

My penance was too easy!

Taking confession from a transaction to deep conversion

DEAR FATHER KERPER: When I returned to the Church, I needed to go to confession. But I felt uneasy and conflicted. Here's what bothered me: Confession seemed too easy and mechanical. Having confessed some very bad sins, I wanted a challenging penance. Instead, the priest said, "For your penance, say three Hail Marys." This seemed like nothing compared to my serious sins. I believed that the Lord had forgiven me, but it felt like a business transaction, not a sacrament. How can three short prayers make up for so many grave sins?

You're right! The celebration of the sacrament of penance can become a quick, impersonal and dreary routine. This, however, is not what the Lord intended. Rather, he established penance as his means of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

Sad to say, many Catholics share your disappointing experience of the confessional. To understand why this happens, we need to study the sacrament's history and changing forms.

As to its origins, the Catholic Church teaches that the Risen Christ established penance on Easter night. St. John recounts how Christ appeared to the apostles, greeted them, and breathed on them, declaring: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you

shall forgive are forgiven them. Whose sins you shall retain, shall be retained." Through these words and actions, Christ empowered the apostles to act as he had. They now shared God's power to forgive sin. To use this power, the "apostle-confessor" needed to "hear confessions." How else could he have known the sins unless the sinner told him?

We learn much about penance by meditating on the post-Easter encounter between the Christ and St. Thomas – "Doubting Thomas." In a sense, we have here the first complete celebration of penance. Its form differs from today's, but we can still discern the sacrament's four core elements: absolution, confession, contrition and penitential acts. Let's consider each.

Absolution

On Easter night and the following Sunday, the Risen Christ greeted the apostles by saying, "Shalom." Through this Hebrew word, the Lord proclaims — and actually establishes — peace, reconciliation and the healing of broken relationships. In effect, the Christ truly "absolved" the apostles through just one word — Shalom!

Confession

St. Thomas had no need to confess his sins explicitly. He had committed them in public, boldly declaring his unbelief, dismissing the testimony of his brothers, and speaking irreverently.

Contrition

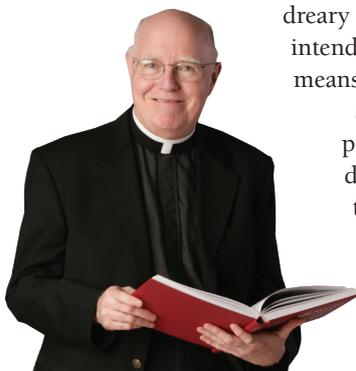
As Christ exposed his wounds to St. Thomas and spoke to him with kindness, the heart of the "Doubter" must have exploded with grief, remorse and shame. His "act of contrition" had no words; it was a deep interior experience.

Penitential Acts

St. Thomas received a penance but not the type we know. His penance consisted of a complete and continuous conversion of heart. He lived out his penance through many years of suffering, poverty and dislocation from family and homeland. His penance culminated in gruesome martyrdom in India.

For St. Thomas, his penance set him on the trajectory toward ultimate sacrifice. Though now rare, many early Christians had experiences like St. Thomas's. So how did three Hail Marys in a safe and warm church replace martyrdom? Here's how.

By the 4th century, martyrdom had become rare as the Church became legal. Many safely professed their faith. These new believers, however, often lacked the fervor of the early Christians. As a result, the early form of penance began to change in the 6th century. And for good reason. It was indeed very severe. Here's how it worked. The old form required



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public confession, exclusion from churches, begging for prayers, and excommunication. It also required habitual prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Upon completing these severe penances, sinners finally received absolution, becoming reconciled to their community. Penance usually happened only once in a lifetime.

Why did early Christians willingly endure such humiliation and hardship?

First, they sensed that all sins, grave and minor, truly offended God, thereby diminishing his glory and obstructing his loving plan for humanity. Sinners, then, felt obligated to repair the damage they had done through their sins.

Second, most early Christians had a more fervent love of God than we do. Love – rather than fear – inflamed their sorrow, causing them to embrace difficult penitential acts rather than micro-penances.

Meanwhile, as lukewarm Christians became more numerous, the Church accommodated them, especially through the influence of Irish monks. The Irish Church, unlike others, had never practiced rigorous penance. When Irish monks flooded Europe, they brought with them the monastic form of penance: private confession, frequent recourse to penance, and handbooks to assist confessors in assigning micro-penances. Eventually, the Irish style became – and remains – the standard form of penance.

While switching from the rigorous to the mild form of penance, the Church overlooked a key element: the need for permanent penance throughout a Christian's life. Though we rarely hear about this now, it survived within old seminary manuals used until 60 years ago.

Father Adolphe Tanquerey, the prolific author of seminary textbooks, discussed it in "The Spiritual Life" (1925).

He wrote: "Our expiation of sin must extend over the full span of our life." He specified three penances: first, joyful acceptance of the crosses sent by Divine Providence; second, patience in the faithful performance of one's daily duties; and third, living within a community in a humble, helpful and cheerful way. To put it another way, those who acquire the virtue of permanent penance bear with others, especially annoying people; fulfill their duties, especially when unnoticed; forgive others, especially the seemingly unforgivable; and mind their own business.

Catholics who practice permanent penance, as Father Tanquerey described it, never notice their holiness. Their penance becomes an instinctive response to the ebb and flow of human existence.

Like St. Thomas, these people move on, remembering the Lord's gracious forgiveness and striving to be good and free from sin.

Why, then, bother with the skimpy micro-penances? Because, when properly understood, they call us back to permanent penance, which is neither "too easy" nor "mechanical" but the hallmark of Christian life. ■

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