

## **21 Centuries of Catholic Doctrine: PENANCE**

*As taught in the Church's historical writings, from the time of the Apostles down to today*

**ca. 70 A.D.—*Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles***

4 In church, make confession of your faults, and do not come to your prayers with a bad conscience.

This is the Way of Life. ...

14 Assemble on the Lord's Day [i.e., Sunday], and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one.

**ca. 96—Pope Saint Clement, fourth Bishop of Rome, disciple of the Apostles Peter and Paul, *Letter to the Corinthians***

51:1 For whatever our transgressions, and whatever we have done through the attacks of the adversary, let us pray that we may be forgiven. ... For it is good for a man to confess his failings rather than to harden his heart.

—*ca. 100, Death of Saint John, the last of the Apostles*

**ca. 107—Saint Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, disciple of the Apostle John, *Letter to the Philadelphians***

3:2-4:1 Those, indeed, who belong to God and to Jesus Christ—they are with the bishop. And those who repent and come to the unity of the Church—they too shall be of God, and will be living according to Jesus Christ. ...

—*Mortal sin*—

8:1 [W]here there is division and anger, God does not dwell. The Lord, however, forgives all who repent, if their repentance leads to the unity of God and to the council of the bishop.

**ca. 150—Hermas, brother of Pope Saint Pius, *The Shepherd***

—*Mortal sin*—

Vis. 3:8:7 "And yet to these [sinners] also," [the shepherd] continued, "repentance is possible. You see," he said, "that some of them have repented, and there is still remaining in them,"

he continued, "a hope of repentance. And as many of them," he added, "as have repented, shall have their dwelling in the tower [i.e., the Church]. And those of them who have been slower in repenting shall dwell within the walls. And as many as do not repent at all, but abide in their deeds, shall utterly perish. ... But if any one relapse into strife, he will be cast out of the tower, and will lose his life. Life is the possession of all who keep the commandments of the Lord ... ."

**ca. 156—Justin the Martyr, *Fragment***

—*Mortal sin*—

[E]ternal fire has been prepared for him as he apostatized from God of his own free-will, and likewise for all who unrepentant continue in the apostasy, he now blasphemes, by means of such men, the Lord who brings judgment [upon him] as being already condemned, and imputes the guilt of his apostasy to his Maker, not to his own voluntary disposition (Irenaeus, *Heresies* 5:26:1).

**ca. 185—Saint Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, disciple of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, *Against Heresies***

—*Mortal sin*—

1:10:1 For the Church ... has received from the Apostles and from their disciples the faith in ... [Christ Jesus our Lord's] coming from heaven in the glory of the Father to re-establish all things (Eph. 1:10); ... in order that to Jesus Christ our Lord and God and Savior and King, in accord with the approval of the invisible Father, every knee shall bend of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue shall confess Him (Phil. 2:10-11), and that He may make just judgment of them all; and that He may send apostates, and the impious, unjust, lawless and blasphemous among men, into everlasting fire; and that He may grant life, immortality, and surround with eternal glory the just and the holy, and those

who have kept His commands and who have persevered in His love, either from their beginning or from their repentance. ...

1:13:7 [The gnostic disciples of Marcus] have deluded many women in our own district of the Rhone, by saying and doing such things. Their consciences branded as with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2), some of these women make a public confession; but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing from themselves the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses.

### 203—Tertullian, *Repentance*

9:3-6 Thus, confession is a discipline for man's prostration and humiliation, enjoining a manner, even as regards dress and food, conducive to mercy. It commands one to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover the body with mourning, to cast the spirit down in sorrow, to exchange the sins which have been committed for a demeanor of sorrow; to take no other food or drink except what is plain, not, of course, for the sake of the stomach, but for the sake of the soul; and most of all, to feed prayers on fasting; to groan, to weep and wail day and night to the Lord your God; to bow before the presbyters, to kneel before God's refuge places, and to beseech all the brethren for the embassy of their own supplication.

Confession is all of this, so that it may excite repentance; so that it may honor God by fear and danger; so that it may, by its own pronouncement against the sinner, stand in place of God's indignation; and so that it may by temporal mortification, I will not say frustrate, but rather expunge the eternal punishments. Therefore, while it abases a man, it raises him; while it covers him with squalor, the more does it cleanse him; while it condemns, it absolves. In so far as you do not spare yourself, the more, believe me, will God spare you! ...

—*Mortal sin*—

10:1 Most men, however, either flee from this work [of confession], 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.

### ca. 215—Saint Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop of Pontus, disciple of Irenaeus, *The Apostolic Tradition*

3:4 [The bishop consecrating a new bishop shall pray thus, saying:] "Father 'who knowest the hearts [of all]' (Acts 1:24) grant upon this Thy servant whom thou hast chosen for the episcopate to feed Thy holy flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2) and serve as Thine high priest, that he may minister night and day, ...

3:5-6 "And that by the high priestly Spirit he may have authority 'to forgive sins' according to Thy command (John 20:23) ... ."

### ca. 240—Origen, disciple of Clement of Alexandria, *Homilies on the Psalms*

2:6 *For I confess my wickedness* (Ps. 37 [38]:19). We have often spoken a denunciation of our wickedness: that is, we have often made a confession of sin. Look, then, to what Divine Scripture teaches us: that sin is not to lie hidden within us. Perhaps there are some who have an undigested mass of food shut up within them, or an abundance either of a humor or phlegm remaining in the stomach where it weighs upon them heavily and to their discomfort. If they vomit it out, they experience relief. It is the same with those who have sinned. If, indeed, they conceal their sin and keep it within them, they will suffer an internal urging, and may come close to being suffocated by the phlegm or humor of sin. If, however, a man in such a circumstance becomes his own accuser, as soon as he accuses himself and confesses, he vomits out his fault and puts in order what was the whole cause of his illness.

Only be careful and circumspect in regard to whom you would confess your sins. Test first the physician to whom you would expose the cause of your illness. See whether he knows to seem weak with one who is weak, to weep with one who weeps, and whether he is acquainted with the art of consoling and comforting. Finally, when he has shown himself to be a physician both learned and merciful, do whatever he might tell you, and follow whatever counsel he may give. If after much deliberation he has understood the nature of your illness and judges that to be cured it must be exposed in the assembly of the whole church, follow the advice of that expert physician, and thereby others may perhaps be able to be edified, while you yourself are the more easily healed.

**ca. 245—Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus***

2:4 [A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner washes his pillow in tears, when his tears are day and night his nourishment, and when he does not shrink from declaring his sins to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who says, "I said, 'To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity', and you forgave the disloyalty of my heart" (Ps. 31 [32]:5). In this way there is fulfilled that too, which the Apostle James says: "If, then, there is anyone sick, let him call the presbyters of the Church, and let them impose hands upon him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14-15).

Hear the rule which the Law enjoins: "If someone of the aforementioned shall have sinned," it says, "he shall confess the sin which he sinned" (cf. Lev. 5:5). There is something wonderful hidden in this, whereby confession of sins is commanded. For they are to be confessed, whatever kind they may be; and all that we do must be brought forward in public. Whatever we have done in secret, whatever sin we have committed by word alone or even in our secret thoughts—all must be made public, all must be brought forward. It will indeed be brought forward by him who is both the accuser of sin and the instigator thereof. For that one who now incites us to sin is the very one who will accuse us when we have sinned.

If, therefore, we anticipate him in life, and become the accusers of ourselves, we will escape the malice of the devil, our enemy and accuser. ... 3:4 You see, then, that confession of sin merits the remission of sin. For if we precede the devil in making our accusation, he will not be able to accuse us. If we become our own accusers, it profits us unto salvation. But if we wait until the devil has accused us, that accusation will deliver us to punishment.

**250—Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, *Letter to His Clergy***

—*Venial sin*—

16 [9]:2 Although for lesser [i.e., venial] sins it is required that sinners do penance for a just time, after which, according to the rule of discipline, they may come to confession and, through the imposition of hands by the bishop and clergy, may receive the right of communication [i.e., Holy Communion], now, in an unpropitious time and while the

persecution continues, when peace is not yet restored to the Church itself, they are being admitted to communication, and the offering [i.e., Eucharist] is made in their name; and, not yet having made a confession of sin, not yet having had hands imposed upon them by the bishop and clergy, the Eucharist is given to them, in spite of what is written: "Whoever shall eat the Bread or drink the Cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27). ...

18 [12]:1 Inasmuch as I find that there is not yet an opportunity of coming to you, and the Summer has already begun—a season disturbed by continual and grave illnesses—I think that we must deal with our brethren. Therefore, ... if they should be seized by some misfortune or dangerous illness at a time when my return is not expected, then, before whatever presbyter is present, or if a presbyter is not found and death begins to be imminent, even before a deacon they are permitted to make their confession of sin, so that a hand may be imposed upon them in penance and they may come to the Lord with ... peace ... (Jurgens, vol. 1, pp. 227-228).

**251—Cyprian, *The Lapsed***

28 Finally, of how much greater faith and more salutary fear are they who, though bound by no crime of sacrifice or certificate, but since they did take thought of doing such a thing, confess even this to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. Thus they remove the weight from their souls and seek the saving remedy for their wounds however small and slight they be; for they know that it is written: "God is not mocked" (Gal. 6:7).

29 God cannot be mocked or outwitted; nor can He be deceived by any clever cunning. Indeed, he but sins the more if, thinking that God is like man, he believes that he can escape the punishment of his crime by not openly admitting his crime. ... 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 satisfaction and remission made through the priests are pleasing before the Lord.

**300—Council of Elvira, *Canons***

—*Mortal sin*—

22 If someone leaves the Catholic Church and goes over to a heresy, and then returns again, it is determined that penance is not to be denied to such a one, since he has acknowledged his

sin. Let him do penance, then, for ten years, and after ten years he may come forward to communion [i.e., Holy Communion]. If, indeed, there were children who were led astray, since they have not sinned of their own fault, they may be received without delay. ...

32 It is determined that if someone, by a grave lapse [i.e., mortal sin], falls into the ruin of death, he may not do penance in the presence of a presbyter, but rather, in the presence of a bishop. However, if constrained by illness, it is necessary, a presbyter may give him communion,—or even a deacon, if the priest command him.

**ca. 310—Lactantius, *The Divine Institutions***

4:30:13 Because, however, all the various groups of heretics are confident that they are the Christians, and think that theirs is the Catholic Church, let it be known: that is the true Church, in which there is confession and penance, and which takes a salubrious care of the sins and wounds to which the weak flesh is subject.

—313, *The Edict of Milan: legalization of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire*

**325—First Council of Nicaea, first ecumenical council, *Canons***

11 In regard to those who transgressed without compulsion or without confiscation of their property or without danger or something of the sort, which happened during the usurpation of Licinius, it is decided by the council, even though they are unworthy of mercy, to treat them, nevertheless, with kindness. Those, then, who are truly repentant, shall, as already baptized, spend three years among the hearers, and seven years among the kneelers, and for two years they shall participate with the people in prayers, but without taking part in the offering (i.e., the Eucharist). ...

**381—Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Doctor of the Church, *The Holy Spirit***

3:18:137 Note well that it is through the Holy Spirit that sins are forgiven. Men make use of their ministry in the forgiveness of sins, but they are not exercising any power that is theirs by right. It is not in their own name, but in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit that they forgive sins. They ask and the divinity forgives. The ministrations are of man, but the gift bestowed is from the Power on high.

**387-390—Ambrose, *Penance***

—*The authority of binding and loosing—*

1:2:7 For those to whom [the right of binding and loosing] has been given, it is plain that either both are allowed, or it is clear that neither is allowed. Both are allowed to the Church, neither is allowed to heresy. For this right has been granted to priests only. ...

1:8:36 Why, then, do you impose hands and believe it to be the effect of the blessing if perchance some sick person recovers? Why do you presume that any can be cleansed by you from the filth of the devil? Why do you baptize, if it is not allowed that sins be forgiven through men? In baptism too there is forgiveness of all sins; what is the difference whether priests claim this power is given them to be exercised in Penance or at the font? The mystery is the same in both. ...

2:2:12 Things that are impossible with men are possible with God. God is able, whenever He wills, to forgive us our sins, even those we think cannot be forgiven. Thus it is possible for God to give us what to us seems impossible to obtain. Now, it seemed impossible that sin should be washed away in water [i.e., Baptism]. ... But what was impossible was made possible by God, who gave us so great a grace. It seemed likewise impossible for sins to be forgiven through penance; yet Christ granted even this to His Apostles, and by His Apostles it has been transmitted to the offices of priests. That has been made possible, therefore, which seemed to be impossible. ...

—*Mortal sin—*

2:3:19 It is most evident from the preaching of the Lord that we have been commanded to restore grace of the heavenly Sacrament [i.e., the Eucharist] to those guilty even of the most grave crime [i.e., mortal sin], if, with their whole heart and by an open confession of their sin, they do penance. It is certain, therefore, that you have no excuse for remaining in your sins.

**387—Saint John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, Doctor of the Church, *The Priesthood***

3:6:190 The priests of Judaism had power to cleanse the body from leprosy—or rather, not to cleanse it at all, but to declare a person as having been cleansed (Lev. 14:2-3). ... 195 Our priests have received the power not of treating with the leprosy of the body, but with spiritual uncleanness; not of declaring cleansed, but of actually cleansing [in the Sacrament of

Penance]. ... Our parents begot us to temporal existence; priests beget us to the eternal. The former are not able to ward off from their children the sting of death, nor prevent the attack of disease; yet the latter often save the sick and perishing soul—sometimes by imposing a lighter penance, sometimes by preventing the fall. ... 196 Not only at the time of our regeneration [in Baptism], but even afterward, they have the authority to forgive sins. “Is there anyone among you sick? Let him call in the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, and if he have committed sins, he shall be forgiven” (Jas. 5:14-15).

**ca. 393—Saint Jerome, Doctor of the Church, *Against Jovinian***

—*Mortal and venial sin*—

2:30 There are venial sins and there are mortal sins. It is one thing to owe ten thousand talents, another to owe but a farthing. We shall have to give an accounting for an idle word no less for adultery. But to be made to blush and to be tortured are not the same thing; not the same thing to grow red in the face and to be in agony for a long time. ... If we entreat for lesser sins we are granted pardon; but for greater sins, it is difficult to obtain our request. There is a great difference between one sin and another.

**ca. 395—Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Doctor of the Church, *Sermon to Catechumens, on the Creed***

—*Mortal and venial sin*—

7:15 When you shall have been baptized, keep to a good life in the commandments of God so that you may preserve your Baptism to the very end. I do not tell you that you will live here without sin, but they are venial sins which this life is never without. Baptism was instituted for all sins; for light sins, without which we cannot live, prayer was instituted. ... We are cleansed only once by Baptism; by prayer we are cleansed daily. But do not commit those sins on account of which you would have to be separated from the Body of Christ; perish the thought! For those whom you see doing penance have committed crimes, either adultery or some other enormities: that is why they are doing penance. If their sins were light, daily prayer would suffice to blot them out. ... 8:16 In the Church, therefore, there are three ways in which sins are forgiven: in Baptism, in prayer, and in the greater humility of penance.

**398—Jerome, *Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew***

—*The authority of binding and loosing*—

3:16:19 We read in Leviticus (13:2; 14:2) about lepers, where they are ordered to show themselves to the priests, and if they have leprosy, then they are to be declared unclean by the priest. It is not that the priests make them lepers and unclean; rather, it is the priests who separate the leper from one who is not a leper, and they can distinguish the clean from the unclean. Just as in the Old Testament the priest makes the leper clean or unclean, so in the New Testament the bishop or presbyter binds or looses not those who are innocent or guilty, but by reason of their office, when they have heard various kinds of sins, they know who is to be bound and who is to be loosed.

**416—Pope Saint Innocent, 40<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, *Letter to Decentius, Bishop of Gubbio***

25:8:11 Truly, since Your Love has wished to take counsel in this matter just as in others, my son Celestine, the deacon, has also added in his letter that Your Love has raised a question concerning what was written in the Epistle of the Blessed Apostle James: “If there is anyone sick among you, let him call in the presbyters and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sufferer, and the Lord will raise him up, and if that man has committed sin, He will forgive him” (Jas. 5:14-15). There is no doubt that this is to be taken or understood in regard to the sick faithful, who are able to be anointed with the holy oil of chrism, which, having been confected by a bishop, is permitted not only to priests but also to all as Christians, for anointing in case of their own necessity or in that of their people. The other question submitted seems to be superfluous, as if to doubt that it is permissible for a bishop to do what there is no doubt the presbyters may do. For it is stated in respect to presbyters, because bishops, prevented by other occupations, are not able to go to all the sick. Otherwise, if the bishop either is able or thinks someone worthy to be visited by himself, he can without hesitation both bless and touch with the chrism, it being his task to confect it. But it cannot be administered to penitents, because it is a kind of Sacrament. For how should it be supposed that one kind of Sacrament could be granted to those, who are denied the other Sacraments?

**419—Augustine, *Adulterous Marriages***

2:16:16 [I]f a man, accusing his wife of adultery, kills her, this sin, since it is finished and does not perdure in him, if it is committed by a catechumen, is absolved in Baptism, and if it is done by one who is baptized, it is healed by Penance and reconciliation.

**ca. 425—Saint Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, Doctor of the Church, *Commentary on the Gospel of John***

12:1 In what way, then, and by what reason does the Savior bestow upon His own disciples the dignity which belongs to the divine nature alone? Certainly the Word, who is in the Father, would not err in what is seemly, and what He does is right and proper. He considered that those who already had in themselves the Divine and Lordly Spirit ought to be lords also of forgiving the sins of some, and of retaining those of others if they wished, the Holy Spirit indwelling in them forgiving or retaining according to their own will, even though the matter is executed directly through men. Bearers of the Spirit, they forgive sins or retain them, or so it seems to me, in two ways: for either they call to Baptism those who are worthy, men already tested for the faith by the sobriety and constancy of their lives, or they prohibit and exclude from divine grace those who are not yet worthy; or in still another way they forgive and retain sins when sons of the Church conquer their sins and, confessing them, reform their lives.

**ca. 430—Cyril of Alexandria, *Worship and Adoration in Spirit and in Truth***

6 But you, if some part of your body is suffering, and you really believe that saying the words "Lord Sabaoth!" or some such appellation which divine Scripture attributes to God in respect to His nature has the power to drive that evil from you, go ahead and pronounce those words, making them a prayer for yourself. You will be going better than you would by just uttering those names, and you will be giving the glory to God and not to impure spirits. I recall also the saying in the divinely inspired Scripture: "Is anyone among you ill? Let him call in the presbyters of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14-15).

**452—Pope Saint Leo the Great, 45<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, Doctor of the Church, *Letter to Theodore, Bishop of Forum Iulii***

108:2 The manifold mercy of God so assists in the event of human lapses, that not only by the grace of Baptism, but even through the medicine of Penance the hope of eternal life is restored, so that those who have violated the gifts of rebirth, when they have condemned themselves by their own judgment, may obtain the forgiveness of their crimes, the safeguards of the divine goodness having been so ordained that the forgiveness of God cannot be obtained except through the prayers of priests. For the Mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5) gave this power to those placed in charge of the Church, that they might grant a course of penance to those who confess, and admit to the communion of the Sacraments through the gate of reconciliation those who have been cleansed by salutary satisfaction. ...

108:5 It behooves each Christian to pass judgment on his own conscience, and not to defer his conversion to God from day to day, ... choosing the narrower limits of a period when there will scarcely be time for the confession of the penitent or for the reconciliation of the priest. But, as I said, even such must be assisted in their need, so that neither the action of Penance nor the grace of Communion may be denied them if, even when the faculty of speech has been lost, they ask for it by signs clearly understood. But if the violence of their illness has been so worsened that in the presence of the priest they cannot even signify what they had asked for only a little while before, then the testimonies of the faithful standing about must be of service to them, so that they may at the same time be accorded the benefit of both Penance and reconciliation.

**459—Leo the Great, *Letter to the Bishops of Campania, Samnium and Picenum***

168:2 With regard to penance, certainly what is required of the faithful is not that the nature of individual sins be written in a document and recited in a public profession, since it is sufficient that the guilt of consciences be indicated to priests alone in a secret confession. For although that fullness of faith may seem to be praiseworthy which, for fear of God, is not afraid to blush before men, nevertheless, because the sins of all are not of such kind that those who seek Penance do not

fear to make them public, such an unapproved custom is to cease.

**ca. 540—Saint Caesar, Bishop of Arles, *Sermons***  
—*Mortal and venial sin*—

179 [104]:2-3 Although the Apostle has mentioned many grievous [i.e., mortal] sins, we, nevertheless, lest we seem to promote despair, will state briefly what they are. Sacrilege, murder, adultery, false witness, theft, robbery, pride, envy, avarice, and, if it is of long standing, anger, drunkenness, if it is persistent, and slander are reckoned in their number. Or if anyone knows that these sins dominate him, if he does not do penance worthily and for a long time, if such time is given him ... he cannot be purged in that transitory fire of which the Apostle spoke (1 Cor. 3:11-15), but the eternal flames will torture him without any remedy. But since the lesser [i.e., venial] sins are, of course, known to all, and it would take too long to mention them all, it will be necessary for us only to name some of them. ... There is no doubt that these and similar deed belong to the lesser sins which, as I said before, can scarcely be counted, and from which not only all Christian people, but even all the saints could not and cannot always be free. We do not, of course, believe that the soul is killed by these sins, but still they make it ugly by covering it as if with some kind of pustules and, as it were, with horrible scabs, which allow the soul to come only with difficulty to the embrace of the heavenly Spouse, of whom it is written: "He prepared for Himself a Church having neither spot nor blemish" (see Eph. 5:27).

**590—Pope Saint Gregory the Great, 64<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, Doctor of the Church, *Homilies on the Gospels***

—*The authority of binding and loosing*—  
2:26:4-6 The disciples receive as their lot the preeminence of celestial judgment, so that, in God's stead, they retain sins for some and for some they forgive them. It was fitting that they be so raised up by God, when they had consented to be so grossly humiliated for God's sake. See, they who feared the strict judgment of God have become judges of souls, and they who feared that they would themselves be condemned now either condemn others or release them. Certainly it is now the bishops who hold their place in the Church. They receive the authority of binding and loosing, who have as their lot a degree of governing. It is a magnificent honor, but that honor carries with it a heavy burden. ... Reasons, therefore,

must be reflected upon; and then the power of binding and loosing is to be exercised. It must be seen what fault preceded, or what repentance followed after that fault, so that the sentence of the pastor may absolve those on whom Almighty God bestows the grace of compunction. ...

2:34:15 We cannot do penance worthily unless we know what penance really is. For to do penance is both to weep for wicked deeds done, and not to do anymore what we would have to weep over. For anyone who deplores some sins but still commits others either dissimulates in doing penance, or does not know what penance is.

—636, *Death of Saint Isidore of Seville, end of the patristic period in the West*

**ca. 645—Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent***

At confession you should look and behave like a condemned man. Keep your head bowed and, if you can, shed tears on the feet of your judge and healer, as though he were Christ. (Very often demons manage to persuade us ... to omit confession.)

—ca. 749, *Death of Saint John Damascene, end of the patristic period in the East*

**787—Second Council of Nicaea, seventh ecumenical council, *Letter of Pope Hadrian***  
—*The authority of binding and loosing*—  
May [Peter] the chief of the Apostles himself, to whom the power was given by our Lord God to bind and remit sins in heaven and earth, be often your protector.

**866—Pope Saint Nicholas the Great, 105<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, *The Responses to the Questions of the Bulgars***

99:35, 65 [W]hen you decide to go forth into battle, do not fail to do what you yourselves have recalled, i.e., go to churches, carry out prayers, forgive sinners, be present at the solemnities of the Mass, offer oblations, make a confession of your sins to the priests, receive the reconciliation and communion. ...

Now then, no one is rightly permitted to receive the communion of Christ, if he is not found to be fasting. For if he is so given over to gluttony that he thinks so little of the mystical table, he seems to break the fast by first consuming secular food [as opposed to the spiritual food of the Mass]. Furthermore, because he does not distinguish between the venerable body and precious blood of Christ

and all the other food, he is known to place them not ahead of every human meal but rather behind. Indeed, the body of Christ is the health-bringing remedy against sin, and whoever does not consume it with veneration before eating all other things, does not desire to be healed but rather weakened. And certainly we see doctors everyday drinking their potions on an empty stomach; and if this is done for the health of the body, how much more should it be performed for the salvation of the soul.

**ca. 975—Roswitha of Gandersheim, Benedictine nun, earliest known female playwright,**

***Paphnutius***

Scene III

PAPHNUTIUS. I long to see the thorns of vice cut away, and the choked-up fountain of your tears flowing once more. Tears of repentance are precious in the sight of God.

THAIS. Oh, voice that promises mercy! Do you believe, can you hope that one so vile as I, soiled by thousands and thousands of impurities, can make reparation, can ever by any manner of penance obtain pardon?

PAPHNUTIUS. Thais, no sin is so great, now crime is so black, that it cannot be expiated by tears and penitence, provided they are followed up by deeds.

**1075—Pope Saint Gregory VII, 157<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, Letter to Emperor Henry IV**

[T]hou art said knowingly to exercise fellowship with those excommunicated by a judgment of the apostolic chair, and sentences of a synod. If this be true, thou dost know thyself that thou may'st receive the favour neither of the divine nor of the apostolic benediction unless—those who have been excommunicated being separated from thee, and compelled to do penance—thou do first, with condign repentance and satisfaction, seek absolution and indulgence for thy transgression. Therefore we counsel thy Highness that, if thou dost feel thyself guilty in this matter, thou do seek the advice of some canonical bishop with speedy confession. Who, with our permission enjoining on thee a proper penance for this fault, shall absolve thee.

**ca. 1140—Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments***

If you say: "But look I tell my sins to God and not to man. I follow Scripture. It tells me to confess my sin to God; it does not send me to a man in whom there is no salvation, but it draws me to confess where remission is promised. ...

What does man do?" listen to what man does. Was he not man who said: "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee" (Mark 2:5)? Truly was he man who said this. For this reason, those who saw him as man but failed to recognize him as God murmured among themselves, saying: "Who is this who even remits sins" (Luke 7:49)? For they knew that it belonged to God to forgive, but they did not know that what belonged to God man had received from God, and what that very man possessed, in so far as he was man, he possessed precisely because he had received it. For he willed at last to receive in his humanity what he always possessed in his divinity, that he might draw near to man in what was peculiarly man's (2:14; Paul F. Palmer, ed., *Sacraments and Forgiveness: History and Doctrinal Development of Penance, Extreme Unction, and Indulgences*.

**1215—Fourth Lateran Council, 12<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council, *Canons***

21 All believers of both sexes shall after coming to the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year in private to their own priest, and strive to fulfil to the best of their ability the penance imposed upon them. ...

Let the priest be discreet and cautious, so that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the injured person like a skilled physician, diligently inquiring into the circumstances both of the sinner and of the sin, so that he may wisely understand what advice he should give him and what remedy he should apply, trying different tests to heal the patient.

Let him guard with greatest care against exposing the sinner even slightly by word or sign or in any other way. But if he should need wiser advice, let him ask for it cautiously, without any mention of the person, for if anyone dares to reveal a sin uncovered to him in the place of confession, we decree that he not only be deposed from the office of priest but also be dispatched to a monastery of strict discipline to do penance for the rest of his life.

**1373—Blessed Julian of Norwich, *Showings or Revelations (short text)***

17 Sin is the sharpest scourge with which any chosen soul can be beaten, and this scourge belabours and breaks men and women, and they become so despicable in their own sight that it seems to them that they are fit for nothing but as it were to sink into hell; but when by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit contrition seizes them, then the Spirit turns



bitterness into hope of God's mercy. And then the wounds begin to heal and the soul to revive, restored to the life of Holy Church. The Holy Spirit leads him to confession, willing to reveal his sins, nakedly and truthfully, with great sorrow and great shame that he has so befouled God's fair image. Then he accepts the penance for every sin imposed by his confessor, for this is established in Holy Church by the teachings of the Holy Spirit. Every sinful soul must be healed by this medicine, especially for sins which are mortal to him. Though he be healed, his wounds are not seen by God as wounds, but as honours. And as sin is punished here with sorrow and penance, in contrary fashion it will be rewarded in heaven by the courteous love of our Lord God almighty, who does not wish anyone who comes there to lose his labours.

**1439—Pope Eugene IV, 207<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, *Exultate Deo***

The fourth sacrament is penance. The quasi-matter of this sacrament is made up of the penitent's acts, which are divided into three elements. The first of these is contrition of heart, for which sorrow for the sin committed and the intention to sin no more are required. The second element is oral confession, for which it is required that the sinner confess to the priest all the sins he remembers. The third element is the penance for his sins, which is determined by the judgment of the priest; it is generally performed through prayer, fasting, or almsgiving. The form of this sacrament is the words of absolution that the priest pronounces when he says: "I absolve you" etc. And the minister of this sacrament is a priest who has the authority to absolve, either as ordinary or as delegated from a superior. The effect of this sacrament is absolution from sins.

**—Anointing—**

The fifth sacrament is extreme unction. Its matter is olive oil blessed by a bishop. This sacrament should not be given except to the sick whose death is feared. The anointing should be done on these parts: on the eyes because of sight, on the ears because of hearing, on the nose because of smelling, on the mouth because of taste or speech, on the hands because of touch, on the feet because of walking, on the reins because of pleasure that prevails there. The form of this sacrament is: "May the Lord, through his loving mercy, forgive you for whatever you have been guilty of through sight" etc. The form is the same for anointing the other members. The minister of

this sacrament is the priest. The effect of the sacrament is the healing of the soul, and also of the body, but only inasmuch as this is beneficial. St. James the Apostle says of this sacrament: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him" (Jas. 5:14 ff.) (Clarkson, et al., pp. 303, 323).

—1517, Start of the Protestant Revolt—

**1565—Saint Teresa (of Jesus) of Ávila, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, Doctor of the Church, *Life***

I immediately asked to confess, and took Communion with many tears. . . .

7 His confessor, a very learned Dominican [Father Vicente Barrón], said that he had no doubt of my father's having gone straight to heaven; he had been his confessor for some years, and praised the purity of his conscience.

This Dominican father, who was a good and God-fearing man, was a great help to me. I confessed to him, and he seriously undertook the task of setting my soul right and showing me the bad state I was in.

**1619—Saint Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva, Doctor of the Church, *Introduction to the Devout Life***

1:19 When you kneel before your spiritual director [in confession], imagine that you are on Mount Calvary at the feet of Jesus Christ crucified and that his Precious Blood drops down on every side to cleanse away your iniquities. Although it is not the actual Blood of the Savior, what flows so abundantly over penitents in the confessional is the merit of his Blood. Open wide your heart so that you can cast out your sins in confession. As fast as they issue from it the precious merits of Christ's Passion enter there and fill it with blessings.

Be sure to state everything with candor and sincerity and in this way put your conscience completely at rest. This done, listen to the advice and commands of God's minister and say within your heart, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears" (1 Kgs. 3:9). Yes, Philothea, it is God whom you hear for he has said to his vice-regents, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16) . . . .

2:19 Our Savior gave the sacrament of penance and confession to his Church so that we may be cleansed from all our iniquities no matter how often and how greatly we have been defiled by them. Never let your soul remain long infected by sin, Philothea, since you have a remedy so near at hand and so easy to apply. A lioness that has been with a leopard hastens to wash herself and get rid of the stench the meeting has left with her lest her mate be offended and angered (Pliny, 8:17:43). So too a soul that has consented to sin must have horror for itself and be washed clean as soon as possible out of the respect it must have for the eyes of God's Divine Majesty who sees it. Why should we die a spiritual death when we have this sovereign remedy at hand?

**1749—Pope Benedict XIV, 247<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, *Apostolica Constitutio***

19 In the first place We remind [confessors] that they are guilty of serious sin if, when sitting in the holy tribunal of Penance, they hear their penitents carelessly without advising or questioning them, but immediately pronouncing the form of absolution when the penitent has completed the list of sins. Such a procedure is, of course, far different from that of a skilful doctor who pours oils and wine on the wound. Yet every minister of the sacrament of Penance does a doctor's work. So they should examine carefully not only the circumstances of the sins but also the character and disposition of the one who has committed the sins; then the minister can prescribe the appropriate remedies to enable him to obtain the salvation of his soul.

**1897—Saint Thérèse (of the Child Jesus) of Lisieux, Doctor of the Church, *The Story of a Soul***

2 I made my first Confession ... I remember you saying to me: "You are not going to confess your sins to a man, my Darling, but to God Himself," and I took this so to heart that I asked you quite seriously if I should not tell Father Ducellier that I loved him with all my heart, since it was really God I was going to speak to.

I had been taught exactly what I had to do, and I went into the confessional and knelt down ... I made my confession. I made a big act of faith when I received my absolution, since you had told me it was at this most solemn moment that my soul would be purified by the tears of the Child Jesus. ... [T]hen [I] left the confessional

with such a light heart that I think I had never been so happy before.

**1979—Pope Saint John Paul the Great, 264<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rome, *Redemptor Hominis***

20 Although the participation by the fraternal community of the faithful in the penitential celebration is a great help for the act of personal conversion, nevertheless, in the final analysis, it is necessary that in this act there should be a pronouncement by the individual himself with the whole depth of his conscience and with the whole of his sense of guilt and of trust in God, placing himself like the Psalmist before God to confess: "Against you ... have I sinned" (Ps. 50[51]:6). In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance—the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction—the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right: man's right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ, with Christ saying, through the minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5); "Go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11).

**2001—John Paul the Great, *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday***

The priest who fully experiences the joy of sacramental reconciliation will find it altogether normal to repeat to his brothers and sisters the words of Paul: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

The crisis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which I mentioned earlier is due to many factors from the diminished sense of sin to an adequate realization of the sacramental economy of God's salvation. But perhaps we should also recognize that another factor sometimes working against the exercise of this delicate and demanding ministry.

Conversely, now more than ever the People of God must be helped to rediscover the Sacrament. We need to declare with firmness and conviction that the Sacrament of Penance is *the ordinary means* of obtaining pardon and the remission of grave sins committed after Baptism. We ought to celebrate the Sacrament in the best possible way, *according to the forms laid down by liturgical law*, so that it may lose none of its character as the celebration of God's mercy (12; *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, April 4, p. 1).