
Baptism, Penance, Eucharist: Sacraments of New Life, Repentance, and Communion

Sacraments in Relationship

It would be a mistake to consider the Eucharist just one of the seven sacraments. Rather, the Eucharist, as source and summit of the Church's life and the life of individual Christians, is unique among the sacraments.

The Eucharist is the Church's full celebration of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit. The other sacraments are particular forms of celebrating that paschal mystery and represent particular ways that it is applied in our lives—for example, in our confirmation for mission, our reception of God's merciful forgiveness, or our living the loving and life-giving covenant of marriage.

When we consider the great grace of repentance and reconciliation, we can clearly see a particular relationship among the three sacraments of Baptism, Penance, and Eucharist.

Baptism joins us to the dying and rising of Jesus and therefore to his Father and to one another (see Romans 6:3–4) as members of his Body, the Church (see Ephesians 4:4–6). It is important to remember that Baptism is also a sacrament of repentance and reconciliation because it sanctifies sinners. After Peter's stirring speech on the first Pentecost, people asked him what they ought to do to be saved. Peter responded, "Repent and be baptized *for the forgiveness of your sins*" (see Acts 2:14–39). This Baptism for repentance means that sins are forgiven, both original sin and personal sins, and that we stand in a reconciled relationship with God. We are in communion with the One who wants to share his life with us.

Penance has been called a second Baptism. It is the sacrament for those who, after Baptism, after being irrevocably claimed as God's own sons and daughters, have sinned and found themselves estranged from God and the Body of Christ, his Church. The sacrament of Penance renews the grace of repentance and restores

us to a reconciled relationship with God and his Church. It restores us to the communion with God and the Church established in Baptism. It also orients us to the Eucharist that makes present and real the fullness of communion and reconciliation given to us in the sacrificial death and life-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ. Clearly, these three sacraments, Baptism, Penance, and Eucharist, are integrally related as sacraments of new life, repentance, and communion in that life.

Briefly, Baptism brings us basic forgiveness, a turning around of our lives, and belonging to Jesus Christ and his Church. Penance depends on Baptism and re-awakens or enlivens the forgiveness and belonging that had their beginning in Baptism. At the same time, Penance enables our entrance into the culminating moment of communion that is the reality of the Eucharist, communion with the sacrifice of Christ and his Body the Church.

With this sense of the integral relationship of Baptism, Penance, and Eucharist as sacraments of new life, repentance, and communion, it may be helpful to focus more particularly on the Eucharist and repentance. How exactly does our repentance, our conversion of heart, our search and acceptance of God's forgiveness, relate to our participation in the Eucharist as communion in the sacrifice of Jesus and the life of his Body, the Church?

The Eucharist Presupposes Repentance

To share in the Body and Blood of the Lord, to participate in his sacrifice, to be linked at the deepest level of our lives with other believers in the mystery of God's redeeming love—all this assumes a converted heart that is capable of this holy communion. If we are truly estranged from God or our neighbor, we are incapable of communion until we repent and receive God's forgiveness. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "If, when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go

and make peace with your brother, and only then come back and offer your gift” (5:23–24). Similarly, Saint Paul writes, “. . . anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of desecrating the body and blood of the Lord. A man must test himself before eating his share of the bread and drinking from the cup. For he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the Body” (1 Corinthians 11:27–30). In light of these biblical injunctions, the Church teaches that those who are conscious of serious sin in their lives must first confess their sins in the sacrament of Penance and receive forgiveness before they receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist Includes Repentance and Forgiveness

There are many prayers in the Eucharistic liturgy that call on God’s mercy and forgiveness. They are prayers of repentance. For example, the opening Penitential Rite includes a calling to mind of our sins along with a call for God’s mercy, “Lord, have mercy,” or *Kyrie eleison*. The Gloria includes the words, “Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.” The proclamation of the Gospel is not only a call to repentance but a moment of forgiveness, as the priest’s personal prayer at the end of the Gospel indicates: “May the words of the Gospel wipe away our sins.” The Eucharistic Prayers repentantly turn to God and seek forgiveness: “Though we are sinners, we trust in your mercy and love. Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness.” The words of institution bring forgiveness to the forefront: “. . . the blood of the new and everlasting covenant . . . will be shed . . . so that sins

may be forgiven.” The Lord’s Prayer, the Lamb of God, and the “Lord, I am not worthy” in the communion rite all contain words of repentance and forgiveness.

Though it does not diminish the need for the sacrament of Penance, the Eucharist is an event of new life, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The Church teaches that through our participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, venial sins are forgiven.

Repentance, Reconciliation, and Communion: Fruits of the Eucharist

Our participation in the Eucharist, according to the teaching of the Church, enables us to avoid sin. In other words, the Eucharist gives us strength to lead a converted or transformed way of life. Our celebration of the Eucharist summons us in the course of daily life to a fuller communion with God and one another in the Body of Christ.

Saint Paul’s teaching forms the basis for these convictions. He writes in 1 Corinthians: “When we bless ‘the cup of blessing,’ is it not a means of sharing the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake” (1 Corinthians 10:16–17).

In the Eucharist, source and summit of the Church’s life and the life of individual believers, we find the culmination of our journey of repentance and communion. For here we find Christ who is our life and our peace.

These reflections are drawn in good measure from the work of Father Rinaldo Falsini, OFM, in his book *Penitenza e riconciliazione nella tradizione e nella riforma conciliare: riflessioni teologiche e proposte celebrative* (Milan: Ancora, 2003), especially pp. 88–104. This insert has been created in preparation for the implementation of the revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, which will take place in the Archdiocese of Chicago on the first Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2003. Copyright © 2003 Archdiocese of Chicago.
