

# Reconciliation

*“During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them.”*

*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1443*

## Introduction

Reconciliation means to reunite or to come together. Today we use this term along with the terms penance or confession to name the Sacrament of Healing in which our sins are forgiven and sinners are reunited to God, the Church, their brothers and sisters, and themselves. In this sacrament through the words and actions of an ordained priest, God restores broken and wounded relationships. The fact that we use several words to describe this sacrament points to the varied practices and emphases of the sacrament over the years.

## Jesus and Reconciliation

In the beginning God “looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” (*Genesis 1:31*) But sin entered the world as a result of the choice of the first humans to disobey God and to follow their own will rather than God’s. That choice, which we call original sin, wounded humanity’s relationship with God and all of creation. It ruptured the original harmony that existed

between God and all of creation. Original sin describes the personal sin of Adam and Eve as well as the fallen state of humans, which we are all born into. However, the Father did not abandon his creation. He reconciled a sinful world to himself in Jesus Christ, his Son. Jesus began his work on earth by preaching repentance “repent and believe in the good news” (*Mark 1:15*). He went beyond preaching to people about repentance and actually welcomed sinners, he ate and drank with them (*Luke 5:33–34*) and he reconciled them with the Father (*Luke 5:17–26*). His death on the cross was the ultimate act of reconciliation.

## The Church and Reconciliation

The Church in apostolic times was confident that Baptism began a new life in which grave sin would have no place. However, it is obvious in the Scriptures of the New Testament that forgiveness and confession of sin were an important element

in the life of the community (*James 5:16*). Eventually some of the early Christians did sin gravely, for example, by giving up their faith under persecution, rather than endure martyrdom. Such public betrayal of Christ was deemed unforgivable by many, as were other grave violations of the moral law, such as murder or adultery. Yet many such sinners repented, and wished to return to the relationship with God and Church that they once had cherished. Clearly, some way had to be found for the community to be faithful to the gospel of mercy, yet to maintain its moral standards. It was out of this need that the Sacrament of Reconciliation developed, as a visible and ecclesial ritual to reconcile or reunite and come back to community and the sharing in the Eucharist. Throughout the history of the Church, the sacrament has taken different forms both public and private and individual and communal. However, the basic theology of the sacrament remained intact, even when different aspects of the sacrament were highlighted in different periods of Church history.\*

### Revision of the Rite of Penance

The Second Vatican Council declared that “the rite and formularies for the Sacrament of Penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and the effect of the sacrament.”

The revised Rite of Penance highlights the original purpose of the sacrament, which is reconciliation with God and the Church. It emphasizes the importance of conversion and the need to rearrange our lives according to the holiness and love of God. By providing three different rites: (1) a rite for Reconciliation that is individual (one penitent and one priest), as well as a new rite offering communal rites for the celebration of the sacrament (2) for individuals with the priest and (3)

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for communal celebrations with a priest within an assembly, the revision affirms that the celebration of the sacrament is primarily a liturgical action and corporate act of worship which builds up the Body of Christ. It is not a “private function (s), but ...celebration(s) belonging to the Church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 26) and “Whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal

celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, it is to be stressed that this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 27). Interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation are expectations of this sacrament. As a Church we stress the relation between Divine forgiveness and forgiving our brothers and sisters.

\*For further information on the history of Reconciliation, see pp. 40–41.

### For Reflection

- What is the relationship of using the term reconciliation for this sacrament and the revision of the Rite to include communal celebrations?