

25. WE RETURN TO GOD

When we repent and confess our sins, we tell God that we are sorry for having turned away from Him. We ask God to forgive us for disobeying. We now turn back to God and promise to live a new life in Jesus Christ. We promise to follow God's commandments, particularly the great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-39)

In every parish, the Sacrament of Penance may be performed in a slightly different way. Your own priest can explain how he would like you to confess your sins. But, in every parish, the same basic things happen:

1. We first prepare ourselves with a few prayers before Confession;
2. We confess our sins to God in the presence of our priest; and
3. We receive forgiveness for our sins when the priest places his **Epitrachelion** (stole) on our heads and prays to God to forgive us.

In the Early Church, people who sinned against God confessed their sins before the whole Church; the whole Church then witnessed to the fact that the person was sorry for his sins and wished to return to life in God and to the love of the people of God.

Today, the priest is the witness who hears our confession. He stands for the Church and witnesses to God and to the Church that we are truly sorry for our sins. He also stands for God. He witnesses that God in His love welcomes us back and grants us forgiveness for our sins. The priest also helps us to see how we can try to live a better life. He helps us to see how we can avoid committing the

same sins again. Sometimes he may ask us to read special prayers, verses in the Bible, or lives of saints to help us to see how we can strengthen ourselves to fight the evil that always tempts us. The priest is our pastor and shepherd. He is our guide to new life in Jesus Christ. But only if we come often to the priest can he really help us to direct our lives to Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

Jesus tells us a parable that shows us that God cares for everyone of us and wants each of us to be with Him in His Kingdom. He says:

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Even so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

(Luke 15:3-7)

In another parable, of the Prodigal Son, we see how God our Father is ready to welcome us back if we repent. When the Prodigal Son returned,

"His father saw him and had compassion and ran and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet;

and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' ”

(Luke 15:20-24)



This parable reminds us that we are already dead if we try to live away from God. We have nothing to keep us alive forever and will die, just as Adam and Eve, and all men after them, have died a physical death. But those who live in Jesus Christ have new life in them. Even though they die, they will rise again and live forever with God in His Kingdom.

We are born into this new life in Baptism. For this reason, the Sacrament of Penance is often called a second Baptism. If our sins turn us away from God, we can make our return to the new life Christ gives by repenting of our sins and coming to God. We can

be "washed" of our sins and made "clean" again in the Sacrament of Penance. After returning to God, He will give us a "new robe" as the father gave the Prodigal Son, and we can again "eat and drink" with Him at His table in the Kingdom. We can again receive the food of new life in Holy Communion.

Now before receiving Holy Communion we must prepare ourselves to receive Jesus Christ in us. We say our prayers of preparation ("Holy God, Holy Mighty . . ." to "O come let us worship God our King"), but we add to the beginning of these prayers, "O Heavenly King," our prayer to the Holy Spirit. Then we may read a few Psalms, such as Psalms 23, 24, and 116 (verses 10-19). Read these Psalms carefully to see how they help prepare us for Holy Communion. Answer these questions on Psalm 116:

1. What verse tells that we come to receive Holy Communion? _____
2. What verses say that we confess our sins in the Church? _____
3. What verse says that God forgives our sins? _____
4. What verse tells of our "Eucharist" to God _____

Activities

1. Make a review card (or cards) showing actions or steps in the Sacrament of Penance.
2. Read the story of St. Pimen, a spiritual man who helped people to see their sins and told them how to begin to make their return to God.
3. Learn one of the Psalms that is said in preparation for Holy Communion.
4. Review the preparatory sequence of prayers, especially "O Heavenly King."