

Confession

by Jim Seghers

Introduction

The sacrament of confession is the awesome gift Jesus uses to reconcile men with God by forgiving sins committed after baptism. The [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) quoting the Second Vatican Council¹ teaches: “Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy of the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.”²

This sacrament is identified by a variety of names: *Conversion* - because it effects our return to the Father, *Penance* - because it consecrates our efforts at conversion, *Confession* - because we reveal our sins, *Forgiveness* - because we obtain God’s pardon and peace, and *Reconciliation* - because our hearts are reconciled with God and the Church.³

Protestants usually reject the sacrament of Confession on the grounds that it is not biblical. An example of this position is found in the following statement by Loraine Boettner in his distorted anti-Catholic book: “We search in vain in the Bible for any word supporting the doctrine of auricular confession.”⁴ He also claims the doctrine is not rooted in the early Church: “It is equally impossible to find any authorization or general practice of it during the first one thousand years of the Christian area. Not one word is found in the writings of the early church fathers about confessing sins to a priest or to anyone except God alone. Auricular confession is not mentioned in the writings of Augustine, Origin, Nestorius, Tertullian, Jerome, Chrysostom, or Athanasius — all of these and many others apparently lived and died without ever thinking of going to confession.”⁵

It is unusual to list Nestorius among the Church’s Fathers. Nestorius was the fifth century bishop of Constantinople who taught that Jesus the man and the divine Word, the eternal Son of the Father, were two distinct persons. The heresy that bears his name was condemned by Council of Ephesus (431). Near the end of this discussion those Fathers will be cited in whose writings, according to Boettner, “not one word” can be found “about confessing sins to a priest.”

Sacred Scripture

Both Catholics and Protestants agree that only God can forgive sins and that Jesus, because he is the God-man, has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus clearly affirmed his authority to forgive sins. “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak

¹ [Lumen Gentium](#), 2.

² [Catechism of the Catholic Church \(CCC\) #1422](#).

³ [CCC](#): #s [1423](#), [1424](#), & [1440](#).

⁴ Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, p. 199.

⁵ *Ibid.*

thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question this in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Rise, take up your pallet and walk? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.’ And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all” (Mk 2:5-11; also: Mt 9:2-8 & Lk 7:47-50).

It is insightful that in St. Matthew’s account of this miracle the evangelist relates that the crowds “glorified God, who had given such authority to *men*,” not simply to a man (Mt 9:8). This brings us to the heart of the issue. Did Jesus delegate his power to forgive sins?

After Jesus rose from the dead he did authorize the apostles to forgive sins. St. John recorded this dramatic event. “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he 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” (Jn 20:21-23).

Sacred Scripture records that God breathes on humans only twice. The first occasion occurred at the moment of creation when God breathed his life into Adam, who was called by God to transmit human life (Gen 2:7). The second instance is narrated in the passage quoted from John’s gospel. Jesus breathed his life giving potency into the Apostles to whom he delegated the task of restoring all mankind in the supernatural life as a new creation in him through the sacrament of forgiveness.

It is important to note that Jesus did not merely commission the apostles to preach about forgiveness. He gave them the specific power to forgive sins or not forgive sins. The proper exercise of this power implies that the apostles would know what a person’s sins are. This in turn necessitates oral confession. It is in this context that James writes: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (Jas 5:16). Similarly, St. John writes: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1: 9).

The commissioning of the apostles to forgive sins in John 20: 21-23 is an extension of the plenitude of authority that Jesus bestowed on Peter. “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19).

St. Paul also addresses this issue in his discussion of the Christian’s new life in Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17-18). Because the apostles are intermediaries Paul asserts: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5 :20).

Objections

1. *The idea of confessing one's sins to a priest implies that Christ's saving work was insufficient. After all, the Bible proclaims that when we believe that Jesus is Lord we are saved.*

The passage alluded to is from Acts: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). This objection implies that faith alone is all that is needed for salvation. This is a bankrupt idea that is explicitly rejected by the Bible. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24).

In interpreting biblical passages it is vital to remember that the Holy Spirit is the primary author of all the books that make up the Bible. Therefore specific passages must be interpreted in the context of the whole Bible and not as an isolated text. Thus it is a mistake to conclude that this passage from Acts 16:31 exhausts what the Bible says about forgiveness and salvation. That is not the case. Reflect, for example, on the following passages.

Jesus taught that we must forgive others before we can be forgiven. "For if you forgive men their trespass, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespass, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:15). Consider also Jesus' response to the rich young man's question, "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" Jesus did not say, "Believe in me." Rather he replied, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19: 16, 17).

Far from diminishing Christ's saving work, the sacrament of confession demonstrates its power. Only God could delegate the power to forgive sins to weak men, who are also in need of forgiveness.

2. *I still don't see the necessity or confessing to a priest when we can go straight to God.*

Catholics confess to their priests because Jesus established this healing sacrament for the benefit of his Church. Submission to Christ requires that we utilize the means he has given us rather than attempting to please God according to our ideas. "I did it my way," is the theme of a popular tune, but it is not the way to please God. Finally it is critical to recognize that when we confess to a priest we are confessing to Jesus who is the priest behind the priest. A priest's ability to forgive sins rests solely on the power of God.

3. *It seems that this whole idea of using a priest as an intermediary contradicts the role of Jesus as the one mediator. After all the Bible affirms that "there is one God; and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2: 5).*

This objection highlights the distortions that occur when biblical passages are torn from their context. Let's consider the whole passage beginning with verse one. "First of all, then, I urge that *supplications, prayers, intercessions* and thanksgivings be made for all

men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time.” (1 Tim 2: 1-6).

Note that Paul urges Timothy and the church in Ephesus to perform acts of “supplications,” “prayers” and “intercessions,” which were highlighted in the text. These are clearly works of mediation. In order to make certain that the importance of his instruction is understood St. Paul adds: “This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” What then, is St. Paul’s theological basis for urging these acts of subordinate mediation? It is found in verse five: “For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” In other words St. Paul supports subordinate or secondary mediation. He does not reject it.

Our activity as subordinate mediators neither diminishes nor negates the singular mediation of Jesus Christ. On the contrary it reveals its strength. Only God can write straight lines with such broken instruments. Jesus does what God has always done, that is, engage the Father’s children in the Trinitarian Family business - the salvation of souls.

4. I have heard it affirmed that the passages you quoted earlier, Jas 5:15 and 1 Jn 1:9, disprove the Catholic practice of confession.

Let’s consider these passages in some detail. James writes: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (Jas 5:16). This passage does not refute the need for confession. It supports it. The real issue here is to whom is one to confess? In immediate context it is clear James is referring to the “elders” (Jas 5: 14). The Greek word that is translated as “elders,” *presbyteros*, is the root of the English word, priest.

By ignoring the context the argument is sometimes made that the expression “one another” refers to any Christian. This argument is supported, it is said, by St. John’s first letter: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1: 9). Although it is clear that the apostle is affirming confession, not negating it, he does not specify to whom one should confess.

This interpretation not only flies in the face of the practice of the early Church but also the practice of Protestant churches since the 16th century. In neither case has there been any general practice that supports confessing one’s sins to each other.

Fathers of the Church

We only have sketchy knowledge of the theology of the sacrament of penance in the first and second centuries. However, penance in some form can be traced back to the apostles. In the second century a debate arose when some claimed that sins committed after baptism could not be forgiven. This belief was proposed by the Montanists beginning about 170 A.D.

This heresy taught a rigoristic mode of life following the ideas of a convert named Montanus. He was probably a former priest of the ancient pagan goddess Cybele whose rituals united uncontrolled enthusiasm with a rigorous insistence on ritual purity. Montanus believed that he was a visionary and a prophet. Among other things he proclaimed that the end of the world was near. Two women, Priscilla and Maximilla, abandoned their husbands to become his ardent followers. Claiming to be inspired directly by the Holy Spirit, Montanus called his followers to renounce marriage, surrender their worldly possessions to their spiritual leaders, and engage in prolonged fasts and austere mortifications. The movement was condemned by Pope Zephyrinus.

Regarding the penitential discipline found in the pre-Nicene Church, J.N.D. Kelly writes: “The system which seems to have existed in the Church at this time, and for centuries afterwards, was wholly public, involving confession, a period of penance and exclusion from communion, and formal absolution and restoration – the whole process being called *exomologesis*. The last of these was normally bestowed by the *bishop*, as Hippolytus’s prayer of Episcopal consecration implies, but in his absence might be delegated to a *priest*.”⁶

Let’s now sift focus to the specific Fathers of the Church of whom, it was falsely claimed: “Not one word is found in the writings of the early church fathers about confessing sins to a priest.”

Didache (40 to 60 AD)

“Confess your offenses in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.”⁷

“On the Lord’s Day of the Lord gather together, break bread and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure.”⁸

Tertullian (220 AD) - From his treatise on *Modesty*:

“But,” you say, ‘the Church has the power of forgiving sins.’ “This I acknowledge.”⁹

⁶ *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 116.

⁷ William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. I, # 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, # 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, # 487.

Origin (244 AD) - *Homilies on Numbers*

“In addition to these there is also a seventh, albeit hard and laborious: the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner washes his pillow in tears, when his tears are day and night his nourishment, and when he does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who says, ‘I said, to the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity,’ and you forgave the disloyalty of my heart.”¹⁰

This passage is insightful, because it answers a question that is frequently addressed to Catholics, namely, “Why do you confess your sins to a priest and not directly to God?” The answer is that in confessing to a priest, we are confessing to Christ, because the priest acts in the Person of Christ.

Chrysostom (386 AD) - *The Priesthood*

“They who inhabit the earth, they who make their abode among men, are entrusted with the dispensation of the things of heaven! **Priests** have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: ‘Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed.’ Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding; but they can bind only the body. Priests, however, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself, and transcends the very heavens. Whatever priests do here on earth, God will confirm in heaven, just as the master ratifies the decisions of his servants. Did He not give them all the powers of heaven? ‘Whose sins you shall forgive,’ He says, ‘they are forgiven them: whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.’ What greater power is there than this? The Father has given all judgment to the Son, now I see the Son placing all his power in the hands of men.”¹¹

Jerome (398 AD) - *Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew*

“Just as in the Old Testament the priest makes the leper clean or unclean, so in the New Testament the bishop and presbyter binds or looses not those who are innocent or guilty, but by reason of their office, when they have heard various kinds of sins, they know who is to be bound and who loosed.”¹²

Augustine (419/420)

The renowned Protestant historian and pathologist, J.N.D. Kelly, asserts that Augustine’s, “allusions to penance are countless.” The following examples are drawn from St. Augustine’s writings.

¹⁰ Ibid., # 493.

¹¹ Ibid., Vol. II, # 1119.

¹² Ibid., # 1486.

Christian Combat (396-397 AD)

“Let us not listen to those who deny that the Church of God is able to forgive all sins. They are wretched indeed, because they do not recognize in Peter the rock and they refuse to believe that the keys of the kingdom of heaven, lost from their own hands, have been given to the Church.”¹³

Treatise on Adulterous Marriages (419/420 AD)

“If a man, accusing his wife of adultery, kills her, this sin, since it is finished and does not perdure in him, if it is committed by a catechumen, is absolved in Baptism; and, if it is done by one who is baptized, it is healed by Penance and reconciliation.”¹⁴

Pastoral Considerations

Recently my home parish, St. Peter in Covington, Louisiana, was graced with a mission given by the Franciscan, Fr. Dennis Koopman. During the third evening Fr. Koopman preached on the subject of reconciliation after which he and six additional priests heard individual confessions for about an hour and a half. Almost everyone in the crowded church went to confession. Their ages ranged from children to elderly grandparents. As I was in the back of church handling the tape ministry, I had the opportunity to observe the faces of the people as they completed their confessions. They glowed. They smiled. They looked peaceful.

The experience of this wonderful inner joyfulness finds an echo in the *Catechism*. “For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation ‘is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation’.”¹⁵ It doesn’t matter whether one’s sins are small and petty or hideously black, there is an enormous contentment that comes from Jesus’ guarantee: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:23).

Confession can be a humbling experience. It is often difficult to reveal one’s sins to a man even when faith reveals that Jesus is the priest behind the priest. Yet this self-effacing revelation of one’s weakness is in itself one of its great benefits of this sacrament because it strikes at the very root of all sin, pride and disobedience.

This sacrament also highlights the communal aspect of sin. Sin is never merely matter between the individual and God. Every sin wounds the Church, the body of Christ. Therefore a public healing must also take place.

Finally, the sacrament of Penance brings special graces to combat the inner tendencies that lead us to sin. I knew a man who suffered from an addictive habit of grave sin. Time and time

¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, # 1579.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, # 1864.

¹⁵ [CCC, #1468](#).

again, he would go through the humiliating process of faithfully confessing his sins. He failed often, but each time he'd return to the sacrament for God's forgiveness. Eventually, he came to realize that many months passed and this sin hadn't returned. Many years have elapsed, but that habit of sin has never returned. Let me end this discussion with a poignant story that illustrates the healing power of this great sacrament. The three players in this true-life drama are Pope John Paul II, Fr. Charlie and Joe. Fr. Charlie and Joe are fictitious names of real people.

Fr. Charlie had returned to Rome where he was ordained. To his great delight he was granted a brief private audience with the Pope. Since his appointment was in the late afternoon, Fr. Charlie decided to walk the city and visit Rome's great churches. As it neared the time he was to meet the Pope, Fr. Charlie hurried down the great steps of a church when someone called out, "Charlie, how are you?" Fr. Charlie stopped to look at the homeless man who was addressing him. There was no recognition. Then the homeless man spoke again, "Charlie, it's me, Joe." Then Fr. Charlie recognized Joe, his classmate of seminary days. They were ordained together. Fr. Charlie heard that Joe had abandoned the priesthood, but he never learned what became of him. During their brief conversation Joe explained that his life had fallen apart after he left the priesthood. As a result he lived begging beside the church destitute and homeless.

As Fr. Charlie left his classmate to hurry to the Vatican, he couldn't get Joe out of his mind. He was overwhelmed by the sadness of it all. When he met the Holy Father, Fr. Charlie briefly told the Pope of his earlier meeting of his old friend and asked John Paul II to pray for him. As Fr. Charlie turned to leave the Holy Father said, "You come and have dinner with the Pope. Bring your friend with you."

Fr. Charlie hurried back to the church wondering if Joe would still be there. To his delight he found him and shared the astounding news that the Pope wanted to have dinner with the two of them. So they trudged back to the Vatican. Fr. Charlie in his black cassock and Joe in his dirty tattered clothes.

Over dinner John Paul II encouraged Joe to tell the story of his decision to throwaway his priesthood and the aftermath of that event. It was a sad story. When dinner was finished the Holy Father addressed Joe: "Come with me. The Pope will now hear your confession." Then he led Joe to another room.

After absolution was given, the Holy Father said to Joe: "Now you hear the confession of the Pope." Joe was aghast. "Holy Father," he said, "I am not in good standing with the Church." John Paul II replied, "I am the Pope. You are now in good standing with the Church." Joe obediently heard the Pope's confession. Afterward the Holy Father instructed Joe. "Go back to the church where you lived as a homeless man and inform the pastor that you are his new assistant with a special mission from the Pope to administer to the homeless people of Rome. Fr. Joe has faithfully fulfilled this mission ever since. Once again Jesus restores a prodigal son to his Father!

December 29, 2001