

Penance as Sacrament of the Sacrifice of the Cross

FREDERICK L. MILLER

*Immaculate Conception Seminary
South Orange, NJ*

EACH OF THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS was instituted by Christ as a channel of his grace for the needs of his people. Saint Thomas Aquinas begins his treatise on the sacraments with an affirmation that God acts through the sacred humanity of Christ in each of the sacraments. *The saving power must necessarily be derived by the sacraments from Christ's Godhead through his humanity.*¹ The Catholic doctrine of the sacraments flows from and, in a sense, is an extension of the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God. Each sacrament has a material and verbal component, the former a sign of the humanity assumed by the Son of God in the Incarnation, the latter, a reminder that it is the *Divine Word who became flesh* for our salvation who acts in the sacraments.

For five of the sacraments, a material sacramental sign (*matter*) and a sacramental word (*form*)—that is, a prayer formula that accompanies and specifies the meaning of the sign—are easily identifiable. For instance, in Baptism, the minister of the sacrament either pours water over the head of the catechumen or immerses the catechumen in a pool of water, with the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The sacramental sign (matter) of Baptism is the pouring of

¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST], III, q. 62, a. 5: “A sacrament in causing grace works after the manner of an instrument. Now an instrument is twofold: the one, separate, as a stick, for instance; the other, united, as a hand. Moreover, the separate instrument is moved by means of the united instrument, as a stick by the hand. Now the principal efficient cause of grace is God Himself, in comparison with Whom Christ's humanity is as a united instrument, whereas the sacrament is as a separate instrument. Consequently, the saving power must needs be derived by the sacraments from Christ's Godhead through His humanity.”

water or immersion in water; the sacramental word (form), the words that Christ himself taught us. In the sacrament of confirmation, the candidate is anointed on the forehead with Holy Chrism as the minister of the sacrament prays, "Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit." The matter of confirmation is the anointing with Chrism, the form, the words determined by the Church. In the Holy Eucharist, the matter is unleavened bread and wine mixed with water, the form, the words Christ used to institute the sacrament of his Body and Blood at the Last Supper. Together matter and form constitute the sacrament through which Christ communicates grace to the recipient.

In the Sacrament of Penance, there is no immediately perceivable material sign such as water in Baptism, chrism in Confirmation, the oil of the sick in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, bread and wine in the Eucharist, and the laying on of hands in Holy Orders. In attempting to identify the matter of the Sacrament of Penance, some have inaccurately identified it as the reality and effects of sin that inhere somehow in the sinner. Although the matter of the sacrament is intimately related to the sins of the penitent, Saint Thomas Aquinas explained that the sacramental sign is not sin *per se* but rather, a sincere sorrow for sin that is inspired by God: "The proximate matter of this sacrament consists in the acts of the penitent, the matter of which acts are the sins over which he grieves, which he confesses, and for which he satisfies. Hence it follows that sins are the remote matter of Penance, as a matter, not for approval, but for detestation, and destruction."² If this contrition is authentically supernatural, it will include, at least implicitly, the willingness to do all that God requires for forgiveness, namely, confession to a priest and the readiness to make amends through acts of penance.

Since the Christian who commits mortal sin is incapable of meriting reconciliation with God through any good work, he must seek the grace of repentance from the Holy Spirit. This plea for grace is itself the gift of the Spirit of God who draws the sinner to the heart of Christ, inspiring sorrow, the desire to confess the sin to a priest, and the need to make amends. The penitent responds to the Holy Spirit by accepting the grace of repentance and sincerely repenting.

The Angelic Doctor stressed that the sacramental sign of Penance is made up of human acts inspired by the Holy Spirit and the absolution of the priest: "In those sacraments which have a corporeal matter, this matter needs to be applied by a minister of the Church, who stands in the place of Christ, which denotes that the excellence of the power which operates

² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 84, a. 2.

in the sacraments is from Christ. But in the sacrament of Penance, human actions take the place of matter, and these actions proceed from internal inspiration, wherefore the matter is not applied by the minister, but by God working inwardly; while the minister furnishes the complement of the sacrament, when he absolves the penitent.”³ The acts themselves reveal that the sinner has already been responsive to God by accepting the grace of repentance. The Lord who begins the process of repentance through actual grace brings it to completion through the absolution of the priest who acts in the person of Christ.

Since the sacramental sign of Penance is not as immediately obvious as, for instance, the sacramental sign of water in Baptism or bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist, it is important to identify what constitutes the sign of the sacrament of penance with as much precision as possible. To do this, theologians have referred to the acts of the penitent—contrition, confession, and satisfaction—as the *quasi-matter* of the Sacrament of Penance. *Quasi-matter* means literally *as if* matter, or to use a modern colloquialism, the acts of the penitent are *kind of like* matter.⁴ Let us step back to see what the sacrament looks like. Remember that a sacrament is a sign of a particular grace of Christ that causes that grace. In the sacrament of reconciliation, a contrite sinner comes to Christ in the person of the priest. The penitent names the sins, expresses sorrow for committing them, and agrees to do penance for offending God and wounding the Church. The priest, acting *in the person of Christ the head of the Church* (*in persona Christi capitis*), forgives the sin.

Sacramental reconciliation has been signified throughout the Christian centuries in various ways: the laying on of hands, the bishop leading

³ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 84, a. 1, ad 2.

⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 84, a. 1, ad 1: “By corporeal things taken in a wide sense we may understand also external sensible actions, which are to this sacrament what water is to Baptism, or chrism to Confirmation. But it is to be observed that in those sacraments, whereby an exceptional grace surpassing altogether the proportion of a human act, is conferred, some corporeal matter is employed externally, e.g. in Baptism, which confers full remission of all sins, both as to guilt and as to punishment, and in Confirmation, wherein the fulness of the Holy Ghost is bestowed, and in Extreme Unction, which confers perfect spiritual health derived from the virtue of Christ as from an extrinsic principle. Wherefore, such human acts as are in these sacraments, are not the essential matter of the sacrament, but are dispositions thereto. On the other hand, in those sacraments whose effect corresponds to that of some human act, the sensible human act itself takes the place of matter, as in the case of Penance and Matrimony, even as in bodily medicines, some are applied externally, such as plasters and drugs, while others are acts of the person who seeks to be cured, such as certain exercises.”

the penitent to the altar, the anointing of the penitent with oil, or as it is today, a declaration of absolution from sin in a formula established by the Church. The sacramental sign properly-so-called includes the encounter of penitent and priest and their conversation that has absolution as its end. The sacramental sign of Penance is the contrite penitent confessing sins to a priest who imposes a penance (matter of the sacrament) and grants absolution with the power and authority of Christ and the Church (form of the sacrament).

In teaching that the Sacrament of Penance has its own particular matter and form, the Catholic Church emphasizes that, although sorrow for sin surely originates in the sanctuary of conscience, it must manifest itself in a physical, concrete manner to be a sacrament. The physicality of Penance—the tangible act of the penitent coming publicly⁵ to a priest to confess his or her sins in the most secret conversation known to humankind—ensures its sacramentality. In other words, although contrition is the most important act of the penitent, it alone is not sufficient. The penitent comes with a sorrowful heart to Christ who was wounded by every sin in his Passion. The penitent likewise acknowledges that the Church has been wounded by the sin. The penitent confesses sin, that is, admits it to the priest plainly, bluntly calling it by its proper name and resolving never to commit the sin again. The self-disclosure of the penitent is often embarrassing, and painful from a human point of view.

In humbly confessing to a priest, who is the guarantor of the presence of Christ and the Church, the penitent venerates the sacred humanity of Christ and makes an act of faith in the divine origin of the Church and her sacraments. He admits that he has wounded the Church by destroying the ecclesial grace of Baptism through sin. The penitent owns up to the need to do penance for the harm caused by the sins. The penance imposed by the priest in confession, subsequent acts of penance done freely out of love, and the acceptance of the sufferings of life join the penitent to Christ in his great act of reconciliation and thereby effect the healing of the penitent who has been wounded by sin.

The priest and penitent concelebrate the Sacrament of Penance, together

⁵ Because the sacrament of penance is always an act of both Christ and his Church, it is public. Most people who receive the sacrament stand in line in a Church and publicly enter the place where the priest hears confessions. That a person goes to confession is a public fact. What the penitent confesses is a different matter. The matter of the confession is protected by the absolutely binding sacramental seal of penance. The public nature of the sacrament does not deny that the penitent always has the right to confess anonymously, that is, behind a screen.

positing the sacramental sign (*sacramentum tantum*) that has the forgiveness of sins as its effect. The absolution of the priest *re-presents* (that is, *makes present*) the sacrifice of Christ. The penitent's contrition (perfect or imperfect), the integral confession of mortal sins, and the willingness to do penance surge forth from the Savior's act of expiating sin. Through the absolution of the priest, Christ's sorrow for sins, confession of sins on the Cross, and satisfaction for sins are made sacramentally present. In Christ and through Christ, the penitent makes a perfect act of contrition (*res et sacramentum*). The effect of this perfect act of contrition is the forgiveness of sins (*res tantum*). We shall return to this point.

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains the sacramentality of Penance with his usual acumen: "As Gregory says [Isidore, *Etymologiae* 6.19], 'a sacrament consists in a solemn act, whereby something is so done that we understand it to signify the holiness which it confers.' Now it is evident that in Penance something is done so that something holy is signified both on the part of the penitent sinner, and on the part of the priest absolving, because the penitent sinner, by deed and word, shows his heart to have renounced sin, and in like manner the priest, by his deed and word with regard to the penitent, signifies the work of God Who forgives his sins. Therefore it is evident that Penance, as practiced in the Church, is a sacrament."⁶

To appreciate the deep Christological significance of the Sacrament of Penance, it is important to acknowledge that the forgiveness of sins has only one source, the Passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Saint Peter acknowledged this unambiguously before the Sanhedrin: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12). Christians claim Saint Paul's boast as their own: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Saint Paul's use of the singular "me" is significant. Paul acknowledges that Jesus loved him and gave himself over to death to save him!

Traditional soteriology embraces this view of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. It holds that Christ, in beholding the face of his Father in the Passion, saw and loved every person, and suffered on behalf of every sinner. When our brothers and sisters in Evangelical ecclesial communities claim that Jesus is their *personal Lord and Savior*, they mean that the God-man held them personally in his heart as he suffered and died on the Cross. They believe that Christ saw them, loved them, and willingly suffered in

⁶ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 84, a. 1.

their place. The singular pronoun used by Saint Paul is of utmost importance: "Christ loved *me* and gave himself up for *me*." Some Christians, including Catholics, influenced by various forms of *low Christology* hold that Christ offered his human suffering and death for the forgiveness of sins as any man might offer his last agony for a specific intention. Some go so far as to claim that Jesus's faith, a virtue that the Church has never attributed to the God-man, was stretched to the limit in his Passion, leading him to the brink of despair. Hence his cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).

In his Treatise on the Sacraments in the *Summa theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas stressed that the Passion of Christ is the one source of the grace that comes to Christians in each of the sacraments: "A sacrament properly speaking is that which is ordained to signify our sanctification. In which three things may be considered; viz. the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ's Passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues; and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life. And all these are signified by the sacraments. Consequently a sacrament is a sign that is both a reminder of the past, i.e. the Passion of Christ; and an indication of that which is effected in us by Christ's Passion, i.e. grace; and a prognostic, that is, a foretelling of future glory."⁷

The Lord's Passion is the *efficient cause* of the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. The acts of the penitent constitute the *material cause* of the sacrament. These acts, inspired by the love of Christ, are united to the Passion of Christ through the absolution of a priest. Absolution, the form of the sacrament that communicates Christ's grace and virtues to the penitent, is the *formal cause* of the forgiveness of sins. The justification of the sinner is the *final cause*, the ultimate purpose, of the sacrament that is the source of eternal life.

In another question, Saint Thomas not only lays emphasis on the Passion of Christ as the source of sacramental grace but also notes that in the sacrament *the virtue of the Passion is in a manner united to us by our receiving the sacrament*. This reference is important for our understanding of how the Sacrament of Penance unites the contrition, confession, and satisfaction of the penitent to the Passion of Christ as the formal cause of forgiveness:

Now sacramental grace seems to be ordained principally to two things: namely, to take away the defects consequent on past sins, in

⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 60, a. 3.

so far as they are transitory in act, but endure in guilt; and, further, to perfect the soul in things pertaining to Divine Worship in regard to the Christian Religion. But it is manifest from what has been stated above (48, 1,2,6; 49, 1,3) that Christ delivered us from our sins principally through His Passion, not only by way of efficiency and merit, but also by way of satisfaction. Likewise by His Passion He inaugurated the Rites of the Christian Religion by offering “Himself—an oblation and a sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). Wherefore it is manifest that the sacraments of the Church derive their power especially from Christ’s Passion, the virtue of which is in a manner united to us by our receiving the sacraments. It was in sign of this that from the side of Christ hanging on the Cross there flowed water and blood, the former of which belongs to Baptism, the latter to the Eucharist, which are the principal sacraments.”⁸

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, enriched by liturgical theology and, in particular, the *mystery theology* of Dom Odo Casel and his confreres, explains how the *virtue of the victim* is made present and supernaturally effective in the liturgy of the Church. This explanation is helpful in coming to an understanding of the unique *representation* of the sacrifice of Christ that takes place in the sacrament of reconciliation:

In the liturgy of the Church, it is principally his own Paschal mystery that Christ signifies and makes present. During his earthly life Jesus announced his Paschal mystery by his teaching and anticipated it by his actions. When his Hour comes, he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father “once for all.” His Paschal mystery is a real event that occurred in our history, but it is unique: all other historical events happen once, and then they pass away, swallowed up in the past. The Paschal mystery of Christ, by contrast, cannot remain only in the past, because by his death he destroyed death, and all that Christ is—all that he did and suffered for all men—participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present in them all. The event of the

⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 62, a. 5. In discussing the Priesthood of Christ, Saint Thomas points to the eternal saving significance of the “virtue” of Christ’s Passion: “Although Christ’s passion and death are not to be repeated, yet the virtue of that Victim endures forever, for, as it is written (Heb. 10:14), ‘by one oblation He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified’” (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 5, ad 2).

Cross and Resurrection abides and draws everything toward life.
(§1085)

The virtue of the victim is surely the perfect obedience through which Christ, offering himself as victim for sin on the Cross, embraced his mission as Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. However, it is more. The *virtue of the victim* includes all the interior dispositions of Christ's heart as he gave his life to glorify his Father and save the sinful human family from eternal death in hell. The *virtue of the victim* is the love that motivated the mysterious substitution through which the sinless Christ took on all human sins as if they were his own so that sinners might be forgiven and transformed in his holiness.

This substitution of Christ for the sinner, his willingness to bear the overwhelming weight of sin and its guilt so that the sinner might receive the gift of eternal life is adroitly articulated by Saint Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For our sake he [the Father] made him [Christ] to be sin who did not know sin, so that we (who accept the grace of repentance) might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). The identical teaching is found in the First Letter of Peter: "He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

The *Catechism* explains that Christ suffered in the place of every human person: "It is love 'to the end' (Jn 13:1) that confers on Christ's sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction. He knew and loved us all when he offered his life (Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25). Now 'the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died' (2 Cor 5:25). No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all. The existence in Christ of the divine person of the Son, who at once surpasses and embraces all human persons, and constitutes himself as the Head of all mankind, makes possible his redemptive sacrifice for all" (§616).

The *Catechism* also teaches that Christ knew and loved each human person for whom he suffered and died. This document of faith clearly affirms that the Savior saw all the people he saved in every place and every age in his vision of the Heavenly Father: "Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: 'The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation (Jn 19:34) 'is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that . . . love with which

the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings' without exception." (§478).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, reflecting on Christ's internal anguish in Gethsemane, offers this description of Our Lord's experience in the garden that likely intensified until he breathed his last on the Cross. It cast a great light on what Jesus suffered in his human psyche, an agony more terrible than the physical torture of crucifixion: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:7–10).

Two statements in this text—"he learned obedience" and "when he was made perfect"—have provoked a great amount of reflection especially among systematic theologians who understandably seek to defend and explain the dogma of the Hypostatic Union, the revealed truth that the man Jesus Christ, from the first moment of his existence as man, was and is the eternal Son of God made flesh.

As the *New Adam*, Christ, the true head of the human family, has a relationship with every man and woman. "To learn obedience" means that Jesus, in fulfilling his Father's will to save the human race, consented to become sin, or to put it more shockingly, vicariously to become the sinner. In his Passion, the sinless Lamb of God experienced how it feels to disobey the Father, reject his love, and deserve punishment. He expiated everyone's sins by grieving over them as if he himself had committed them. He confessed the sins of every person to the Father. He made satisfaction for them through his suffering, both physical and mental, and in his Passion implored forgiveness for all men and women.

Exegetes point systematic theologians to the literal meaning of "when he was made perfect." This literally means, "when he had finished the task for which he was sent" or "when he had attained his end." What precisely was/is this *end*, this condition of being *perfect*? Christ attains the end for which he was sent into the world in his "hour." In the garden and on the Cross, Christ does what the Father asked him to do: he suffers in the place of sinful men and women, offering them the possibility of the remission of their sins in him and through his obedience to the Father. Bearing all sins with an infinite love for his Father who is infinitely offended by sin and with an infinite love for the sinner who has lost the way to God, Christ reconciled man and woman to God. To be forgiven, the sinner must receive Christ's love, enter into his obedience and appropriate his

loving surrender to the Father's will. By consenting to suffer in the place of every sinner, Christ, the sinless victim of sin, *became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

Pope John Paul II, in his 1984 Apostolic Letter on the Meaning of Human Suffering, *Salvifici Dolori*), commenting on the fourth Suffering Servant Song of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 52:13 through 53:12), explains how Christ was able to substitute himself for every sinner and accomplish the redemption (the passages that are particularly apropos are emphasized here):

The Song of the Suffering Servant contains a description in which it is possible, in a certain sense, to identify the stages of Christ's Passion in their various details: the arrest, the humiliation, the blows, the spitting, the contempt for the prisoner, the unjust sentence, and then the scourging, the crowning with thorns and the mocking, the carrying of the Cross, the crucifixion and the agony.

Even more than this description of the Passion, what strikes us in the words of the Prophet is the depth of Christ's sacrifice. *Behold, He, though innocent, takes upon himself the sufferings of all people, because he takes upon himself the sins of all. "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all": all human sin in its breadth and depth becomes the true cause of the Redeemer's suffering.* If the suffering "is measured" by the evil suffered, then the words of the Prophet enable us to understand the extent of this evil and suffering with which Christ burdened himself. It can be said that this is "substitutive" suffering; but above all it is "redemptive." The Man of Sorrows of that prophecy is truly that "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." *In his suffering, sins are cancelled out precisely because he alone as the only-begotten Son could take them upon himself, accept them with that love for the Father which overcomes the evil of every sin; in a certain sense he annihilates this evil in the spiritual space of the relationship between God and humanity, and fills this space with good.*

Here we touch upon the duality of nature of a single personal subject of redemptive suffering.

He who by his Passion and death on the Cross brings about the Redemption is the only-begotten Son whom God "gave." And at the same time this Son who is consubstantial with the Father suffers as a man. His suffering has human dimensions; it also has—unique in the history of humanity—a depth and intensity which, while being

human, can also be an incomparable depth and intensity of suffering, insofar as the man who suffers is in person the only-begotten Son himself: "God from God." Therefore, only he—the only-begotten Son—is capable of embracing the measure of evil contained in the sin of man: in every sin and in "total" sin, according to the dimensions of the historical existence of humanity on earth. (§17)

The Sacrament of Penance in its unique way *re-presents* the sacrifice of the Cross, not under the appearance of bread and wine as at Mass, but in the inner sanctuary of the penitent's conscience. Through sacramental absolution, the penitent's contrition, or at least attrition, the integral confession of mortal sins, and the willingness to make satisfaction for them are transformed into a real participation in the Passion of Christ. In Penance, Christ's perfect act of contrition for sins, his confession of our sins to his Father, and his perfect expiation of sin through love are re-presented, that is, made present and communicated to the penitent. Absolution makes Christ's sacrifice present and unites the sinner to the Lord in his act of expiating sin. In the expression of contrition, perfect or imperfect, the honest confession of all mortal sins by name and number, and the willingness to do penance to expiate sin, the penitent meets Christ in his perfect worship of the Father and receives a share in his charity. The absolution of the priest unites the dispositions of the penitent to the perfect disposition of Christ crucified. This meeting of the sinner and the Savior renders the penitent's contrition perfect and acceptable to the Father.

The communion of the penitent with Christ in his Passion brings about the forgiveness of sins. The sincerely contrite penitent under the impulse of grace turns to Christ and adores him as the one who saves from sin and death. If the penitent's contrition is motivated either by the love of God or merely by the fear of punishment in hell, the simple recognition of Christ as Savior brings the penitent into Our Lord's perfect act of love for the Father as he hung dying on the Cross. The confession of mortal sins brings the penitent into communion with the agony that Christ suffered because of these individual sins. Christ's confession of sins on the Cross gives merit to every confession of sin in the Church. The acceptance of the penance given by the priest manifests the penitent's willingness to join Christ in his work of expiating sin. This Christocentric understanding of the acts of the penitent and absolution elucidates exactly what Catholics mean when they make the claim "Christ is my personal Lord and Savior."

There is a holy exchange in the sacrament: Christ, who took every sin as his own and suffered in the place of every sinner, gives the penitent a share in his holiness through the remission of sins. He does this only when the

sinner is ready and willing to share in his sorrow for sins, to confess the sins that afflicted Christ in his Passion and his great act of expiation of sin through charity. The readiness of the sinner to do penance is itself the manifestation of God's saving grace.

This explanation of the sacrament casts light on Saint Thomas's teaching that the *res et sacramentum* of Penance is interior repentance. Aquinas explained that the sacrament supplies whatever is lacking in the contrition of the penitent and causes the penitent to make an act of perfect love of God. In other words, if the contrition is imperfect, absolution renders it perfect. Through absolution, God infuses an act of perfect contrition in the will of the penitent. This perfect act of charity causes the penitent to turn against sin and adhere to God in love. In response, God forgives the sins.

In summary, Saint Thomas explained that in the Sacrament of Penance the *sacramentum tantum*, the sign (matter and form) that causes grace, is, on one hand, the acts of the penitent that have been prompted by grace and, on the other hand, the absolution of the priest. The immediate effect of the sacrament, the *res et sacramentum*, is an act of perfect contrition in the heart of the sinner. This act of sorrow, flowing from the heart of the crucified Christ, is made present by the absolution of the priest. Therefore, the redemptive love of Christ freely received by the sinner *destroys the sin* that stands between the penitent and the Heavenly Father. Divine forgiveness is the ultimate effect of the sacrament—the *res tantum*.

Saint Thomas's explanation of interior repentance as the *res et sacramentum* of the sacrament has immense value. Among other things, it highlights the personal engagement of the penitent in the forgiveness of sins. However, there is a subtlety in this explanation that people find difficult to grasp, and for several reasons. Theologians and spiritual writers have noted that the immediate effect of absolution, interior repentance, need not be and most frequently is not felt by the penitent. As a result, the Thomistic position, although accurate, is not always immediately appealing. People ask, "how am I forgiven by making an act of love that I neither feel emotionally nor experience in any way except perhaps as an act of faith?" The confusion is aggravated by the assertion that an act of perfect contrition, which is impossible to identify with the certainty of faith, remits mortal sins before the reception of absolution as long as the penitent intends to confess the sins. Explain this as you will, it can and does tempt people to consider confession as ultimately superfluous.

For these and other reasons, some have either rejected or not understood Aquinas's teaching that interior repentance is the *res et sacramentum* of Penance and opted for a simpler explanation: God forgives the sins

confessed through the absolution of the priest. This position does not address the *res et sacramentum* of Penance at all. Presuming the sincerity of the acts of the penitent, it claims that the absolution of the priest per se causes the forgiveness of sins.

If the acts of the penitent (the matter) and the absolution of the priest (form) make the grace and virtues of Christ's Passion immediately present to the penitent, and if Christ the Savior communicates his own sorrow for sin, his confession of sin, and the efficacious satisfaction of Calvary to the penitent as his own, one begins to envision a renewal of the sacrament at the level of Christological mysticism. This mystical view of Penance reconciles the Thomistic position on the *res et sacramentum* with the speculation of more contemporary theologians who claim that the immediate and abiding effect of the sacrament is reconciliation with the Church which causes reconciliation with God. The interior reconciling communion that Penance effects between Christ and the penitent concomitantly effects reconciling communion with the Church. Finally, the *re-presentation* of Christ's Passion in the Sacrament of Penance explains why only a man who has the capacity to *re-present* the sacrifice of the Cross in the mystery of transubstantiation has the power to forgive sins in the name of Christ and the Church.