J.M.J.

The Christological Dimensions of the Sacrament of Penance
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The Sacrament of Penance unites us with the Father, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This can be shown through the forgiveness of sin obtained through the Sacrament of Penance, our relationship with the Church and the structure of the Church, the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance with regard to our redemption, our restoration into the community through the Sacrament of Penance, and how the Sacrament of Penance enables us to perform our mission in Christ.

The Forgiveness of Sin

In the Sacrament of Penance, the priest acts “in persona Christi”, absolving the penitent of her sins and giving her the Holy Spirit. Perfect contrition is needed for the forgiveness of sins, and this is brought about through the Sacrament of Penance. The external words of the priest and the external acts of the penitent (i.e., the Sacrament) cause the penitent to have perfect contrition. All of these together, that is, the external words of the priest, the external acts of the penitent, and the perfect contrition of the penitent, cause and result in the forgiveness of sin. Thus the Sacrament of Penance conforms the recipient to Christ and brings her deeper into communion with Christ and His Church.

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The Constitution of the Church

Our interior life must be expressed through the visible Church. Exterior acts, such as those involved in the Sacrament of Penance, ‘stabilize’ the interior spiritual life. The visible exterior life (manifested within the structure of the Mystical Body of Christ, i.e., the Church) and the individual’s interior life are both necessary and they mutually reinforce each other. In addition, the visible Church provides guidance for our interior lives, intercedes on our behalf, prays for our conversion, and is the instrument through which we receive absolution.

It is through our union with Christ that we can benefit from His reparation. The sinner must have a repentant attitude in order for the Sacrament of Penance to be effective. Repentance includes not only “sorrow for sins” but also “the readiness to make reparation.” However, by ourselves alone we are unable to adequately make reparation for our sins. It is only “our union with Christ” (in His Mystical Body) and our awareness of both that union and our reliance on Christ’s Passion and Death for the satisfaction of our sins that we can have true repentance, and thus receive the power and full effects of the Sacrament of Penance.

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5 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 254.
6 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 254.
7 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 254.
8 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 254.
10 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 264.
11 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 264.
12 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 264.
13 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 264.
Redemption

Christ is our Redeemer because He has liberated us from sin and “bodily death.”

Although our liberation from bodily death and infirmity will not come until the general resurrection, our liberation from sin is effected through our baptism into Christ, and then again in the Sacrament of Penance. Through the Sacrament of Penance we are restored to a state of grace and our turning away from sin and towards God is strengthened and solidified.

Sin and the Community

An individual’s sins harm not only themselves but also the Church, which is not only the Mystical Body of Christ but also a worshipping community. The Sacrament of Penance reconciles the penitent with God; but moreover, the sacrament also reconciles the penitent with the Church, restoring and righting the penitent’s relationship with the Church. Moreover, sin damages our relationship with our fellow community members, and the Sacrament of Penance heals those relationships and restores us to our proper place within the community.

Sin and Mission

Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are formally received into the Church and given our share of the mission of Christ. However, sin either harms our relationship with God and

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14 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 272.
16 cf., O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 256.
17 O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 256.
18 cf., O’Neill, Meeting Christ, 254.
19 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 289.
20 cf., Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 293.
22 cf., Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 288.
23 Bramwell, The world of the sacraments, 286.
acts as an obstacle to our communion with Him (venial sin), or it destroys our relationship and communion with God (mortal sin). Therefore, sin acts as an obstacle (venial sin) or prevents us (mortal sin) from fulfilling our share of the mission of Christ. The Sacrament of Penance restores our communion with God and therefore enables us to participate fully in the life of the Church and commit ourselves to our mission.

Conclusion

We are absolved of our sins and brought deeper into communion with Christ and His Church through the Sacrament of Penance, which involves both our interior repentance and the exterior acts of the penitent and the priest. The Church is the instrument through which we receive such absolution and reconciliation, and the exterior acts of the penitent and the Church reinforce and strengthen our amendment away from sin and towards God. Our union with the Mystical Body of Christ enables us to receive the Sacrament of Penance, and through the Sacrament of Penance we receive the redemption won for us by Christ that is proper for our current state, that is, liberation from sin. The Sacrament of Penance reconciles us with the community and the Church, heals our relationships, and enables us to fully engage in our share of the mission of Christ.

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References


