

## UNIT TWO: HOW WE CELEBRATE

### LESSON 6: PENANCE: A Chance to Come Back to God

#### CONTENTS OF LESSON:

1. The Sacrament of Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) was initiated by Christ, when he gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins. It is like a 'plank of salvation' which God gives us after we make a shipwreck of our lives. [CCC 1441-2;1446]
2. The story of the Prodigal Son illustrates the steps of the Sacrament of Penance (CONTRITION, CONFESSION, PENANCE, ABSOLUTION) and brings out its deeper meaning:
  - i. The son left his father's house to seek freedom and happiness on his own. **SIN** is rejecting God and putting self before him. We stop trusting God and disobey him. [CCC 397-98]
  - ii. The son found himself alone, starving and miserable. The main **CONSEQUENCE OF SIN** is a break in our relationship with God. This leads to loss of inner peace and peace with others too. Finally, sin leads to death. [CCC 399-400]
  - iii. The son had a conversion of heart and decided to return to his father. We too need to experience **CONTRITION**: Sorrow and hatred of our sin and a determination to sin no more. Contrition also involves trust in God's mercy. [CCC 1431, 1451]
  - iv. The son confessed his sin to his father: **CONFESSION**. We too need to confess our sins to the priest. This helps us to face our sinfulness. After a good examination of conscience, we should confess *all* the sins we remember. Confession of mortal sins is necessary to receive Holy Communion. Confession of venial sins is also very beneficial. [CCC 1455-58]
  - v. The son returned to his father. **PENANCE** involves repairing the harm caused by our sin, to ourselves and others. It means expressing our inner repentance in concrete ways: reconciling with others, returning stolen goods, prayer, Bible reading, self-denial, accepting suffering for Christ etc. Sin leaves a mark on us which needs purification: penance helps to accomplish this. [CCC 1434-38; 1459-60; also 1473]
  - vi. The father embraced his son, dressed him and brought him into his house. God gladly grants us forgiveness. The priest gives us **ABSOLUTION** in the name of God. We are once more reconciled to God, ourselves, others and the Church. A good confession 'anticipates' final judgement so that we already pass 'from death to life.' [CCC 1468-70]
3. *Through this sacrament, Christ desires to heal us and give us new life. We make use of this gift by making a good confession and seeking to live a new life with the help of God.* [CCC 1484]



REFERENCES: John 15:11-24; 20:21-23; 1John1:8.

MATERIALS NEEDED: Handouts A & B; Bibles, slips of blank paper.

*NB. An additional handout has been included to help the students prepare for Confession. They should keep this to use for the recollection before Confirmation.*

#### I. STARTER:

- Today we are going to look at the Sacrament of Penance (It is also called Confession or Reconciliation). Do you have any doubts or questions about Confession? Write them down and we will try to answer them together at the end of the class.

*[Students write their questions on slips of paper. If they have more than one, they use a separate slip. The teacher adds some slips with the following questions:]*

1. *What is the use of going to Confession? I don't see any change in myself.*
2. *Why should I go to a priest? I can go directly to God.*
3. *I'm afraid the priest will tell my parents my sins.*
4. *I don't want the priest to have a bad impression of me.*
5. *I'm a good person. I have nothing to confess. Why should I go for Confession?*

*[The slips are placed in a box. Different students come forward and read the questions aloud. They are sorted into separate piles according to their similarity.]*

## II. DEVELOPMENT:

- Jesus wanted to make sure we understood what sin does to us, and how merciful God is, so he told the story of the Prodigal Son. Let's go through the story and see how it is connected to our story.

*[Distribute Handout A. Read the whole passage: Luke 15:11-24 aloud. Students read the verses for each section and attempt to complete the statements. The teacher also adds some comments:]*

1. The son left his father's house to seek freedom and happiness on his own. Maybe he did not trust his father or realize how good his life at home was.  
When we sin, we stop trusting God and reject him. We put ourselves first.
2. After wasting his fortune the son found himself alone, hungry, disgraced, miserable. *[Accept other adjectives]* When we sin we experience broken relationships: with God, within ourselves, and with others. Sin leads to spiritual death.
3. The turning point in the story came when the son realized his condition. The Bible says 'he came to himself). At the same time he remembered his father's house and how everyone there was happy and well-cared for. CONTRITION means to realize my sin, to hate it, and to be truly sorry for it. It means firmly deciding to stop sinning. At the same time, like the prodigal son, I hope in God's mercy.
4. The son said to his father, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." We need to confess [CONFESSION] our sins after examining our conscience. We should be honest and confess all our sins.  
If we have committed a serious sin (mortal) we cannot go for Holy Communion; just as the son couldn't just slip back into his father's house without first making up with his father and receiving his forgiveness. It is helpful to confess even 'everyday sins' (venial) because we get grace to fight temptation.
5. The son returned home. If the son had just felt sorry and kept sitting with the pigs, there would have been no happy ending. He had to express his change of heart by action. This is the meaning of PENANCE.  
Our sin has caused harm to others and to ourselves. We need to do what we can to repair the damage. Besides what the priest may ask us to do, we can express our repentance by: paying for something we have destroyed, admitting our faults, making up with our enemies, helping others (specially the needy), accepting suffering and difficulties patiently, making sacrifices, prayer, Bible reading etc.

All sin leaves a mark on us. Although Christ has already paid the price for our forgiveness, sincere penance helps to purify us and prepare us for heaven.

6. The father hugged his son and brought him into his house. He dressed him and ordered a party to celebrate. (The shoes, robe and ring show how the father honored his son and gave him back his place as a son).

God joyfully welcomes us back when we return with true contrition. He not only forgives us, but gives us the honored place of a son or daughter.

After we do our part the priest gives us ABSOLUTION in the name of God and the Church. As a result of this we are reunited with God; we experience peace within ourselves and with others. In fact, by making a good confession we are, as it were, freed even from final judgement, because God already forgives us now and gives us eternal life.

Baptism could be described as a ship that saved us from drowning in sin. But even after being baptized we are still weak and do sin. It is as if we have fallen back into the water. The church describes Confession as a 'second plank of salvation' that God throws to rescue us.

### III. ACTIVITY:

[Students now look again at the questions written at the start of the lesson. Each group receives one set of questions (of the same type). They attempt to give a good reply to them. After a while, the answers are given aloud as a dialogue. The teacher guides the activity and makes sure good answers are given:]

1. *What is the use of going to Confession? I don't see any change in myself.*  
Maybe you are not making your Confession in a real way. If you are truly sorry, make a good confession and try to make up for your sins with God's help, you will surely see a change in yourself. Even if *you* do not, others will see a change.
2. *Why should I go to a priest? I can go directly to God.*  
We *should* say sorry directly to God, but God wanted to give us the Sacrament of Confession. Jesus himself instituted the Sacrament and gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins. [Read John 20:21-23] We should accept the priest as standing for God.  
Another thing to remember is that sin also hurts the community. So it is good to confess to the priest, who also stands for the Church.
3. *I'm afraid the priest will tell my parents my sins.*  
Any priest who hears confession is bound to keep the sins he hears absolutely secret. There are no exceptions made, even if a murderer confesses and the court asks for information. If he breaks the rule, he receives severe punishment.  
The priest stands for God, so while confessing it might help to picture our loving and forgiving Father.
4. *I don't want the priest to have a bad impression of me.*  
We must realize ourselves that we are sinners, and be humble about it. Saint Jerome said, "If the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal."  
It may be difficult, but we must do it if we want healing of our spirits.  
Remember also that the priest himself is a human being and has his own weakness. He too sins, so he will understand the weakness of others.
5. *I'm a good person. I have nothing to confess. Why should I go for Confession?*  
No one can claim to be without sin. Saint John says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." (1John1:8) We should ask the Holy Spirit to help us see our sin and how we hurt God and others. The closer you are to God, the more humble you become, and the more you will realize your sinfulness.

### IV. INTERIORISATION/PRAYER:

[Students spend some time in quiet reflection preparing for Confession with the help of the Handout B. It would be good if priests are available for Confession. However, students should be free to make their confession or not to.]

#### HOME ASSIGNMENT:

⇒ Read the handout. ⇒ Share what you have learnt with your family.