

Guidebook

— FOR —

CONFESSORS

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The Universal Call to Holiness

Through their baptismal vocation all the faithful receive within them the seed of divine life, sanctifying grace, which should increase throughout their lives. Each man and woman is called to become another Christ, *alter Christus*, with a deep and personal life of prayer and a true commitment to the good of their neighbor. This is a demanding vocation, and many times they will fail because of the effects of original sin, and their own personal weaknesses. For this reason there is need for a sacrament that will not only forgive sins, but give the faithful grace to overcome their faults, and to provide them sustenance in their journey towards God.

The Sacrament of Confession has the unique power of uprooting and cleansing the principal obstacles to our sanctity . . . those thoughts, words, actions, and omissions that take us from God, and leave a residue of guilt and punishment in our souls. At the same time Reconciliation gives us a grace and peace of mind that brings us closer to Christ himself, as Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus, and Peter did when they humbly admitted their sins. In other words, the Sacrament of Confession truly helps us all—priests and lay faithful—to fulfill Christ's universal command to his followers, “**Be holy as your heavenly father is holy**” (Mt 5:48).

The Sacrament of Confession is also the sacrament of conversion, a point stressed frequently by Saint Josemaría Escrivá both in his preaching and writings: “Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father's house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart, which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving. We return to our Father's house by means of that sacrament of pardon in which, by confessing our sins, we put on Jesus Christ again and become his brothers, members of God's family” (*Christ Is Passing By*, 64. Scepter Publishers, New York, NY).

Using the parable of the prodigal son as inspiration, he further states that penance is a sacrament of joy: “God is waiting for us, like the father in the parable, with open arms, even though we don’t deserve it. It doesn’t matter how great our debt is. Just like the prodigal son, all we have to do is open our heart, to be homesick for our Father’s house, to wonder and rejoice in the gift which God makes us of being able to call ourselves his children, of really being his children, even though our response to him has been so poor” (*Christ Is Passing By*, 64. Scepter Publishers, New York, NY).

Reconciliation has repercussions upon the entire people of God as well. The more it is received, the more holy families become, with positive effects for entire communities and nations. It enables people to be less egotistical, and more thoughtful of those around them. It helps them to examine their motives and failings frequently, not only as private persons, but as family members, colleagues, and fellow citizens. For this reason we can affirm that every good confession not only helps the individual man or woman to become more holy, but enables the entire Church to become more holy . . . since through the contrition and penance of her members she draws closer to her Bridegroom. We could even say that all mankind is helped by good confessions, since God’s grace and forgiveness will extend through those who have been forgiven to those still far away from God.

Jesus Christ Forgives Throughout the Centuries

No sacrament can be understood outside of its living context, which is the Mystical Body of Christ. The Sacrament of Confession is part of Christ’s perennial love and service to his faithful throughout the centuries. It is the result of his Incarnation and his salvific mission to the human race.

Like all the sacraments, Penance is intrinsically connected with the liturgy, since it is a form of praise to God by his Church: indeed all of the sacraments are celebrations that draw the faithful closer to God. Baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, they are members of his Body on earth. Priests have the mission of serving all the faithful through these sacraments. In the words of the *Catholic Catechism*, *the ordained priesthood guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church* (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1120).

Therefore it is not the individual priest who forgives sins; it is **Christ working through him**. For this reason the Church has taught that the sacraments work *ex opere operato*, by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. In other words, by the very act of the sacrament being performed—with a valid minister, and the prescribed matter and form—absolution and grace are conferred.

Within the classification of the sacraments, both Penance and Anointing are called sacraments of healing. Through them the sinner is reconciled with God, the Church, and truly, with himself. If he was in the state of mortal sin, his sin is forgiven in God's eyes, he is restored to union with the Church, and he is strengthened in his personal life to be more faithful to God. Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation on Penance summarized these points in terms of reconciliation: *The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.* (John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance*, Dec. 2, 1984, no. 31, 5). If the sinner has made a good and sincere confession, he will experience in some way the joy and wholeness that the prodigal son experienced when his father forgave him, and welcomed him back to his home (cf. Lk 15:11–24).

The foundation and existence of the Sacrament of Penance presupposes—of course—the fact of sin in the human race, both

original and personal. We do not have a perfect nature; because of the sin of Adam and Eve our nature is flawed and has evil tendencies, one of which is concupiscence. The Church rejected Martin Luther's teaching that human nature is totally corrupted by sin, yet she has always held that our nature is fallen and is in constant need of healing and forgiveness.

The confession of sins to an ordained minister of Christ is part of the mystery of Redemption. Through this sacrament Christ the High Priest, and only Victim for sins, applies the merit of his Passion, death, and resurrection to the sinner. Indeed all the sacraments derive their power from Christ's paschal mystery. In the Sacrament of Penance, the merit which Jesus earned on the cross through his obedience is applied to the sinner who humbly confesses his disobedience to God. As Pope John Paul II stated in his first encyclical, "*The redemption of the world—this tremendous mystery of love in which creation is renewed—is at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human heart—the heart of the first-born Son—in order that it may become justice in the hearts of many human beings . . .*" (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 9).

Sacramental Grace

Besides forgiveness, grace is imparted in every good confession. If the soul is in grave sin, he receives sanctifying grace which had been lost through sin, and the eternal punishment due to his sin is taken away. This allows him once again to share in God's own life—to receive the privilege of the Divine Indwelling within his soul. He is no longer an enemy of God but a friend of God, and even more, he once again forms part of his Divine Family. If the person has confessed venial sins, those sins are forgiven, along with some or all of the temporal punishment due to them, depending on the person's dispositions. His soul increases in sanctifying

grace, and he receives a special sacramental grace to avoid those sins in the future.

A good confession is a new opportunity for a person. With God's grace and favor within, he can grow both in human virtue and the supernatural virtues infused into his soul at Baptism. He can live a more perfect life as a son of God, avoid more easily the occasion of sin in the future, and become more and more like Christ. For all of these reasons the Church recommends frequent confession, which *helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ, and progress in the life of the Spirit* (CCC 1458).

As said above, every sin hurts the community of God's people on earth—but every good confession heals and restores that people once again. It is the Church herself, having obtained her power through Christ the Savior, who intercedes for the sinner, and desires him to be reintegrated into her community. This is actually affirmed in the words said immediately before absolution: **“Through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace. . . .”** No sin therefore is totally personal or individual.

Throughout his life and especially on the cross Christ atoned for sins: he literally put “at one” the alienated human race with his Father God. He confided the grace of that atonement to his Church, who like a good Mother applies it to us in the sacrament of pardon. As such his atonement is infinite because he is an infinite Person. But we too must do our part to show sorrow for sins and make atonement or satisfaction for them. This is the meaning of the penance that we voluntarily accept and carry out as part of the sacrament. It is what the Church desires us to do in order to show our union with the atoning Christ, who makes up for all sins through his sacrifice.

It is also a consequence of our recognition that we are responsible for our lives and actions. If we were not free, if we had no option but to choose sin, why should we make atonement for it? There would be no need to do so.