

# Penance and Reconciliation: A Sacrament of Healing

“Is Christ here or not?” Jarred by the sudden and insistent voice as I exited the church, I looked up, turned, and found a woman standing beside me. She said, again, “Is Christ here or not?”

“Excuse me,” I replied, “what do you mean?” With an incredulous shake of her head, she spun around and started walking away from me. Both alarmed and intrigued I followed, attempting to keep pace saying, “Wait! Yes! Christ is here!”

She turned back in my direction, halting my step. “Yes, Christ is here! That’s the right answer!” she said smilingly. Quickly she resumed her stride away from me and disappeared around the corner.

The recollection of the encounter makes me smile as I retell it. “Is Christ here or not?” It’s a powerful and thought-provoking question. In faith our response is a resounding “yes!” Yet, there are times when we are acutely aware of how absent Christ seems from aspects of our life. Those times when despite our faithful zeal for the Gospel, our best intentions and our love of others, the patterns of self-centeredness, self-righteousness and self-brokenness blind us to the miracle of Christ’s presence alive and active all around us – and even in us.

In these times we need Christ who reconciled the world to himself all the more. We need Christ who says, repent (basically, change your ways) for the kingdom of God is at hand. Christ who says, I do not condemn you, go and sin no more (Jn 8:11). We need Christ who promises to be here always (Mt 28:20) – Christ who sends the Holy Spirit to stir our hearts so that we might desire to grow in the ways of faith and holiness (Jn 14:26).

The sacrament of penance is an encounter with the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. Regularly celebrating this sacrament is a spiritual exercise of a healthy disciple.

The practice of self-searching goes beyond looking at single acts, by challenging us to look at our patterns of choices and evaluate them according to the ways of the

Gospel and the habits of faithful discipleship.

At the same time we have consolation and comfort in the mercy and love of our God who knows that we are a work of art in progress. Jesus Christ calls us to change our heart, but does not leave us alone to do this work. Instead he promised to be with us always and has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us in our journey of faith, helping us see the ways in which we can ever deepen our growth in holiness.

God alone forgives sins. When we celebrate the sacrament of penance, we experience the healing and reconciling presence of Christ through the word of God proclaimed, through our contrite confession of sinfulness, through the support and prayer of the community gathered together, and through the ministry and words of absolution of the priest.

But the sacrament of penance is not just the work of God and a priest. The sacrament of penance is the work of us all. At our baptism we were clothed in Christ and entrusted with his mission. In this case that mission calls each disciple – the entire church community – to be reconcilers, each according to his or her vocational call.

In his writings, St. Paul tells us that by our baptism we become ambassadors for Christ whose work is reconciling the world to God (2 Cor 5:17-21). Just as we experience the power of God's love and mercy in the forgiveness of our sins, we also become the face of God's redeeming presence to others. Together we are called to be a reconciling community of faith who welcomes every person.

Each of us is challenged to be reconciled and become reconcilers clothed in Christ's mercy, compassion and love. Each of us is called to be an encounter with Christ who promised to be with us always. Each of us is called to welcome the sinner, who surprisingly looks a lot like us.

Can you say with confidence, "Yes, Christ is here"?

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This is the third in a series of articles about the six-week spring session of Why

Catholic?