

The matter of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the acts of the penitent, namely, his or her sorrow for sins committed, confession of all serious sins committed since the last celebration of the sacrament, and fulfillment of the acts of penance suggested by the minister of the sacrament.¹ The form of the sacrament is the action of the Church; namely, the priest's words of absolution. The moment of the sacrament is when the two come together.

There are three main forms of the sacrament in use in the Church today: (1) individual confession to a priest, (2) a communal penance service with individual confession to a priest, and (3) a communal service with general absolution. The least used form of the sacrament—and most restricted—is the communal service with general absolution. This form is used only in extreme circumstances and in emergency situations, such as during a major disaster, for soldiers in battle, when one would otherwise be unable to confess for a time as long as a month, or when the number of priests available is clearly inadequate. Whatever ritual is used, it must signify conversion, repentance, and reconciliation.

There are two forms in use for individual confession. One is a short form in which the penitent confesses his or her sins and receives absolution from the priest. The longer form usually contains these elements:

1. Greetings exchanged
2. God's mercy expressed in Scripture readings
3. Reflection and dialogue on the Scripture
4. Confession of sins
5. Spiritual direction toward conversion
6. Penance given and absolution pronounced
7. Final exchange of peace and dismissal

Why Reconciliation Is a Sacrament

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a sacrament because it is a solemn, public, official act of the Church signifying and effecting the conversion and reconciliation of a sinner. It is a celebration because the whole community of the Church (in the person of a priest, a small group assembled officially, or a parish, a diocese, and so forth) welcomes the alienated person back into the community. It is an act of worship because, through the sacrament, people acknowledge their failures to cooperate in God's plan for their destiny and their willingness to become reconciled to God and to the people of God.

1. Not-so-serious sins need not be confessed, though they may be. The common form of reconciliation for the common sins all Catholics commit is the Penitential Rite at the beginning of Mass.

Penitent

One who is sorry; one who confesses guilt and seeks forgiveness.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a sacrament of God's mercy in the world.

—Richard McBrien

Essential Elements of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Contrition
Confession
Absolution
Satisfaction