

Penance

The sacrament of **penance** is our formal act of reconciliation with God in the Church when sin has severed us from the Church's life. Because penance is the way to communion with God when that communion has been broken by sin, it is often referred to in Church Tradition as the renewal of baptism, or as the re-establishment of that condition of life with God which was given to men in the basic sacraments of inauguration into the Christian life.

Not every sin requires the necessity of formal penance through the sacramental ritual. This is obvious because Christians are never completely without sin. Certain grave sins or the prolonged separation from holy communion, however, do call for the act of sacramental penance. Also, Christians living in communion with Christ are expected to make use of this sacrament periodically in order to humble themselves consciously before God and to receive guidance in the Christian life from their pastor in the Church. It is the teaching of the Orthodox Church that sacramental penance is necessary for those receiving Holy Communion when they have committed grave sins or when they have been separated from the eucharistic meal for a long time.

The sacrament of penance exists in the Church to allow for the repentance and reconversion of Christians who have fallen away from the life of faith. There are three main elements to the act of formal penance. The first is a sincere **sorrow** for sins and for the breaking of communion with God. The second is an open and heartfelt **confession** of sins. At one time this confession was done publicly before all men in the midst of the Church, but in recent times it is usually done only in the presence of the pastor of the Church who stands in behalf of all. The third element of penance is the formal **prayer of absolution** through which the forgiveness of God through Christ is sacramentally bestowed upon the repentant sinner.

The fulfillment of penance consists in the reception of Holy Communion and the genuine reconciliation of the repentant sinner with God and all men according to the commandments of Christ. From this there obviously follows the necessity of a sincere attempt by the penitent to refrain from sin and to remain in faithful obedience to God and in uprightness of life before Him and all people.

The sacrament of penance, like all sacraments, is an element of the life of the Church which presupposes a firm belief and conviction that Christ himself is present in the Church through his Holy Spirit. A person without the experience of Christ in the Church will not understand the meaning of sacramental penance and the need for the open and public confession of sins. When the Church is experienced as the new life in Christ and as the genuine communion with God in his kingdom already present with men in sacrament and mystery, then not only will sacramental penance and the confession of sins be understood, but it will be cherished as the great mystery of God which it is: the unique possibility for reunion with God through the forgiveness of Christ who has come to save sinners who confess their sins and who sincerely desire to change their lives according to the ways which he himself has given.

In a word, the Orthodox Church strictly adheres to the teaching of the Bible that only God can forgive sins, that he does so through Christ in the Church, that his conditions are genuine repentance and the promise of change which are witnessed by confession; and that confession, by definition, is the open and public acknowledgment of sin before God and all mankind.