

# I Confess: The Biblical Basis of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

**ISSUE:** Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest? Is this biblical?

**RESPONSE:** In confessing their sins and receiving absolution through the ministry of a priest, Catholics are following the teaching of Jesus and His Apostles, both in the Bible and in the Sacred Tradition of the Church. Jesus empowered His apostles to forgive men's sin, sending them to be ministers of reconciliation in His name, as His Heavenly Father first sent Him (Jn. 20:21-23).

**DISCUSSION:** Through the Sacrament of Baptism, a person is cleansed of original sin and receives the "grace of a new birth in God the Father, through His Son, in the Holy Spirit" (St. Irenaeus as cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 683). Through this regeneration in water and the Spirit, a person becomes a Christian, born again as a son or daughter of God (Jn. 3:3-6; Rom. 8:14-17).

After becoming a child of God, one may freely damage or break off his relationship with God through sin. Whereas venial sin damages our relationship with God, mortal sin actually severs the relationship through the loss of God's supernatural life of grace within us (cf. 1 Jn. 5:16-17; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1854-64).

When a person chooses to kill that life of grace through mortal sin, God, who is full of mercy, seeks to reconcile His prodigal son or daughter to Himself (cf. Lk. 15:11-32). God alone can forgive sins (Catechism, no. 1441), yet he empowered the Apostles and their successors (bishops and priests) to carry out His ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-21). St. John writes:

[Jesus said,] "As the Father has sent Me [with all authority, Mt. 28:18], even so I send you." And with 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; cf. Lk. 10:16; Mt. 16:19, 28:18-20).

The Church's power to bind and loose (Mt. 16:19, 18:18) provides further scriptural evidence for this sacrament. As the Church has taught for 2,000 years, the priest exercises his ministry *in persona Christi* (that is, in the person of Christ). This means that in confessing one's sins to a priest, one truly confesses one's sins to Christ Himself and receives pardon from God. Because the priest acts *in persona Christi*, he is the spiritual head or "father" of the community (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14-15). Thus, Confession reconciles us with Christ and His Body, the Church, whom we have wounded by sin.

Sin is never a private matter, since it always disrupts the order of creation and the whole community (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-6). Through Christ, the priest forgives the sinner in the name of the whole community, the Body of Christ. "Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God" (Catechism, no. 1445). In his New Testament Epistle, St. James exhorts us, "[C]onfess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (Jas. 5:16).

Though venial sins are remitted through the reception of Holy Communion (Catechism, no. 1394), the Church recommends that all the faithful, even those who are not conscious of having committed a mortal sin, make frequent Confession (Catechism, no. 1458). The Sacrament of Confession is one of healing. It makes us aware of our sinfulness and our dependence on God; therefore it is vital to receive the sacrament frequently in order to advance in holiness. One of the precepts of the Church is that all the faithful are bound by obligation to confess "grave" sins at least once a year.<sup>1</sup> It is also very important to note that those who are conscious of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion without having first received absolution in Confession, "unless [there is] a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possible way of going to Confession" (Catechism, no. 1457).

Again, sin is not a solitary matter, nor does any Christian have a “God-and-me-alone” relationship with the Father (1 Cor. 12:12-26). Confessing our sins within the Body of Christ allows us to reconcile with God and strengthen the Church, providing a witness so that all may turn and repent (2 Pet. 3:9).

<sup>1</sup> Code of Canon Law, no. 989; Catechism, nos. 1457, 2042.

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