"Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . . I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord" -St. Cyrpian of Carthage, The Lapsed, 28 (A.D. 251)

"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." -1 John 1:8

"Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained." -John 20:23

1. The Reality of Sin

In the lesson on Creation, we dealt with the Fall of Man and Original Sin. Now we will look at exactly what sin is, its effects, and the manner God has provided sacramentally to deal with sin.

2. What is "Sin"?

The etymology of the word "sin" comes from the Old English *synn*, which means to incur guilt. The Latin, *peccatum*, means a slip, a mistake, a fall, or a lapse, but does not necessarily imply moral guilt (culpa). Theologically speaking, although sin is a "mistake" or a "lapse", it is a culpable lapse and always has the notion of guilt attached to it, as is expressed in the German and Scandanavian roots of the word.[1]

Theologically, sin is an offense against God and is a privation of grace. Sin is nothing else than a morally bad act, an act not in accord with reason informed by the Divine law (St. Thomas, "De malo", 7:3).

3. The Nature of Sin

According to long-standing Catholic Tradition, sin is primarily understood as a privation of the good, a disordering of the will in which an evil (or sometimes just a lesser good) is sought over the Highest Good, which is God. This disordered movement of the will brings about a loss of grace in the soul. Sin, properly understood, is a lack of grace, a deprivation of the good, as well as the act that brings this state about (hence the phrase "to commit sin" but also "to be in a state of sin."
"As death is the privation of the principle of life, the death of the soul is the privation of sanctifying grace which according to all theologians is the principle of supernatural life" (Catholic Encyclopedia).

[1] P.Gmc. *sundjo (cf. O.S. sundia, O.Fris. sende, M.Du. sonde, Ger. Sünde "sin, transgression, trespass, offense"), probably ult. "true" (cf. Goth. sonjis, O.N. sannr "true"), from PIE *es-ont-, prp. of base *es- "to be" . The semantic development is via notion of "to be truly the one (who is guilty)," as in O.N. phrase verð sannr at "be found guilty of"

Sin is primarily an offense against God. Though we can sin against our neighbor, of course, every sin is committed directly and immediately against God: “Against You, You alone have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Your sight” (Ps. 51:4).

4. Types of Sin

Throughout history, theologians have attempted to categorize sin according to many different categories. The Confiteor classifies sins as done “in my thoughts, in words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.” Sins can be classified as sins of commission versus sins of omission, sins against God and sins against man, or as spiritual or carnal sins. However we classify it, the root of all sin is a perverted will in the heart of man. As Christ said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man” (Matt 15:19-20).

As the Catechism teaches, sins are most rightly evaluated according to their gravity (CCC 1854). This is the distinction between mortal and venial sin.

5. Mortal Sin

Tradition defines mortal sin as a sin that destroys charity in the heart of man due to a grave violation of God’s law. It snuffs out the grace of God in the heart and renders a person unfit for heaven. Traditionally, mortal sin has been seen as a violation of one of the Ten Commandments (though this definition is not exhaustive). The Church gives us three criteria for determining if a sin is mortal or not:

1) Grave Matter: does the sin violate any of the moral precepts set forth in the Ten Commandments? (CCC 1858)

2) Full Knowledge: does the sinner understand that the action is an objectively evil act? (CCC 1859)

3) Complete Consent: did the person commit the sin freely, or was he under constraint? (The Catechism says that “feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish but rather increase the voluntary nature of sin” CCC 1859)

All three of these components must be met for the sin to be mortal; if any one is lacking, it is not a mortal sin. Circumstances and unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the guilt of a grave offense (although no one is deemed ignorant of the moral law). We must distinguish here between malum (the objective evil committed), and the culpa (the subjective level of responsibility incurred by the sinner). One can commit a malum without incurring the culpa if there is ignorance or some other mitigating factor. In a mortal sin, the sinner is guilty of both malum and culpa.

6. Venial Sin

A venial sin occurs when one, in a less serious matter, does not observe exactly the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge of complete consent.

"Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace, it is humanly reparable."

-CCC 1863

On venial sin, St. Augustine taught, "While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call "light": if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession." The Apostle John tells us, "All wrongdoing is sin, but there is a sin which is not deadly [Lt: mortal]" (1 John 5:17).

Overcoming venial sin is the true struggle for Christian perfection, and many manuals have been written by great saints to help us overcome the hold of venial sin, such as St. Francis de Sales Introduction to the Devout Life and the Spiritual Exercise of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

7. Accessory to Sin

In addition to sins we ourselves commit (either by positive act or by omission), Catholic Tradition teaches us that we can be guilty of sin by being an accessory to another person's sin. There are nine ways we can be guilty for another's sin:

- By counsel.
- By command.
- By consent.
- By provocation.
- By praise or flattery.
- By concealment.
- By partaking.
- By silence.
- By defense of the ill done.

The exact degree to which an accessory is culpable depends, like other sins, on circumstances. It is possible to be guilty of mortal sin even if you did not commit the sin; for example, by encouraging somebody else to steal you become guilty of the mortal sin of theft.

8. The Seven Deadly Sins

Catholic moral theology distinguishes seven deadly, or capital, sins. This list is not meant to be exhaustive of all sin, but merely represents the seven categories that every sin can be divided

down into. These are the seven basic sins from which every other sin derives; they are countered by the seven cardinal virtues, which we will discuss in our class on the moral virtues. The seven deadly sins are:

1) Envy: a sadness or anger at another's prosperity (different from jealousy).
2) Sloth: refusal to exert oneself to do the things necessary to attain salvation (acedia).
3) Gluttony: use of created goods to excess (immoderation).
4) Wrath: a desire for vengeance in order to do evil to someone.
5) Pride: excessive belief in one's own abilities that does not recognize the grace of God.
6) Lust: an inordinate craving for physical pleasure.
7) Greed: a rapacious desire to increase in material wealth or gain.

According to long-standing belief, it is pride that is the root of all sin and the source of envy, the cause of the Devil's fall from grace (Wis. 2:24). It is also believed that the 1/3 of the Angels that feel did so because of either Pride or Envy, or a combination of the two.

9. Punishment for Sin

Sin, by its very nature, incurs punishment. The punishment of sin flows from the nature of sin itself. If sin is mortal, it incurs and eternal punishment[2]; if the sin is venial, a temporal punishment suffices (lingering consequences, disordered or spiritual damage left behind by sin). Eternal punishment consists of eternal separation from God (hell); thus, those who die in a state of unrepentant mortal sin are eternally lost. Those who die in venial sin must have the effects of the sin effaced off their soul before entry into heaven. This can be accomplished either on earth or in purgatory.

Temporal punishment due to sin can be expiated by prayers, good deeds, almsgiving, attendance at Mass, etc. One must be in a state of grace to merit this because none of these deeds are meritorious apart from God's grace. Thus, the prime importance is to confess your mortal sins, then do penance for the temporal punishment due to sin, which brings us to the sacrament.

10. The Sacrament of Penance

Like all the sacraments, Penance was instituted by Christ. It is the means He left to His Church whereby He would be able to remit sin for all time. This sacrament has had other names throughout the ages: Confession and Reconciliation are two other common names for it. **The form of this sacrament is the absolving words of the priest, *"I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* The matter of the sacrament is twofold: the proximate matter is the confession and contrition of the penitent; the remote matter is the sins themselves that the penitent brings to the confessional.**

11. Scriptural Basis

The Scriptural basis of this sacrament is found in two main places, though many others could be added:

[2] See the lesson on the Atonement

Matthew 16:19, 18:18: The power of the Keys is granted to Peter personally and to the Apostles in communion with him: “Whatsoever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The power of binding and loosing from sin is included in the power of the Keys.

John 20:21-23: After He had risen from the dead, Christ appeared to his disciples and told them, “Peace be to you. As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. When He had said this, He breathed on them, saying: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.’”

As Christ had forgiven sins while on earth (Matt. 9:2, Mark 2:5, Luke 5:20, 7:47), He now invested the apostles with this power (“as the Father has sent Me, so I send you”). This power was given not to the Apostles as a personal gift, but as a power proper to their office that, like the command to preach and baptize, was handed down to their successors.

12. History

The ancient manual Didache (c. 70 AD) reports that confession was made in Church prior to reception of the Eucharist: “In church thou shalt confess thy transgressions, and shalt not betake thyself to prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life” (4:19-20). The early Church practice of confession in the Church was meant to be a means of purification for worthy reception of the Eucharist. This confession was always made to a priest; there is not a single record of a confession being made to a layman.

Most Fathers tell us that confession was made in public and that this sacrament was generally only used once after baptism. Around the year 200, Tertullian wrote, “although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened up with the bar of baptism, has permitted it still to stand somewhat open. In the vestibule He has stationed a second repentance for opening to such as knock; but now once for all, because now for the second time; but never more, because the last time it had been in vain. . .”

This and other like excerpts show us that it was common for penance to be used only once, and only for serious sins such as murder, adultery and apostasy. However, the penitent, if he committed these sins again, was not to despair. Tertullian goes on: “However, if any do incur the debt of a second repentance, his spirit is not to be forthwith cut down and undermined by despair.” Nobody doubted that God could forgive sins a second time, but it was the practice to give the sacrament only once.

In the Middle Ages, thanks in large part to the Irish confessors of the 6th, 7th, and 8th centuries, confession became private and the use of public confession faded out. In the Middle Ages, it was standard to make a confession once a year, around Easter; this later became part of canon law at Lateran IV (1215). Later popes encouraged a more frequent Confession; recent popes such as Pius XII, Paul VI and John Paul II encouraged regular confession of even venial sin.

13. Parts of the Sacrament

The sacrament of Confession consists of four parts, all of which must be fulfilled for the confession to be valid and fruitful for the penitent. They are: contrition, confession, absolution and satisfaction on the part of the penitent. Let's briefly look at each part:

Contrition: Contrition means sorrow for sin and is essential for any confession to be valid. Without contrition, there can be no absolution. Contrition is either perfect or imperfect. Perfect contrition is sorrow for sin because it offends God, Who is all good and deserving of all our love. Imperfect contrition consists in sorrow for sin because we fear the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. Either form of contrition is acceptable; perfect contrition is able to remit punishment due to sin as well, depending on the level of its purity. Imperfect contrition does not remit temporal punishment.

Confession: Confession refers to the actual, auricular confession made to a validly ordained priest in the confessional. Sins must be confessed in kind (what you did) and number (how many times you did it). If the priest requires more circumstantial information, he will ask it of you. The priest is prohibited by the Seal of the Confessional from revealing anything about your confession to anybody.3 Should a priest break this seal, he is automatically excommunicated and cannot be readmitted to communion except by the Pope himself. St. John Nepomucene of Bohemia was drowned in 1393 by orders of the King of Bohemia for refusing to violate the seal of the confessional regarding confessions made by the King's wife.

Absolution: Providing the confessor accepts that adequate contrition and confession have been made, he then pronounces the formula of absolution, which actually absolves the penitent of all the sins that they have confessed. Knowingly withholding a sin from your confessor is itself a sin that must be confessed. Absolution is pronounced in the name of Jesus Christ and accomplished by His power, exercised *in persona Christi* by the priest.

Satisfaction: Satisfaction refers to a penance, prayer or good work assigned to you by the priest as a means of expiating the effects of the sin and/or making right the disorder caused by the sin. Premeditated intentional refusal to perform the penance can invalidate the absolution. The penance is meant to be medicinal and remedial. It is important to understand that the performing of the penance is not the source of the absolution; the forgiveness comes from the mercy of Christ applied through the formula of absolution.

14. Frequent Confession

Current canon law requires that all mortal sin be confessed once a year at least, preferably at Easter. However, this is a bare minimum and is not recommended for those making any serious attempt at holiness. Remember a few things: just because you may forget about a sin does not mean that it is automatically forgiven. Can you keep track of all your sins for a whole year? Also, what if some disaster or calamity overtakes you before you get to confession? Intentionally putting off confession is not healthy for the soul.

As soon as you commit a sin, you ought to make an immediate heartfelt act of perfect contrition to God to the best of your ability. An act of perfect contrition is capable of remitting your sin, but

the obligation to go to confession as soon as possible remains; the same is true of anyone receiving a general absolution in case of emergency. The efficacy of an act of contrition is not mechanical; it is proportionate to the degree of love that motivates it.

Monthly confession is a good practice, and confession of venial faults is encouraged. That being said, we must also avoid scrupulosity, which is defined as obsessive concern with one's personal sins, including "sinful" acts or thoughts usually considered minor or trivial.

Frequent reception of the sacrament of penance ensures a healthy balance in our spiritual life and will prepare our souls for the Beatific Vision.

For Further Reading:

Ps. 51; Matt. 15:10-20; John 20:21-23
1 John 5:15-17
Didache; Catechism of the Catholic Church § 1422-1491, 1846-1877
Scott Hahn, Lord Have Mercy
Josef Pieper, The Concept of Sin
St. Thomas Aquinas, De Malo
St. Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life