

# Seeking God's Mercy Together

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As a cellist who plays in a local symphony, I understand how each instrumentalist contributes to the whole orchestra. When I care enough to practice and when I show up at rehearsal, I help my section and the orchestra carry out its mission to perform a piece as envisioned by its composer. However, if my ego gets in the way, if I ignore the need to practice, or if I fail to show up at a rehearsal, I can diminish or even harm the symphony's work.

The same might be said of Christians, whose common goal is to bear witness to Christ to one another and to the world. We too have the potential to build up or to break down the community of believers because of what we say or fail to say, because of what we do or fail to do.

The Church acknowledges that sin harms both the individual and the community, and that reconciliation heals both the individual and the community.

Repentance always carries with it reconciliation with one's brothers and sisters, to whom sin always causes harm. (*Order of Penance*, 5)

For this reason, the Church includes a communal form of the sacrament of reconciliation. This form of the sacrament, also known as a communal penance service, is typically held during Advent or Lent, but it can take place at any time of the year. At a communal penance service, the faithful gather to ask forgiveness for their sins and to pray for one another. While the act of confession is still performed individually, other parts are done together.

The service begins with the assembly joining their voices in song. After an introduction and an opening prayer, the Word of God is proclaimed.

The Sacrament of Penance should begin with the hearing of the word, because through his word God calls people to penance and leads them to a true conversion of heart. (*Order of Penance*, 24)

The proclamation of the Word of God is central to this liturgy. Hearing the Word of God, the penitents are reminded of God's mercy as they examine how closely their lives reflect the Gospel. The Word challenges the penitents to change, to turn away from sin and toward God's love. Following the



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homily, the assembly is led in an examination of conscience based on the Word they have heard and then they pray a form of general confession (for example, the Confiteor: "I confess to almighty God . . .").

Before each penitent approaches the priest for individual confession, the Lord's Prayer is prayed, and according to the *Order of Penance*, this prayer is so critical that it is never to be omitted. The first words, "Our Father," remind the faithful that God desires an intimate relationship with the human family. The use of the word *our* and other plural pronouns throughout the prayer demonstrate that human beings are interdependent and that each one's actions affect the other. In the prayer, the faithful not only ask for forgiveness, they seek the grace to be able to forgive those who have offended them. Thus, all are called to be instruments of reconciliation. Following individual confession, the community is invited to stay and together give thanks for God's merciful love.

A communal penance service offers the faithful the opportunity to acknowledge the shortcomings of the human family, to seek forgiveness together, and to pray for one another. Freed and forgiven, the assembly is sent forth to be a reconciling community for the world.