

QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION by Fr. Steve Lape

1. I could just ask God directly for forgiveness. Why confess to a priest?

Our God is truly a forgiving God. God has already forgiven us for our sins through the suffering, death, and rising of Jesus Christ. Yet, even though Jesus died for us for our sins, we still sin and are in need of healing when we do.

Here are several reasons why the Catholic Church teaches the confession of sins to a priest.

- i) **THE VISIBLE, SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH** – As Catholics, we believe that God’s invisible love and forgiveness is made visible through the sacraments. A Sacrament, as you may recall, is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, of God’s invisible grace offered to strengthen our lives to do God’s will. It’s more meaningful and powerful for human beings to hear and see some visible sign that they are forgiven than it is to just assume that a God we cannot directly see has forgiven us. Hearing the words, “I forgive you,” “I absolve you from your sins,” or “I love you” are much more powerful to hear from someone than to just go on in life thinking that everything’s probably all right.
- ii) **II) PRIESTS AS MEDIATORS** – Priests serve in the capacity of Jesus Christ, “acting in the person of Christ,” as the Church teaches. Just as Jesus Christ was The Mediator to bring all humans into right relationship once again with God, the priests continue to do the work of mercy, forgiveness and healing of Jesus, who is no longer with us in the human form. Thus, priests are considered representatives of Jesus or “mediators” (with a small “m.”)
- iii) **PRIESTS AS ADVISORS** – In talking a priest in confession, one can gain encouragement and advice in how to avoid sin in the future, to love more faithfully, and to be reassured that that he or she is not alone in their difficulties, but part of a caring faith community.
- iv) **INDIVIDUAL SIN AFFECTS THE WHOLE** – When we stumble in following God’s command to “love one another as I love you,” it not only hurts our individual relationship with God. Sin also affects the whole Church, with all of its members. Sin makes us less willing to be truly giving and caring for the well-being of others around us. Thus, it makes sense to recommit ourselves to doing God’s loving will be a positive act involving the church community, particularly going to reconciliation.
- v) **SCRIPTURE SUPPORTS IT** – Matthew 18:18: Jesus empowers the 12 Apostles in his telling them: “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.” The statement reflects the authority that the church leaders had in their Christian mission: to protect the Church from straying from the Loving Truth of Christ, as well as cleans and heal as Jesus Christ did during His earthly life.

John 20:22-23: (Jesus) breathed on (the Apostles), 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.” This passage goes along with what was just discussed in the previous quote, but with the added Emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit in their mission of love and healing.

Other passages which point to the Church’s carrying on Christ’s forgiving ways:

Mk 1:15; Mt 6:12, 14-15; Mt 11: 20-24, James 5:16

2. How often should a person go to confession?

According to Church law, each Catholic is obligated to confess any mortal (serious) sins at least once a year. Confessing venial sins is recommended, but not obligatory.

- i) MORTAL SIN is a serious offense against God and the Church which deprives a person of sanctifying grace, which is the supernatural life necessary for one's soul to achieve eternal happiness and oneness with God in Heaven. There are 3 criteria that are necessary for a sin to be considered mortal:
 - a) SERIOUS MATTER – an action committed which is considered seriously wrong in itself.
 - b) SUFFICIENT REFLECTION – one knows how seriously wrong something is, but does it anyway after considerable reflection, and
 - c) FULL CONSENT – the person freely consents to doing the wrong.
- ii) VENIAL SIN involves less serious offenses against God's law of love. If one of the above criteria for mortal sin is lacking in the wrong one does, then the sin would be considered venial. Venial sin does not deprive the individual of sanctifying grace, but it harms us by making us less fervent in serving God and our neighbor in the self-giving way which God intends us to live.

3. What about general absolution at penance services, during which the priest absolves everyone present without hearing private confessions?

- i) General absolution at penance services is not considered as the norm for receiving the sacrament of penance, but only in more extraordinary circumstances. It involves conditions:
- ii) All sins are forgiven in a general absolution. However, according to canon 963 in the Church's CODE OF CANON LAW, "a person who has had serious (mortal) sins remitted by a general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as there is an opportunity to do so before receiving another general absolution unless (there's a) just cause.
- iii) General absolution can only be given when there is no time to hear individual confessions.
- iv) If there is a lack of priests, general absolution may be given.

