

Reconciliation

Jesus said to [the apostles] again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ~ John 20:21-23

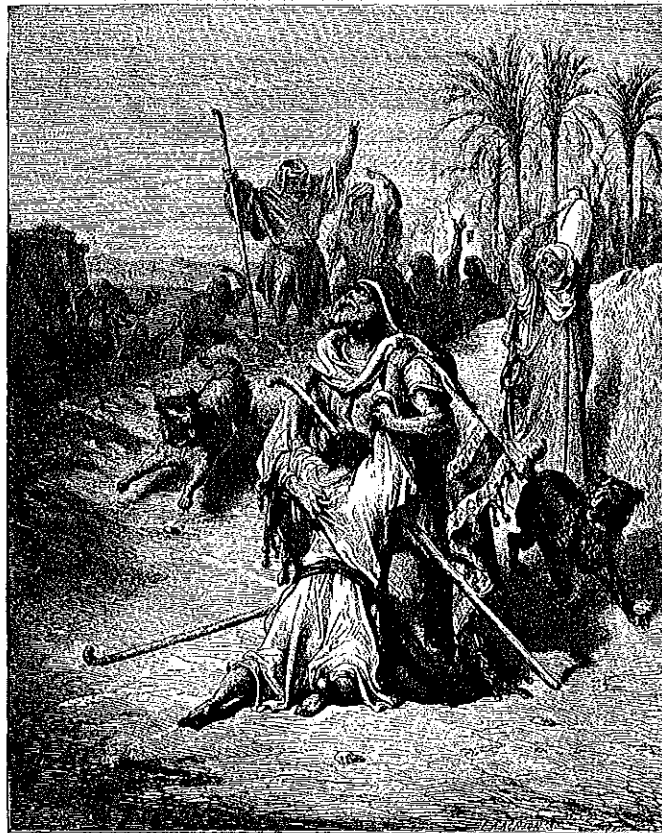
THE sacrament of Reconciliation continues the work of conversion and forgiveness in the life of the Christian — a work that is necessary, because the inclination to sin is not removed in Baptism and our life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin. As long as we live on earth, we must struggle against this inclination, and thus we demonstrate our choice to love God above all else, to be saints.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1:8), "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), even after Baptism. For this reason, Jesus gave to the Twelve the power to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, especially for those who have committed mortal (deadly) sin (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). In this way, we receive spiritual healing and salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The Names of the Sacrament

The preferred name for this sacrament is "Reconciliation," because this name identifies the very

"Through the priest, God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner."



The Prodigal Son, by Gustave Doré, 1833-1883

purpose of the sacrament. The sacrament reconciles one with God and restores their intimate friendship. Nevertheless, each of the names given to this sacrament highlights important aspects. The name "sacrament of Conversion" emphasizes Jesus' command, "Repent, and believe in the gospel," which is given to every person (Mk 1:15; see also Lk 15:18). The name "sacrament of Confession" points to the essential element of "confession" in which the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) both confesses his or her sins and a belief in God's mercy. The name "sacrament of Penance" is perhaps the old-

est name for this sacrament and underscores the importance of doing penance as both a sign of thanksgiving to God for his mercy and an expression of the desire to repair the damage caused by sin. The last two names, "sacrament of Forgiveness" and "sacrament of Reconciliation," are closely united. Through the priest, who acts *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner who converts, confesses, and repents. In this

way, "God ... through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). This ministry is both a gift and a duty for the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) — as he or she is forgiven and reconciled, likewise he or she must forgive and reconcile as Christ's ambassador (see 2 Cor 5:20).

The Rite of Reconciliation

Although this sacrament may be received as often as desired, there are occasions when the sacrament is obligatory (required). The Church obliges all the faithful to confess their sins once a year. Also, the Christian is obliged to go to Confession before receiving Communion if even one mortal (deadly) sin has been committed (see 1 Cor 11:27).

Jesus gave only the apostles the authority to forgive sins, and so bishops, as the successors of the apostles, and priests are the only ones with the authority to forgive sins (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). As part of this great authority, they are required to keep the "sacramental seal," that is, they must keep everyone's confession absolutely secret. Neither a bishop nor a priest may ever make known to anyone, for any reason, in any way, the confession of another person. Even if someone were to confess sins as serious as murder, drug dealing, or rape, they may never reveal even the smallest detail of the confession.

The essential elements of the Rite of Reconciliation are the sinner's repentance, confession, and intention to do their penance, and the priest's absolution. The first essential element, the sinner's repentance, be-

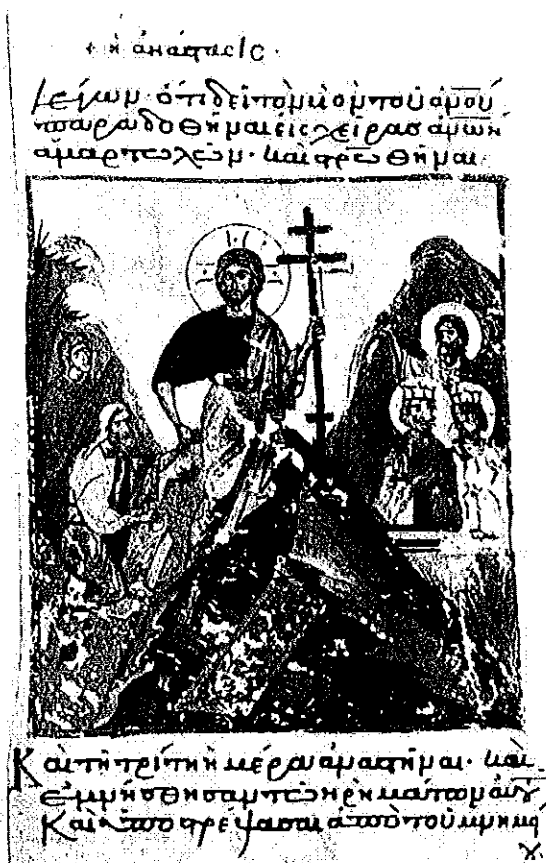
gins before the actual rite. Repentance or contrition is a gift from God in which one experiences sorrow (great pain and detestation) for sin: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Jb 42:6). Genuine repentance includes the choice of the sinner to make

a firm resolution to sin no more. Many times, the weight of our sin, especially habitual sins, make it more difficult to make that firm resolution in the face of countless resolutions made and broken in the past, but Jesus gently invites us to come to him with our sorrows and burdens (see Mt 11:28). The sacrament is for the weak, so we need not worry about how many resolutions have been broken. When questioned on the limit to forgiveness, the Lord says, "[Not] seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). With the Lord there is no limit to his forgiveness. Those who approach the sacrament in humble contrition will receive forgiveness from him: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17). Those, however, who approach it in a spirit of complacency, accepting the fact that they will do wrong again, are not truly sorry and are not really seeking forgiveness. God honors the freedom he has bestowed on the human person.

If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God: "Restore us to thyself, O Lord! Renew our days as of old!" (Lam 5:21).

Before seeking Reconciliation, the penitent must prepare to receive the sacrament by asking God's help in examining his or her conscience: "Behold, we

"If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God."



Jesus' descent to the dead, 12th century book of the Gospels

are before thee in our guilt, for none can stand before thee because of this" (Ez 9:15), and to grant the gift of contrition. Various Scripture passages may be used in examining one's conscience, for example, the Ten Commandments (see Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (see Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and on love (see 1 Cor 12-13), the conduct of Christians (see Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and the Spirit (see Gal 5:19-23).

Following the examination of conscience, true repentance, and a resolution not to commit those sins again, the penitent is prepared to receive the sacrament, choosing to sit face-to-face with the priest or kneeling behind a curtain.

The actual Rite of Reconciliation begins with the priest's greeting and blessing of the penitent, which may be followed by a reading from Scripture. After this, the penitent begins his or her confession by making the Sign of the Cross and saying words similar to these, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned; my last confession was a month ago." Next, the penitent confesses to the priest every mortal (deadly) sin committed since the last confession, and the approximate number of times each one was committed. Intentionally withholding mortal sin from confession is the serious sin of sacrilege, because of his dishonesty and failure to trust in God's mercy. It is beneficial to the penitent

to confess venial sins, a practice that helps in realizing the seriousness of these sins and how they, too, offend God and harm one's relationship with him. The confession is concluded with the penitent's own words or a traditional formula such as, "I am sorry for these and all my sins."

At the completion of the penitent's confession, the priest may ask questions to give suitable counsel.

Then, the priest gives some penance for the sinner to do in order that the person may begin to repair the damage done by his or her sin, to make satisfaction, and to make necessary changes to avoid sin in the future. Next, the priest asks the person to make an Act of Contrition aloud, such as the following: "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In

choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy" (*Rite of Penance* 45).

The priest then grants the sinner absolution by extending his hand over the penitent: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and 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" (*Rite of Penance* 46).

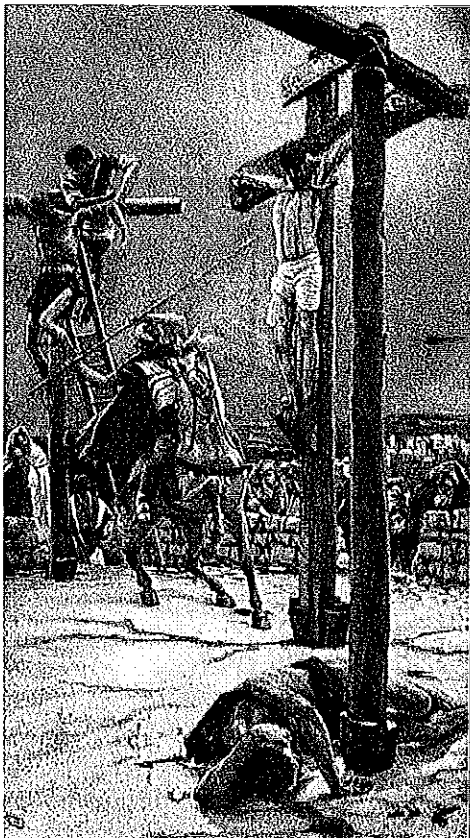
The priest may then offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." The penitent responds, "His mercy endures forever." The rite concludes with a dismissal and a blessing, for example, "The Lord has freed you from your sins, go in peace."

After the priest's absolution, the penitent then does the penance given to him or her by the priest, in order to make reparation for the sin he or she committed.

The Effects of Reconciliation

The sacrament of Reconciliation reunites the sinner with God. Through mortal sin, we destroy our intimate friendship with God. Sin separates us from

"The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation."



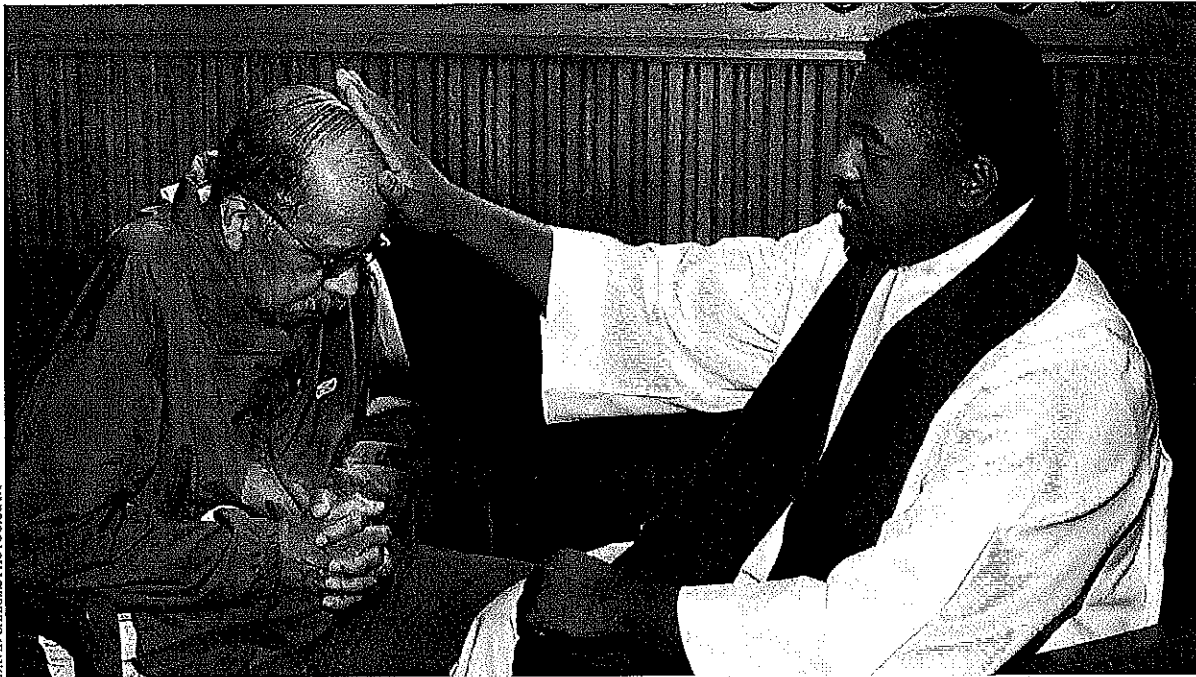
The piercing of the side of Jesus, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

God by weakening his life within in us and causing us to neglect the abundant gifts he first gave to us in Baptism. Sinners become like the prodigal son, who separated himself from his father and squandered his inheritance (see Lk 15:11-32). So too we sinners must humble ourselves and beg our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, as the prophet cries: *"Hear, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned before thee"* (Bar 3:2). The Father, who longs for our return, can then run to us, embrace us, and kiss us (see Lk 15:20). Again and again, when we fall, our Father offers his mercy to the truly repentant: *"Thou art merciful to all, ... and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.... Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living"* (Wis 11:23, 26).

in Christ, but also to every other baptized person. We become both children of God and brothers and sisters to one another in the Trinity-family, the communion of saints (see Gal 4:5-7, 1 Cor 12:12-31). For this reason, Reconciliation is also necessary to reconcile us with our brothers and sisters in the Church.

The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation. Every sin, however, has temporal consequences connected to it. These temporal punishments are only partially remitted in Reconciliation. In order to be free of those consequences, the forgiven sinner must do penance to repair the harm done by his or her sin, that is, "to make satisfaction."

Proper reception of the sacrament provides sac-



DAVID CLARKE PHOTOGRAPHY

Reconciliation is a sacrament of mercy and healing

Reconciliation is the way for the baptized who have committed mortal sin to return home, to re-establish their intimate friendship with God. And our Heavenly Father is full of mercy, ever willing to reconcile the penitent sinner to himself: *"Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"* (Mi 7:18-19).

Furthermore, mortal sin separates the faithful from the family of God, the Church. This is so because in Baptism, each one is united not only to God

ramental grace in abundance. These graces assist the penitent in making satisfaction, in growing in virtue and in fighting temptation. They are invaluable and they are a major reason for the recommendation for frequent reception of this sacrament. Not only are we strengthened in virtue but we learn, ever more, the dreadful reality of our sins so that we might strive ever more to avoid them: *"Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass, and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin, that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord"* (Wis 12:2).

(CCC 976, 979-983, 1420-1484)

Confession to a Human Being

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper; but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. ~ Proverbs 28:13

AT ONE TIME or another, we have probably heard questions, or asked them ourselves, concerning the Catholic practice of confessing their sins to a priest. "Why," some will ask, "do Catholics *have* to go to confession?" while others say, "Who needs confession when I can go straight to God?" Some may even ask, with the scribes listening to Jesus, "*Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" (Mk 2:7). These questions pose essentially the same objection: confessing sins to another human being may be therapeutic, as some psychologists tell us, but it cannot bring about the forgiveness that God alone can grant.

The answer to this objection lies in the proper understanding of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the role of the priest. The sacrament is a *real encounter with Jesus*, who healed and forgave the sins of many to the astonishment of the religious leaders surrounding him (see Mt 9:2-7; Lk 7:48-49). Before ascending into Heaven, he breathed the Holy Spirit on his apostles and said, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (Jn 20:23). This power of Christ given to the apostles expressed his will to institute the sacrament of Reconciliation and to extend the ministry

"When a Catholic walks into a confessional, Christ is there in the priest."

of forgiveness throughout the world and down through the centuries.

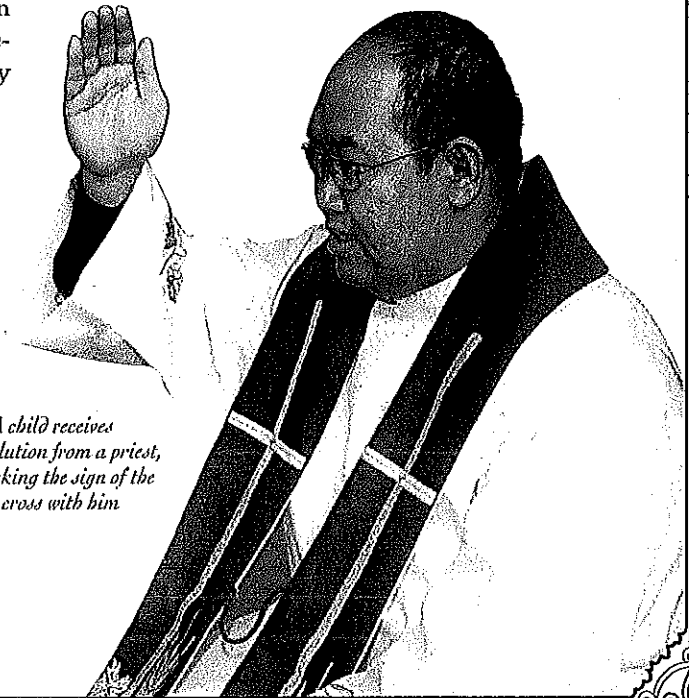
When a Catholic walks into a confessional to confess his or her sins, Christ is there in the priest because the priest acts not in his own name but *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"). Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, Christ has configured the priest to himself in this way specifically so he (the priest) can carry out this sacrament and the other functions given to him by Christ. When the priest absolves the penitent, it is Christ himself who speaks although the voice is that of the priest. Unless this power to forgive sins is real, confession to a priest would be a sham and, worse, an offense against God. No one can forgive sins except God; but likewise no one can decide whether to mediate this power through an earthly priesthood except God. Christ revealed the Father's will in this matter, instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation, and thereby set out God's plan to extend his mercy and forgiveness to the whole world through the ministry of his priests.

(CCC 1455-1456, 1464-1467)



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

A child receives absolution from a priest, making the sign of the cross with him



Continual Conversion and Penance

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church. ~ Colossians 1:24

JESUS CALLS EVERY PERSON to turn away from sin and to turn towards him — that is, to convert. This conversion requires not only change in one's actions but also a conversion of heart, a radical change of being. In the conversion of heart, one changes from being "dead to sin" to "alive ... in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11), from a child of wrath (see Eph 2:3) to a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7).

We cannot change (convert) our own hearts, and so conversion is first a work of God, the one who "will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt 30:6). God "circumcises our hearts" in Baptism, when we are cleansed from sin and made children of God, "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17), and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). God gives to each person the grace for conversion, to choose either to accept or reject. By a response of faith, the person accepts this gift of conversion, and by doing penance, cooperates with this grace.

Penance is any act which assists the Christian to turn away from sin and toward Jesus. Whenever we sincerely do penance, we cooperate with the grace of conversion. We will rejoice in our sufferings for the sake of Christ and experience a willingness to complete in our own bodies "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24; see also Phil 3:8). Our penance thus expresses an interior conversion.

Forms and Examples of Penance

Scripture suggests three forms of penance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (see Tb 12:8, Mt 6:1-18). Fasting cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's individual life, prayer cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with God, and almsgiving cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with others. Tradi-

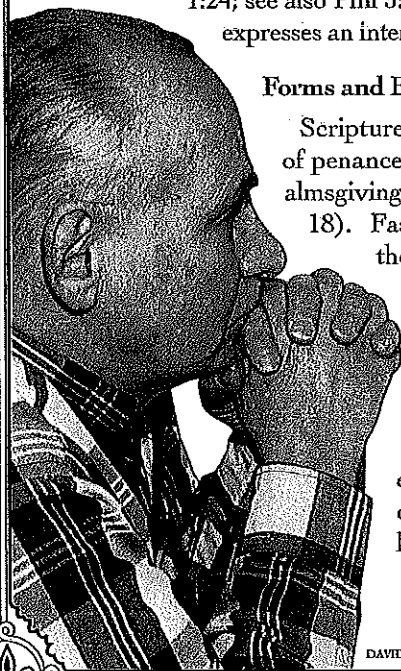
tional fasting means abstaining from food for a given period of time to draw closer to God. Some people fast on bread and water alone as a way of teaching that Christ alone is the soul's only real nourishment. Almsgiving means giving money (or food, clothing, etc.) to the poor. The Church teaches that we must recognize Christ in the poorest of the poor. These are his brothers and sisters; as members of his Body, we must care for them. Furthermore, the practice of penance in one form affects the other two. For example, if we pray with true repentance, we will desire to change our way of life and will change the way we treat others.

Because of ever-present human weakness and sin, continual conversion is necessary. Someone who truly desires to cooperate with God's grace need only utter a prayer like "How can I love you more, Lord Jesus?" and many ideas will surely come to mind. Scripture teaches that crying tears of repentance (see Lk 7:37-48), "love for one another" (1 Pt 4:8), and "bring[ing] back a sinner from the error of his way" (Jas 5:20) each "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8; see also Jas 5:20). Other ways to accomplish conversion are receiving the Eucharist, reading Scripture, praying the Rosary or any other devotion, worshiping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, examining one's conscience, caring for the poor, giving money and time to those in need, seeking and following spiritual direction, visiting the lonely, practicing self-denial, and patient acceptance of suffering and persecution.

Requirements to do Penance

The penance assigned by the priest in the sacrament of Reconciliation is how the penitent is asked to make satisfaction for the sins they have just confessed and of which they have been forgiven. The baptized are also obliged to observe the days of abstinence and fasting during Lent. Additional penances should be done during those liturgical seasons and days designated for penitential practices — the forty days of Lent, Holy Week, Advent, and every Friday — since these are times when the Church intensely works together as the family of God in continuing conversion. (CCC 1427-1439)

"Penance expresses an interior conversion."



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Anointing of the Sick

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ~ James 5:14-15

THROUGHOUT JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY, he healed the sick both physically and spiritually (see Mt 4:24; Mk 1:32; Lk 4:40; Jn 6:2). For example, when Jesus healed the paralyzed man, he said, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven,... Rise, take up your bed, and go home" (Mt 9:2, 6). Jesus commanded the Twelve to "[h]eal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, [and] cast out demons" (Mt 10:8; see also Lk 10:9), and he gave them the authority "to heal every disease and every infirmity" (Mt 10:1). The Twelve did as Jesus commanded and then passed on this authority to their successors, who are the bishops (see Mk 6:12-13; Acts 5:15-16). In this way, the Church received the mission and authority to heal every disease and every infirmity from Jesus himself, which she carries out primarily through the sacraments.

Now sickness, especially when it is prolonged or life-threatening, can give someone the reason to take time to pray and think about the meaning of life. Sickness, one of the consequences of the sin of our first parents, remains a part of our earthly existence even after Baptism. God sometimes even uses it as an instrument of love and mercy. Nevertheless, God's will is that finally all sickness will be healed. Most of the time, the body is able to heal (regain its strength and life) through various remedies, doctors, and preventive medicine. Like the body, the soul also is in need of healing. This healing is primarily accomplished through the sacraments.

In Baptism, we are restored to life by the washing away of sin and union with Christ. In Reconciliation, sins are forgiven and the effects of sin are healed. The Eucharist especially heals us because

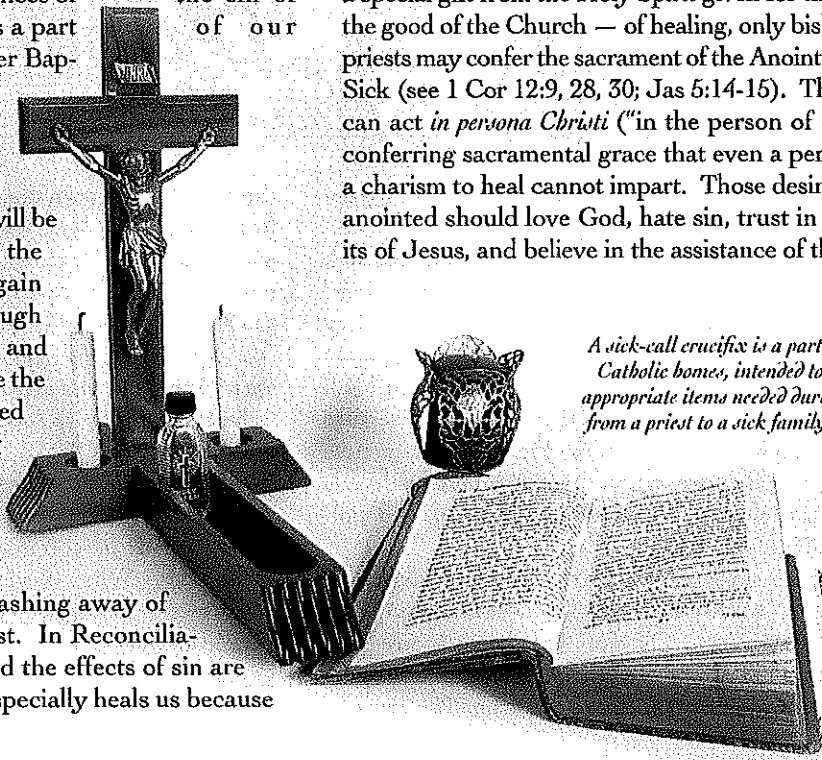
we receive Jesus himself, the Healer. In addition to these sacraments, Jesus also gave the Church the Anointing of the Sick (see Jas 5:14-15).

Who can receive the Anointing of the Sick?

This sacrament may be received by anyone who has a chronic, serious illness, by anyone preparing for a major surgery, or by anyone in danger of death. The sacrament may be repeated every time a person becomes seriously ill or when their condition worsens. Those experiencing the debilitations of old age also may receive it. Finally, Anointing of the Sick is intended for those who are "at the hour of their death," because, along with Reconciliation and Viaticum, Anointing of the Sick is one of the sacraments that prepare us for our Heavenly home.

Rite of Anointing of the Sick

Although some people have received the charism — a special gift from the Holy Spirit given for the sake of the good of the Church — of healing, only bishops and priests may confer the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (see 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30; Jas 5:14-15). They alone can act *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), conferring sacramental grace that even a person with a charism to heal cannot impart. Those desiring to be anointed should love God, hate sin, trust in the merits of Jesus, and believe in the assistance of the saints.



A sick-call crucifix is a part of many Catholic homes, intended to provide appropriate items needed during a visit from a priest to a sick family member

DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

This is called a good disposition. Even though the sacrament may be celebrated at bedsides in private homes, hospitals, or other institutions, efforts should be made to gather at least a small community, especially family members and close friends.

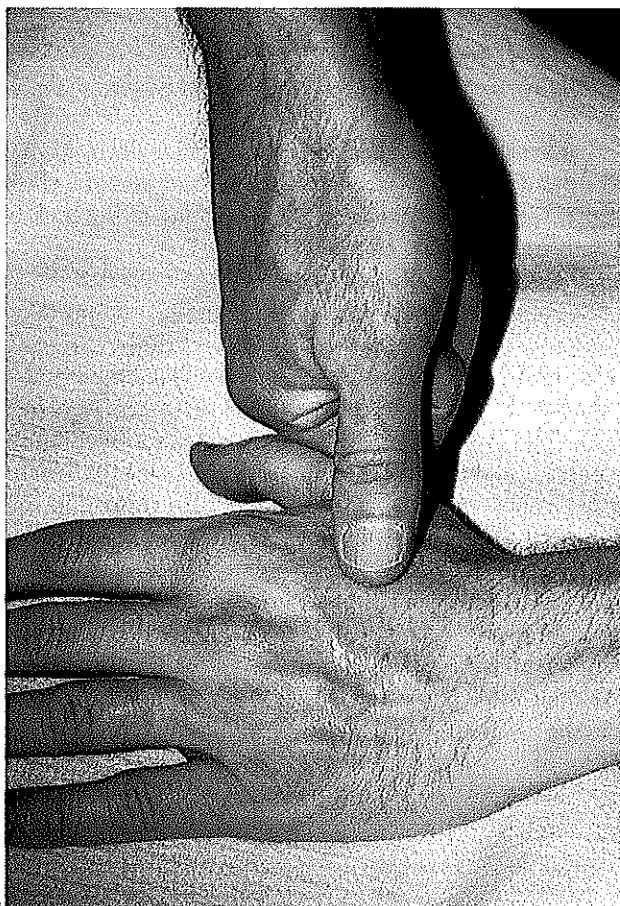
In cases where death is not imminent, the sacrament may be received in a ceremony in church on the occasion of a parish Mass. At times the sacrament of Reconciliation may precede reception of this anointing. However the sacrament is celebrated, the following three elements must be included: the prayer of faith, a laying on of hands, and an anointing with oil.

In the "prayer of faith," the priest asks those present to pray for the sick person. In the form of a litany, they ask God to give the sick person strength; freedom from all harm, sin, and temptation; relief from sufferings; and recovery of life and health.

Next, the priest lays hands on the head of the sick person and silently prays. The "laying on of hands" is the gesture that Jesus used to heal the sick: they brought "the sick with various diseases ... to him; and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them" (Lk 4:40; see also Mk 6:5; Lk 13:13). This same gesture is also used for calling upon the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14-17). Likewise, when the priest lays his hands on the sick person, he is healing, blessing, and calling on the Holy Spirit.

Last, the priest anoints the sick person with the "oil of the sick," blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass during Holy Week. Oil represents healing, strengthening, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and again is an imitation of what Jesus did when he "anointed

"Those who are anointed can be joined more closely to the suffering and death of Christ."



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

with oil many that were sick and healed them" (Mk 6:13). The priest anoints both the forehead and the hands of the sick person, but he may also anoint other parts according to the local custom and/or the area of pain or injury. First, the priest anoints the forehead, saying, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick* 124). Then he anoints the hands, saying, "May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up" (*Pastoral Care of the Sick* 124). Other parts of the body may be anointed, and this is ordinarily done in silence.

What are the effects of the Anointing of the Sick?

The first effect of the Anointing of the Sick is the grace, God's own life, which gives strength, comfort, peace, and courage to the sick person in order to overcome the difficulties and temptations of their illness or old age. Through the sacrament, the sick person is helped to trust Jesus more deeply, to know that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed" (Rom 8:18), and to be able to "take up his cross" and follow Jesus ever more closely (Lk 9:23). Furthermore, "if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:15). Forgiveness is a spiritual healing, a healing of the soul. If God so wills, the sick person may also experience a healing of the body. When this is the case, the healing of the body serves as a sign to all that God has visited his people and that a time will come when there will be no sickness.

Those who are anointed can be joined more close-



JUTTERNIMAGES

“Sickness, especially when it is prolonged or life-threatening, can give someone the reason to take time to pray and think about the meaning of life.”

ly to the suffering and death of Christ. Sometimes the special mission or ministry given to the seriously ill or elderly is to suffer, just as Jesus suffered. Through the Anointing of the Sick, the anointed person is more easily able to “rejoice in [his] sufferings” (Col 1:24; see 1 Pt 4:13) and to willingly complete in their bodies “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col 1:24) both for their own sake and for the sake of his Body, the Church. Because of their union with Christ and his Body, when those who are anointed bear their suffering for the sake of Christ, they are able to help the Body of Christ greatly: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). This ability to participate in the saving work of Jesus to help the Body of Christ grow in every good and holy way is called “redemptive suffering.”

Finally, the sacrament of Anointing, especially

when celebrated at the hour of death with Reconciliation and Viaticum, gives the sick person the grace they need to journey from earth to their Heavenly home.

Prayer after Anointing

Lord Jesus Christ, you chose to share our human nature, to redeem all people, and to heal the sick. Look with compassion upon your servant N, whom we have anointed in your name with this holy oil for the healing of his/her body and spirit. Support him/her with your power, comfort him/her with your protection, and give him/her the strength to fight against evil. Since you have given him/her a share in your own passion, help him/her to find hope in suffering, for you are Lord for ever and ever. Amen

(Pastoral Care of the Sick 125).

(CCC 1420-1421, 1499-1525)

