

## CHAPTER 7

### PENANCE

#### A. INTRODUCTION

- 7.1.1 Christ entrusted to the Apostles the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, the Gospel of conversion, and the ministry of reconciliation. On the evening of the day of his Resurrection, as the apostolic mission was about to begin, Jesus granted to the Apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the authority to reconcile repentant sinners with God and the Church: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>797</sup>
- 7.1.2 As the successors to the Apostles, bishops have, since ancient times, carried on this ministry of reconciliation for the particular churches entrusted to them. They are the moderators of the penitential discipline for their flocks, and priests are their collaborators in this ministry. By virtue of the sacrament of holy orders, bishops and priests have been given the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."<sup>798</sup>
- 7.1.3 In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a legitimate minister, are sorry for them, and intend to reform themselves, obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism.<sup>799</sup>
- 7.1.4 The whole power of the sacrament of penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship. Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this 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. Indeed the sacrament of reconciliation with God brings about a true spiritual resurrection, restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.<sup>800</sup>

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<sup>797</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (2003), cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) can. 3: DS 1703; cf. Mark 16: 15; Matthew 28: 18-20; John 20: 22-23.

<sup>798</sup> CCC 1461-1462; cf. John 20: 23; 2 Corinthians 5: 18; LG 26 §3; CIC cann. 844, 967-969, 972; CCEO can. 722 §§3-4.

<sup>799</sup> CIC can. 959.

<sup>800</sup> CCC 1468, cf. Luke 15: 32; Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) 3: DS 1674; *Catechism of the Council of Trent (Roman Catechism)* II V 18.

- 7.1.5 This sacrament is called the sacrament of *penance*, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance."<sup>801</sup>
- 7.1.6 It is also called the sacrament of *conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.<sup>802</sup>
- 7.1.7 It is also called the sacrament of *confession* since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament, though this term does not convey all the richness of meaning which this sacrament has in the life of the Church. Yet in a profound sense it is also a "confession" of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man.<sup>803</sup>
- 7.1.8 It is also called the sacrament of *forgiveness*, since in giving absolution the priest represents God who grants the penitent "pardon and peace."<sup>804</sup>
- 7.1.9 It is also called the sacrament of *reconciliation*, for while forgiveness of sins brings reconciliation with God, it also reconciles sinners with the Church, which they have wounded by sinning.<sup>805</sup>
- 7.1.10 While the general title of the liturgical book is the Rite of Penance, to designate not only the sacramental rite but penitential celebrations which are not concluded with sacramental absolution, the term reconciliation has been used in the individual chapters. Though the term "penance" puts the emphasis on what is done by man, the term "reconciliation," already used in the primitive Church and later by the Council of Trent, emphasizes penance

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<sup>801</sup> CCC 1423, 1459; cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento poenitentiae* (1551) can. 12: DS 1712.

<sup>802</sup> CCC 1423. Cf. Mark 1: 15; Luke 15: 18.

<sup>803</sup> BCLN February 1974; CCC 1424, 1482; cf. SC 26-27. This is the sense in which Saint Augustine's "Confessions" are to be understood.

<sup>804</sup> CCC 1424, cf. RP 46, formula of absolution.

<sup>805</sup> CIC can. 959. BCLN February 1974. CCC 1458: "Whoever confesses his sins ... is already working with God. God indicts your sins; if you also indict them, you are joined with God. Man and sinner are, so to speak, two realities: when you hear 'man' – this is what God has made; when you hear 'sinner' – this is what man himself has made. Destroy what you have made, so that God may save what he has made... When you begin to abhor what you have made, it is then that your good works are beginning, since you are accusing yourself of your evil works. The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. You do the truth and come to the light." This text is from Saint Augustine, *In evangelium Ioannis* 12, 13.

- as an encounter between a son or daughter and God the Father.<sup>806</sup> It imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: “Be reconciled to God.” He who lives by God’s merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord’s call: “Go; first be reconciled to your brother.”<sup>807</sup>
- 7.1.11 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. Re-established or strengthened in the communion of saints, the sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ, whether still on pilgrimage or already in the heavenly homeland.<sup>808</sup>
- 7.1.12 Since the priest represents the Church in the act of reconciliation, however, even in private confession, the social and communal element is still expressed.<sup>809</sup>
- 7.1.13 Regardless of the manner of its celebration, the sacrament of penance is always, by its very nature, a liturgical action, and therefore an ecclesial and public action.<sup>810</sup>

## B. SIN – MORTAL AND VENIAL

### *Mortal Sin*

- 7.2.1 The distinction between mortal (or grave) and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience.<sup>811</sup>

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<sup>806</sup> BCLN February 1974.

<sup>807</sup> CCC 1424, quoting 2 Corinthians 5: 20; Matthew 5: 24.

<sup>808</sup> CCC 1469, cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 26; LG 48-50. “It must be recalled that ... this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.” CCC 1469, quoting REP 31 V.

<sup>809</sup> Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, “God’s Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance,” A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Archdiocese of Washington, 8 January 2007.

<sup>810</sup> BCLN February 1974; CCC 1424, 1482; cf. SC 26-27.

<sup>811</sup> CCC 1854. Cf. 1 John 5: 16-17.

- 7.2.2 Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him.<sup>812</sup>
- 7.2.3 Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us—that is, charity—necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation.<sup>813</sup>
- 7.2.4 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is *grave matter* and which is also committed with *full knowledge* and *deliberate consent*."<sup>814</sup>
- a. *Grave matter* is specified by the Ten Commandments, which correspond to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother." The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.<sup>815</sup>
  - b. Mortal sin requires *full knowledge* of the sinful character of the act, and of its opposition to God's law.<sup>816</sup>
  - c. Mortal sin also implies a *deliberate consent* sufficient to be a personal choice.<sup>817</sup>
- 7.2.5 Mortal sin results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's

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<sup>812</sup> CCC 1855. See also CCC 1856, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 88, art. 2.: "When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object ... whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbor, such as homicide or adultery...."

<sup>813</sup> CCC 1856.

<sup>814</sup> CCC 1857 (emphasis added); REP 17.

<sup>815</sup> CCC 1858; Mark 10: 19.

<sup>816</sup> CCC 1859.

<sup>817</sup> CCC 1859. See also CCC 1860: "Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin. Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest." Cf. Mark 3: 5-6; Luke 16: 19-31.

forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.<sup>818</sup>

### *Venial Sin*

- 7.3.1 Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it. One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without complete consent.<sup>819</sup>
- 7.3.2 Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However, venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly reparable. "Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness."<sup>820</sup>
- 7.3.3 "While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call 'light': if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession."<sup>821</sup>

## C. THE MINISTER

- 7.4.1 A priest (*sacerdos*) alone is the minister of the sacrament of penance.<sup>822</sup>
- 7.4.2 The valid absolution of sins requires that the minister have, in addition to the power of orders, the faculty of exercising it for the faithful to whom he

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<sup>818</sup> CCC 1861.

<sup>819</sup> CCC 1855, 1862. See also CCC 1856, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 88, art. 2.: "But when the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial."

<sup>820</sup> CCC 1863; REP 17, 9.

<sup>821</sup> CCC 1863. The text is from Saint Augustine, *In epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos* 1, 6.

<sup>822</sup> CIC can. 965.

- imparts absolution. A priest can be given this faculty either by the law itself (i.e., the Code of Canon Law or liturgical laws) or by a grant made by the competent authority (i.e., archdiocesan faculties for priests, or a special delegation).<sup>823</sup>
- 7.4.3 By the law itself, in virtue of office, a local ordinary, a pastor, and those who take the place of a pastor possess the faculty of hearing confessions, each within his jurisdiction.<sup>824</sup> In other words, those who hold these offices do not require faculties from any authority other than the law itself.
- 7.4.4 Even if a priest lacks the faculty to hear confessions, he absolves validly and licitly any penitents whatsoever in danger of death from any censures and sins, even if an approved priest is present.<sup>825</sup>
- 7.4.5 In urgent necessity, any confessor is obliged to hear the confessions of the Christian faithful, and in danger of death, any priest—even if he is lacking in faculties, suspended, excommunicated, or dispensed from the obligations of the clerical state (i.e., “laicized”)—is so obliged.<sup>826</sup>
- 7.4.6 In hearing confessions the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honor and the salvation of souls.<sup>827</sup>

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<sup>823</sup> CIC can. 966 §§1-2; cf. can. 969 §1: “The local ordinary alone is competent to confer upon any presbyters whatsoever the faculty to hear the confessions of any of the faithful. Presbyters who are members of religious institutes, however, are not to use the faculty without at least the presumed permission of their superior.”

<sup>824</sup> CIC can. 968 §1.

<sup>825</sup> CIC can. 976.

<sup>826</sup> CIC can. 986 §2.

<sup>827</sup> CIC can. 978 §1. CCC 1481: “The Byzantine Liturgy recognizes several formulas of absolution, in the form of invocation, which admirably express the mystery of forgiveness: ‘May the same God, who through the Prophet Nathan forgave David when he confessed his sins, who forgave Peter when he wept bitterly, the prostitute when she washed his feet with her tears, the Pharisee, and the prodigal son, through me, a sinner, forgive you both in this life and in the next and enable you to appear before his awe-inspiring tribunal without condemnation, he who is blessed for ever and ever. Amen.’” Tertullian, *Repentance* (203) 10: 1: “[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness.” Aphrahat the Persian Sage, *Treatises* (340) 7: 3: “You [priests], then, who are disciples of our illustrious physician [Christ], you ought not deny a curative to those in need of healing. And if anyone uncovers his wound before you, give him the remedy of repentance. And he that is ashamed to make known his weakness, encourage him so that he will not hide it from you. And when he has revealed it to you, do not make it public, lest because of it the innocent might be reckoned as guilty by our enemies and by those who hate us.”

- 7.4.7 When he celebrates the sacrament of penance, the confessor fulfills the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The confessor is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.<sup>828</sup>
- 7.4.8 The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. He should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ. He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy.<sup>829</sup>
- 7.4.9 In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority.<sup>830</sup>
- 7.4.10 In posing questions, the confessor is to proceed with prudence and discretion, attentive to the condition and age of the penitent, and is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice.<sup>831</sup>
- 7.4.11 If the confessor has no doubt about the disposition of the penitent, and the penitent seeks absolution, absolution is to be neither refused nor deferred.<sup>832</sup>
- 7.4.12 The confessor is to impose salutary and suitable penances in accord with the penitent's personal situation, and must seek his spiritual good. They must correspond as far as possible with the gravity, nature, and number of the sins committed. They can consist of prayers, offerings, works of mercy, service to neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the crosses we must bear. Such penances help to configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him."<sup>833</sup>

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<sup>828</sup> CCC 1465.

<sup>829</sup> CCC 1466; cf. PO 13.

<sup>830</sup> CIC can. 978 §2.

<sup>831</sup> CIC can. 979.

<sup>832</sup> CIC can. 980.

<sup>833</sup> CCC 1460, quoting Romans 8: 17, 3: 25; 1 John 2: 1-2; cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento poenitentiae* (1551) 8: DS 1690.

- 7.4.13 The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.<sup>834</sup>
- 7.4.14 The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession are also obliged to observe secrecy.<sup>835</sup>
- 7.4.15 The absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is invalid except in danger of death.<sup>836</sup>

#### D. THE PENITENT

- 7.5.1 To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.<sup>837</sup>
- 7.5.2 The sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. For it is now, in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by mortal (grave) sin. In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and “does not come into judgment.”<sup>838</sup>
- 7.5.3 There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final

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<sup>834</sup> CIC can. 983 §1, cf. can. 1388 §1: “A confessor who directly violates the sacramental seal incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; one who does so only indirectly is to be punished according to the gravity of the delict.” A confessor can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents’ lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the “sacramental seal,” because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains “sealed” by the sacrament. CCC 1467; cf. CIC can. 1388 §1; CCEO can. 1456.

<sup>835</sup> CIC can. 983 §2, cf. can. 1388 §2: “An interpreter and the others mentioned in can. 983 §2 who violate the secret are to be punished with a just penalty, not excluding excommunication.”

<sup>836</sup> CIC can. 977. Cf. can. 1378 §1: “A priest who acts against the prescript of can. 977 incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See.”

<sup>837</sup> CIC can. 987.

<sup>838</sup> CCC 1470; cf. John 5: 24; 1 Corinthians 5: 11; Galatians 5: 19-21; Revelation 22: 15. In the new English translation of the order of the Mass, the priest’s concluding prayer for the Act of Penitence is, “May almighty God have mercy on us and lead us, with our sins forgiven, to eternal life.” ICEL, English translation of The Order of Mass I, 2006, 2008.

- impenitence and eternal loss. “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”<sup>839</sup>
- 7.5.4 Every member of the Christian faithful is free to confess sins to a legitimately approved confessor of his or her choice, even to one of another rite.<sup>840</sup>
- 7.5.5 No one is prohibited from confessing through an interpreter as long as abuses and scandals are avoided and the sacramental seal is maintained inviolate.<sup>841</sup>
- 7.5.6 A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all mortal (grave) sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.<sup>842</sup>
- 7.5.7 It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.<sup>843</sup>

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<sup>839</sup> CCC 1864; Mark 3: 29; cf. Matthew 12: 32; Luke 12: 10; cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986) 46.

<sup>840</sup> CIC can. 991.

<sup>841</sup> CIC can. 990, cf. can. 983 §2. See also ADW, Liturgical Norms and Policies, 2010, 7.4.13-15.

<sup>842</sup> CIC can. 988 §1. CCC 1454: “The reception of this sacrament ought to be prepared for by an examination of conscience made in the light of the Word of God. The passages best suited to this can be found in the moral catechesis of the Gospels and the apostolic Letters, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic teachings.” Cf. Matthew 5-7; Romans 12-15; 1 Corinthians 12-13; Galatians 5; Ephesians 4-6; etc. A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful who, especially in preparation for sacramental confession, (1) examine their conscience with the purpose of amendment; (2) devoutly recite an act of contrition, according to any legitimate formula. MI, grants, 9 1°-2°.

<sup>843</sup> CCC 1458: “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.” Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) 8: DS 1680; CIC can. 988 §2. Cf. Luke 6: 36. See also CCC 1452, quoting Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 87, art. 3, *sed contra*: “I answer that, As stated above, no infusion of fresh grace is required for the forgiveness of a venial sin, but it is enough to have an act proceeding from grace, in detestation of that venial sin, either explicit or at least implicit, as when one is moved fervently to God. Hence, for three reasons, certain things cause the remission of venial sins: first, because they imply the infusion of grace, since the infusion of grace removes venial sins, as stated above; and so, by the Eucharist, extreme unction, and by all the sacraments of the New Law without exception, wherein grace is conferred, venial sins are remitted. Secondly, because they imply a movement of detestation for sin, and in this way the general confession [i.e., the recital of the Confiteor or of an act of contrition], the beating of one’s breast, and the Lord’s Prayer conduce to the remission of venial sins, for we ask in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses.” Thirdly, because they include a movement of reverence for God and Divine things; and in this way a bishop’s blessing, the sprinkling of holy water, any sacramental anointing, a prayer said in a dedicated church, and anything else of the kind, conduce to the remission of venial sins.”

- 7.5.8 After having reached the age of reason, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her mortal (grave) sins at least once a year.<sup>844</sup>
- 7.5.9 The penitent is obliged to fulfill the penances imposed upon him or her personally.<sup>845</sup>

## E. NOTES ON RITES, TIMES, AND PLACES

### *Matter and Form*

- 7.6.1 The *matter* of the sacrament of penance is the penitent's contrition, confession and satisfaction, which are by God's institution required in the penitent for the integrity of the sacrament and for the full and complete remission of sins. The *form* of the sacrament is the formula of absolution, "I absolve you," (*Ego te absolvo*) spoken by the minister. Other prayers added according to the custom of the Church do not belong to the essence or the form, and are not necessary for the valid administration of the sacrament.<sup>846</sup>
- 7.6.2 Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of mortal (grave) sin is reconciled with God and the Church. Only physical or moral impossibility excuses from confession of this type; in such a case reconciliation can be obtained by other means.<sup>847</sup>
- 7.6.3 Since the integral confession of serious sins is by divine decree a constitutive part of the sacrament, it is in no way subject to the discretion of pastors

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<sup>844</sup> CIC can. 989. See also ADW, *Liturgical Norms and Policies*, 2010, 2.1.6.b, 2.44.2, 3.7.1-3, 4.8.2-3, 5.3.1, 5.6.2, 5.7.1-2, 7.7.15, 8.3.1-3, 9.17.3.a.

<sup>845</sup> CIC can. 981.

<sup>846</sup> Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) 3: DS 1673; *Catechism of the Council of Trent (Roman Catechism)* II, 4. In this sacrament the matter is not material or tangible, as it is in baptism, confirmation, or the anointing of the sick. The three words, "I absolve you," are required for the validity of the sacrament.

<sup>847</sup> CIC can. 960; cf. can. 916. CCC 1452: "Perfect contrition" (contrition of charity) arises from a love by which God is loved above all else. "Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible." Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) 4: DS 1677. CCC 1453: "The contrition called 'imperfect' (or 'attrition') is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of penance." Cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) 4, and can. 5: DS 1678, 1705.

(dispensation, interpretation, local customs, etc.). In the relevant disciplinary norms, the competent ecclesiastical authority merely indicates the criteria for distinguishing a real impossibility of confessing one's sins from other situations in which the impossibility is only apparent or can be surmounted.<sup>848</sup>

### *Times and Places*

7.7.1 Priests must encourage the faithful to come to the sacrament of penance and must make themselves available to celebrate this sacrament each time Christians reasonably ask for it. All priests with faculties to administer the sacrament of penance are always to show themselves wholeheartedly disposed to administer it whenever the faithful make a reasonable request. An unwillingness to welcome the wounded sheep, and even to go out to them in order to bring them back into the fold, would be a sad sign of a lack of pastoral sensibility in those who, by priestly ordination, must reflect the image of the Good Shepherd. And by their own frequent reception of the sacrament of penance, priests become living sermons on the importance of the sacrament to all the faithful.<sup>849</sup>

7.7.2 Local ordinaries, parish priests, and rectors of churches and shrines should periodically verify that the greatest possible provision is in fact being made for the faithful to confess their sins. It is particularly recommended that in places of worship confessors be visibly present at the advertised times, that these times be adapted to the real circumstances of penitents, and that confessions be especially available before Masses, and even during Mass if there are priests available who are not participating in the Mass itself, in order to meet the needs of the faithful.<sup>850</sup>

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<sup>848</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (2003).

<sup>849</sup> CCC 1464; cf. CIC can. 486; CCEO can. 735; PO 13; Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (2003) 1 b; cf. PO 13; RP *praenotanda* 10 b; Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, "God's Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance," A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Archdiocese of Washington, 8 January 2007. *Didache* 4:14, 14:1: "Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.... On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure." Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4: "[A final method of forgiveness is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner ... does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine...." Cyprian of Carthage, *De lapsis* 15: 28: "Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who ... confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience.... I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord."

<sup>850</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (2003) 2; cf. CDF, Response, in *Notitiae* 37 (2001) 259-260.

- 7.7.3 The proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or oratory.<sup>851</sup>
- 7.7.4 Confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional without a just cause.<sup>852</sup>
- 7.7.5 Provision must be made in each church or oratory for a sufficient number of places for sacramental confessions which are clearly visible, truly accessible, and which provide a fixed grille between the penitent and the confessor. Provision should also be made for penitents who wish to confess face-to-face.<sup>853</sup>
- 7.7.6 The minister of the sacrament can decide, for a just reason and apart from a case of necessity, even if the penitent may request otherwise, that a sacramental confession be heard in a confessional equipped with a fixed grille.<sup>854</sup>
- 7.7.7 By its design, furnishings, and location within the church building, the place for reconciliation can assist penitents on the path to contrition and sorrow for sin and to proclaim their reconciliation with God and the community of faith.<sup>855</sup>
- 7.7.8 A sound-proof place with a chair for the priest and a kneeler and chair for the penitent should be provided. Since the rite includes the reading of Scripture, the space should also include a Bible. Appropriate artwork, a crucifix symbolic of Christ's victory over sin and death, icons, or images reflective of baptism and the Eucharist, or Scriptural images of God's reconciling love, can help to enhance the atmosphere of prayer. Warm, inviting lighting welcomes penitents who seek God's help and some form of amplification as well as Braille signs can aid those with hearing or visual disabilities. Additional rooms or spaces will be needed as confessional areas for communal celebrations of penance.<sup>856</sup>
- 7.7.9 A communal penance service, often celebrated in Advent and Lent in preparation for the great feasts of Christmas and Easter, consists essentially in a communal celebration of the Word in preparation for the sacrament, which is then administered in the form of private, individual confession. Communal celebration shows more clearly both the social impact and the common experience of sin and the ecclesial nature of penance and reconciliation. It

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<sup>851</sup> CIC can. 964 §1.

<sup>852</sup> CIC can. 964 §3.

<sup>853</sup> NCCB, Complementary Norm for CIC can. 964 §2; BLS 103.

<sup>854</sup> Pontifical Commission for the Authentic Interpretation of Legislative Texts, Response, 16 June 1998.

<sup>855</sup> BLS 104.

<sup>856</sup> BLS 105.

- should not be confused with general absolution, which is reserved for wholly exceptional circumstances.<sup>857</sup>
- 7.7.10 Absolution cannot be imparted in a general manner to many penitents at once without previous individual confession unless:
- a. danger of death is imminent and there is insufficient time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;<sup>858</sup>  
or
  - b. there is grave necessity, that is, when in view of the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors available to hear the confessions of individuals properly within a suitable period of time in such a way that the penitents are forced to be deprived for a long while of sacramental grace or Holy Communion through no fault of their own. Sufficient necessity is not considered to exist when confessors cannot be present due only to the large number of penitents such as can occur on some great feast or pilgrimage.<sup>859</sup>
- 7.7.11 It belongs to the Archbishop to judge whether the conditions described above are present. He can determine the cases of such necessity, attentive to the criteria agreed upon with the other members of the Conference of Bishops.<sup>860</sup>
- 7.7.12 Unless pastors are notified to the contrary, it may be assumed that the conditions described above, which are necessary for general absolution, do not exist in the Archdiocese of Washington.
- 7.7.13 For a member of the Christian faithful validly to receive sacramental absolution on the occasion of the reception of general absolution, it is required not only that the person is properly disposed but also at the same time intends to confess within a suitable period of time each mortal (grave) sin which at the present time cannot be so confessed.<sup>861</sup>

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<sup>857</sup> Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, "God's Mercy and the Sacrament of Penance," A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Archdiocese of Washington, 8 January 2007. The social and ecclesial aspect of the sacrament is shown even in the way it can be abused; writing of the unlawful extension of the practice of "general absolution," Pope John Paul II said, "On the basis of an arbitrary extension of the conditions required for grave necessity, in practice there is a lessening of fidelity to the divine configuration of the Sacrament, and specifically regarding the need for individual confession, with consequent serious harm to the spiritual life of the faithful *and to the holiness of the Church.*" Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei* (2003) (emphasis added).

<sup>858</sup> CIC can. 961 §1 1°.

<sup>859</sup> CIC can. 961 §1 2°.

<sup>860</sup> CIC can. 961 §2.

<sup>861</sup> CIC can. 962 §1.

- 7.7.14 Insofar as it can be done even on the occasion of the reception of general absolution, an exhortation that each person takes care to make an act of contrition is to precede general absolution even in the case of danger of death, if there is time.<sup>862</sup>
- 7.7.15 Without prejudice to the obligation of all the faithful who have reached the age of reason to confess their mortal (grave) sins at least once a year, a person whose mortal (grave) sins are remitted by general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as possible, given the opportunity, before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes.<sup>863</sup>

## F. INDULGENCES

### *Doctrine of Indulgences*

- 7.8.1 To understand the Church's doctrine and practice of indulgences, it is necessary to understand that sins can have two consequences: punishment that is eternal, and punishment that is temporal. These punishments are not inflicted by God, but follow from the very nature of sin.<sup>864</sup>
- a. First, mortal (or grave) sin deprives us of communion with God and makes us incapable of eternal life. This is the *eternal* punishment of sin that is remitted through the sacrament of penance, in which the sin is forgiven and communion with God is restored.
  - b. Second, every sin, whether mortal or venial, also entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, a kind of damage to the spiritual soul, which must be purified apart from the remission of eternal punishment. This purification occurs either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees the forgiven sinner from the *temporal* punishment of sin.<sup>865</sup>

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<sup>862</sup> CIC can. 962 §2.

<sup>863</sup> CIC can. 963; cf. can. 989.

<sup>864</sup> There can be other effects of sin, in the form of ecclesiastical penalties. CCC 1463: "Certain particularly grave sins incur excommunication, the most severe ecclesiastical penalty, which impedes the reception of the sacraments and the exercise of certain ecclesiastical acts, and for which absolution consequently cannot be granted, according to canon law, except by the Pope, the bishop of the place or priests authorized by them. In danger of death any priest, even if deprived of faculties for hearing confessions, can absolve from every sin and excommunication." Cf. CIC cann. 976, 1331, 1354-1357; CCEO cann. 725, 1420, 1431, 1434.

<sup>865</sup> CCC 1471-1472; cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento paenitentiae* (1551) cann. 12, 13: DS 1712, 1713; Session XXV, *Decretum de purgatorio* (1563): DS 1820.

## *Communion of Saints*

- 7.9.1 In the communion of saints, “a perennial link of charity exists between the faithful who have already reached their heavenly home, those who are expiating their sins in purgatory and those who are still pilgrims on earth. Between them there is, too, an abundant exchange of all good things.”<sup>866</sup>
- 7.9.2 Thus Christians in this world—the pilgrim Church or Church militant—are not alone as they seek holiness. “The life of each of God’s children is joined in Christ and through Christ in a wonderful way to the life of all the other Christian brethren in the supernatural unity of the Mystical Body of Christ, as in a single mystical person.”<sup>867</sup>

## *Spiritual Treasury of the Church*

- 7.10.1 The spiritual goods of the communion of saints are the “treasury of the Church” –not material goods, but the infinite and inexhaustible value which Christ’s merits have before God.<sup>868</sup> This treasury includes as well the truly immense, unfathomable, and pristinely valuable prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as well as the prayers and good works of the saints who followed in the footsteps of Christ and by his grace made their lives holy. Thus they attain their own salvation and at the same time cooperate in saving their brothers and sisters in the unity of the Mystical Body.<sup>869</sup>

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<sup>866</sup> IDA 5.

<sup>867</sup> IDA 5. Saint Cyprian, *Epistula* 56 [60] 5: “Let us remember one another in concord and unanimity. Let us on both sides [of death] always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters no cease in the presence of the Father’s mercy.” Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 23 9: “Then [during the Eucharistic Prayer] we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition....”

<sup>868</sup> CCC 1476; IDA 5.

<sup>869</sup> CCC 1477; IDA 5. See Colossians 1: 24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church...” Cf. Romans 8: 16-17: “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” See also 2 Corinthians 1: 5: “For as Christ’s sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow.” Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, Secretary to CDWDS, “Toward an Ars Celebrandi in Liturgy,” November 2008: “Indeed, liturgy is a treasure given to the Church, which is to be jealously guarded. This is so also because it is the *actio Christi* realized in and through the Church, which is His own Body, in its three-fold extension—the Church Victorious, the Church Purifying and the Church Militant.”

- 7.10.2 The Church intervenes in favor of Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints, to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for sins. These indulgences are obtained by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted to the Church by Christ Jesus.<sup>870</sup>
- 7.10.3 Through indulgences, the Church does not simply come to the aid of these Christians, but also spurs them to works of devotion, penance, and charity.<sup>871</sup>
- 7.10.4 In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others, well beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others. Thus recourse to the communion of saints lets the contrite sinner be more promptly and efficaciously purified of the punishments for sin.<sup>872</sup>

#### *Indulgences for the Living and Suffrages for the Dead*

- 7.11.1 To undergo purification while they are in this life, Christians patiently bear sufferings and trials of all kinds, accepting temporal punishment as grace. They also strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the “old man” and to put on the “new man,” and, when the day comes, to face death with Christian serenity.<sup>873</sup>
- 7.11.2 Since the faithful departed now being purified are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishments due for their sins may be remitted.<sup>874</sup>

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<sup>870</sup> CCC 1478; IDA 5.

<sup>871</sup> CCC 1478; IDA 5.

<sup>872</sup> CCC 1475.

<sup>873</sup> CCC 1473; Ephesians 4: 22, 24. See also the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, cf. CCC 2447; CCC app. B. CCC 1450: “Penance requires ... the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction.” Cf. *Catechism of the Council of Trent (Roman Catechism)* II V 21; cf. Council of Trent, Session XIV, *Doctrina de sacramento poenitentiae* (1551) 3: DS 1673.

<sup>874</sup> CCC 1479. The word *suffrages* (from the Latin *suffragium*, meaning “support”) refers to the prayers of intercession said for the deceased. John T. Ford, *Glossary of Theological Terms* (Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, 2006). Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 159 1: “There is an ecclesiastical discipline, as the faithful know, when the names of the martyrs are read aloud in that place at the altar of God, where prayers are not offered for them. Prayer, however, is offered for the dead who are remembered. For it is wrong to pray for a martyr, to whose prayers we ought ourselves be commended.” Idem, *De civitate Dei* XX, 9, 2: “Neither are the souls of the pious dead separated from the Church which even now is the kingdom of Christ. Otherwise there would be no remembrance of them at the altar of God in the communication of the Body of Christ.” Cf. LG 50: “[T]he pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with

7.11.3 Any member of the faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences to apply them to the dead by way of suffrage.<sup>875</sup>

#### *Norms on Indulgences*

7.12.1 An indulgence is the remission before God of temporal punishment for sins whose guilt is already forgiven, which a properly disposed member of the Christian faithful gains under certain and defined conditions by the assistance of the Church which as minister of redemption dispenses and applies authoritatively the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.<sup>876</sup>

7.12.2 An indulgence is partial or plenary insofar as it partially or totally frees from the temporal punishment due to sins.<sup>877</sup>

7.12.3 Any member of the faithful can gain partial or plenary indulgences for oneself or apply them to the dead by way of suffrage.<sup>878</sup>

7.12.4 To be capable of gaining indulgences, a person must be baptized, not excommunicated, and in the state of grace at least at the end of the prescribed works.<sup>879</sup>

7.12.5 To gain indulgences, however, a capable subject must have at least the general intention of acquiring them and must fulfill the enjoined works in the established time and the proper method, according to the tenor of the grant.<sup>880</sup>

7.12.6 To gain a plenary indulgence, in addition to excluding all attachment to sin, even venial sin, it is necessary to perform the indulgenced work and fulfill the following three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Sovereign Pontiff.<sup>881</sup>

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great piety the memory of the dead, and 'because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins,' [2 Maccabees 12: 46] also offers suffrages for them."

<sup>875</sup> CIC can. 994; cf. MI, norms, 3.

<sup>876</sup> CIC can. 992; cf. MI, norms, 1.

<sup>877</sup> CIC can. 993; cf. MI, norms, 2.

<sup>878</sup> CIC can. 994; cf. MI, norms, 3.

<sup>879</sup> CIC can. 996 §1; cf. MI, norms, 17 §1.

<sup>880</sup> CIC can. 996 §2; cf. MI, norms, 17 §2.

<sup>881</sup> MI, norms, 20 §1.

- 7.12.7 Unless otherwise stated, an indulgence cannot be gained by a work already imposed by law or precept.<sup>882</sup> One, however, who performs a work which has been imposed as a sacramental penance and which happens to be one enriched with an indulgence, can at the same time both satisfy the penance and gain the indulgence.<sup>883</sup>
- 7.12.8 As regards the granting and use of indulgences, the other prescripts contained in the special laws of the Church must also be observed.<sup>884</sup>

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<sup>882</sup> MI, norms, 21 §1.

<sup>883</sup> MI, norms, 21 §2.

<sup>884</sup> CIC can. 997. See MI, *passim*.