

## Why Do We Do That: Confession

Have you ever heard someone challenge the Catholic Sacrament of Confession? Maybe you've heard some of these arguments:

- Why can't you confess your sins straight to God? (*This should be the first thing you do to show contrition*)
- The priest is a human – he is a sinner just like me and you – he can't forgive your sins... (*That's right. The priest doesn't forgive our sins – God does through the ministry of His priesthood.*)
- Where does it say in the bible that I have to confess my sins to a priest? (*John 20:19-23 among others.*)

The Church is under attack. Lawmakers in Nevada, Maryland and Kentucky have made unsuccessful attempts to strip away the Seal of the Confessional. Although none of these bills have passed, don't think that more won't be on the horizon.

### So, what's the big deal about confession?

- 1) Allows us to meet Christ and receive his word that we are forgiven
- 2) There is value in the act of admitting guilt to another human being
- 3) There is value in hearing that we are forgiven – if you “only tell your sins to God” how positive are you that you are forgiven? When you go to Confession, you hear the words from Christ through the Priest, “I absolve you of your sins.”
- 4) Gives us strength to avoid sin in the future – we receive God's Grace which helps battle the temptations to sin again.

### What is confession?

The sacrament instituted by Christ by which those who fall into sin after Baptism may be restored to God's Grace.

### Where is confession in the Bible?

John 20:19-23 – On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

- Why would Jesus give the Apostles this authority to forgive or retain a person's sins, if He didn't expect them to use it?
- It is important to note that immediately after giving us the “Lord's Prayer” Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 6:14-15 that if we forgive others, God forgives us but if we do not forgive others, neither will God forgive us. So here we see a distinction between the Apostles versus other followers of Christ: The Apostles can either forgive or retain sins; other followers of Christ have no choice but to forgive.
- Sin affects the entire body of Christ. It's not just about the sinner. We are seeking to be reconciled with the Church. So it's only appropriate that we go to a priest – a representative of the Church in order to be reconciled with the Church.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20 – And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

- In John 20:19-23 Jesus instituted the sacrament of reconciliation. Now we read how St. Paul is preaching that Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the Apostles and the Apostles are ambassadors for Christ imploring the Corinthians (and all people) to be reconciled to God.

### Why not go straight to God?

- You should go straight to God as soon as you are aware of any sin, but you must go to confession to be absolved of mortal sin.

### **What is mortal sin?**

- Sin that causes you to lose sanctifying grace
- Three conditions must be met for a sin to be a mortal sin: CCC 1857
  - 1) Grave matter – As defined in Mark 10:19 (breaks a commandment)
  - 2) Full knowledge – You know that the act is sinful
  - 3) Deliberate consent – You made a personal choice to do the sinful act.
- Ignorance/Passion/Mental States can diminish culpability

### **How do I make a good confession?**

- 1) Before going to Confession, say a prayer asking for the Grace to make a sincere and entire confession
- 2) Perform an Examination of Conscience. This can be found in the back of most Missals. There are also several good ones available on line, but make sure it is legitimate. (Parish, Archdiocesan or Vatican website.)
- 3) Enter confessional and say “Bless me father, for I have sinned,” and state how long it has been since your last confession.
- 4) Tell the priest your sins.
- 5) Listen to his words of advice
- 6) Say an Act of Contrition
- 7) After leaving the confessional, it is good to say a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s Mercy.
- 8) Perform the penance prescribed

### **What is the seal of the confessional?**

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. He cannot be compelled by law to disclose a person's confession or be bound by any oath he takes, e.g. as a witness in a court trial. A priest cannot reveal the contents of a confession either directly, by repeating the substance of what has been said, or indirectly, by some sign, suggestion, or action. A Decree from the Holy Office (Nov. 18, 1682) mandated that confessors are forbidden, even where there would be no revelation direct or indirect, to make any use of the knowledge obtained in the confession that would "displease" the penitent or reveal his identity.

### **What happens if a priest violates the seal of confession?**

Quoting Canon 1388.1 of the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism states "A confessor who directly violates the seal of confession incurs an automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; if he does so only indirectly, he is to be punished in accord with the seriousness of the offense." From the severity of the punishment, we can clearly see how sacred the sacramental seal of confession is in the eyes of the Church.