

ON CONFESSION

Happily, there has been a gradual return to the Sacrament of Penance (also called Confession or Reconciliation) in the last few years. This article is an attempt to clarify some matters about this sacrament.

I. THE NEED AND BENEFITS OF CONFESSION

People often ask why they should go to a priest for confession when they can tell God directly that they are sorry for their sins. Personal prayers of confession and contrition are always good and helpful, but Scripture itself calls for the confession of sins to others on earth, and the ability of bishops and their successors to give absolution. See, e.g., Matt. 16:19, 18:18; John 20:23; James 5:13-16; see also Acts 19:18. And thus the Church has, from an early time, considered it a matter of faith that confession to a bishop or priest designate is the only ordinary means of obtaining forgiveness for mortal sins committed after baptism; and she from early days onward has encouraged the confession of lesser sins. See, e.g., Catechism 1456-58, 1497; Council of Trent, Decree on Penance (1551).

The Bible recounts that, when Christ walked the earth, people who were repentant of sins were not content with simply asking God in prayer for forgiveness, but rather went to Him in visible form confessing their sins to Him and asking His forgiveness. See, e.g., Luke 7:36-50, 23:40-43. Likewise, just before the public ministry of Jesus, St. John the Baptist was seen as the representative of God, and people confessed their sins to him, as they had done before the priests and prophets before. See Matt. 3:5-6; Mark 1:5; Num. 5:5-7; 2 Sam. 12:13-14. For there is a natural desire to communicate with God in as personal a manner as possible, and to hear from Him in audible form that we are forgiven, rather than wonder at whether our confession and contrition to Him is sufficient. Priests act as the ambassadors of Christ, see 2 Cor. 5:18-20, and thus allow people to speak to Christ in an audible and tangible fashion. The sacraments in general provide that certainty of God's grace through visible, tangible and audible means generally; and the sacrament of Reconciliation does so for sins.

In addition, as the Catechism notes, there is something healing about confessing one's sins to another person, especially the one who was injured or a representative. See Catechism 1455. As Fr. Stanley Jaki, the former President of the Pontifical Academy of

Science, wrote, psychology as had to "discover anew those insights" of Scripture, but now increasingly "the confessional has been replaced by the couch." See Praying the Psalms 79. Psychological assistance has a role in healing from the standpoint of human wisdom; but it is the priest who, without charge, provides healing from the standpoint of the divine.

On the other side of the coin, recounting one's sins to God alone in prayer, while valuable and a good preparation for Reconciliation is by itself too easy. Especially in the midst of sin, God can seem distant, and thus apologies to Him may easily be half-hearted; the requirement to go to another person, and one trained in hearing confessions, tests one's real resolve to confess sins and atone for them. Furthermore, we live in community and in the Church, and sins do not only offend God, but also other humans and the Church. And thus it is important to confess sins to another human and a representative of the Church. And, while it is not the main reason for the sacrament, the priest in Reconciliation can give advice on how to avoid sins in the future. The sacrament also gives us grace and strength from heaven to "go and sin no more." See John 5:4, 8:11. In all ways, the sacrament of Reconciliation is based both upon divine Revelation and common sense, and helps us continually "rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of our faith." Heb. 12:1-2.

II. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE SACRAMENT

On the penitent's part, there are three requirements for the sacrament, namely, true contrition, an honest confession, and a willingness to perform penance. Contrition means a true sorrow for sin and a resolve to try to avoid the sins in the future. Contrition is best if it is based upon a deep love for God and passionate desire to avoid offending divine love; and such contrition makes the sacrament all the more powerful. But lesser forms of contrition, based upon a personal shame and disappointment, sorrow at offending others, or even fear of divine judgment, are sufficient to make the sacrament effective. Likewise, the resolve to try to avoid sins in the future obviously does not mean that one will in fact never commit the same sins again; fallen human nature is often too weak for that. See Rom. 7:18-25. But contrition does imply that one does not intend to continue committing those sins and will make efforts to do better. By contrast, if one is either not sorry for sins at all, or only sorry that they caused some negative effects on one's life, or if one has no intention of changing, such a lack of contrition would prevent any real reconciliation with God, as it would with another human injured by sin.

As one of the names for the sacrament implies, the individual confession of sins is an essential part of the sacrament. Only when such individual confession is impossible (e.g., in a sinking ship or for a person who is on artificial respiration and unable to speak) is this requirement, for the time being, waived. The confession must include all unconfessed mortal sins that one can remember, that

is. Unless it is important to understand the nature of the sin, it is not necessary to confess many details about a mortal sin; but the number and kind (e.g., slander against a co-worker, missing Sunday Mass without reason, artificial contraception) must be described. If one cannot remember exact numbers or honestly forgets some grave sins, which is common when a person has not been to confession for a long time, the sacrament is still effective. Any forgotten mortal sins should be confessed in a later Reconciliation. While the forgiveness of mortal sins is most important, as a practical matter, when people go to Confession regularly, they usually soon get to the level where the main struggle is against lesser sins. Confession of these sins is very helpful, both spiritually and psychologically, for it calls down the power of heaven to release us from the burdens that weigh down our souls. See, e.g., Heb. 12:1-1 James 5:16; Ps. 32:3-7.

The final part of the sacrament for the penitent is the penance assigned by the priest. This penance does not itself make up for sins, but rather is our cooperation in divine grace. Although penances in a bygone era were often rather severe, today they are more a beginning practice to help overcome the tendency to sin. Still, they are important, and participation with Christ through them is crucial to our call to join with Jesus and therefore become a co-heir with Him. See Rom. 8:16-17; Catechism 1460.

On the Church's part, a priest with the faculties to confer the sacrament must hear the confession and confer absolution. In the Latin rite, the Church has given the prayer for absolution, and said that the essential aspect is the concluding words, "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In case of emergency, the priest may shorten the absolution to those final words, but those words are essential and cannot be changed. It is true that, as the Catechism points out, the Eastern rites of the Church (i.e. the traditions of the Church that arose in the east parts of the Mediterranean region, Eastern Europe and the area around the Middle East) set forth different forms of absolution, which the priests of those rites use. See Catechism 1481. But a priest must use the prayer authorized by his rite. A priest does not confer this or any sacrament by his own power, but rather by authority of the church given by Christ.