

Know Your Faith

Session 5 - Confession

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

V. Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created.

R. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations. Through Christ Our Lord.

Amen.

- I. The Catholic Teaching
 - a. Necessity of Confession – “Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as ‘the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.’” (CCC 1446)
 - b. Mortal and Venial Sins
 - i. In scripture – 1 John 5:16-17 – “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.”
 - ii. Three conditions
 1. Grave matter
 2. Full knowledge
 3. Full consent of the will
 - iii. “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” (CCC 1456).
 - iv. “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church” (CCC 1458).
 - c. Effects of sin
 - i. It offends God’s justice and, if mortal, shatters our relationship with him
 - ii. **It further darkens our intellect, weakens our will, and strengthens concupiscence**
 - iii. It harms the Church, the body of Christ, and human society

- iv. It merits punishment, either in this world or the next, as a natural consequence
- v. Mortal sin is spiritual death that merits damnation – eternal self-separation from God by a person’s own choice
- d. Contrition
 - i. “Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place. Contrition is ‘sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again’” (CCC 1451).
 - ii. When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called "perfect" (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible” (CCC 1452).
 - iii. The contrition called "imperfect" (or "attrition") is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear). Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution. By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance” (CCC 1453).
- e. Satisfaction
 - i. “Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance." (CCC 1459)
 - ii. “The *penance* the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. **Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him."** (CCC 1460)
- II. “From Reason” or “Why Confession Makes Sense”
 - a. Confession encourages the virtue of humility
 - b. Confession encourages accountability

- c. Confession to another helps avoid self-delusion
- d. Confession helps to avoid spiritual laziness or complacency
- e. Confession of sins can be cathartic
- f. Confession is fitting to human nature: we are social creatures, our sin harms the Body of Christ, reconciliation comes through that Body
- g. Sacramental confession offers an objective criteria to know one is forgiven
- h. The penitent often receives concrete advice on how to avoid sin in the future

III. Scripture

- a. OT types: See Leviticus 19:20-22 and Baruch 1:13 among others. This simply shows there is an OT precedent for confession of sin as well as the ministry of priesthood in the atonement for sin.
- b. John 20:21-23 - Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."
- c. 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 – "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."
- d. James 5:13-16 - "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is any one of you sick? He should **call the elders of the church** to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶**Therefore confess your sins to each other** and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

IV. The Fathers of the Church

- a. "Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . . On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure" (*Didache* 4:14, 14:1 [A.D. 70]).
- b. **"For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ"** (Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 3 [A.D. 110]).
"For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop" (*ibid.*, 8).

- c. "[The Gnostic disciples of Marcus] have deluded many women. . . . Their consciences have been branded as with a hot iron. Some of these women make a public confession, but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing from themselves the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:22 [A.D. 189]).
- d. **"[The bishop conducting the ordination of the new bishop shall pray:] God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles . . . and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command" (Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 3 [A.D. 215]).**
- e. "[A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, 'I said, "To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity"' (Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]).
- f. **"Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . . I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord" (Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed*, 28 (A.D. 251)).**
- g. **"It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God's mysteries is entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist [Matt. 3:6], but in Acts [19:18] they confessed to the apostles" (Basil, *Rules Briefly Treated* 288 [A.D. 374]).**
- h. "Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: 'Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed.' Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding; but they can only bind the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? 'Whose sins you shall forgive,' he says, 'they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.' What greater power is there than this? The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men

[Matt. 10:40; John 20:21–23]. They are raised to this dignity as if they were already gathered up to heaven" (John Chrysostom, *The Priesthood* 3:5 [A.D. 387]).

- V. A Brief history – development of the outward form while retaining the fundamental reality
- a. In the early Church, for serious sins (apostasy, murder, adultery), there was a period of exclusion from the community followed by a reception back, mediated by the bishop. This would involve a public confession of faults as well as a public, and often long, penance.
 - b. Some Church writers argued that there could be only one such “second chance” after baptism, so as not to make it appear that there was a loophole that simply allowed one to sin.
 - c. By the fifth century, and with Pope St. Leo the Great, confessions were becoming increasingly private, while penances remained public.
 - d. In the early sixth century, a practice arrived in Spain and France that had developed in Ireland and England. This system allowed for reconciliation with the Church as often as the penitent needed it by private confession. This solved the problem of many Christians delaying their reconciliation until their deathbed.
 - e. By the seventh and eighth centuries, private confession, and not public penance, became the focus of the sacrament. Able to make use of the sacrament more frequently, it became customary to also confess lesser, or venial, sins.
 - f. Despite these historical changes, the underlying fundamental structure of the sacrament has remained consistent
- VI. Answering Objections
- a. Your sins were all forgiven when you accepted Christ as savior by the act of faith. You’re putting your trust in a ritual rather than in the work of Christ. Works vs. Faith.
 - i. If all my sins were forgiven, that is, if I cannot lose sanctifying grace, then why do the apostles have the power to both forgive and retain sins? If all sins are forgiven in the act of faith for the rest of one’s life, the power to retain is superfluous.
 - ii. If this is the case, why did the earliest church unhesitatingly assert the need and the power to reconcile sinners?
 - iii. All our trust in is Christ. All the efficacy of the sacrament derives from the finished work of Christ. The sacrament is the instrument of Christ.
 - b. I can go directly to God and ask Him to forgive my sins.
 - i. And you should. The Church encourages one to make an act of contrition, a prayer directly to God, whenever one is conscious of having sinned
 - ii. The objection begs the question: “What does God will for you to do?” Has God given the power of forgiveness to human agents? Scripture says he did, as did the earliest Christians, and the Church for 2000 years. What does the objector make of John 20?

- iii. "Let no one say I do penance secretly; I perform it in the sight of God, and He who is to pardon me knows that in my heart I repent... Was it then said to no purpose, 'What you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed in heaven?' Was it for nothing that the keys were given to the Church?" (St. Augustine, *Sermo cccxcii*, n. 3).
 - iv. "I can go directly to God and asked to have my cancer healed." And you should. But does this mean we don't also go to human agents of healing that God has given us – doctors?
 - c. "Only God can forgive sins."
 - i. True. But God's power allows him to make use of secondary causes – he uses created things and persons to carry out his will.
 - ii. Only God can create. But He has chosen to allow humans to participate in His act of creation when a man and woman have a child.
 - iii. Catholics do not believe that the human priest has, of his own power or person, the ability to forgive sins. It is only God who forgives sins, *through the instrumentality of the priest*.
 - iv. "Only a rational being can write love letter." – But that does not exclude that rational being from using a pen. So we can, in a sense say, that a pen can write a love letter without denying the absolute necessity of the human writer.
 - d. There is one mediator between God and man. (1 Tim 2:5)
 - i. True. In an absolute sense only Christ is the mediator between God and man, as both God and man Himself.
 - ii. But this does not limit Christ's ability to associate with Himself others in the work of bringing people to God.
 - iii. A parallel: "There is one book on the table."
 - iv. The context of 1 Tim 2:5 – 1 Tim 2:1-4 – "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."
 - 1. Paul calls us to go between God and people in our prayers and intercessions....to be mediators in a relative sense – if we are in Christ.
 - e. Confession and satisfaction attempt to add to the finished work of Christ
 - i. No, nothing can be added to the superabundant, completed work of Christ for our redemption.
 - ii. The question, rather, is how we apply that work to our lives here and now. The sacrament adds nothing to the work of Christ, but rather, enters into the finished work of Christ. All the sacraments are participations in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.
 - iii. We are also called to participate in Christ's work – to be conformed to Christ and His work. See Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 1:24.

- iv. Christ's work on the cross forgave the eternal consequences of sin (Hell), but there still remain often "temporal consequences" for sin that our satisfaction can assist in putting right. More on this when we talk about Purgatory and Indulgences.

Conclusions

- 1. John 20:21-23 clearly shows Christ handing on to his followers His own authority to forgive sins.**
- 2. The early Church, from the beginning, saw the spiritual value of confession of sins.**
- 3. The early Church also saw the power of reconciling sinners lying in the hands of the bishops and presbyters.**
- 4. Confession in no way replaces the work of Christ or the role of God, but shows forth His power in associating with himself secondary causes. It manifests His love by bringing us into His work of salvation.**
- 5. There is no source of forgiveness, in Confession or otherwise, except the saving work of Christ.**

Know Your Faith Revised Calendar

- March 8th – Confession (Social Hall)
- March 15th – No Session; Parish Mission
- March 22nd – Purgatory (Zuker Hall)
- March 29th – The Papacy (Zuker Hall)
- April 5th – No Session; Easter Monday
- April 12th – Mary (Zuker Hall)