

PENANCE

Introduction:

It is the sacrament that erases sins committed after baptism.

It is for serious sins, although one may confess for one's advancement and sanctification.

It is unique: the Council of Trent calls it "*the only plank of salvation after the shipwreck*" (mortal sin).

I. THE POWER TO FORGIVE SINS

Our Lord had it and uses it constantly in the Gospel (the paralytic, the adulterous woman, etc.). He had it by His own authority, being God, since God can forgive offences committed against Him.

But Our Lord gave the apostles and their successors (bishops and priests) this formidable power. On the evening of the Resurrection: "*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 20:22-23).

The Church merely clarified the procedure.

Note: To forgive or to retain; the priest therefore has a choice to make; he is a judge who binds and unbind. He forgives when he gives absolution, he withholds when he refuses it. This sacrament is therefore instituted as a tribunal, but a tribunal of mercy.

I. THE SENSITIVE SIGN

a) **The remote matter** of this sacrament is the sins themselves. (A matter to be removed and not imposed as in the others).

b) **The proximate matter** is the penitent's actions by which he "brings" the remote matter, the sins.

Note: The dispositions of the subject are therefore much more necessary than in other sacraments, because they belong to the sensible sign and render the sacrament invalid if they do not exist.

FOR A SIN TO BE FORGIVEN, THREE THINGS ARE NECESSARY:		
❶	Contrition We distinguish between:	Regret for one's sins. There will <u>never</u> be forgiveness for those who do not regret their sins and are therefore prepared to repeat them. A firm resolution (the intention not to fall again) is an essential part of contrition. → Perfect contrition: Remorse for one's sins <i>out of love for God</i> whom they have offended. This disposition alone erases sins, since those who possess it (through magnificent grace) love God above all else and thereby regain sanctifying grace. Nevertheless, one must still go to confession because one can never be absolutely certain of one's contrition, and since the Church is a society, an external step is necessary to return to grace. → Imperfect contrition (or attrition): Remorse for one's sins <i>out of fear of the punishment they deserve or shame at their ugliness</i> . There is necessarily a beginning of love for God (for goodness itself), but it is not sufficient to regain charity and grace. <u>With</u> and through absolution, this provision restores grace. The Council of Trent states: " <i>Attritum fit contritum</i> " through absolution. Those who are in imperfect contrition are brought to perfect contrition.
❷	The confession¹ We are obliged to tell, under penalty of invalidity:	By divine right. It belongs to this sacrament (against the modernists). The matter must be subject to absolution, and it is confession that allows this. It is the confession of sins to priests. → All mortal sins committed since the previous valid confession, that is, those not yet forgiven. → Their number. → Aggravating circumstances, to the extent that they alter the sin itself: examples: stealing from a church (sacrilege), fornicating with a married woman (adultery).
❸	Reparation² or satisfaction:	Anyone who truly regrets his sin is necessarily eager to make amends for it, insofar as it depends on him. This is reparation. It is the priest who imposes this reparation by giving a "penance" to be done. Under penalty of invalidity, one must at least be determined to do it. It is generally mild and should not prevent the penitent from doing it on his own.

¹ Forgotten sins do not invalidate the sacrament (God demands total sincerity, not an absolutely complete list). We confess them, if we remember them at the next confession, without being obliged to provoke it because of this.

² Certain sins carry with them an obligatory penance: returning what has been stolen, abandoning a habitual accomplice. In general, the proximate occasion to sin should be considered as the sin itself.

c) **The form** of this sacrament is absolution. Absolution is the sentence of the priest who forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ: *“I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* The response is: *“Amen.”*

Notes: - The priest holds his palm towards the penitent, a remnant of the ancient rite which included, along with absolution, the laying on of hands.

- All absolution requires the physical presence of the penitent. Pius XII declared all absolution given remotely (by telephone, fax, etc.) to be invalid.

II. THE EFFECTS OF PENANCE

Every sin has three formidable consequences:

- **Fault** (Latin: culpa): it is the responsibility incurred, which brings upon us God’s wrath.
- **Punishment** (Latin: pœna): God’s justice having been violated must be satisfied.
- **Bad habit** (Latin: fomes peccati: source of sin). *“He who has drunk will drink again”*; sin always leaves its mark on us. A tendency to sin again, like a drunkard who wants to convert and has never wanted to drink so much. Penance completely erases the first, but only partially remits the other two (in which it differs from baptism).

Sacraments	Fault	Punishment	Habit
BAPTISM	Ø	Ø	1/2
PENANCE	Ø	1/2	1/2

Note: Penance restores (or confirms) sanctifying grace. Its sacramental grace is the abhorrence of sin and the recourse to God to avoid sin in the future.

III. THE MINISTER

It is the priest and he alone (the bishop, in this regard, being a priest). In addition to the power of order, he needs jurisdiction; jurisdiction is a power of the Church which consists in placing the faithful under the power of order of a priest.

This jurisdiction is personal, granted by superiors: (the Pope → the bishop → the parish priest → the curate) or granted by law in certain cases (danger of death, or request from the faithful, common error, etc.). This second case is called the “substitution” of the Church.

IV. HOW TO CONFESS.

- We engage in a serious examination of conscience.
- We kneel and say: ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned’.
- We recite the Confiteor up to “it is my own most grievous fault “.
- We say how long it has been since we last went to confession.
- We confess our sins and answer any questions the priest may have.
- We finish the Confiteor: “Therefore, I beseech”.
- We await instructions from the priest, who is both judge and doctor of souls.
- The act of contrition is recited while he gives absolution (remembering the penance).
- We thank God for such a great blessing.