

Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer

## Reconciliation of a Penitent

“Pastoral Offices” is the title of a section of the BCP (407-511) containing rites for occasions in the lives of individual Christians. While the Eucharist and Christian Initiation (Baptism) are integrated into the celebration of the liturgical year, the pastoral offices, on the other hand, are geared to the pattern of individual life and are printed in chronological order. The rites of the BCP address both major life transitions—birth, marriage, and death—and pastoral need for reconciliation and for healing. Confirmation is also considered in the pastoral offices. There is a recognition by the Church that a transition in one member’s life affects the whole Christian community.



This week we will focus our attention on one of the pastoral offices: Reconciliation of a Penitent. Throughout the gospel narratives, Jesus heals those he encounters. His healing addresses more than bodily health. Jesus heals emotional (spiritual) distress, and he heals relationships and communities, bringing people back into reconciled life with one another and with God. Jesus’ ministry shows us that God’s desire for people is health and wholeness. In other words, God desires that his people live in peace.

Jesus entrusted his ministry of healing and reconciliation to his disciples. Over the centuries, the church has taken this calling very seriously. As Christians, we strive to live this ministry of healing and reconciliation by offering prayers, forgiveness, and compassion to one another. At Good Shepherd we have an active prayer ministry and several ministries that serve our members while sick and those in the healing process.

Two sacramental rites in the Episcopal Church –reconciliation of a penitent and unction of the sick—serve as outward signs of our participation in and experience of God’s reconciliation and healing. First, we look at *Reconciliation of a Penitent*.

Baptism and Eucharist are the primary sacraments of reconciliation. Yet embedded in the rites of the church is an awareness that although we publicly acknowledge that we do not lead our lives always as we should, we at times fail. And when we do, we seek to act, to repent and return to the Lord.

Reconciliation of a Penitent is the sacramental rite whereby we seek and receive that forgiveness. Many Episcopalians think that “confession” is only for Catholics, but the Episcopal Church has always had a service of confession. And while we say a confession in church every Sunday, sometimes our corporate confession of sin in the liturgy, or even our own prayers of confession, can become rote. The Episcopal Church’s approach to the rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent is, in the words of Scott Gunn: “all can, some should, none must.” This rite is not the only way to confess our sins and be forgiven, and if we are confessing and seeking forgiveness in other ways, we don’t have to participate in the rite of reconciliation.

But to dismiss this sacrament because it isn't required diminishes its power and importance. Reconciliation is an opportunity to name before God and someone else the things for which we're sorry or ashamed or that burden our conscience. And then, in return, we hear from God and from another person the truth that we are forgiven and loved and reconciled. When we hear the words of absolution focused on us and the act or failures we have named, rather than the gathered congregation, this can help us hear the assurance of forgiveness in a new and powerful way. And sometimes we can hear Jesus speak to us the words he first spoke to his disciples, "Peace be with you."

And that does it for this week. I hope you enjoyed our time together. Next time we will explore another pastoral office: Ministration to the Sick. See you then.

In Christ, Deacon John

"Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer" by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

"Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices" by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

"Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer" by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016