



# LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

## WATERS OF BAPTISM TEARS OF PENITENCE: LITURGICAL CATECHESIS FOR THE *RITE OF PENANCE* SECTION 1 OF 3

Every time I do formation on sacramental preparation for the celebration of first reconciliation, I always point out that the foundation for building catechesis begins with the revised *Rite of Penance (RP)*. I am always amazed at the number of catechists who are surprised at the changes in the rite. “Do you mean that we don’t begin with ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned?’ When did that start?” “I never had a reading from Scripture.” “When did they change the Act of Contrition?” “Why didn’t anybody tell us?”

### “Why Didn’t Anybody Tell Us?” A Call for Catechesis

When the English translation of the revised *Rite of Penance* was approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship in 1975, the United States Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) recommended that the new rite not be introduced until adequate catechesis had been done for clergy and the faithful. To allow time for a full and authentic catechesis, they delayed the effective mandatory date for implementation until the First Sunday of Lent 1977. To facilitate this catechesis, the BCL prepared *The Rite of Penance: Study Book Edition*.

The importance attached to preliminary catechesis for the revised rite was paralleled with the publication of other related catechetical materials. Participation aids were released for use by both the confessor and the penitent. Information leaflets for parishes were published and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC) pub-

lished *The New Rite of Penance: Background Catechesis* to assist dioceses and parishes with implementation of the new rite.

Lent 2007 celebrates thirty years since the revised rite was mandated for use in the United States. As we look back, we have an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness and success of this initial catechesis. How far have we come since this preliminary catechesis? Have the revised sacramental rites truly formed and transformed our spirituality of reconciliation in the Church? Have we grown in our appreciation of how the Church ritualizes conversion and reconciliation? Do we see the celebration of the sacrament within the broader mission of the Church to call all people from sin to conversion? Do we understand the penitential life within the broader context of the Father’s loving plan to reconcile the world to himself in Christ? These are but a few of the major points stressed in the awe-inspiring introduction to the *Rite of Penance*.

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Ambrose of Milan. “St. Ambrose of Milan, Letters (1881). pp. 269–324. Letters 41–50.” 12 Sept. 2006. <[tertullian.org/fathers/ambrose\\_letters\\_05\\_letters41\\_50.htm#Letter41](http://tertullian.org/fathers/ambrose_letters_05_letters41_50.htm#Letter41)>.

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### SECTION 2 OF 3

#### Catechesis for the Sacrament: Conversion and Reconciliation

It's time that we begin to deepen and enrich our catechesis for the celebration of the sacrament. The rite emphasizes the importance of inner conversion and points out that those who come to the sacrament should be "wholeheartedly converted to God." This conversion is expressed through four major actions: contrition, confession, penance and absolution (6).

Some find it surprising that contrition is named first. Many still regard contrition as the prayer we pray when we recite the Act of Contrition. Yet the rite stipulates that true contrition is something that happens *before* we come to the sacrament. It is rooted in our profound awareness of God's love for us. Only when we begin to consider, judge, and arrange our lives around this fundamental belief of God's love do we begin to see how our actions may violate this relationship. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) is a perfect example. The son decides to return to the Father only when he remembers how good it was at his father's house. As he returns home, he finds his father already on the road to meet him.

An authentic catechesis for the sacrament needs to lead people to come to know, believe, and experience this God of Love. It cannot be limited simply to teaching the Act of Contrition. In his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* ([usccb.org/pope/CARITAS-06-eng.pdf](http://usccb.org/pope/CARITAS-06-eng.pdf)), Pope Benedict XVI states "We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life" (1). Catechesis needs to stress that what brings us to the sacrament is not merely a knowledge that we should do so every so often, but a profound *metanoia* (change of heart). An Act of Contrition, then, is not merely a prayer we memorize but, rather, a prayer that manifests and expresses our sincere conversion.

Confessing our sins has always been an integral part of the sacrament, even from ancient times. For some, discovering that the revised rite does not specify naming the number of times a sin is committed is enough catechesis for a lifetime. Looking back over the past thirty years, however, the real question we need to ask is how have our children, youth and adults grown in their understanding of sin? How has catechesis moved them beyond a laundry list of sins to being able to understand that confession of sins "comes from true knowledge of self before God" (RP 6b)? We need to seek ways of providing people

with opportunities to deepen their knowledge of self in light of their relationship with a triune God. This is the task of catechesis.

Furthermore, one of the remarkable contributions of the revised *Rite of Penance* is that it not only speaks of personal sin, but also of social sin. Our catechesis on social sin has been weak. Many people are surprised to hear that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CIC)* states "...we have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when we cooperate in them: by participating directly and voluntarily in them; by ordering, advising, or approving them; by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so; by protecting evil doers" (1868).

"For your penance, say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys." How often have we received this penance in confession? The revised rite, however, makes an intimate connection between penance and conversion. Authentic catechesis should lead us toward awareness that penance manifests our intention to change. The rite states that "true conversion is completed by expiation for the sins committed, by amendment of life, and also by rectifying injuries done" (6c). For this reason, the act of penance should be a real remedy for sins committed in order to lead us to a renewal of life.

We also need to examine our catechesis on absolution, which completes the sacrament. Most are aware that through absolution our sins are forgiven. How has our catechesis led people to also understand that, through this visible sign, we are brought into the loving embrace of the reconciling Christ? Authentic catechesis should transform lives by leading all people to grasp that, through this sacrament, we are also reconciled with God and the Church and are formed into a reconciling people. The Rite explicitly states "Thus the people of God become in the world a sign of conversion to God" (4).

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### Liturgy as Catechesis

Catechesis on the sacrament is one avenue for faith formation. The way the parish celebrates the sacrament forms faith as well. It has been said that old habits die hard. The past emphasis on private celebration of the sacrament has resulted in some parishes continuing to use the old form of the rite (“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”) on occasions when there is one penitent present. In contrast, there are communal celebrations when they are inviting the parish community to celebrate the sacrament.

The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states very clearly that “Liturgical celebrations are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church” (26). Even the celebration of the Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents has a communal dimension. Therefore, in the revised *Rite of Penance*, the celebration of the sacrament using this ritual form is placed within a liturgical context. And this liturgical context needs to be respected in order that all may see that “the celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith” (7).

The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution may be used whenever several people have gathered to celebrate the sacrament. In many cases, parishes reserve this form for use several times a year when the entire community is invited to come. Some are now recognizing the fact that this rite may be used even on those weekly (Saturday) occasions when a group is present.

### Invitations to Conversion

Lastly, we need to give serious attention to the non-sacramental penitential services found in Appendix II of the *Rite of Penance*. These are often overlooked in pastoral practice. Their purpose is to promote and give communal expression to the Church’s commitment to ongoing conversion, foster

a spirit of penance, and better dispose the community to celebrate the sacramental forms.

### Conclusion

In a survey taken among bishops before the revision of the *Rite of Penance*, the bishops expressed their desire to restore the vitality of the sacrament. They lamented the fact that the sacrament was often seen as mechanical and privatized with the reduction of its meaning to the confession of sins and the general lack of awareness of the role of conversion and reconciliation. What more do we need to do to emphasize the ecclesial dimensions of the sacrament? How can we broaden our catechesis to introduce all people to the powerful mystery of reconciliation? How can we better foster the interior disposition of conversion? How can we expand our catechesis to include formation on the many ways we live out continual repentance through works of mercy and acts of charity?

In a letter to his sister, Saint Ambrose of Milan (340?–397) connects the conversion experienced in baptism to the conversion experienced by those who fall into sin after baptism and are reconciled with God through the sacrament of penance. He states: “But the Church has that water, and the Church has tears, the waters of Baptism and the tears of penitence” (*Letter XLI* 12).

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