

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

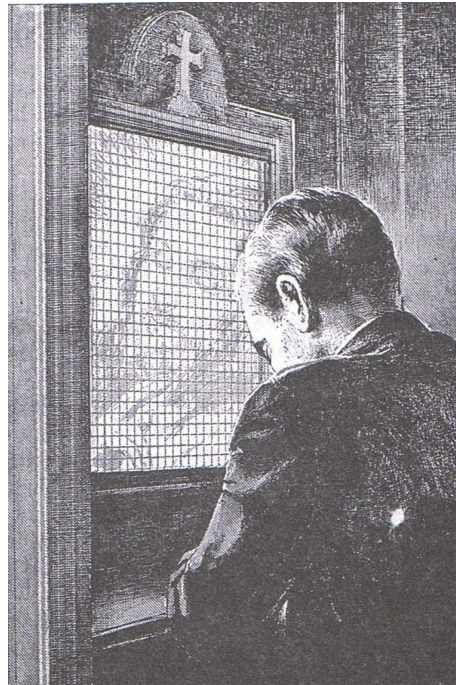
The Lord Jesus, physician and healer of our souls forgave sins during his earthly ministry. He willed that his Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, continue his work of healing and granting forgiveness (see John 20:22-23). In our Catholic faith we fulfill and celebrate this desire of our Lord in the Sacrament of Confession. Those who approach this sacrament celebrate and receive pardon, through God's mercy, for sins and offenses committed against him and are, at the same time reconciled to the Church which they have wounded by their sins.

What is Confession?

The outward sign, (i.e. what we can see and hear), in the Sacrament of Confession is the declaration by a penitent of his or her sins, together with the imposition of hands by the priest and the prayer of absolution which ends, *I absolve you from all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* Most often there is also a discussion between the priest and the penitent so that the penitent is genuinely helped and encouraged by the celebration of the sacrament. There is also the expression of sorrow for sin by the penitent. If it is well celebrated, each confession should be a rich experience of the mercy and love of our God who offers us many graces.

There are actually many names by which this sacrament is called and these names or descriptions help us to see different aspects and graces of this sacrament. It is called the *Sacrament of Conversion* because it celebrates Jesus call to conversion. It is called the *Sacrament of Penance* since it calls the penitent to make amends to

others for sins committed. It is called the *Sacrament of Confession* because the open declaration (which is what the word "confession" means) of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is called the *Sacrament of Forgiveness* since by this sacrament and through the sacramental absolution of the priest, God grants the penitent pardon and peace. It is called the *Sacrament of Reconciliation* since it brings together, by God's grace, those whom sin has separated to some degree.



Problems and Concerns

Although this sacrament has such a great potential for benefits and blessings in our spiritual lives, it is also sadly true that many neglect to celebrate it frequently. For many there is fear or embarrassment. Others see it as unnecessary or unbiblical in its origins.

Perhaps the best way to continue

with the consideration of the Sacrament of Confession is to address these questions and concerns each in turn. In so doing we will also see that the Sacrament of Confession is quite well founded in biblical norms and that it is established by Christ. We will also understand some more of the graces offered in the sacrament.

"Why should I have to tell my sins to a priest?"

This is often the first question that comes to the mind of many when the Sacrament of Confession is mentioned. The most direct answer to this question is that Jesus himself gave us this sacrament as a method by which we should declare our sins and find forgiveness. The Church exhorts the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Confession in obedience to the will of Christ. Perhaps if we look to an important text from the Bible we can see how this is so.

Confession is a Biblical Teaching.

Shortly after his resurrection from dead, Jesus appeared to the Apostles and said to them, *Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.* And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* (John 20:21-23) This Bible text teaches us some very important things.

In the first place we should note that this passage does not make a lot of sense if it always sufficient merely for us to confess all our sins privately to Jesus in prayer. Why would Jesus give the Apostles the astonishing power to

forgive sins unless he expected people to come to them and benefit from this ministry and be submitted to it?

Hence, the Bible does not teach us that all we must do is tell our sins privately to Jesus in prayer. Rather, since Jesus gave the power to forgive or retain sin to the apostles, it is implicitly clear that he expected people to speak openly of their sins to the Apostles.

There are other passages which also indicate that the practice of the early Church was an open declaration of sin: *Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices* (Acts 19:18). Here is another example from the Letter of James: *Is anyone among you sick? Let him summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.* (James 5:14-16)

Thus, the general biblical teaching, (while not excluding personal confession of sins to God in prayer) emphasizes that we confess our sins one to another.

But why to the priest?

It will be noted in the passage from John's Gospel that Jesus gave the power to forgive or retain sin only the Apostles. There is no evidence that he ever gave such power to the other disciples in general. In our Catholic tradition, we see the office of Apostle as the origin and model for the priesthood. Thus, when Christ gave

certain roles or powers only to the Apostles we have maintained that distinction down through the centuries by reserving those functions only to bishops and priests. Thus we strive to follow the tradition set by Christ himself that the forgiveness of sins was a power given to the apostles and their successors, not to the disciples in general.

Other scriptures also help support this practice of reserving the forgiveness of sin to the priesthood. We have already seen the scripture from James which exhorts those who are sick to call upon the presbyters of the Church. "Presbyter" is the Greek word from which we get the English word "priest." Thus the context of the anointing of the sick and the forgiveness of sin seems to be the visit of the presbyters, not just any fellow Christian. Likewise Paul seems to distinguish himself and Timothy from the Corinthians to whom he writes with these words, *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation* (2 Cor 5:18).

Finally, our earliest historical sources outside the Bible (the writings of the Fathers) also indicate that the power to forgive sins was given only to priests. St. Cyprian a North African Father of the Church who lived in the early 300's in one of his most famous treatises, writes that the forgiving of serious sins can take place only, "through the priests." (*De lapsis*, 28) Thus, both the Bible and our Tradition help to confirm the Catholic practice of reserving the power to forgive sins to the bishops and the priests.

Is everyone required to go to confession?

Perhaps it is better to say that while everyone is invited to partake of the Sacrament of Confession only some

are required to do so. This teaching is summed up well in the New Catechism: *One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience. The confession of venial faults, without being necessary in itself, is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church* (CCC # 1493). Thus, though venial sins can be forgiven in a number of ways (an act of contrition, prayer, fasting, works of charity, the penitential rite at the beginning of Mass) mortal sins must be brought to the Sacrament of Confession.

Confession is Essential

There are many today who minimize the role that the Sacrament of Confession plays in their lives. We do well however to question such an attitude. Jesus, after all, made the reconciliation of sinners the central purpose of his ministry. His very name "Jesus" means "savior" and his parents were told by the angel to name him this *because he will save his people from their sins* (Matt 2:21). St. Paul also reminded Timothy of this basic truth: *The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* (1 Tim 1:15). If the reconciliation of sinners to God is the central purpose of Jesus' ministry and if he saw it as important enough to entrust this on-going work to his Church, why should we do with anything less than frequent and faithful celebration of the Sacrament of Confession? *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God!* (2 Cor. 5:20)