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Since the *Order of Penance* is a liturgical act, it is appropriate that the priest begin the dialogue with the penitent.

The Revised *Order of Penance*: An Opportunity for Catechesis

J. Philip Horrigan

Our Lord Jesus Christ brought about reconciliation between God and the human race by the mystery of his Death and Resurrection. (cf. Romans 5:10) This ministry of reconciliation was entrusted by the Lord to the Church in the person of the Apostles” (2 Corinthians 5:18ff.).

But because of human weakness, it happens that Christians “abandon the love they had at first” (cf. Revelation 2:4) and even break off the union of friendship with God by sinning. For this reason, to forgive sins committed after Baptism, the Lord instituted the special Sacrament of Penance (cf. John 20:21–23), which the Church has faithfully celebrated down through the ages, in various ways indeed, but preserving its essential elements.¹

This decree, from 1973, put into the ritual practice of the universal Church a new *Rite of Penance* for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. This *Ordo Poenitentiae* included three ritual forms: The Order for Reconciling Individual Penitents; the Order for Reconciling Several Penitents with Individual Absolution; and the Order for Reconciling Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution. A fourth rite that was non-sacramental was intended for use as a communal celebration to address the need for reconciliation and healing of social evils in the world.

This *Order of Penance* has remained relatively unchanged since its implementation in the English-speaking Church on the First Sunday of Advent 1975.

In keeping with the current guidelines for liturgical translation, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a revised translation for the *Order of Penance* and submitted it to the Congregation for Divine Worship and

the Discipline of the Sacraments in 2021. The congregation issued its decree of approval on April 25, 2022. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023, the revised translation may be used. As of April 16, 2023, use of the translation will be obligatory.

The changes in the revised *Order of Penance* are primarily in the translation of some of the prayers in the rite and the accompanying texts (for example, in the pastoral notes). Two additions have been made to the rite and are found in chapter 4: “Various Texts to Be Used for the Celebration of Reconciliation.”

Due to the limitations of this article, only Form I, The Order of Reconciling Individual Penitents will be considered.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of the changes in translation are found in the introduction, sometimes referred to as the “pastoral notes.” The liturgical theology embedded in the previous translation of the introduction remains essentially unchanged. Those theological principles can be stated as follows:

- God has reconciled the world to himself through the paschal mystery: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- The mercy of God that shaped the ministry of Jesus in his earthly life is at the very heart of the ministry of the Church.
- It is this merciful love of God that is made available to every sincere penitent in the sacrament of penance.
- The celebration of the sacrament of penance is for the forgiveness of sins, the reconciliation of the penitent with God, and the conversion of the penitent to a new life of conformity to Christ.

In addition to the changes in translation there are a few changes in the syntax of the text itself.

One example is the change in the tense of several verbs from the past to the present tense. For example, in the introduction of the 1975 rite: “He (Christ) filled it (the Church) with his divine gifts.” The verb *filled* seems to indicate that the action of Christ was once and for all time. The new translation reads: “He fills her, who is his Body and fullness, with his divine gifts” (3). In the present tense, the verb (*fills*) speaks more clearly of the action of Christ as an ongoing action that unfolds throughout time in the life of the Church.

Another positive change is the use of *his (her)* when referring to the penitent. The prior translation simply referred to the person as “the penitent.”

In almost every paragraph, the new translation changes a passive description of the rite to an active one. For example: “Next comes the penitent’s confession of sins” becomes “The penitent then confesses his (her) sins” (18). This wording gives the ritual dialogue an active and more engaging character.

Many of the section headings have been changed from a possessive title to a declarative one. For example: Penitent’s Prayer and the Priest’s Absolution becomes the Prayer of the Penitent and the Absolution by the Priest (19).

The only change in a rubric within the rite is the addition of the phrase “in an open place” (12) when referring to the place for the confessional. It is not clear if this means that the confessional is in an open place, so that it is visible, or whether an open place apart from a confessional is an appropriate option. This latter situation is frequently the case when several confessors are present for the celebration of penance and several confessionals are simply not available.

There are several examples of a change in specific words.

In paragraph 6(b), the priest is described as acting in the person of Christ when “he pronounces sentence for the forgiveness or retention of sins by virtue of his power of the keys.” Unfortunately, the word *sentence* is easily associated with the actions in a courtroom when a crime has been committed and the perpetrator is sentenced by a judge. Surely this is not the

nature, either of the ministry of the confessor or of the satisfaction that is asked of a penitent after he/she has turned to the mercy of God.

This reference to a judicial system is further emphasized by the phrase describing the role of the priest as exercising “the office of judge” (10a). While it is true that the priest as a confessor may need to discern the seriousness of one or more sins, and arrive at an appropriate penance, he does this in the image of the Good Shepherd, in his office as an ordained minister of the Church.

A second example of the use of words that some may think out of place is the reference to medical terms. Words and phrases such as *diseases of the soul*, *suitable remedies*, and *appropriate medicine* speak of the more clinical nature of physical injuries and illnesses rather than the spiritual and inner dis-ease that affects the spiritual well-being of every penitent. Sin is not a disease but a chosen action; it doesn’t arrive in our life as a virus but from a free choice to do or say something that is wrong, even evil. It is noticeable that the use of the profound and multivalent word *healing* is missing from the text.

Many will miss the more inclusive word *children* in the description of absolution (6d). The prior translation reads “the Father receives the repentant children who come back to him,” an obvious reference to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). The new translation reads, “The Father welcomes the son returning to him.” The use of the word *son* may be a more literal reference to the same parable, but the text is not quoting the words of the parable.

One final example is a query about the use of the word *priest* in place of the word *confessor*. It is, of course, not a wrong word, but given the use of the word *penitent* it seems that the correlative term for the ordained minister, in his role in the



The revised *Order of Penance* provides ten options for the act of contrition or prayer of the penitent.

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A rubric in the Order for Reconciling Individual Penitents directs that the priest adapt to the person's circumstances, underlining the pastoral nature of the sacrament.

ritual action, is more properly *confessor*. The new translation capitalizes the word *Priest* throughout the text.

THE ORDER FOR RECONCILING INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

The first segment of the ritual dialogue that constitutes the *Order of Penance* is the reception of the penitent. The rubric states that the priest welcomes the penitent “with kindness” and greets him (her) with “friendly words” (41). The rite does not give any example or formula for this greeting. The presumption is that the penitent does not begin with the phrase “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” Since the *Order of Penance* is a liturgical act, and the priest is the presider, it seems only appropriate that the priest open the dialogue that will follow. Then the penitent makes the sign of the cross. The priest may do this as well, both saying the words that accompany this gesture.

The priest continues by inviting the penitent to trust in God, saying, “May God who has shone his light in our hearts grant that you may truly know your sins and his mercy” (42). Other “similar” words may be used for this invitation. The new translation uses the phrase “who has shone his light in our hearts” to replace “who has enlightened every heart.” The use of the words “our hearts” appears to make the dialogue more personal rather than the more general reference to “every heart.” The adverb *truly* is inserted in the new translation, perhaps intending to underline the importance of the act of confessing. The verb *trust* is omitted in the new translation, leaving the verb *know* to cover both the sins and the mercy of God.

The second segment of the ritual dialogue is the reading of the Word of God (42). As in the current ritual this element is optional. In light of the directive of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* that “the treasures of the Bible are to be opened

up more lavishly, so that a richer share in God’s word may be provided for the faithful,”³ and given that the rites for the celebrations of the other sacraments include a proclamation of Scripture, as do the other forms for the sacrament of reconciliation, it is appropriate that confessors take this option to heart. The penitent, then, may encounter the rich treasury of Scripture the council fathers had so earnestly hoped for.

The option for the penitent to choose the reading is now omitted at this point in the text. The new translation only notes that the priest may choose a reading from the options found in chapter 4, or he may proclaim one from memory. However, the rubric in chapter 4 (84) does, in fact, include the penitent in the choosing of a reading.

The third segment of the ritual dialogue is the confession of sins and the acceptance of satisfaction (44). The penitent may begin his (her) confessing with the usual formula, “I confess to Almighty God.” In practice, the penitent may use other suitable words, or may simply respond with his

(her) sins when prompted by the priest. The rubric for this segment does not require the penitent to mention the last time he (she) was at confession, or how many times one or more sins were committed. The priest may ask for this information in order to discern the spiritual state of the penitent and to help him to offer suitable counsel. Any questioning by the confessor that resembles an interrogation should be avoided.

When the penitent has confessed his (her) sins, the priest offers “suitable counsel.” The description of this counsel remains unchanged. Then the priest proposes a “work” of penance. The prior word was an *act* of penance. The difference may be subtle. Perhaps the use of the word *work* helps the priest consider a spiritual or corporal work of mercy as a penance instead of the default penance of saying prayers.

The final rubric in this section states that the priest “take care that he adapts to the penitent’s circumstances in every way, whether in the manner of speaking or even in the counsel provided.” The phrase *in the manner of speaking* is new to this rubric. This might suggest that the priest adapt his comments based on whether the penitent is a child, a teenager, an adult, a woman, a man, a married or single person, someone with special needs, an elderly person, someone in addiction recovery, etc. This short phrase underlines the very pastoral tone that the celebration should have, no matter who the penitent might be.

The next segment of the ritual dialogue is the prayer of the penitent and the absolution. There are three changes in this part.

The first is the invitation by the priest to the penitent to express his (her) contrition. The prior word used was *sorrow*. Although both words intend to lead the penitent to speak of being sorry for their sins, the word *contrition* is likely to cue the penitent to recite a memorized act of contrition. The word *sorrow* is more likely to be taken as an invitation to use one’s own

words to express that sorrow. A spontaneous act of contrition is often a more heartfelt expression than the recitation of a memorized prayer.

The second change is a new translation for the act of contrition, the prayer of the penitent. There are now ten options for the prayer of the penitent. Each of them is a new translation, though the central theme is consistent with the prior texts. The texts are quite rich in their expression, and most have biblical overtones. If a penitent is to use any one of these prayers he (she) would certainly need a copy from which to choose the one they wish to use.

The third change in this part is found in the absolution. The phrase “and sent the Holy Spirit among us” now reads “and poured out the Holy Spirit.” Both phrases express the action of God through Christ. The verb *sent* clearly states the intention of God on behalf of the people of God, especially those who seek the grace of reconciliation. The words *poured out* more graphically express the abundance of grace that comes with the gift of the Holy Spirit. To pour is a lavish gesture, even to fill a measure “that is shaken down and overflowing” (Luke 6:38). An additional change in the absolution is in the phrase “May God give you pardon and peace.” This now reads, “May God grant you pardon and peace.” The difference of the two words is admittedly subtle; perhaps the verb *grant* expresses a more gratuitous and generous action by God. Anyone can *give* something to another; but to *grant* elevates the action from simply offering a thing to bestowing an honor or a favor out of love for the other. And surely that is what God does when we are forgiven our sins.

The final segment in the ritual dialogue is “the proclamation of praise and the dismissal of the penitent.” The words of praise and the response of the penitent remain the same: “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. / For his mercy endures for ever.” The words of the dismissal, “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace” are changed to “The Lord has forgiven your sins. Go in peace.” There are four additional options for the words of praise and dismissal. Each of the four has a new translation, though each is similar in theme. Three of the four combine both the praise and the dismissal into a single proclamation. Only one has a response by the penitent, namely the word *Amen*.

In the first option, the word *suffering* has been changed to *evil*; the word *heal* has been changed to *remedy*; and the word *holiness* has been changed to *grace*. In the third option, the word *sins* has been changed to *iniquity* and *forgotten* has been changed to *blotted out*. Although these changes are not drastic, neither are the words synonymous. Each offer a certain nuance that might convey a greater or lesser meaning to the ear of the penitent. For example, to hear that God has forgotten my sins (cf. Jeremiah 31:34) offers a very different image



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To ensure the solemnity of the rite, the parish celebration of Form II, Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution, should engage the liturgical ministries of reader, music, and hospitality.

of God’s tenderness and mercy than the image of God blotting out my sins.

THE PRIEST CONFESSOR

The Church’s ministry of reconciliation is exercised through the person of the priest in the ritual celebration of the sacrament of penance. The priest “exercises a paternal office when receiving a penitent sinner and leading him (her) to the light of truth, revealing the heart of the Father to people and displaying the image of Christ the Shepherd” (10c).

The images of a fatherly figure and of a (good) Shepherd seem to clash with that of the judge (10a) who pronounces a sentence (6b). The very first rubric should be the best guide for the priest, both in the initial greeting and for the duration of the celebration. If the priest begins the rite “with kindness” using “friendly words,” it seems natural that he would maintain this friendly demeanor and gentle attitude throughout the celebration.



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A homily can provide the assembly with a walk-through of the *Order of Penance*.

LENTEN CELEBRATIONS OF PENANCE

In the liturgical tradition of the Church, the season of Lent has been marked with a penitential character. The music, the liturgical orations, the passages of Scripture, the homilies, the vesture, and the liturgical environment all compose a Lenten tapestry that reflects the call to reconciliation and conversion.

The whole Church is called to engage in the penitential exercises of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, with a special emphasis given to the sacrament of penance. Communal celebrations of the sacrament, using Form II, Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution, are a common practice for most parishes. The *Order of Penance* offers a variety of options for the Scripture readings, the examination of conscience, and the accompanying prayers. The ministries of hospitality, reader, and music should be engaged to give the celebration a suitable solemnity.

The only change in the revised translation for Form II of the *Order of Penance*, apart from those noted previously in Form I, is the addition of more verses for the psalms (133–147), which are included in chapter 4, “Various Texts to Be Used in the Celebration of Reconciliation.” This change allows liturgy preparers and musicians to choose all or part of the psalm for the celebration. The revised *Order of Penance* retains the two examples for penitential services during Lent (5–19).

This revised translation of the *Order of Penance* continues the noble work of the Church in her ministry of reconciliation, and in her role as an instrument of the abundant mercy of God for all who desire to renew their hearts and live in harmony with their brothers and sisters in Christ. ♦

Priest confessors could easily develop one or more types of greeting that would put every penitent at ease when they approach. Similarly, priests could commit to memory several Scripture passages that could be used during the rite. He could vary the choice of these passages depending on the age or gender of the penitent. The rubrics suggest that the penance that is assigned should in some way relate to the sins that are confessed so that the penitent can make satisfaction for his (her) sins and amend the situations of his (her) life that sin has fractured.

Although most priests know the rite by heart, not every penitent follows the order of the rite in quite the same way. It would be helpful for worship aids to be available. This could take the form of a simple, easy-to-read card that both confessor and penitent can follow. Although the “proclamation of praise of God and the dismissal” have been part of the rite for many years, it may be the least familiar part of the rite. A printed copy of this brief dialogue would be helpful. Initially, the priest may want a copy of the newly translated absolution as well.

The implementation of the new translation of the *Order of Penance* provides a good opportunity for parish-wide catechesis. One form would be to distribute a worship aid for the sacrament to every parishioner at the Sunday liturgies. The homily for that Sunday could be a “walk through” of the rite, using the guide as a way to renew familiarity with the ritual dialogue and to encourage parishioners to seek out the profound gift of God’s tender mercy in the sacrament of penance.

Notes

1. Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship 1973.
2. CSL, 51.

REV. J. PHILIP HORRIGAN is a presbyter of the Archdiocese of Kingston, Ontario, a liturgical design consultant, and the former director of the Department for Art and Architecture for the Archdiocese of Chicago.

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