

What we today call the Sacrament of Reconciliation existed in a completely different form during the early Christian era. It was a group of Irish monks who were largely responsible for transforming this sacrament into the version with which we're familiar today.

It's easy to imagine that the seven sacraments have existed in something like their present form from the get-go. But.... all of them have changed in ways over the course of the Church's history.... and none has changed more than the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

For the Church's first seven centuries, penance could be received no more than once in a lifetime. That policy dated back to the time of St. Peter. The New Testament tells us that Jesus gave the power of forgiveness to his apostles.... but it says almost nothing.... about how they were to exercise it.

In the early Church.... the prevailing belief was that Baptism was the celebration of the forgiveness of sin.... and that the baptized, having turned away from sin.... would not need to be forgiven again.

But the Church Fathers soon realized that they needed a way to deal with post-baptismal sin.... because many baptized Christians were slipping back into their old way of life. A formal system of public penance was devised to handle such setbacks. Typically.... after penitents publicly confessed to the local bishop.... they were assigned an onerous penance that lasted several years. During this time, they wore sackcloth and garments that scratched or tore the skin as a modest reminder of Christ's scourging.

They were also required to leave Mass immediately after the homily and forbidden to receive the Eucharist. Yet another public shaming of the sinner. At least part of their penance consisted of long hours of prayer and fasting.

The order of penitents typically was made up of four different groups (or stages).... in a kind of ascending order or gradual progression from one group to another. First the penitents were part of the (1) weepers. Dressed in sackcloth and marked with ashes, these sinners stood at the entrance of the place of worship, begged forgiveness and asked those going inside to pray for them.

After months or longer, the penitents, now known as the (2) hearers, were allowed to stand inside the church.... where they could not see their neighbors at Mass but could hear the readings and homily.

They next graduated to a group called the (3) kneelers.... and would kneel or prostrate themselves in the church during the Mass.

Finally.... the penitents moved into a group called the (4) standers or bystanders.... who were allowed to worship with their neighbors through the entire Mass but still could not receive Communion.

Not until they had completed this long and arduous public penitential period were they “reconciled” with the Church and welcomed back into full communion.

By the seventh century.... it had become obvious to many that the Church’s rules for penance were not working as they were intended.... but there were still no plans in Rome to reform them.

At least a century earlier, Irish monks had developed a different practice of penance within their own communities.... adapting a little-known tradition traceable to the first monastic communities in the Egyptian desert.

They were struggling to overcome venial “faults” in their quest for saintliness.... not seeking reconciliation after committing grave offenses such as murder, adultery, and apostasy.

The Irish monks developed a system of confession in which the private recitation of sins was followed by the private performance of penance. They not only adopted this practice themselves.... but introduced it to the faithful outside the monastery, making it applicable to all sins and available to all sinners.

You can imagine how much more appealing the private confession and penance was as compared to the public.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes it: “During the seventh century, Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the ‘private’ practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest.”

This was a radical change in the history of the sacrament. Gradually, confession went from being public to private, and from a once-in-a-lifetime rite to an as-often-as-needed practice. The “order of penitents,” segregated from the rest of the community, disappeared.

Although the Irish monks practiced frequent confession of their “faults”—and recommended that fellow Catholics do the same—they also continued for some time to impose severe penances on those who committed serious sins.

The monk-missionaries brought handbooks known as “penitentials” with them on their travels. The handbooks suggested a suitable “tariff” or penance to “pay” according to the rank of the sinner, the rank of the person offended against, and the objective seriousness of the sin.

Abuses were not unknown: wealthy penitents were sometimes able to negotiate a reduction in the tariff—or hire a substitute or “assistant” to carry out part or all of a severe penance. But over time, the penitentials fostered consensus about the comparative seriousness of various sins and thus made assessments of the appropriate penance more uniform and less arbitrary.

As the Irish monks made converts and founded new communities on the continent, they promoted a conception of penance aimed at restoring the sinner to a full relationship with God rather than reconciliation with the community. They also shifted the focus from performing penances to making sincere and sorrowful confessions.

It was this milder form of penance promoted by the Irish missionaries that had gained wide acceptance throughout the Christian world by the early Middle Ages. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council established that penance would involve private confession and that all Christians in the Latin Church would be obligated to confess their sins at least once a year.

It was also at this time that penance officially became a sacrament. (The “dark box”—the confessional booth located in the rear of most churches—wasn’t invented until the sixteenth century, during the Counter-Reformation.)

The bishops and clergy on the continent who regarded the penitential practices of the Irish as a dangerous departure from tradition that would make reconciliation too easy. After centuries of debate, however, Rome finally sided with the Irish. Reconciliation, the Church decided, was not to be a one-time offer.

The Church came to realize that.... a sacrament that offers God’s boundless mercy.... should not try to ration it.

Potential Questions for small groups

- What does practicing this sacrament look like in your spiritual journey today?
- What things have helped you to make fruitful confessions?
- Have you found fruitful ways of leading others to embrace this sacrament?
- Why do you think the Lord instituted this sacrament and how does it relate to the others?
- How has this sacrament impacted your life –or– how do you feel following confession?
- What has been your relationship with this sacrament during your spiritual journey so far?
- If a non-Catholic asked you why you go to Confession, what would you say?

Summary of Effects of Reconciliation:

- It forgives and pardons us of our sins
- We get peace of mind and soul.... and serenity of conscience
- We're restored to God's grace and His intimate friendship
- Our dignity is restored
- The Sacrament gives us new strength to resist future temptations
- It repairs our relationship with God, His Church, it's members
- Confession forms our conscience
- By receiving Reconciliation more frequently.... we are encouraged to be as merciful as Christ is merciful