absolution you receive and can look forward to receiving regularly, is itself a foretaste of that complete freedom from sin and perfect union with God that he has in store for you in heaven.

Let us then resolve to see in this great and consoling sacrament a spur towards that goal, and receive it with the enthusiasm and gratitude - and regularity - it deserves.

## **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION - SUMMARY**

### **Preparation**

Prepare yourself for five or ten minutes, usually in silence, examining your conscience. This can also be done with the help of a Scripture reading (see pp. 33-38).

### **Celebrating the sacrament**

Approach the priest who welcomes you, and bless yourself . Introduce yourself, and how long it is since your last confession.

The priest may read a short passage of scripture.

The priest will invite you to make your confession.

Make confession of your sins as simply and clearly as you can, asking forgiveness for them.

Listen attentively to any advice, encouragement and guidance the priest may have.

Accept the penance the priest proposes.

Say a prayer of sorrow (act of contrition).

Receive the absolution of your sins from the priest.

Final prayer and conclusion.

### **Afterwards**

Spend ten minutes in quiet prayer (see pp. 39-45). Say the prayer(s) given as part of your penance. Ask God to help you to make satisfaction for your sins.

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## PREPARING FOR CONFESSION

### **Recognising my sins**

Awareness of sin is a vital part of the Christian life. I can only be free from sin when I first acknowledge it. One passage from Luke's Gospel makes the point well.

'The tax collector stood some distance away, not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven; but he beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner". This man, I tell you, went home again at rights with God; the other did not. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the man who humbles himself will be exalted'. (*Lk 18:13-14*)

The gospel parable about the seemingly good Pharisee, and seemingly sinful tax-collector gives me confidence that if I, with the tax-collector, can honestly pray: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner', God will forgive me, whatever my sins, and they can be washed away by his forgiveness. If I am not aware of my sin, like the Pharisee, I am in a sad state; I am not at rights with God.

### **Have mercy on me, a sinner**

If I need to be further convinced, or need more scripture to reflect on, then I need only ask, 'Who was the only person to whom Christ promised, "This day you will be

with me in paradise”?’ (*Lk 23:43*) Not a ‘saint’ in any recognisable way, but a thief, someone who knew he had done wrong and deserved punishment.

Recognising sin is the first step to the joy of being freed from sin. To start, I need to see my sin, to know that my sin is mine. I am to blame. It is my responsibility. This sin is then also mine to confess to Christ and so to be freed from it. I am not free to confess what I don’t admit to owning. I have to recognise and admit to my sin before I can give it to Christ. Then he will lift the burden from me, taking my sins on his cross.

My difficulty is not only in having the courage to say ‘sorry’. My problem, so often, is to recognise my sins in the first place.

### **Conscience**

My conscience (consciousness) is my self-awareness before God. It includes an awareness of what I think, say, do, or decide not to do. It includes my perception of how I match up to God’s will, and this awareness can be clear or cloudy, and true or false. Am I at one with him? Conscience isn’t only to do with feelings either. It is not a matter of whether I’m weighed down with guilt, or buoyed up with the consolation of feeling good. It is an assessment I make, using all that is human within me, my understanding, my mind, my experience and so on, not just emotions.

### **Forming my conscience**

But there is something even more important about conscience. It is about having a vision of each detail of my life, not from my point of view, but from God's. He must be asked to form my views. If my conscience were true, I would see all areas of my life in the same way that God does. God wants my conscience to be formed in union with his clear view. My part in conscience formation requires me to work to develop different aspects:

1. My knowledge of God's will (his self-revelation)
2. My awareness of myself; what I do, think, or refrain from doing (my self-awareness)
3. My awareness of what God would like me to be doing, saying, (discernment).

The first of these gives me the obligation to learn about the faith, the second gives the obligation to learn about myself, and the third gives me the obligation to develop my loving relationship with God, to grow, to talk, to listen, to share and to learn. Not only are these things obligations, they are also invitations from God, to grow in love.

### **Role of conscience in preventing sin**

St Maximus the Confessor, in the seventh century, listed five things which make a soul cut itself off from sin:

1. Fear of others
2. Fear of judgment

3. Hope of future reward
4. Love of God
5. The promptings of conscience.

It is a good itemised list. In our society, for whatever reasons, the awareness of the power of all these criteria seems weakened. There are fewer impulses to fear man and to fear judgment. Many people do not understand the great gift of hope, and often do not understand the deep love of God. As I live in this society, my awareness of sin, too, is more easily clouded, and can even be under attack. Perhaps more is demanded of the prompting of my conscience now than ever before. It is put under pressure, and at the same time I often feel I lack the discernment to be aware of sin and to react against it as I should.

Part of the training of conscience is like any other training; it works best when it is disciplined and regular. No boxer, knowing that he had a major fight coming up, would neglect a day's training, and the same is true in the Christian life. There will always be temptations, perhaps major ones when I least expect them. By daily examination I learn to recognise where the blows are likely to come from, and how to duck and avoid them.

### **An informed conscience**

More and more, individual informed conscience is relied upon as the key to the prevention of sin, perhaps too much so. Perhaps I should mould my way of life so that more of

the other factors of Maximus work together, to stop me sinning. The most effective way to prevent sin in my life is to be constantly aware of all the items in Maximus's list. Wherever human laws, or peer pressures are aligned to God's will, it is a blessing and a help to avoid sin. In the same way a true awareness that I am to be judged, a strong hope in God's kingdom, and an awareness of his overflowing love are all important. They can each help to diminish my sinfulness. I should constantly pray for each of these blessings, and thank God when they are present. Whichever of these are present, however, I can never afford to neglect conscience.

### **Examining my conscience**

There are several problems and difficulties which regularly seem to get in the way when I try to examine my conscience. If these are a problem, it is good to recognise them, and to have some way to deal with them.

### **Need for humility**

Sin can't be seen without humility. I need to ask God for it again and again. St Francis de Sales said that if we are truly humble, our sins will be infinitely offensive to us, since God is offended by them. If I want to grow, it means wanting to grow in humility. It may take me down unexpected paths. Because of my human nature, one effective way of growing in humility is by being

humiliated, by failing, by not measuring up. When I pray for humility, I shouldn't be surprised if this is how it comes.

### **Too lax or too scrupulous?**

St Ignatius of Loyola suggests that if the devil sees I have a delicate conscience, he seeks to make it excessively delicate (scrupulous) in order to upset me. If he sees that I have a lax conscience, he will attempt to make it more lax, so that if I ignore lesser sins, he will try to make me ignore more serious ones too. Ignatius suggests that I ask God to make me aware of the direction in which my conscience is drifting, and always try to move it back towards the right path. So if my conscience is lax, I try to be vigilant to make it more strict, and if it seems scrupulous, I am vigilant so that small sins don't unduly disturb the peace and joy which should, at some level, be the norm of Christian life.

### **Temptation or sin?**

Temptation occurs when either my own will, or the devil, puts into my mind a proposal and makes it seem attractive. The proposal concerns something that is not virtuous, not responding to God's grace, and not according to God's will. I sin only when I consent to that proposal, when I put its short-term attractions before the eternal attractions of being with God. There will, each day, be thousands of temptations to sin trying to distract

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