

Why We Confess

Introduction

1. ‘Why should I confess my sins to a priest? Why can’t I just go directly to God?’
2. ‘When do I have to go to confession? How often?’
3. ‘What is the difference between mortal and venial sin? Could you give me a list?’
4. *Why We Confess*: explain the *sacrament of reconciliation*; emphasize its *biblical roots*

What is a Sacrament?

1. 1885 Baltimore Catechism: “outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.”
2. 1992 *Catechism*: “*powers* that come forth from the body of Christ” (CCC 1115)
3. The Woman with a Hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34; see Image in CCC p. 275)

1. The Sacrament of Conversion

1. “The *sacrament of conversion*”: makes present Jesus’ call to conversion (CCC 1423)
2. Jesus’ first words: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15)
 - a. “Repent” (Greek *metanēō*): literally means to ‘change one’s mind’
3. Conversion: “an essential part” of the kingdom (CCC 1427)
4. First Conversion: turning to Christ in baptism (CCC 1426)
5. “Second conversion”: returning to God from sins committed *after* baptism (CCC 1428)
6. St. Ambrose: there are two conversions, of “water and tears” (CCC 1429)

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: *above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin*, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. *It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification.* The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as “*the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace*” (CCC 1446)

7. “Sin which is not mortal” vs. “Sin which is mortal” (1 John 5:16; see CCC 1852-60)
 - a. Venial Sin: a lesser offense a/g God or neighbor (cf. spiritual sickness)
 - b. Mortal Sin: a grave offense a/g God or neighbor (cf. spiritual death)
8. “Anyone” aware of “mortal sin” “must not receive Holy Communion” unless he has “first received sacramental absolution...” (CCC 1457; confession ‘at least’ once a year)

2. The Sacrament of Forgiveness

1. Only God forgives sins; Jesus, “the Son of God” has authority to forgive (CCC 1441)
2. Jesus and the Sinful “Woman” (Luke 7:36-50)
 - a. Mortal Sin: “What sort of woman this is... she is a *sinner*”
 - b. Contrition: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, *for she loved much*”
 - c. Absolution: “*Who is this*, who even forgives sins?”
3. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24)
 - a. Conversion: “When he came to himself...”

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- b. Confession: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...”
 - c. Forgiveness: “His father saw him and had compassion”
 - d. Resurrection: “this my son was dead, and is alive again”
 - e. Reconciliation: “He was lost, and is found.”
4. Priest in Confessional: like “the Father who awaits the Prodigal Son” (CCC 1465)

Why We Confess (Part 1): Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever been asked by someone, “Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest? Why not just go straight to God?” What did you say?

2. What do you think of the ‘new’ definition of a sacrament as a “power” that “flows forth from the body of Christ” (CCC 1115)? How does this definition affect the way you see the sacraments, especially confession?

3. Have you ever wondered what the difference is between “mortal” and “venial” sin? What is the biblical basis for this difference, and how might you explain it to someone trying to understand it? (Hint: think here in terms of relationships.)

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1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997. See CCC 1420-1498. A wonderful and official summary of the Church’s teaching on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.
2. John Paul II. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance (2 December, 1984). A beautiful, magisterial, and inspiring explanation of sin,

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- reconciliation, and the sacrament of confession by St. John Paul II. Available at www.vatican.va.
3. Scott Hahn. *Swear to God: the Promise and Power of the Sacraments*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. An excellent introduction to the seven sacraments from a biblical perspective. Very informative but also very easy to read.
 4. Scott Hahn. *Lord, Have Mercy: the Healing Power of Confession*. New York: Doubleday, 2003. An excellent explanation of the sacrament of confession from a scriptural point of view. Very easy to read; a great gift for someone interested in going back to confession but now sure how. *Note: Contains an excellent "Examination of Conscience" to use in preparation for Confession.*

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1. Conversion and forgiveness sound great: but where is the *confession* part in the Bible?
2. And why does the priest give a “*penance*”? What is the penance for?

3. The Sacrament of *Confession*

1. “*Sacrament of confession*”: “disclosure of sins to a priest” is an “essential” part (1424)
2. Confession “frees us”; “look squarely” sin and “take responsibility” (CCC 1455)
3. Confession of Sins in the Old Testament:
 - a. “Confession” of “sin” before a “priest” (Lev 5:1-10, Num 5:5-7)
 - b. King David’s Psalm of confession: after sinning with Bathsheba (Psalm 51:1-17)
4. Jesus gave the apostles the *power* to forgive sins (John 20:21-23; CCC 1462)
 - a. “Whose sins you forgive *are forgiven*”
 - b. “Whose sins you retain *are retained*”
4. The Early Church practiced “confession” of sins (1 John 1:8-9)
 - a. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves”
 - b. “If we *confess* our sins... [God] will forgive our sins”
 - c. “Call for the elders... *Confess* your sins to one another” (James 5:14-16)
5. The Priest: “sign and instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner” (CCC 1465)
6. The Sacramental Seal: “absolute secrecy” regarding the sins confessed (CCC 1467)

4. The Sacrament of *Penance*

1. Forgiveness (Absolution) vs. Reparation (Penance) (cf. broken window):

Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. *Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins.* This satisfaction is also called “penance.” (CCC 1459)
2. The Penance Given by the Confessor: prayer, sacrifice, service, etc. (CCC 1460)
3. John the Baptist: “bear *fruits* as befit *repentance*” (Luke 3:8)
4. Zacchaeus: “if I have extorted anything... I shall repay it four times over” (Luke 19:8)

5. The Sacrament of *Reconciliation*

1. Reconciliation with God and the Church (CCC 1496)
2. A Sacrament of *Healing*: “Peace and Serenity of Conscience (CCC 1421, 1496)
3. The Healing of the Paralytic: “My son, your sins are forgiven...” (Mark 2:3-12)

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“Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.” There are profound reasons for this. *Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner: “My son, your sins are forgiven.” He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them.* (CCC 1484)

Why We Confess (Part 2): Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Reread all of Psalm 51, King David’s psalm of confession after sinning with Bathsheba. Do you recognize any parts of the Psalm from the Mass? Do any verses resonate with your own experience of sin and forgiveness?

2. If our sins are forgiven, why does the priest also give us a *penance* to perform? What is the difference between the “forgiveness” of sins and doing “penance” for sin?

3. How does it affect your understanding of Confession to think of encountering *Christ* in a “personal” way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Have you ever experienced the “peace and serenity of conscience” that the Catechism describes after being forgiven (CCC 1421, 1496)?

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