

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- Sin isn't hidden from God.
- Sin has consequences beyond yourself.
- Scripture can support penance.
- The sacrament follows several steps.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

Elizabeth and Allison had been very good friends since the sixth grade. In their first year of high school, they continued to share everything and were always there for each other.

One evening, they went to the movies with a group of friends. They told their parents where they were going, what they were going to see, and who would be there. But once they got to the theater the rest of the group decided to see another movie—one Elizabeth and Allison knew their parents wouldn't have approved. They were uncomfortable but convinced themselves it wasn't really a problem. After all, they weren't exactly lying to their parents.

When the girls talked the next morning, they debated what story they would tell their parents. They were irritable with one another. Something special about their friendship seemed to be missing. They both felt disconnected from their parents and each other. There were feelings of separation and loneliness inside each of them.

How could one small bad decision suddenly seem so big?

This example shows how one small decision can ripple out into something bigger. Elizabeth and Allison's choice to lie to their parents turned into something that pushed them away from each other, damaging both their relationships with each other and their parents. This small choice with bigger consequences might remind you of the creation story in Genesis. At first, Adam and Eve lived in harmony and peace with themselves, each other, creation, and God. Then the serpent—Satan—entered the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve sinned. In Genesis 3, we see the pain and alienation they experienced after they disobeyed God.

"Sin is an offense against God....Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it."

CCC 1850

Alienation From Self

Alienation means "a feeling of separation or distance." Genesis 3:7 tells us that after Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced feelings of shame and guilt for the first time. They lost respect for themselves. They were suddenly aware of their nakedness, their imperfections, and their selfish side. Feelings of openness and confidence were replaced with feelings of shame.

Alienation From God

Genesis 3:8 goes on to tell us that "the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God." The trust and closeness that had been part of their relationship with God was replaced with fear and distance.

Often when we sin, we think God must be angry with us. We distance ourselves from God, thinking we are unworthy of his love. It's important for us to remember that we don't (we can't) earn God's love. God's love is an unconditional love. God loves us only for who we are, not for what we do or don't do.

Alienation From Community

"The woman whom you put here with me— she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it."

Genesis 3:12

Adam tried to blame Eve for leading him into disobedience, just as Eve blamed the serpent. As a result, Adam and Eve felt a great deal of tension and anger toward each other. We've all experienced selfishness in ourselves and others. Selfish people aren't people we want to be around because it's hard to trust people who only look out for themselves. This is why sin gradually affects everyone close to us. It brings problems and divisions.

- How did Allison and Elizabeth's dishonest behavior affect their relationship with each other? With their parents? With God?
- Is there a way for them to repair the damage? What would you do?



What Is Sin?

God and the Church tell us that certain behaviors are sinful because they disrupt or destroy our growth as human and as spiritual beings. When we intentionally do what we know is wrong, we lose respect for ourselves. We lose faith in ourselves. Our self-esteem suffers because we see ourselves as less valuable or less worthy. Our sins also do real and lasting damage to our relationships with others and with God. The earliest Christians understood sin as "missing the mark." In other words, we miss our potential by certain actions, words, or thoughts.

God values us no matter what we do. The Bible tells us time and again how Jesus cares deeply for his lost sheep. Yet when we act in ways that hurt others or degrade ourselves, it's more difficult for us to love ourselves, love others, and love God. It is also more difficult for us to accept love from God and others.

When we can't accept the love that God and others offer us, we shut ourselves off from our spiritual nourishment. In this state, we are in great need of **reconciliation**, being brought back into harmony with God, others, and ourselves.

"Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and the effect of the sacrament. For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation 'is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation.'"

CCC 1468

How Did Jesus Feel About Sin?

Reconciliation involves a change of heart, the forgiveness of sin, and the rebuilding of relationships. It was important in the ministry of Jesus, who constantly called people to repentance and heartfelt, sincere sorrow for wrongdoing. He tells us, "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

The ministry of Jesus made it clear that God's healing and mercy are communicated in very visible, human ways. Take a moment to read the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–24). Keep in mind that at the time of Jesus, it was undignified and almost unheard of for a grown man to run; yet the father sprints across his fields to embrace his son.



The early Christian community believed Jesus had given the apostles and their successors the power to forgive sins. "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained'" (John 20:22–23).

In the early Church, reconciliation took place through participation in the Eucharist (see Matthew 26:28), the anointing of the sick (see James 5:14–15), works of charity and fasting (see Luke 7:47 and Matthew 6:16), and correcting each other out of love (see Matthew 18:15–20 and 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15).

- What does this story tell you about God's love for you?
- When did the Church begin the ministry of reconciliation?



How Does the Church Practice Reconciliation Today?

While sin may be secret, it is never private. Nothing we do is hidden from God, nor is anything we do totally isolated from others.

- How do our decisions impact those who care about us?



The purpose of the sacrament of reconciliation is to restore our relationship with God and our neighbor through God's forgiveness of our sins. It should help us celebrate our efforts to be a people of mercy and forgiveness. As Christians, we are called to be a people of reconciliation even if those actions are sometimes countercultural. As Christians, we are called to be God's instruments in removing the barriers that keep individuals and groups from communicating with and caring for each other.

When we participate in this sacrament, we must accept God's forgiveness and be willing to forgive others. When we have real sorrow for our sins, we want to do **penance** for them, to make up for whatever harm we have done. Doing penance helps bring about reconciliation.

The Church emphasizes that this sacrament, like all sacraments, belongs to the faith community. When we are healed as individuals, the entire body of Christ is strengthened.

"Sin damages or even breaks fraternal communion. The sacrament of Penance repairs or restores it. In this sense, it does not simply heal the one restored to ecclesial communion, but has also a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members."

CCC 1469

How Do We Make the Most of This Sacrament?

As with all sacraments, there is nothing magical or automatic about what occurs. Poor or insincere preparation will result in an unsatisfying experience.

Good preparation begins with a good **examination of conscience**, a careful, honest look at ourselves and our behavior. It isn't to count up our good and bad deeds but to reflect on how well we have loved God, others, and ourselves. When examining our consciences, we shouldn't dwell on what we have done wrong but focus on what we failed to do or refused to do right. Not all sin is doing something wrong; sometimes a sin can be choosing not to act at all.

When we feel bad about our behavior, sharing those feelings with someone we trust can be a healing experience. When we name and face our sinful actions and habits, they lose much of their power over us. Facing sin and taking responsibility for actions that have hurt us or others are the first steps in healing. Listening to someone who will help guide us in the right direction is another important step.

Why Should I Tell My Sins to a Priest?

Just as a priest is Christ's representative during baptism, he is also Christ's representative in the sacrament of reconciliation. This ministry has been passed down from Christ to the apostles, and from the apostles to bishops and priests, for the sake of the Church community. The Catholic Church asks its members to confess their sins to a priest because it believes that sin, however secret, in some way hurts the growth and life of the community, as well as that of the sinner.

Because sin wounds the community, true reconciliation must include the community and not just God. In the confessional, the priest represents the whole Christ—the head who is Jesus and his body, the Church.

The penance that the priest gives us following confession should help us reflect seriously on what we can do to avoid sinful behavior and walk more closely with Jesus. Ideally, acts of penance given by the priest should be related to the sins committed. For example, if you have difficulty controlling your temper, your penance might be to practice patience. Once penance is given, the priest prays the prayer of reconciliation, also called **absolution**. At this time, our sins are forgiven by God through the priest.

How the Sacrament Is Celebrated

1. Enter the **confessional**, a small room or space where the priest is seated.
2. Say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Then tell the priest that it's your first confession (or how long it's been since your last confession).
3. Name any sins you are sorry for and want to confess. Don't worry about listing each one in detail. Just explain how you disobeyed God and why you feel sad or apart from his love.
4. The priest will give you some advice. Listen carefully. He will then give you a penance. Penance is not punishment; it is a simple act you can do to make up for any hurt or damage your sins caused. Your penance will also help you grow closer to God and others.
5. Say an Act of Contrition prayer. Your leader can give you a copy.
6. The priest will pray over you and, with a sign of the cross, you are absolved (pardoned), by God through the priest.
7. Thank the priest as you leave, and remember to do your penance.

As a group, work on the chart below:

Sin	How does it hurt you?	How does it hurt others?	What might a penance be?
Gossiping			
Cheating			
Using God's name in vain			
Stealing			
Lying			
Bullying			

Recall a time when you were dishonest or hurt someone because you acted selfishly.



How did you feel when you realized what you'd done? Did you do anything to say you were sorry? If not, is there anything you could do now?

Journey of Faith for Teens: Catechumenate, C6 (826290)

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSSR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

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