History of the Sacrament of Penance

Up to 250 A.D.

* Penance was part of baptism
* As adults came to the Church they would renounce their former life and embrace a new Christian life.
* The spirit within the community highly valued forgiveness and mercy. Paul’s letters are full of confidence in the forgiveness God offers in Jesus to those who turn to him For example: Col. 3:12-15
* Persecutions bought apostasy (the abandonment or renunciation of a religious or political belief or principle). Can the apostate be re-admitted to the church? Some said ‘no’ but the ‘ayes’ prevailed.

FROM 300 A.D. – 500 A.D.

* Gradually it came to be realised that the penance was a sort of ‘second baptism’, available on a ‘once-only’ basis.
* Penance was public and communal. The bishop was the minister. Four stages: recognition … confession … a ‘penitent’ for long time …. reconciliation to the Church.
* Penance necessary for grave sins, the three mentioned most often were murder, idolatry, adultery.
* Lesser sins were not matter for confession – they would be forgiven with prayer and mortification.
* Private sacramental confession was unknown.
* Penance became so strict that many people would wait until death for opportunity to be forgiven.

DEVELOPMENT OF PRIVATE PENANCE: 500 A.D. – 1215 A. D.

* New form of penance came to Continental Europe with Irish and Scots missionaries.
* A practice of spiritual direction as a rite of private penance begins to develop.
* Sinners would now confess in private to a priest.
* Penance could be given many times during a person’s life.
* Priest would follow penitential books written by holy men, in which penances for particular sins would be found.
* Penitents would be reconciled to Church after they completed the ‘penance’ given by the priest.
* Lateran Council (1215) states that the sacrament should be given once a year. Later it is made clear that this only applies if one has committed grave sin.

UP TO REFORM OF THE VATICAN COUNCIL

* Sacrament of Confession has three parts:
  1. Confession of sins.
  2. Giving of penance.
  3. Absolution with satisfaction.

*From “Reconciled and Reconciling”*