

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

By Jim Seghers

The following essay was originally prepared for a class of adults who were in the process of entering the Catholic Church.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* opens its discussion of this marvelous sacrament with the following paragraphs:

1420 Through the sacraments of Christian initiation, man receives the new life of Christ. Now we carry this life "in earthen vessels," and it remains "hidden with Christ in God." We are still in our "earthly tent," subject to suffering, illness, and death. This new life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin.

1421 The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick.

From the dawn of civilization until the present time, human history illustrates the painful reality of sin – even after receiving the forgiveness of sin through Baptism. The Bible tells us that sin first came into the world when Adam and Eve rejected God’s perfect plan for their lives (Genesis 1-3). They were disobedient because they yielded to the devil’s temptation to do things “their way.” The result was disastrous.

The devil’s cunning temptation to our first parents questioned God’s fatherhood. His deceptive lie alleged: “God does not love you. He is not to be trusted. He’s really a tyrant imposing unreasonable rules because he is selfishly trying to protest his privileged position. He does not want you to be like him. He has deceived you. He never intends to give you the gift of his life. Look how he’s withholding it from you by forbidding you to eat of ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ (Gen 2:17). God is an enemy from whom you must protest yourself. If you want to be like God, be free like me. Reach out and take what you want. God will never give it to you.”

This fundamental deception is imbedded in every sin. Pope John Paul II taught: “Original sin attempts, then, to abolish fatherhood”¹ by denying the fundamental truth that God is love and can be trusted. To counter our vulnerability to sin Jesus fortified our new life through the sacrament of Baptism, by the gift of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and the worthy reception of the Eucharist.

1426 Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls

¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 228.

concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life.

Personal Sin

The frailty we experience in this life can draw us into sin even after we have been reborn into Christ in the Sacrament of Baptism. In John's First Letter the Apostle makes a distinction between mortal sins that kill the life of grace in our souls, and those sins that do not kill the life of grace in the soul.

1 Jn 5:16-17

“If any one sees his brother committing what is not a *mortal sin*, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not *mortal*. *There is sin which is mortal*; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not *mortal*.”

Sins that are not mortal are called *venial* sin. Notice the seriousness of mortal sin; prayers are insufficient to remove its guilt. Forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance is required.

Mortal Sin

There are three essential conditions that constitute a sin mortal. If any of them is lacking, the sin is venial not mortal.

1. *Grave Matter* – The object of our sinful act must be serious. For example, it is a sin to steal. The matter is grave if one steals a car, but it is not grave if one steals a pencil.
2. *Sufficient Knowledge* – One must know that the evil act is gravely sinful.
3. *Full Consent of the Will* – The evil act must be consciously and deliberately chosen. Force, being half asleep, and stress are among the factors that may diminish the full consent of the will. No one steps into mortal sin by accident or unaware.

Jesus Gave the Power to Forgive Sins to His Church

Christ formed the Church with Peter as its visible head: “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18). Jesus then said to Peter:

Matt 16:19

“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.*”

The idea of *binding* and *loosing* is rooted in Old Testament. For example, God chose Moses to communicate and interpret his Law. Moses became the mediator between God and his chosen people. In Matthew 16:18-19 Jesus conferred upon Peter his own authority to rule God's human family, the Church.

In the time of Moses, others were also delegated to judge what was prohibited (*bound*) or what was permitted (*loosed*), in other words, when the people were “absolved” or “condemned” for specific violations of the law. St. Matthew records that Jesus also gave the power to bind and loose to all the apostles:

Matt 18:18

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus had the authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt 9:6). Jesus gave his Church the wonderful power to forgive sins. In this way Christians have Jesus’ guarantee that the sins they commit after Baptism are forgiven.

Jesus empowered the apostles to forgive sins on Easter Sunday:

Jn 20:21-23

“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.*’”

The Bible records that God breathed on humans twice. The first occasion occurred when God breathed his life into Adam, who was given the vocation to transmit human life (Gen 2:7). The second occasion occurred when Jesus breathed into the Apostles his life-giving potency to forgive sins. He entrusted them with his mission to restore their brothers and sisters to supernatural life and spiritual health through the sacrament of forgiveness.

It is important to recognize that Jesus did not merely commission the apostles to preach about forgiveness. He gave them the awesome power to forgive sins. Obviously, the proper use of this power required the apostles to learn of a person’s sins through oral confession.

Thus, St. James wrote:

Jas 5:16

“*Confess* your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Similarly, St. John wrote:

1 Jn 1: 9 “If we *confess* our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

St. Paul affirmed that Christ:

2 Cor 5:19

“gave us the *ministry of reconciling* the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

It has always been God’s plan to involve his earthly children in the Family business of the Blessed Trinity, that is, the saving of souls. The forgiveness of the priest does not

diminish God's sovereign authority; rather it demonstrates its power. Jesus is always the eternal High Priest forgiving us through the ministry of his priests. In this way he restores us to the Father.

The formula of Absolution? (CCC 1449)

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of His Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins: through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and *I absolve you from your sins* In the name of the Father, and of the Son And of the Holy Spirit.”

But why confess to a priest? Why not go to God directly?

The answer is simple. We must confess our sins in the manner Jesus established. We don't have God's permission to pick-and-choose what we like or don't like. When we do that, we are worshipping ourselves, not God!

Of course, when we sin, we should repent immediately and directly to God, but we only have Christ's guarantee of forgiveness when we confess our sins in the way God intended. Priests have Jesus' power and authority to forgive sins. Jesus wants us to make use of this power. Therefore when a priest gives absolution, the penitent has Jesus' guarantee that his sins are forgiven. We have Jesus' word for it!

Pride and Humility

There are additional reasons why Jesus established the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Pride is at the root of every sin. It can be humiliating to acknowledge our secret sins to a man, even a man empowered heal us in the name of Christ. Therefore the sacrament gives a double dose of what we need: forgiveness of our sins and training in humility.

The Ripple Effect of Sin

Every sin has a communal ramification. It's never just the individual and Jesus. Sometimes people will say: “My sins are personal matters between God and me; or “It's nobody's business what I do in my personal life.” These statements are false.

The truth is sin is never only a matter between the individual and God. The human race is a family, God's family. The Church is depicted as the Mystical Body of Christ. (1 Cor 6:15; 12:12; 12:27; Eph 4:12; Rom 12:4-5) Therefore what we do, good or evil, impacts the other members positively or negatively.

Consider the personal sin of Adam. Because he was the biological father of the human race, the evil consequences of his disobedience have negatively impacted all of us. In contrast the obedience of Jesus, the new Adam, has brought all of us countless benefits.

Rom 5:19

“For by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.”

Every sin has a ripple effect that reaches out with harmful tentacles to those around us. Sin does not only break God's laws, it fractures lives – families and civilizations. This is easy to perceive in the case of drunkenness or drug addiction, because of the obvious injurious side effects to the addict, families members, and society as a whole. However, every sin in some way and in different degrees injures others. Sin is a cancer that breeds more sin. Consider acts of selfishness. If left unrepented, they easily lead to anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, discord, slander, envy, quarrelling, and even violence. These behaviors tear apart families and societies.

Sexual sins cause us to deny the inherent dignity God created within each of us by reducing persons to mere objects. These sins twist the beautiful procreative act, in which God joins with man and woman to form another human life, into a selfish act of pleasure disconnected from its dimensions of self-donating commitment. The result of these sins can be readily seen in our world today in the large number of divorces, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and violent crimes against women and children.

A sacrament known by many names

This marvelous sacrament is identified by different names, each one highlighting one of the powerful facets.

The *Catechism* tells us it is called a (CCC 1423-1424):

- *Sacrament of Conversion* because it makes Jesus' call to conversion sacramentally present. This is the first step in returning to the Father when we have strayed by sin.
- *Sacrament of Penance*, **which** highlights the sinner's steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.
- *Sacrament of Confession* because the disclosure of our sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is also a "confession," an acknowledgement and praise of God's holiness and mercy toward a sinful man.
- *Sacrament of Forgiveness* because Jesus grants the penitent "pardon and peace" by the priest's sacramental absolution.
- *Sacrament of Reconciliation* because it imparts God's healing love: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

The Essential Elements of a Confession. (CCC 1491-1494)

Over the centuries, the Church has permitted great flexibility in the form of administering this sacrament of healing. In the early centuries, for example, the forgiveness of grave sins was administered through public penance that sometimes lasted many years.

Subsequently, confession was made in secret between the penitent and a priest.

Regardless of the concrete form, certain essential elements have always remained.

- *Contrition*
- *Confession*
- *Reparation and Penance*

1. Contrition (CCC 1451-1453)

To have our sins forgiven we must be truly sorry for our sins. Genuine sorrow goes beyond the *feelings* of remorse. *It always includes the determination to avoid sin in the future together with the people and places that might tempt us to sin.* This idea is aptly expressed in the Act of Contrition.

“I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.”

1864 There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept His mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss.

2. Confession (CCC 1455-1456, 1458)

The *Catechism* teaches that in confessing our sins “man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God” (CCC 1455). It is only after we look honestly at ourselves and take ownership of our sins that the process of conversion can truly begin. That is why confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance.

We must confess all mortal sins committed since our last confession because it is these sins that destroy the life of grace in the soul. Unless forgiven this state can eternally separate us from God.

The confession of venial sins is strongly recommended, but not required. The confession of venial sins “helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit”(CCC 1458).

3. Reparation and Penance (CCC 1459-1460)

Along with giving absolution, the priest-confessor assigns an act of penance. It might be an act of kindness, self-denial, or a prayer. These acts are often connected with the gravity and nature of the sins confessed. Clearly, these small acts of penance of themselves could never make full restitution for our sins, but they are effective because they plug into the infinite merits of Jesus Christ.

Many sins directly injure others. Asking forgiveness and determining not to harm others again is not enough. We have an obligation to mend the damage we have done to the degree that it is possible. This includes the restitution of stolen property, repairing the reputation of someone we have slandered, and reimbursing the injured person for the damage we have caused.

It is important to perform these acts promptly. If we forget the acts of penance assigned in confession, our sins are still forgiven, but we have missed this opportunity to share in the healing work of Christ.

When are we required to go to confession? (CCC 1457)

- The Church commands that after having attained the age of discretion, each person is obligated to confess *serious sins* at least once a year.
- Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive the Blessed Eucharist without first receiving sacramental absolution.
- Children must go to the sacrament of reconciliation before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

What do I say and do in the confessional?

1. Entering the confessional

The choice is yours. You can go to confession face-to-face or behind a screen. Generally if you go behind the screen you will kneel. Usually, when going to confession face-to-face you will sit facing the priest, but kneeling is an option.

2. The confession

After you are settled in your chosen place, the priest will give a greeting. For example, he may say a brief prayer like:

“May God enlighten your heart to help you know and acknowledge your sins, and trust in His great mercy.”

If you are very unsure of what to do next, you might simply say:

“Father I am nervous because this is my first confession (or I have not made my confession in ____ years). I am not sure what to do. Please guide me through the sacrament.”

If that is not the case, simply say:

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned. My last confession was (two months, five years, etc) ago. Since that time the following are my sins.”

Then confess your sins. Depending on the situation the priest may ask tactful questions to determine the kind of sins you are confessing or to make sure you have made a decision to avoid this sin in the future.

3. The advice and penance

Once you have named all your sins the priest may give you encouragement and advice. Giving you a penance will follow. For example, he may ask you to say the Rosary or reflect on Jesus passion and death for 20 minutes.

Then he will ask you to make a good act of contrition.

An Act of Contrition

O my God, I am sorry for my sins because I dread your just punishment, but most of all because I have offended you who are all good and deserving all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin, to do my penance, and to amend my life. Amen.

This will be followed by absolution. You can reply, “Thank you.” Leave the confessional.

4. Completing your penance

If possible complete your penance immediately while we enjoy the experience of having all your sins removed. When God forgives, your sins have disappeared.

5. Pray daily to avoid the occasion of sin

Because of our human tendency to sin, we must strive for holiness each and every day. It is a good habit to pray daily to avoid sin, particularly those sins that you recently confessed

The Residue of Sin

Jesus perfectly redeemed us by his death and Resurrection. The application of his infinite merits is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through the Church. Thus in the sacrament of confession the guilt of sin is taken away. In the case of mortal sin, the very real danger of eternal damnation is also removed. However, even after the sacrament of penance has repaired our torn relationship with God, the obligation of temporal punishment may remain.

Why is there temporal punishment after we've gone to confession?

The temporal punishment caused by our sins is not an expression of God's anger, nor does it indicate that God's forgiveness is deficient. Instead it results from the harmful attachments to sin we cling to even after the sin is forgiven. When we confess our sin we may not have a complete repentance because we still adhere to something connected with that sin. A man, for example, may sincerely repent about watching pornography, but he may still be powerfully drawn to the stimulation those images provided. A difficult battle may await him. As a result temporal punishment remains. Our loving Father allows temporal punishments to cleanse us of our sinful attachments because they harm our relationship with him and may jeopardize eternal life with him in heaven.

Perfect love

Perfect sorrow is the complete repentance of sin that flows from our ardent love of God. When perfect love accompanies sacramental forgiveness, the sinner is so completely healed that no temporal punishment remains. In contrast, when our sorrow is less than perfect, our deformed attachments demand purification before we go to heaven. This cleansing must occur during our journey on earth or after death in the state called Purgatory.

Purgatory (CCC 1031, 1032)

Purgatory is not a second chance for those who die in the state of mortal sin. Rather, it is the final purification of the elect. In the words of the *Catechism*

1030 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

There is a radical difference between the punishment of hell and the purification of Purgatory. Hell is a place of despair, hatred, and eternal torment. The fire that burns in hell is the flame of God's wrath. Purgatory is a place of sorrow, acceptance, and hope where we experience the purifying fire of God's love. Nevertheless, the suffering in Purgatory is very real. On earth we experience many distractions that dull the powerful longing for God that is deeply imbedded in every soul. Once we die the intense desire to possess and be possessed by God consumes our whole being. Any delay in this embrace of eternal Love is indescribably painful.

Scriptural Basis for Purgatory

Although the word "Purgatory" is not in the Bible, the idea is clearly taught in Sacred Scripture.

New Testament:

1. The Book of Revelation teaches that "*nothing unclean*" shall enter heaven (Rev 21:27).
2. St. Paul speaks of our judgment in terms of a cleansing fire: "If any man's work is burned up, he will *suffer loss*, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15).
3. St. Peter similarly wrote: "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which through perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:7).
4. Peter also tells us that Christ visited a place for the dead that is not hell and not heaven, and preached to them the good news so that heaven would be open to them (1 Peter 3:19).
5. Jesus also talks about the sinner who "will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt 12:32). It implies that some sins, venial sins, can be forgiven in the next life.
6. The Book of Hebrews commands: "pursue peace with everyone, *and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*" (Heb 12:14).

Old Testament:

Further evidence of purification after death is found in the Old Testament:

1. Praying for the dead is a practice mentioned in Sacred Scripture. Judas Maccabeus prayed for his fallen comrades "that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out... Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Macc 12:42, 46)
2. The Book of Sirach teaches, "Give graciously to all the living, and withhold not kindness from the dead" (Sir 7:33).

Indulgences (CCC 1471-1473)

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. An indulgence is either *partial* or *plenary* according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin.

Key Points

- An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasure of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments do for their sins.
- The Church attaches indulgences to specified prayers or good works, for example, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, reading Sacred Scripture, and saying the Rosary.
- Indulgences can be applied either to the living or the dead.

Reflection

Sin thrives in darkness. It seeks to remain hidden and unacknowledged. In the sacrament of forgiveness, Jesus breaks down this dangerous barrier of silence that can easily lead to denial and excuses. Sacramental Confession to a priest brings us the light of Christ's truth. It compels us to face the evil we have chosen and admit that we have failed our Lord and wounded his heart.

This sacrament invites us to weep with a profound regret and repentance! Through the power of this sacrament Jesus heals those who are afflicted with the leprosy of sin. Jesus gently and lovingly tells us to sin no more without reproach, just as he did with the unfortunate woman caught in adultery. He also gives us His strength to lean on so we can be faithful to our determination to avoid sin in the future.

Finally, through the authority he gave to His Church, Jesus applies His merits to purify us from the attachments of sin. When we leave the confessional it is with the absolute certitude that our sins are forgiven. We have Jesus' word for it. Jesus wants our death to be the happiest day of our life because on that day we can fly into the eternal embrace of His loving arms.

Luke 5:32

“And Jesus answered them, ‘I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance’.”