

The Power of the Sacrament of Confession

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“Peace be with you!” With these words, the Risen Lord greeted his frightened Apostles in the Upper Room on the day of his Resurrection. They were troubled, anxious, and fearful, thus Christ repeated the words, *“Peace be with you.”* But then he added, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them”* (Jn. 20:19-23). What an extraordinary gift! The Risen Lord was proclaiming that all the suffering He had just endured was to make available for us gifts of salvation and forgiveness. He wanted the Apostles to receive these gifts. He wanted them to become Apostles of this forgiveness to others.

The gift of Jesus forgiveness is the Sacrament of Confession, also called Penance and Reconciliation. It is the place where we meet the Lord who wants to grant us forgiveness and the grace to live in his Divine Will. The Church sees Confession as so important that she encourages frequent Confession in order to grow closer to Christ Jesus and his Body, the Church. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we seek forgiveness and repentance, let go of patterns of sin, and grow in the life of virtue and of intimacy with God.

I here recall the writings an ecclesiastically approved mystic when describing one of her early encounters with Jesus: *“...the Lord asked me to go and confess and follow one of His rules which is in Scriptures as well, which is to confess to one another it says in the Scriptures (James 5:16). Now the Church has given us the priests so I thought, well, since I have this gift from God and I'm directly speaking to Him, why do I have to go through that Confession to go to someone when I can be directly with God. And believe me, I felt God's anger on me and it scared me. So, you know, my pencil even dropped from my hand, it flew away... to confess, although many people don't like to do that, it's an act of humility, it's a super act of humility. If one does not want to confess it's like he or she lacks humility, so I believe in what the Lord says”* (Broadcast of February 15th, 2005).

The Church's Catechism further illustrates the importance of sacramentally confessing one's sins to God before a priest:

“In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins, the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: ‘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’ (Mt. 16.19). The office of binding and

loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head” (CCC, 1444).

It has been related that St. Padre Pio spoke to a recently-widowed woman; her husband had left her and their two children to live with another woman for over three years. Suddenly cancer had taken his life. He consented to receive the last sacraments before his death, after many pressing appeals. The woman asked: “Where is his soul. Padre? I haven't slept, worrying.” “Your husband's soul is condemned forever,” Padre Pio responded. The woman replied: “Condemned?” Padre Pio sadly nodded. “When receiving the last Sacraments, he concealed many sins. He had neither repentance nor a good resolution. He was also a sinner against God's mercy, because he said he always wanted to have a share of the good things in life and then have time to be converted to God” (Dorothy Gaudiose, Prophet of the People, Alba House, NY, NY. p. 158).

This episode accentuates the importance confessing “all” sins before a priest, as the *deliberate* withholding on one sin renders the entire confession invalid.¹

While acknowledging that God has given to us the opportunity to confess our sins before a priest, some may yet ask, “*Why must I confess if I am not aware of having committed any grave or mortal sins*”? In answer, St. John's Gospel reveals, ***“If we say, ‘We are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. If we say, ‘We have not sinned,’ we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”*** (1 Jn. 1:8-10). St. Augustine also notes that although Baptism removes Original Sin, “concupiscence” remains in the baptized, which is an inclination that leads us to sin. While in infants concupiscence does not produce any harm, in adults concupiscence must be combated with humility, Confession and works of mercy.² It would do us well to remember that the Sacrament of Confession not only erases sins, but it infuses in us a positive strength by virtue of the “sacramental grace” it bestows, which enables us to more easily overcome temptation, advance in holiness and obtain greater merit in heaven. The greatest saints, who were filled with the love of God and have avoided mortal sins, confessed frequently, as they were keenly aware of the great benefits that derive from this Sacrament.

¹ The Catholic Catechism, article 1456 affirms: “*Confession to a priest is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance: ‘All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in Confession...’ When Christ's faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember [mortal and venial], they undoubtedly place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon. But those who fail to do so and knowingly withhold some, place nothing before the divine goodness for remission through the mediation of the priest, “for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know”.*

In this article of the Catholic Catechism relates that the *deliberate* withholding of grave or venial sins renders the confession invalid. So should one, out of fear, shame or scrupulosity, refuse to open oneself up to the confessor, he has the authority to exhort the penitent to transparency and, should they refuse, delay their absolution. St. Padre Pio, who enjoyed the gift of introspection, occasionally refused certain individuals absolution for such reasons.

² Augustine, *pec. mer.* 2.4.4, CSEL 60.73-75; PL 44.152-153; NBA 17/1.120-122.

Indeed, Jesus reveals to St. Faustina Kowalska that sacramental Confession extends to us the great benefit of a personal, life-giving encounter with Jesus Himself:

“Daughter, when you go to confession, to this fountain of My mercy, the Blood and Water which came forth from My Heart always flows down upon your soul and ennobles it. Every time you go to confession, immerse yourself entirely in My mercy, with great trust, so that I may pour the bounty of My grace upon your soul. When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I myself act in your soul. Here the misery of the soul meets the God of mercy. Tell souls that from this fount of mercy souls draw graces solely with the vessel of trust. If their trust is great, there is no limit to My generosity. The torrents of grace inundate humble souls” (Diary of Divine Mercy, entry 1602).

That we all stand in need of God’s forgiveness through Confession is also accentuated in the message of Sept. 14, 1992 in the ecclesiastically approved private revelations bearing the “imprimatur” and “nihil obstat” in which Jesus reveals, *“there is not a good man left, no, not one really,³ there is not one who understands; since all of you are under sin's dominion... I have come to you to offer you a free Gift: the Gift of My Love... allow Me to uproot all that is not Me in your heart, you will never see how today My Holy Spirit seeks in you more than any time: reconciliation and unity; I have shown you how to unite; unity will be in your heart; reconciliation will be in the heart and not by a signed treaty... learn that My Sacred Heart seeks from you: charity, generosity, prayer, and a spirit of reconciliation, and to love one another as I love you; will I hear from you, your cry of surrender and of repentance?”*

In this message Jesus reminds us that the first step each one of us must take toward the unification of the churches is first to unite and reconcile with God in our hearts. This always occurs with sacramental Confession. On Feb. 1, 1987, Jesus: *“It is I, Jesus Christ; I love you;. any message bearing blames or harsh words, know that it is not coming from Me; I am love, love, love”*; On Jan. 19, 1995: *“beware, then, and keep your tongue from judging; I am the sole Judge”*; On Oct. 10, 1990, He adds, *“I shall reveal to you the Cains, whose language is not My Language but this one of rich merchants and trade; pray for these Cains; do not judge them, spend your time with prayers for them, do not allow your tongue to slip.”*

And yet, our weakness, so long and it is not deliberate, does not impede God’s work, for on Nov 7, 1989, He reveals, *“I use My instruments as they are with all their imperfections and all their **weaknesses** to dictate to them My Knowledge”*.

Another reason God asks us to confess our sins is to prepare us for the “Day of the Lord”. To an approved mystic Jesus reveals, *“I tell you: **woe to anyone who finds himself without My***

³ Allusion to Rom 3.10.

Light in My Day ... these I will purge with My Fire; as for those who kept My precepts and My Law based on love, and who are the salt of the earth, they shall not be tested by fire... My Day is imminent, and woe to the corpses on that Day of My Return; alas too for those who centred their lives on material things, when My Day comes; My appearance will be fire; already My Footsteps are heard and My Footprints seen by many; when I reveal Myself to those who did not acknowledge Me, when in these times of grace I presented Myself as Mercy and as a Lamp, I will reveal Myself then as a consuming Fire...” (Message of June 1, 2002).

See why it is so important to go to Confession? In Confession one is forever absolved of all sins, and for such individuals the ‘Day of the Lord’ will be far less severe than for those who, in this time of mercy (Jubilee Year of Mercy), have chosen to ignore Jesus’ appeal to reconcile with Him and his Church.

Now how do we confess our sins sacramentally? First, we approach the Sacrament without fear but with great trust in God’s mercy; second we confess all of our sins with a contrite heart (that is, out of love for God love we make a firm resolution to avoid sin). It is noteworthy that all we are required to confess is: a) the “nature” (grave or venial) and, b) “number” of all the sins we are able to recall. Remember, Confession it is a not a judgment seat, but a mercy seat where God rejoices in extending to us his unconditional act of forgiveness. *“Do your best and God will do the rest.”*

You should all commit to memory that every priest is bound to uphold the inviolable seal of Confession. Quoting Canon 983.1 of the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism states, *“...It is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason”* (CCC, 2490). A priest, therefore, cannot break the seal to save his own life, to protect his good name, to refute a false accusation, to save the life of another, to aid the course of justice (like reporting a crime), or to avert a public calamity.

Very few Christians realize that sacramental Confession is one of the greatest exorcisms of the Church. Indeed, sacramental Confession is the “direct” expulsion of all evil from the penitent. This direct means of expelling Satan from the penitent was conferred to the Church by Jesus Christ in Scripture when he told his apostles to “cast out demons.” While the Sacrament of Confession is a direct exorcism that expels demons from us and disposes us to receive Jesus in Communion worthily, very few Christians frequent the Sacrament of Confession anymore. Because the effects of the Sacrament of Confession has no effect on those who do not receive it, many Christians remain bound by Satan physically through illness, psychologically through neuroses or spiritually through sin. However, by frequenting the Sacrament Confession, Satan loses his power over us.

As noted earlier, Confession it is a not a judgment seat, but a mercy seat where God rejoices in extending to us his unconditional act of forgiveness. This unconditional mercy was

accentuated in Pope Francis' homily at the morning Mass of July 24, 2015, where he affirmed, *“Confession is not a judgment but a meeting with God who forgives all our sins, without exception.”* Basing his reflections on an extract from St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, Pope Francis related, *“First of all, God always forgives us. He never tires of this. It's we who get tired of asking for forgiveness. But He does not tire of pardoning us. When Peter asked Jesus: ‘How many times must I forgive? Seven times?’ – ‘Not seven times: seventy times by seven.’ Namely always. That's how God forgives us: always. But if you have lived a life full of so many sins, so many bad things, but in the end, a bit repentant, you ask for forgiveness, He will immediately pardon you! He always pardons us... There is no sin which He won't pardon.⁴ He forgives everything. [Some people say] ‘But father, I don't go to confession because I have committed so many really bad sins, so many that I can't be pardoned.’ No, this is not true. He forgives everything. If you go (to Confession) repentant, He will forgive everything... So many times He doesn't even let you speak! You start to ask for forgiveness and He lets you feel that joy of forgiveness before you have even finished confessing everything...*

Where's the meeting in this? The meeting with the Lord who pardons you, hugs you and rejoices. And this is our God who is so good. We too need to teach (others): teach our children, our youngsters to make a good confession, because going to confession is not like going to the dry cleaners to get a stain removed. No! It's about going to meet with our Father who pardons us, who forgives us and who rejoices.”

⁴ The “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 12.31) that will not be forgiven is a grave (mortal) sin that one brings to the grave without having confessed it; it becomes “unforgivable” if one dies with it. St. Augustine is clear on this matter when he affirms, that “he who dies in a state of obstinacy is guilty of the sin against the Holy Spirit” (*Enchiridion*, lxxxiii). The Catechism also relates that “Mortal sin destroys charity [love] in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to Him” (CCC, 1855). And what is this charity (love) that is destroyed by *unconfessed* mortal sin if not the gift of participation in the life of God from the Holy Spirit? St. Paul reveals, “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5.5).