

What is penitence?

They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:31-32).

Looking at Western society in 2019, it's clear that more and more people are becoming health-conscious. In fact, the Health and Fitness economy last year was estimated to be worth \$3.7 trillion USD. It seems that people everywhere are strapping on fitbits, eating kale, and hitting the gym. This emphasis on physical well-being is admirable, but what about the spiritual side of things? What can we do to take care of the inner man? Well, we probably won't find the answer on the treadmill or in the organic produce aisle, but there is something we can do to increase our spiritual health, and that is to understand and practice the virtue of penitence. To do this properly, we must first acknowledge our infirmity, and that involves understanding something about sin.

Many people think of sin as an evil act, and while that is in one sense correct, it's not the whole story. In the Book of Genesis we are told that God created man in his likeness and image, and along with the rest of creation, pronounced the first humans to be "very good." However, in choosing to disobey God, our first parents fell into sin, losing the god-like perfection of their original state. We are their spiritual heirs, and like them are flawed, so that we can't help but leave "undone those things which we ought to have done," and do "those things which we ought not to have done." This memorable passage from the *Book of Common Prayer* provides an excellent synopsis of what sin really is—that is, falling short of perfection. We sin not only when we are intentionally cruel, or disobedient, or selfish, but also when we fail to be as charitable, thoughtful, or kind as we ought. So we are all sinners, even when we think we're actually pretty good. Jesus said, *be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*, and this should be our spiritual goal, but our fallen nature leaves us incapable of achieving perfection on our own. Thankfully, God in his goodness has provided a way.

Through Baptism we are washed with "water and the Holy Ghost" which results in regeneration of the spirit. Though we are still inclined to sin, this regeneration restores our nature and does away with the effects of the Fall. Through Confirmation we are strengthened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and given the power to increase in heavenly perfection, and while this process will never be completed in this life, it is the end for which we were created. But what about the fact that despite these sacramental gifts, most of us seem to continue to sin? Most of us still think, or say, or do bad things, and nearly all of us fall short of the perfect love for God and neighbor that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. How do we deal with this? The answer is, we repent. Repentance, or penitence, is a reorientation towards God. The Greek word is *metanoia*, which quite literally means "a change of mind." When we repent, we recognize our misdeeds, our failings, and our flaws, and resolve to do better. We can do this in our private prayers and in the

context of the Daily Office or the Mass, but one of the most effective ways is through the Sacrament of Penance, or as it's sometimes known "Confession."

Many people mistakenly believe that auricular confession is not part of the Anglican tradition, but a careful reading of the Prayer Book reveals otherwise. The traditional catholic understanding of confession is affirmed in the ordination of priests, where the bishop says to the ordinand, "whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven, and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained." Similarly, the English Prayer Book contains a provision for auricular confession in the Visitation of the Sick, after which, the priest is enjoined to say, "Our Lord, Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offence: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins." Sanction for this extends back to the practice of the early Church, and ultimately to Jesus himself, who told his disciples *whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.*

Though auricular confession is not required in the Anglican Catholic Church, many people find it helpful and a great comfort in the process of dealing with sin. In fact, it's not unlike a visit to the doctor where one's illness can be cured and overall level of health and fitness assessed. Just as not being sick and knowing the right sorts of things to eat and drink can help us in our pursuit of physical health, so too can the sacred cleansing and spiritual direction found in Confession help us in our quest for a clean and healthy spirit. So while you can practice penitence on your own (and this is certainly a virtue to cultivate), having the guidance, grace, and assurance that flow from the sacrament can be a tremendous help. If you are interested in learning more about penitence and its benefits for the soul, further study on the Sacrament of Penance is a good place to start. And if you find that want to take advantage of its benefits, your local priest should be able to set up a time and a place to help you take the next step in advancing your spiritual health.