

Nurturing Faith at Home ***Understanding the Sacrament of Reconciliation: What is It?***

Reconciliation is probably the most underutilized sacrament. As this sacrament is unique to the Catholic Church, other Christians have often questioned the value and the need for it. Without doubt, many Catholics do not fully appreciate the sacrament either. In recent years, the number of Catholics participating in the sacrament of reconciliation – or what is also known as the sacrament of penance or confession – has decreased. I believe this is due to a lack of understanding and instruction regarding this gift from God. In the next two issues of *Nurturing Faith at Home* I hope to clarify – in common language – the significance of the sacrament of reconciliation and provide information that you in turn can share with your children. Unlike baptism, reconciliation may be received countless times. The Catholic Church suggests that we go to confession often, but at least once a year. In fact, we *need* to receive God's grace – His forgiveness and the strength to live good and holy lives – frequently and repeatedly.

Our Need for Forgiveness

The two great commandments – to love God and to love one another – tell us who is most important in our lives: God first, then others, and finally ourselves. We sometimes put ourselves first and God last. We turn our backs on God and His ways. We do things that hurt our relationship with God and our relationships with others. This is called **sin**. Through sin, we also hurt ourselves, because we *need* to love and to be loved.

The wonderful thing is that God wants us to have a loving relationship with him and with others. And so He has given us an opportunity to make things better. It's called **reconciliation**. To reconcile simply means to make things right with those we have hurt. If we have done something to hurt our relationship with another person, then reconciliation helps us repair the damage and heal the relationship so that we are friends again.

Four Parts to Reconciliation

There are four main steps involved in reconciliation – in making things right with God. The first is **contrition**, which simply means that we are truly feeling badly about our sin. Contrition is not to be confused with regret, which is being sorry for something just because one is now in trouble. Contrition is a sincere and genuine feeling of sadness for what we have done. Often the priest will invite the individual to recite a prayer expressing one's remorse – the Act of Contrition.

The second step is **confession**. We tell our sins to the priest. Some sins are considered more serious than others; it is these grave sins that we confess to the priest in strict confidence. After confession, the priest gives us a **penance**, which is an opportunity to do something good to make up for one's wrongdoing. Penance makes better one's relationship with God and with another person. It could be an act of kindness or extra prayers said after.

Finally, one receives **absolution**. This is a sign of God's forgiveness. If a person is truly sorry for one's sins, God always forgives. When one asks for forgiveness, He doesn't say, "Well, let me think about it?" However, we also show God and others that we are sorry for our wrongdoings by trying not to make the same mistakes or bad choices again.

To summarize all of this, God wants to have a loving relationship with each one of us. Even when we sin, he still loves us just as much as ever, and he is always willing to forgive us when we want to confess our sins and make things better. Forgiveness and love are what reconciliation is all about. Through the sacrament of reconciliation, we re-discover who we are: God's children, created in his image and likeness, created to seek God and to live holy lives. In the March issue of *Nurturing Faith At Home*, I will address the pertinent and familiar question, *Why are Catholics required to confess their sins through a priest?*

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