

“I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgression to the Lord,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Ps 32:5)

✠ Lecture XV: The Sacrament of Repentance & Confession ✠

In the biological order, when a baby is born, it is generally healthy, but as time goes on, it becomes subject to diseases that oppress and torment life. In the spiritual order, too, though the soul is made clean and free from all sin by baptism, it nevertheless contracts stains and spiritual diseases during life. The Sacrament of Repentance and Confession is for spiritual wounds received after baptism. Original Sin was washed from the infant in baptism and from the adult, personal sins as well. Fortunately, the Lord is Practical, “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:14). He also knows that the white robe given to us in baptism is not always kept immaculate. Therefore, in His mercy, He instituted this Sacrament for spiritual guidance, healing, and reconciliation with Him.

✠ Institution of the Sacrament:

Lord Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament when He said to His disciples:

- “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Mt 18:18)
- “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (Jn 20:22-23)

→ The above words imply “hearing confessions” because how would the disciples know which sins to forgive and which sins not to forgive if they did not hear them? Therefore it was written:

- “Many who had believed came **confessing and telling** their deeds.” (Acts 19:18)

✠ Roots of the Sacrament in the Old Testament:

All through the Old Testament, there was a preparation for this Sacrament, in as much as God strove to induce men to acknowledge their sins before Him:

- To elicit a confession, God asked Adam, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?” (Gen 3:11) Likewise, He asked Cain after killing his brother Abel, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen 4:9)
- God ordered the children of Israel to confess their sins:
 - a) “And it shall be, when he is guilty in any of these matters, that he shall **confess** that he has sinned in that thing ... So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin.” (Lev 5:5-6)
 - b) “When a man or woman commits any sin ... that person is guilty, then he shall **confess** the sin that he has done. He shall make restitution for his trespass in full value.” (Num 5:6-7)
 - c) “If they **confess** their iniquity ... then I will remember My covenant...” (Lev 26:40,42)
- King Solomon said, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever **confesses** and forsakes them will have mercy” (Prov 28:13)
- Joshua said to Achan, “Give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession **to Him**, and **tell me** now what you have done; **do not hide it from me**” (Josh 7:19)
- King David confessed to Nathan the Prophet saying, “I have sinned against the Lord.” (2 Sam 12:13)

→ It is no surprise then to read that Jerusalem, all Judea, and the entire region around the Jordan went out to St. John the Baptist and “were baptized by him in the Jordan, **confessing their sins**” (Mt 3:6). All these were only types and figures of the Sacrament that was to come because forgiveness became possible only through the merits of our Lord’s passion.

✚ Stages (Types) of Confession:

1. **Confession to one's self:** This is the first thing one needs to do as Lord Jesus Christ mentioned in His parable of the Prodigal Son that "he came to himself" (**Lk 15:17**)
2. **Confession to God:** Once a person acknowledges the sin, he/she should lift up his/her heart and confess this sin to God as King David said, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (**Ps 51:4**)
3. **Confession to the priest:** This is the practice of the Sacrament of Repentance & Confession where the confessor receives spiritual guidance and forgiveness as St. James said, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders (priests) of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord ... Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (**Jam 5:14,16**). When St. James says "pray for one another," he is referring to the priests praying for the sick and when he says, "confess to one another," he means the sick confessing to the priests.
4. **Confession to the person against whom the trespass was committed:** With the guidance and advice of the father of confession, the confessor may be required to confess to the person against whom he/she sinned with the willingness to restore genuine Christian fellowship with that person.

✚ The Unacceptable Confession:

Confession without repentance and without hope is not acceptable to God and will not benefit the person anything. For example, Pharaoh confessed his sin to Moses the Prophet several times and Judas confessed saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (**Mt 27:4**), but both of them perished.

✚ The Acceptable Confession:

1. The acceptable Confession must be accompanied by Repentance which is characterized by:
 - a) Contrite heart and regret, "Now, therefore, says the Lord, turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (**Joel 2:12**). – "For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (**2 Cor 7:10**)
 - b) Steadfast intention to never go back to sin, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (**Jn 5:14**) – "We are not of those who draw back to perdition" (**Heb 10:39**) – "It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: A dog returns to his own vomit, and, a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire" (**2 Pet 2:21-22**)
 - c) Steadfast faith in Lord Jesus Christ and His grace, "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me." (**Mic 7:8**)
2. The acceptable Confession must be preceded by self-examination.
3. The confessor must:
 - a) Not excuse his/her self, "Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?" (**Ecc 5:6**)
 - b) Not hide anything from the father of confession, "Pour out your heart like water before the face of the Lord" (**Lament 2:19**)
 - c) Be truthful in his/her confession, remember Sapphira who lied to St. Peter in her confession (**Acts 5**)
 - d) Not have any bias toward his/her self, "He who loves his life will lose it" (**Jn 12:25**)

* This lecture is adapted from, *'The Church Sacraments'* By Archdeacon Habib Guirgess.