How Our Understanding of the Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation Has Changed Over the last 50 Years and in the Last 1500 Years...

Confession has a checkered history, and our understanding of it has changed greatly in the last generation and a half. In the time since Vatican II, the way that we celebrate all the sacraments has been investigated, and reformed where necessary. These reforms started with research into the beginnings of the sacraments. Of all our celebrations, few things have changed as much as reconciliation. Here is a timeline:

- **300 AD** This is about the time that you would find the Order of Penitents existing in the church. People who had killed (even legally, such as in battle), committed adultery, or apostasy (denying the faith) were not allowed to be part of the Eucharistic community. They were not even allowed inside. If they wished to rejoin the church, they had to prove that they were sincere and do heavy penance. Sometimes this took years. The idea was that you could only do this once in your life.
- **600 AD** Irish monks began to travel through Europe. They brought with them the idea of confession. This was a way for people to examine their lives and receive advice about how to live better as a Christian. These monks were not necessarily priests. It is interesting to note that at first the church was very suspicious of this and didn't encourage the development.
- **1000 AD** The idea of confession was more popular, and priests performed the rite, offering absolution. However, the theologians and bishops didn't agree exactly on how the whole thing worked.
- **1215 AD** At the Fourth Lateran Council, the idea of confession had matured to the point that the faithful were asked to confess their sins to a priest at least once a year.
- **1560 AD** People had practiced confession for several centuries, but this was when it was officially defined as a sacrament. (We didn't have an official list of seven sacraments until this point, at the Council of Trent.) The bishops also wanted to make sure that priests knew what they were doing in dealing with penitents, which was one of the reasons that they worked to establish the seminary system for the education of clergy.
- **1560- 1960 AD** Confession became more and more popular, and everyone was expected to go to the sacrament often. In fact, people were encouraged to confess even if they didn't have serious sins.

There also influenced a few heresies that taught that people tended to evil, and that most of what they did was sinful. The church condemned these extreme positions, but these attitudes still influenced people's ideas, making confession seem that much more necessary.

- **1960 to now** Looking back into history, the bishops and theologians have encouraged us to recover some of the old ideas about the sacrament.