

CHAPTER 5

REPENTANCE: THE MYSTERY OF FORGIVENESS

The mystery of the Eucharist follows, at the beginning of the life in Christ, after the mysteries of baptism and chrismation; it perfects the unity with Christ of those who have entered into the Church. As the Christian life continues, however, the Eucharist usually follows after the mystery of confession because this strengthens anew the union with Christ in the one who, through his sins, has created a distance or a division between himself and Christ. Through confession the believer leaves this separation behind. If someone were to never commit a single sin after baptism, or were able to fully develop the powers given to him at baptism, for him the Eucharist could be imparted without the sacrament of confession; in this case, the Eucharist's only purpose would be to unite such a person more and more closely to Christ or to continually nourish his life from Christ. But given that there is no man who does not sin or who develops completely the powers imparted to him at the outset (in baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist), the Eucharist is distributed after a confession of sins and unfulfilled duties has been made, and after these sins have been forgiven through the mystery of repentance.

The sacrament of confession, or of repentance, consists in the forgiveness of the sins—visibly by the bishop or priest, and invisibly by Christ—of those who confess these sins and do penance for them.

A. The Institution of the Mystery and Its Practice from the Beginning of the Church

We know that Christ instituted this mystery because He Himself celebrated it and was the first to impart the forgiveness of sins to certain persons, and because He also gave the power of forgiving sins to His disciples and to their successors.

Christ was indeed the first to celebrate this mystery, through the forgiveness of sins that He accorded to numerous people who confessed their faith in Him and sought His help, thereby implicitly confessing their sins and accepting His urging to sin no more. In the majority of cases, it was through the touch of His hand, or by means of some material object that He had touched with His hand, that Christ imparted the grace of healing and, implicitly, of the forgiveness of sins. All such cases occurred within the context of a direct personal relationship with the sick person: the material object was placed in contact with the body of the sick person, or power radiated out from the body of Christ, or the sick person came or was physically brought close to Christ, or He spoke a word that was full of His divine power (cf. Matt 9:20–22; 9:25; 9:28–29; 8:31–32; etc.).

Around the time of His Ascension into Heaven, given that it would no longer be possible to visibly impart the forgiveness of sins, Christ gave power to His disciples to grant this forgiveness. He gave them this power when He imparted to them the Holy Spirit, and this power is, properly speaking, His own power at work in them. Hence the forgiveness granted by His disciples and their successors is granted by Christ Himself; that is, it is a forgiveness granted in heaven. “And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:22–23). This is a power that Jesus had promised to His disciples earlier, and He had prepared them for this gift: “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18). We must understand the following words of St. John Chrysostom in the sense that the one who grants forgiveness through priests is Christ Himself: “And what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants . . . For they have been conducted to this dignity as if

they were already translated to Heaven, and had transcended human nature, and were released from the passions to which we are liable."¹ That is, the priests themselves have been taken up to heaven and have united their judgment with the judgment of Christ in an atmosphere totally free from the influence of the passions and human esteem; they have given over all judgment to Christ so that He can express His judgment through them.

Christ demonstrated the potency of this manifestation of His power through other persons even while He was on this earth, as, for example, when He healed persons at a distance through other persons who stood in direct relationship with Him (as the Syro-Phoenician woman in Matt 15:28). But the special and permanent power to forgive sins Christ gave to His disciples and their successors, and not to all who had come into contact with Him; He did this through a verifiably objective act so that it could be seen that they were not arrogating to themselves control over Christ's power simply through their own will.

Only persons chosen by Christ in an objectively verifiable manner, as the apostles were chosen, can possess and exercise the power of Christ with seriousness—and can be taken seriously by others in their exercise of it—because in this way both those who were chosen and the others possess an objective guarantee that the former have indeed been chosen by Christ. They possess this guarantee in the fact that those chosen have been revealed as such by the Holy Spirit through an act of consecration celebrated in the Church and guaranteed by the Church, through the invocation of this same Holy Spirit by a bishop—himself acting in the character of a person who was also consecrated within the Church—and so on, all the way back to the apostles. This is the only way that there can be any objective verification that a man has not simply taken upon himself Christ's power to forgive sins. It is the only way to prevent challenges to the authority of those persons whom Christ chooses, in a verifiable way, to exercise this power, and it is the only way to prevent unverifiable claims on the part of certain persons that they have received this power from Christ. For otherwise, all the faithful could claim that they were invested with the power of forgiveness. In that case, however, mutual forgiveness could degenerate into an exercise of mutual complaisance. How would it be possible to distinguish between those of the faithful who took the exercise of

this act seriously and those who did not, or who, indeed, made this act the basis for complaisance or resentment?

In their relationship with Christ and the Church, the persons objectively chosen to exercise this power of forgiveness receive it on one hand from Christ; on the other hand, they receive it within the context of an act celebrated in and guaranteed by the Church. In other words, they receive it through the agency of another person, himself chosen in an act celebrated within the Church through the Church's prayer and liturgical order, and therefore through a person who has been guaranteed by the ecclesial community, in communion with all the other ecclesial communities. The selection of a person of this type is thus an act of the Holy Spirit but also an act of the Church; or rather, the Holy Spirit is at work within a visible act celebrated in the Church or by the Church. The acts celebrated by a person consecrated in this way have the quality of acts of Christ, through the fact that they have the endorsement of the Church. *In her character as the body of Christ, filled with Christ, the Church is the visible milieu in which and through which Christ chooses certain persons whom He invests with His power so that, through them, He Himself can exercise this power.*

The mystery of the forgiveness of sins by the bishops or priests of the Church has been practiced since the beginning of the Church. The case of Ananias and Sapphira proves, by way of exception, the rule of confessing sins before the apostles (Acts 5:3). It is true that in the Epistle of James the following counsel is given: "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (Jas 5:16). But this text, as is evident, does not say that the faithful are freed from their sins through this mutual confession. For this, there must be forgiveness from God, and only the bishop or priest, because he is chosen and sent by God, can offer this forgiveness. Through their mutual confession and through the prayers that they offer for one another, the faithful are healed only of the weaknesses that lead them into the sins that they have also revealed in confession. Moreover, in the Church a mutual forgiveness is also practiced among the believers; this leads to their spiritual growth, but it is only a precondition to God's bestowal of the final forgiveness (see, for example, the Our Father, Matt 6:12 and Luke 11:4; and the Parable of the Two Debtors, Matt 18:23-35). In any case, in the verses immediately preceding the text cited above, St.

James had already shown that the absolution of sins occurs through the prayer of the priests (Jas 5:14–15).

There are numerous testimonies that, already from the beginning of the Church, all three major components of this mystery were practiced: confession of sins before a priest, repentance for these sins, and forgiveness granted by the priest.²

Referring to the confession of sins, the *Epistle of Barnabas* tells the Christian, “Confess your sins” (chap. 19). Clement of Rome says the same: “For it is better that a man should acknowledge his transgressions than that he should harden his heart,”³ and also makes mention of the priest’s role in receiving the confession and in imposing a penance in consequence of it. By using the singular, these disciples of the apostles show that they are talking about an individual confession on the part of sinners, not a confession made in common. In the period immediately following that of the apostles, both St. Ignatius of Antioch⁴ and St. Irenaeus⁵ also speak of the confession of sins.

In the third century, Tertullian likens the confession of sins to the showing of wounds or lesions to a doctor.⁶ Those who do not reveal their wounds because of shame die by being eaten away by them.⁷ “I give no place to bashfulness when I am a gainer by its loss.”⁸

St. Cyprian concerned himself extensively with the confession of sins before the priest, with repentance for sin, and with the forgiveness imparted by the priest. He too saw in the priest a spiritual physician, and he places great emphasis on the need for the confession of sins before the bishop or priest and for the cleansing of these sins before the reception of Holy Communion. He speaks of those who, facing the danger of death, must cleanse themselves of their sins immediately: “If they should be seized with any misfortune and peril of sickness, [they] should, without waiting for my presence [as bishop], before any presbyter who might be present . . . be able to make confession of their sin, that, with the imposition of hands upon them for repentance, they should come to the Lord with the peace which the martyrs have desired.”⁹ This Holy Father asks for the individual confession of sins so that the priests can make a correct judgment about the condition of those who are confessing and about the penance they must impose.¹⁰ He urges those who want to obtain forgiveness from the priest that instead of trying to obtain forgiveness by means of coercion or deception, they open their hearts so “that their

breasts, covered over with the darkness of sins, may acknowledge the light of repentance."¹¹

Origen too understands the confession of sins to a priest as the revelation of spiritual wounds to a physician so that they can be healed by the penance that the priest will prescribe for them. "For the chief of physicians was he who was able to heal every disease and every illness; His disciples Peter and Paul and the prophets too are also doctors like those who, after the apostles, have been placed in the Church and to whom has been entrusted the discipline of healing the wounds; it was the will of God that they be physicians of souls in His Church."¹² The existence of individual confession before the bishop (hence also before the priest) and of absolution by the bishop is also attested in the third century, in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which constitutes the basic text for books 1 and 2 of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, composed a little later. The *Apostolic Constitutions* instructs the bishop,

Do not pass the same sentence for every sin, but one suitable to each crime, distinguishing various kinds of offenses with much prudence, the great from the little. Treat a wicked action in one manner, and a wicked word in another; a bare intention still otherwise. So also in the case of a contemptuous word or suspicion. And some you should curb by threatenings alone; some you should punish with fines to the poor; some you should mortify with fastings; and others you should separate according to the greatness of their distinct crimes.¹³

This separation means exclusion from Holy Communion, from the communion with Christ and hence from the communion with the rest of the faithful (excommunication).

B. The Constitutive Elements or Stages of the Mystery

The constitutive elements of the mystery are *the confession of sins, repentance* for these, and *absolution by the priest*. Even the confession of sins, however, cannot be looked upon as an act of the penitent in isolation from the priest, and his repentance must take concrete form in the fulfillment of certain deeds recommended by the priest. Thus the role of the priest is not reduced to the simple enunciation of an absolution at the end but is exercised throughout the whole unfolding of the mystery.

i. The Confession of Sins and Its Spiritual Value

This mystery may be said to be a mystery of intimate and sincere communication between the penitent and the priest, or even a mystery of the communion between them. In it the priest penetrates into the soul of the penitent, who opens himself up to the priest voluntarily; the nature of their contact does not remain superficial and transient. Both the penitent's contribution and that of the priest are much greater in this sacrament. In the other mysteries grace works on the plane of the objective, the ontic, at the roots of being itself, but often in a manner not perceptible to the senses. In this sacrament grace works through a more thorough and vibrant commitment on the part of the penitent, through confession and repentance, and then, on the part of the priest, in the assessment of the means that he recommends for the spiritual healing of the penitent's sickness; finally, grace works through the penitent's contribution when he complies with these recommendations. The need for a deeper commitment is explained by the fact that, whereas through the mysteries of baptism and chrismation, the sins of the sacrament's recipient were forgiven by means of a simple confession of faith and a pledge to abide in this faith and in the commandments of Christ, the mystery of repentance is celebrated in the case of someone who has proved that he has not cooperated with the grace of baptism. He thus has a greater guilt and proves that some sickness or weakness has befallen him that can lead him, even after baptism, to new lapses. In order to be healed, he therefore must explain the reasons why he has fallen and what his weaknesses are. Then, through contrition and his promise to not sin again, he must show a much more decisive commitment to struggle against those weaknesses that have already proved themselves capable of easily triumphing over his nature. The purpose of this mystery makes it evident that for persons who fall back again and again into the same grave sins, the means of remedying their weaknesses must be applied with greater and greater strictness. Otherwise, the mystery does not have the effect of providing a person with lasting remedies, and so does not again make him into a truly new man.

For this reason, the penitent in this sacrament does not merely make a general confession of faith or an unspecified commitment to a new life in Christ; he also reveals the deepest parts of his soul in their inability to offer a firm resistance to sins. He reveals the weaknesses

that have led him into sin and that have developed even more as a consequence of his sin. The priest, moreover, is required to discern the weaknesses that underlie the sins known to mankind, as well as those that are unknown, together with these particular sins. In this way the penitent manifests a confidence in the priest of a kind shown to no other man, and from the priest he expects counsel, help, and absolution. Hence the priest must follow the confession attentively and truly penetrate into the soul of the one who opens himself up to the priest, who is thus able to give counsel and help appropriate to the weaknesses that have been revealed. Alongside his authority as the visible representative of God, and a considerable moral authority, the priest is also expected to possess a good knowledge of the manner in which the different human weaknesses can be cured.

Moreover, by means of the questions he asks, the priest must help and guide the penitent to move toward what is essential in his confession, so that the penitent—either intentionally or simply by not knowing what the important questions are—does not wander from the main path. It is quite possible for the penitent to get lost in a tide of sentimental and irrelevant words by which he covers up to a great extent his true sins and weaknesses, and so he goes away unhealed and lacking the recommendations necessary to produce his healing. Human beings cannot cure themselves by their own help alone, whether their tendency is on one hand to minimize their weaknesses because of their superficiality, or on the other hand to exaggerate them because of an overly scrupulous conscience. Nor can they be helped by simply anybody who comes along. Out of the wrong kind of concern to be helpful, some of their friends will want to make light of these weaknesses, whereas others will exaggerate them still more. Even those who have a rich psychological or psychiatric awareness cannot help them in the same way as a priest can, because a person also needs to confide in a divine help that, in the search for healing, can make use of all the efforts of his will.

From beginning to end, this mystery occurs between two persons within a relationship of intimacy. And this relationship is eased for the penitent because the priest presents himself to the penitent as someone who speaks to him in the name of the Lord, and the priest speaks as much with the forgiving love of God that causes the penitent not to despair as with that seriousness that keeps him from making light of

the penitent's weaknesses. In the confession phase, the penitent reveals his own mystery (or secret) to the priest in a way he does to no one else, and the priest comes to know the man's mystery exclusively. On his part the penitent knows that the priest will not tell this mystery to anyone else. Even from this point of view, therefore, a mystery takes place between the two of them. Simultaneously, a profound and intimate spiritual bond—one that is completely exceptional—comes into being between the two of them. Only the priest can truly know the penitent, for only to him has the penitent revealed himself with all sincerity, knowing that the priest will never laugh at his weaknesses or divulge them or even show surprise at hearing the man's most serious deviations from the good. We could say that the two are linked in a unique kind of friendship; their souls touch and vibrate in this contact with what is most serious and intimate within themselves. Together with the priest, the penitent realizes the greatest communion that can be realized with a fellow human being. Here is a new reason for thinking that this mystery is the mystery of a communion like no other: it is the mystery of reestablishing full communion between a believer and the priest as the visible instrument of Christ and as the representative of the Church. Hence it is the mystery of bringing the penitent into communion with Christ and the Church, of preparing him for his communion with the body of Christ. No man other than the priest in the mystery of confession can fill the role of intermediary in this more extended communion with the rest of humanity and with God.

But the intimacy brought about between priest and penitent, while they are still in this phase of confession, is not of a spiritual nature only, for into it enters an air of unusual gravity: the will of the penitent to return to purity, and of the priest to be of real help to him. Such gravity is founded on the consciousness that in this relationship Christ Himself is invisibly present but transparent and perceived in a mystical way. It is Christ Himself who seeks to help them in this intention of theirs, Christ before whom both of them feel responsible, or united through their response. The penitent has confidence in the priest precisely because he feels in him that responsibility before Christ for his own soul; he feels that the priest is listening in the name of Christ and has a real power to help that comes to him from Christ. And this in turn makes the penitent open up his own soul and reveal his sins and weaknesses with full sincerity, seriousness,

and repentance. Christ Himself is active in this mystery through the encounter of both of these intimate inner worlds that have reached a high degree of sensitivity.

The penitent's act of confessing with trust, seriousness, and repentance is itself an effect of Christ's activity. For the penitent does not reveal all his sins to other men, or he reveals only some of them, and then often with a kind of bravado. Because Christ is at work through the vibrant and serious intimacy established between priest and penitent, this mystery causes them to make a leap from the plane of the soul to the divine plane, where the Holy Spirit is active. For this reason, the priest is called the *duhovnic* ("spiritual father") in this sacrament, and his activity in it is a spiritual (*duhovnicească*) activity.

The spiritual space of the mystery when it is celebrated with this degree of seriousness has become, or has begun to become, a space of holiness that will have a real effect upon the reformation of the penitent. The priest will exercise the activity of spiritual fatherhood especially in directing the penitent toward a life of contrition or repentance, which he must fulfill if he is to be healed from the wounds of his sins.

The fact that the priest works as the visible instrument of Christ and as the representative of the Church does not diminish his responsibility and hence his capacity to experience a personal communion between himself and the penitent in Christ. On the contrary, his responsibility becomes more acute to the degree that he becomes more conscious of being the visible instrument of Christ.

In the course of the confession, the penitent transcends in a certain degree the sin, or the power of his sin, precisely because of this communion between two responsibilities that co-penetrate one another. The more sinful the penitent, the more vibrant the priest's responsibility to win back the person's soul, the greater his compassion for the sinner, and the more acutely he experiences the obligation to have him return to the path of salvation. This in turn awakens a sharper responsibility for sin in the penitent himself. The reality of Christ's presence between the two is suggested by the fact that the priest hears the confession of the penitent before the icon of Christ, and that after the introductory prayers he says to the penitent, "My spiritual child, Christ stands here invisibly receiving your confession made in humbleness. Therefore, do not be ashamed, nor be afraid, nor hide from me anything of what you have done, but tell me everything without any doubt or timidity,

so that you may obtain forgiveness from our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁴ The priest seeks to elicit from the penitent a total sincerity, for the sinner makes his confession not just before a human being who can be deceived, someone before whom the confession might be considered a humiliation unbecoming to human pride, but in a special way before Christ Himself.

Often today, people are ashamed to divulge their sins, or they think it ignoble to humiliate themselves in this way before a priest. Yet these same people will on one hand often feel the need to unburden their consciences to someone, whereas on the other hand they realize that the priest inspires in them a particular trust through the great responsibility he bears before Christ and through the humility with which he listens to them, never considering himself better than the penitent. In fact, the priest disappears behind the figure of Christ, placing Christ before the conscience of the penitent as the supreme tribunal before whom no man feels humiliated, an authority who is at the same time the Person with the most understanding and forgiving love for our human helplessness, the one who prayed even for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him.

But why is the confession of sins a necessary condition for their forgiveness? Tertullian had already observed that the Lord does not ask for the confession of sins because He would be ignorant of them otherwise but because their confession is a sign of real contrition and it increases contrition,¹⁵ because at the same time it is a sign of trust in God and in the priest who represents God.

The Lord rejoices in confession because it is the beginning of the communion into which the penitent enters once again with Christ, and because he enters in the company of a man who presents himself before God in Christ's name. The penitent thus recovers a spiritual humility or tenderness and is embarrassed by his sin and by having grieved the Lord. This is a tenderness utterly opposed to the hardness of heart that marks the impulse toward sin, which is careless or desperate selfishness. The penitent returns therefore to the capacity for pure communion with his fellow human beings. He makes the first act toward an exodus from the proud and individualistic prison within himself, from the neglect and spiritual insensitivity that have held him captive outside of this communion. The confession itself raises him up as a human person, inasmuch as it includes humble

contrition for the sins confessed and the will to free himself from the mastery of sin.

Through confession the penitent makes the first act toward being raised up above sin, and in this he is aided by the introductory prayers, by the encouragement of the priest, and even by his own questions. The priest helps the penitent during the whole time of the confession by encouraging the confession itself, by not showing any eagerness to know more, and by not making any unpleasant sign of particular surprise that might serve to curb the penitent's impulse toward making his confession. Neither should the priest show any kind of carelessness, spiritual absence, boredom, or haste, but rather a strongly human understanding that does, however, seek to create and sustain the state of contrition in the penitent. By his face the priest must show that the sins that have been mentioned do not create a situation in which the penitent should despair, but he must also show that they should not be taken lightly.

The penitent must be helped to truly repent of his sins, for through repentance the door to forgiveness is opened for him. Repentance gives him a hope that is guaranteed by the authority of Christ, as well as the help he needs so that he himself can overcome his sins and weaknesses.

The spiritual father makes himself sensitive to the sins of the penitent in order to awaken the penitent's sensitivity and help it grow, thereby giving him the power to lift himself up out of his sins. Together with Christ, who lowered Himself to the level of man's powerlessness, the priest also descends, but in a descent that empowers. In order to bring about this opportunity to deepen his sensitivity and contrition, Christ asks that the penitent confess his sins, with the help of the spiritual father. He is also asked to confess so that he may receive the power to take a further step toward overcoming his weaknesses, as Tertullian says.

The force of sin that is lodged in the penitent's weaknesses, a force that has become like a second nature to him, is not something that can be dissolved, however, by an emotional experience lasting a quarter of an hour or a little longer, depending on the length of the confession. If this power of sin is to be dismantled, the emotional experience hostile to sin must take concrete form in deeds and attitudes opposed to these weaknesses, in order to weaken the habits they have created and form other habits within the person's nature. At this point, the phase of con-

fession comes to an end, and there begins the phase of the penitent's repentance; this phase helps him to develop his contrition and regret for the sins committed and to deepen his decision to sin no more.

ii. The *Epitimia* (Penances) Recommended by the Priest

In recommending these deeds and attitudes, the priest's role becomes of primary importance. If, when he was hearing the confession, the priest exercised the role of an understanding friend, mixed with that of a judge and physician who assays the nature and gravity of the various things confessed to him, now he exercises the double role of judge and physician who weighs the appropriate means for healing the underlying weaknesses that have come to light. He is a judge not in the sense of someone who hands down sentences but in the sense of someone who comes to make decisions—lovingly and for the good of the penitent, and with all the skill of a spiritual doctor—about the worth of the means appropriate to the person's healing. This judicial activity is simply the work of appraisal placed at the service of the work of the physician.

The priest prescribes a "canon" or "*epitimia*"; that is, he applies the canons prescribed for different kinds of sins, canons whose purpose is not to punish but to heal the penitent. In this phase of the mystery, the indispensability of the priest becomes even more obvious due to the simple fact that the penitent cannot prescribe for himself his own medicine, nor can anyone else who is a mere fellow Christian do this with the authority needed to insure that the prescribed remedy is carried through to completion. These medicines must be given to the penitent in the name of the Lord, who is represented by a person different from the penitent himself and who, having been chosen by Christ, bears the authority of the Lord, particularly that of indicating which remedies correspond to the will of Christ. If the penitent himself, or simply any other person, were to prescribe these, he might be either too indulgent or too severe in the choice of means that he recommended. Through his spiritual reading, his observation of the different spiritual processes, and his experience, the spiritual father is expected to have a formation that allows him not only to give the most effective counsels with a certain degree of assurance but also to persuade the penitent about their worth so that the latter will let himself be persuaded to follow them.

The tradition of the Church knows no unforgivable sins. The Savior's words "If you forgive the sins of any" (John 20:23) have been understood to apply universally, and the Fathers, especially Hermas¹⁶ and Augustine,¹⁷ consider that all sins are forgiven through this mystery. The Apostle Paul forgives the incestuous Corinthian (1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Cor 2:7), subjecting him first to an *epitimia*, and the Apostle John brought back to repentance a young man who had become the leader of a band of brigands and was guilty of all manner of crimes.¹⁸ According to the testimony of St. Irenaeus, certain women who had been seduced into unchastity by the Gnostic Marcus were received back at a public confession,¹⁹ while Dionysius of Corinth declares that all who return must be received back, regardless of any sin or heresy of any kind.²⁰

The Church condemned the Montanists, who disputed the Church's right to forgive those guilty of murder, adultery, or idolatry; and also the Novatianists, who thought that not only were these sins unforgivable but all grave sins—and indeed, according to some historians, even lesser sins. The Church likewise condemned the Donatists, who affirmed at the time of the persecutions that the *traditores* (those who had betrayed the faith) were not to be forgiven.

Although in the Gospel of Matthew (12:31-32) blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is said to be something that will never be forgiven, or in the First Epistle of John (5:16) the distinction is made between those sins which are mortal and those which are not mortal, the former are to be understood as the hardening of heart in those who do not wish to repent of their sins.²¹ In the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:4-10 and 10:26-29), there are harsh words for those who, knowing Christ and having received His grace in baptism, have fallen away completely from Him; hence stress is laid on how difficult it will be for them to be renewed once they have grown used to not taking Christ seriously (they have "trampled the Son of God underfoot," Heb 10:29). Nevertheless, the possibility of forgiveness is still admitted, for even the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:12) acknowledges the possibility of a certain delay in the fulfillment of Christ's will.

Although all sins are forgiven through this mystery, the reception of Holy Communion, however, is deferred in the case of grave sins in which there is no evidence of a contrition that matches the gravity of the sins committed, and in which the penitent has not first demon-

strated such contrition through his deeds or sought healing for the weaknesses that were created in him in the wake of these sins, weaknesses that will cause their repetition. The obligation to no longer commit grave sins already confessed must be demonstrated through contrary attitudes and deeds and through various reparations. The priest requires all these based on the words of the Savior, who declared that it is not enough that someone promise God that he will henceforth live his life as a gift dedicated to Him, but rather that, having made this promise, he is to first go and be reconciled with his accuser (Matt 5:23–25).

Hence, even from the earliest times the Church established a time of penance in order to curb and heal the consequences of certain grave sins, such as homicide (including abortion), the unchastity of the unmarried, adultery, apostasy and heresy, and serious misappropriations of the goods of others in different open and violent forms (robbery, commercial fraud, usury, exploitation of the weak, etc.).

The spiritual father is only able to absolve the penitent or else to find that he cannot yet be absolved until he has freed himself inwardly from the bonds of his sin and opened himself to the possibility of a communion between himself and the Church, between himself and Christ. This too is an act of complete faith in Christ and in the Church. Hence, as at baptism and the Eucharist, the penitent is asked about his faith, because someone who is outside the Church cannot be received either to the Eucharist or to the mystery of repentance, which is a necessary precondition to receiving the Eucharist.

In the light of this fact, we can understand why the Orthodox Church cannot accept *intercommunion*. The Eucharist is not only the imparting of the body of Christ in Communion but also, in a special way, the common offering of the sacrifice on the part of those who partake of Communion. This, however, implies that they too are offering themselves as a sacrifice in Christ. For this to happen, they must be wholly identified with Christ and with one another in faith. Hence before the offering of the sacrifice, the community confesses its faith “with one mind” and on this basis shows forth its unity in love. And after the Creed the priest says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”²² Those who offer sacrifice are already within the communion of faith and hence within the communion of the Holy Spirit, on

the basis of their communion in faith. The penitent himself must be reestablished in this communion so that he can take part in the offering of Christ's sacrifice, of which he partakes by Communion.

The community also attests that this penitent, by his own will, has set himself outside the communion of the Church. It accepts this situation with pain, until the person in question provides proofs on his part that he has indeed, and in a stable way, broken with these sins and so has reestablished inwardly his communion with Christ. This is how the Church defends herself against the disintegrating effects that someone whose actions work to destroy her unity might have upon her. Thus even the spiritual father requires the penitent to carry out certain deeds by which the covenant of faith and moral life can be reestablished with the community of the Church.

The Church has set up this "penitential discipline" on the basis of the New Testament passages cited above and more clearly on I Corinthians 5:9–12:

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?

Thus the priest works also in the name of the community through the mystery of repentance, which implicitly gives him its assent, as it does to all his acts.

The role of the means that the priest prescribes for the healing of those with grave sins shows itself not only in the fact that the *epitimia* are adapted to the number and kind of the sins, to the situation and capacity of each penitent, but also in that they can be abbreviated when the priest observes in the penitent a special zeal to break inwardly with the habit of sin, or when the penitent is threatened by the approach of death. Whereas St. Basil the Great prescribes a separation from the Eucharist for a period of seven years for fornication, of fifteen years for adultery, and of twenty years for murder, canon 102 of the Council of

Trullo asks that the rigorous application of the older canons be carried out only in extreme cases:

It behooves those who have received from God the power to loose and bind, to consider the quality of the sin and the readiness of the sinner for conversion, and to apply medicine suitable for the disease, lest if he is injudicious in each of these respects he should fail in regard to the healing of the sick man. For the disease of sin is not simple, but various and multiform, and it germinates many mischievous offshoots, from which much evil is diffused, and it proceeds further until it is checked by the power of the physician. Wherefore he who professes the science of spiritual medicine ought first of all to consider the disposition of him who has sinned, and to see whether he tends to health or (on the contrary) provokes to himself disease by his own behavior, and to look how he can care for his manner of life during the interval. And if he does not resist the physician, and if the ulcer of the soul is increased by the application of the imposed medicaments, then let him mete out mercy to him according as he is worthy of it. For the whole account is between God and him to whom the pastoral rule has been delivered, to lead back the wandering sheep and to cure that which is wounded by the serpent; and that he may neither cast them down into the precipices of despair, nor loosen the bridle towards dissolution and astringency, or by greater softness and mild medicines, to resist this sickness and exert himself for the healing of the ulcer, now examining the fruits of his repentance and wisely managing the man who is called to higher illumination. For we ought to know two things, namely, the things which belong to strictness and those which belong to custom.²³

The later Fathers proceeded to shorten in important ways the time for excluding penitents from Holy Communion. Thus “Theodore the Studite knows of no *epitimia* that continue for longer than three years, and it is only when confronted with sinners who are not repentant that it is necessary to have recourse to the rigorous ancient canons [namely, those of Basil the Great].”²⁴ John the Faster, who according to some was the patriarch of Constantinople at the end of the sixth century and according to others an ordained monk of the eleventh century,²⁵ reduces the *epitimia* for sins of fornication to a period of two to three years for those under thirty years of age and to three to four years for

those older than thirty years.²⁶ Nevertheless, if these sins were not sins of unnatural vice, the period of the *epitimia* could be further shortened to a year or even half a year, obviously on condition that during this time the penitent ceased to commit these sins. In the case of those who retain their sins, the spiritual father also retains them. Killings (including abortions) and cases of incest receive *epitimia* of up to twelve or fifteen years.²⁷ Among the *epitimia* laid down by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, some are by nature reparations: "If a woman aborted her child, give her the canon [in addition to those of John the Faster] to feed a poor child, if she can afford it . . . Tell the murderer that, as the Holy Patriarch Athanasius and the Emperor Andronikos I Vlastares have established, he has to divide his wealth among his children and one part to give to the widow and to the poor children left behind. If the man who was murdered had none [wife or children], let him give that part as alms in memory of the murdered man's soul, and let him pray to God fervently so that the cry of the victim's blood for retribution may stop."²⁸

Today, when many people receive Communion only rarely, the fact of being excluded from Holy Communion for a year or two or even three is not felt to be effective as a penance. More effective is the insistence that a person abstain from committing the particular sins confessed and assume certain corresponding acts of reparation.

Because these recommendations are intended for the spiritual healing of the penitent, they too can be shortened or lengthened depending on whether the penitent performs them with zeal or displays an attitude of neglect toward them. Consequently, the spiritual father must maintain a spiritual connection or friendship with the penitent, and this friendship itself can be of great use to the latter.

It must also be noted that the effectiveness of the recommendations given by the spiritual father depends to a large degree on whether the spiritual father himself is living his life in conformity with them. He will not have the authority to demand these acts of abstinence and discipline from the penitent if he does not observe them himself. Hence the *Euchologion* gives the following advice to the spiritual father:

He who takes upon himself the difficult task of a confessor has the duty to be an image and example to all: abstinent, humble, eager to do good works, praying to God at all times to receive the word of understanding and knowledge so that he may be able to

bring those he shepherds to the right path. First of all he is to . . . fast on Wednesday and Friday throughout the year according to Church canons . . . so that on the basis of his good deeds, he can order others to do the same. For if he is without knowledge, is not abstinent, and is a lover of flattery, how can he teach others good deeds? Who would be so ignorant as to obey what he says when he himself is without order, or if he is a drunkard, how can he teach others not to become drunk? . . . He who is like this will be punished according to Church law as one who broke the divine canons. For not only did he damage himself, but also all those who confessed to him, because they remain unconfessed; everything that he bound or loosed is in fact not loosed, according to canons 6 and 43 of the Council of Carthage.²⁹

iii. The Absolution Given by the Priest to the Penitent

The third and last phase of the mystery is the *absolution from sin* proclaimed by the spiritual father. He asks Christ to free the penitent from his bonds, then adds his own absolution as well. This shows that the one who forgives the penitent at that moment is in fact Christ, but it is the priest's prayer that effectively makes present the forgiveness that comes from Christ. That Christ's forgiveness comes through the prayer of the priest shows simultaneously the humility and the necessity of the priest's position, for he is the one who says the prayer so that forgiveness may come about. The additional element of the priest's absolution is a kind of attestation, through the priest's prayer as authorized representative of the Church and visible instrument through whom Christ celebrates the mystery, that forgiveness has truly been granted by the Lord.

In this sacrament there is no further material element beyond the hand and the stole of the priest, which he lays upon the head of the penitent. The stole (*epitrachelion*) is a sign that the priest has been sent by Christ and the Church, and also a sign also of the responsibility that has been placed upon his shoulders. Through the body and liturgical vestment of the priest, the grace of Christ comes upon the penitent just as once it flowed through the body and the garments of the Lord to those who sought His help with faith. Ultimately, grace comes upon the recipient's being as much through the hand of the priest as it does through the material elements present in the other mysteries.

Nevertheless—given the exceptional spiritual interpenetration that occurs between spiritual father and the penitent in this mystery, an interpenetration where Christ Himself is present in the course of the penitent's confession and the priest's counsels to him—it may be possible to say that this intimate encounter itself constitutes the “matter” through which the Holy Spirit is at work in this sacrament. For because each of the two has opened himself up with exceptional warmth toward the other, the Spirit is present as the Spirit of communion, the Spirit who unites the two into one, sowing himself in them as a single Spirit. The hand and the *epitrachelion* of the priest laid upon the head of the penitent could then be the expression and visible crowning of that spiritual communion that has come about between them, a communion in which the priest is the instrument through whom the Spirit of Christ is present, whereas the penitent is the one within whom the Spirit of Christ penetrates. The mystery in general is here also shown to be the unity formed by two or more in Christ. It is also a mystery when two persons are united in marriage through the agency of the Holy Spirit who is invoked by the priest, for it is only in God that the many can be one.

Pavel Florensky, in his explanation of the Lord's words “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20), says, “‘Two’ is not ‘one plus one,’ but something essentially greater, something essentially more manifoldly significant and powerful. ‘Two’ is a new compound of spiritual chemistry, where ‘one plus one’ (the leaven and meal of the parable) is transformed qualitatively and forms a third thing (the leavened whole).”³⁰ In this new, higher quality, they come to know through experience the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, the mysteries of the love that unites. It is due to this fact that they can bind and loose.

The knowledge of mysteries, or, more particularly, the power to bind and to loose is again the co-asking of two who have agreed on earth as touching anything, i.e., of two who have fully humbled themselves the one before the other, who have fully overcome contra-dictions, contra-thoughts, and contra-feelings to reach consubstantiality the one with the other. Such co-asking is always fulfilled, says the Savior. Why is this so? It is because the gathering of two or more in the Name of Christ, the co-entering of people into the mysterious spiritual atmosphere

around Christ, communion with His grace-giving power transforms them into a new spiritual essence, makes of two a particle of the Body of Christ, a living incarnation of the Church . . . It is clear that Christ is then "in the midst of them." He is "in the midst of them" like a soul in the midst of every member of the body that it animates.³¹

It must be made clear that the encounter of the priest and the penitent has become an encounter in the name of the Lord, because the penitent recognizes the priest as the visible instrument of Christ; thus the covenant between them in Christ is facilitated by the presence of the priest. Accordingly, although the penitent, from where he stands in need of forgiveness, also participates in the prayer of forgiveness, the prayer of both finds its point of unity within the prayer of the priest and so is fulfilled as a priestly prayer with which the penitent is in agreement. In the priest's position as point of convergence, the primacy of Christ is manifested in this covenant or agreement. This primacy also manifests itself in the fact that forgiveness is imparted through the priest's declaration of absolution, accompanied by the placing of his hand and his *epitrachelion* upon the head of the penitent.