

The Sacrament of Penance



| <u>RCIA Handouts:</u> | <u>Pages:</u> |
|---|---------------|
| 1. "A Guide to Confession" | 2 – 5 |
| 2. "A Brief Guide To The Sacrament Of Reconciliation/Penance" | 6 - 9 |
| 3. "Soul Scrubbin' – Calming the Fears of Confession" | 10 – 13 |
| 4. "Why Go To Confession?" | 14 – 16 |
| 5. "Why Confess Your Sins to a Priest?" | 17 - 20 |

A Guide to Confession

Five Steps for a Good Confession

1. Examine your conscience.
2. Be sincerely sorry for your sins.
3. Confess your sins.
4. Resolve to amend your life.
5. After your confession, do the penance the priest assigns.

Procedure in the Confessional

You say: *“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been – (state the length of time) – since my last confession. These are my sins.”*

Then tell your mortal sins and the number of times committed. If you have no mortal sin to confess, then confess the venial sins you have committed since your last confession.

When you have finished telling your sins, you should say: *“For these and all the sins of my past life I am truly sorry.”*

The priest now gives the necessary advice, assigns your penance and asks you to say the Act of Contrition (in some form). Then wait and listen as the priest gives the absolution.

Then say **Thank you, Father**, leave the confessional and perform the penance assigned by the priest.

An Act of Contrition

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all My love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.”

The Differences in Sins

There are two major kinds of sin: original and actual.

Actual sin is sin which people commit. There are two kinds of actual sin, mortal and venial.

Mortal sin is a horrible offense against God, so horrible that it destroys the life of grace in the soul. Three simultaneous conditions must be fulfilled for a mortal sin: (1) the act must be something very serious; (2) the person must have sufficient understanding of what is being done; (3) the person must have sufficient freedom of the will. So I cannot commit a mortal sin if the matter is not serious (e.g., if I stole a small amount of money from my employer), or if I did not know what I was doing (e.g., if I were to hurt someone accidentally or unthinkingly), or if I did not act with full freedom (e.g., I was under physical or emotional pressure).

A Catholic should know well the difference between mortal and venial sins.

Examination of Conscience

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.

- Do I give God time every day in prayer?
- Do I seek to love Him with my whole heart?
- Have I been involved with superstitious practices (horoscopes or ouija boards) or have I been involved with the occult?
- Do I seek to surrender myself to God's Word as taught by the Church?
- Have I ever received Communion in the state of mortal sin?
- Have I ever deliberately told a lie in Confession or have I withheld a mortal sin from the priest in Confession?

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- Have I used God's name in vain: lightly or carelessly?
- Have I been angry with God?
- Have I wished evil up any other person?
- Have I insulted a sacred person or abused a sacred object?

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

- Have I deliberately missed Mass on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation?
- Have I tried to observe Sunday as a family day and a day of rest?
- Do I do needless work on Sunday?

4. Honor your father and your mother.

- Do I honor and obey my parents?
- Have I neglected my duties to my spouse and children?
- Have I given my family good religious example?
- Do I try to bring peace into my home life?
- Do I care for my aged and infirm relatives?

5. You shall not kill.

- Have I had an abortion or encouraged anyone to have an abortion? Have I physically harmed anyone? Have I abused alcohol or drugs? Did I give scandal to anyone, thereby leading them into sin?
- Have I been angry or resentful?
- Have I harbored hatred in my heart?
- Have I been sterilized for reasons of birth control?
- Have I encouraged or condoned sterilization?

6. You shall not commit adultery.

- Have I been faithful to my marriage vows in thought and action?
- Have I engaged in any sexual activity before marriage or outside of marriage?
- Have I used any method of contraception or artificial birth control?
- Has each sexual act in my marriage been open to the transmission of new life?
- Have I respected all members of the opposite sex, or have I thought of other people as objects?
- Have I been guilty of any homosexual activity?
- Do I seek to be pure in my thoughts, words and actions?
- Am I careful to dress modestly, so as not to tempt others?
- Have I been guilty of masturbation?

7. You shall not steal.

- Have I stolen what is not mine?
- Have I returned or made restitution for what I have stolen?
- Do I waste time at work, school or at home?
- Do I gamble excessively, thereby denying my family of their needs?
- Do I pay my debts promptly?
- Do I seek to share what I have with the poor?

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

- Have I lied?
- Have I gossiped? Harmed someone's reputation?
- Have I spoken behind someone else's back?
- Am I critical, negative, or uncharitable in my thoughts of others?
- Do I keep secret what should be kept confidential?

9. You shall not desire your neighbor's wife.

- Have I consented to impure thoughts? Have I caused them by impure television, movies, books, magazines or internet? Do I pray at once to banish impure thoughts and temptations?
- Do I listen to, or engage in, impure conversations or jokes?

10. You shall not desire your neighbor's goods.

- Am I jealous of what other people have? Do I envy other people's families or possessions?
- Am I greedy or selfish?
- Are material possessions the purpose of my life?
- Do I trust that God will care for all of my material and spiritual needs?



A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION/PENANCE

The sacrament of God's loving forgiveness

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION

If we say we are free of the guilt of sin we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us. But if we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. If we say we have never sinned we make him a liar and his word finds no place in us. My little ones, I am writing this to keep you from sin. But if anyone should sin, we have in the presence of the Father, Jesus Christ, an intercessor who is just. He is an offering for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for those of the whole world. (1 John 1:8- 2:2).

Reminder: Individual confession is the only ordinary way to be reconciled with God for serious sin (barring a serious hindrance.)

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

1. Roughly how long is it since my last confession? (Only sins committed since then need be confessed.)
2. Have I committed any mortal sins? These must be confessed by type and approximate number. A mortal sin is one which involves serious matter, full consent of the will, and full awareness that the act is seriously sinful. Some examples of objectively serious sins (mortal if the other two criteria are present):
 - Missed Sunday Mass (or Holyday Mass) without a serious reason
 - Received the Eucharist in the state of mortal sin
 - Committed impure acts with self (masturbation)
 - Committed adultery, or fornication (sexual intercourse outside marriage)
 - Kissed or touched someone passionately for arousal (unmarried)
 - Committed a homosexual act
 - Practiced contraception
 - Dwelled on impure thoughts (sexual fantasies for arousal)

(Note: sexual sins are ordinarily not the worst serious sins but they are quite common.)

- Had an abortion or paid for one
 - Promoted abortion rights
 - Withheld a mortal sin in confession
 - Took or sold cocaine or other dangerous drug for recreation
 - Got drunk
 - Refused to help any of God's poor or needy when able
3. Some sins which are generally venial though a few could be mortal depending on the situation.
- Lied, or cheated
 - Stole _____ (must be returned)
 - Used the Lord's name in vain or cursed ("Damn _____, etc.) or used foul language
 - Fought with others
 - Did unnecessary work on Sunday
 - Was selfish or lazy or proud
 - Spoke unkindly to others
 - Told harmful lies about others
 - Told harmful truths about others without serious reason to do so
 - Was excessively critical about others
 - Became unreasonably angry
 - Willfully delayed forgiving
 - Failed to accept God's forgiveness
 - Dressed immodestly
 - Was late for Mass or left early without a serious reason
 - Was disrespectful to parents
 - Failed to fulfill duties of own state in life (specify which duties)
 - Gave scandal to children or others
 - Was irreverent in Church
 - Ate or drank too much
 - Willfully angered others
 - Watched TV shows or movies which promoted immoral sex or violence
 - Watched excessive TV or wasted time
 - Drove car too fast or carelessly
 - Violated (a just) law (specify which law)
 - Failed to care for own health

4. Smaller sins/imperfections for mention by the spiritually advanced:

- Failed to pray enough
- Failed to make God first always
- Had unkind or prideful thoughts
- Failed to be loving or kind to others
- Failed to trust in God always

CONFESSION OF SINS

After the greeting, and Scripture reading (if any), tell the priest how long it has been since your last confession and confess your sins. All mortal sins must be confessed by type and number to be reconciled to the Lord (and receive the sacrament validly).

Although venial sins need not be confessed, we are encouraged “also to make use of the sacrament of Penance for venial sins alone.” (John Paul II). If you have only venial sins to confess, for the sake of brevity mention only those few which are most significant.

NOTE: If you need help confessing, simply say, “Father, I need your help confessing.”

SORROW FOR SINS and FIRM PURPOSE OF AMENDMENT

In order to be forgiven, the penitent must express sorrow and sincerely intend not to sin again.

The Act of Contrition should be said slowly, reverently:

ACT OF CONTRITION

O my God, I am deeply sorry for having offended You, and I despise all my sins because of Your just punishments; but most of all because they offend You my God who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace to sin no more and avoid the near occasion of sin.

After the penitent says the Act of Contrition, the priest gives absolution while the penitent makes the sign of the cross.

PRAISE OF GOD AND DISMISSAL

Priest: Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.

Penitent: **His mercy endures forever.**

The penitent is dismissed and goes to perform his penance in the spirit of love for God.

Additional copies – Write or call:

Catholic Faith Alive!

1910 Ventura Ave.

Silver Spring, MD 20902

(301) 649-2037

www.cfalive.org

Copyright 1990 Rev. T.G. Morrow – With Ecclesiastical Permission

SOUL SCRUBBIN'

Calming the Fears of Confession

Alright Cowboys and Indians. Try this. Walk up to a person who hasn't showered in a year. Now, take a deep breath. A bit smelly, huh? That's what anybody would smell like after not washing for a year.

Now consider this. When's the last time you washed your soul in the sacrament of penance? A year? Pretty smelly by now. Two years? Really smelly by now. Five years? More? We're talking gas mask application.

I know, I know, I can hear you barking out all the reasons why: "I don't want to give up certain things!", "Why should I confess to a priest?", "I don't want to get chewed out by a priest!" Well, fine. You're not alone. But do yourself a favor. Take five minutes and read this article and see if there's a good reason why you **should** go and give your soul a bath.

Catholic Twin Circle newspaper asked a group of Catholics (many of them young) who still went to church, why they had stopped going to confession. See if you find yourself in their answers, and then read on to see your answers **answered**.

- **Fear of the priest**

Some people committing sexual sins fear that celibate priests can't understand their sins and what prompts them to commit them. "After all," said a 22-year-old woman, "priests are beyond all that. How can they understand?"

Other Catholics fear priests because of bad experiences in the past. A college student who had confessed to masturbation at age 13, said the priest chewed him out and left him feeling more guilty than when he entered the confessional. But more often, non-confessing Catholics **worry** about what the priest will **think** about them. A teenage boy observed: "My parish priest knows me, and I'm afraid he'll recognize my voice. I won't be able to face him again"

- **How do I put sin into words?**

Some Catholics drop out of confession because they don't know what to say to the priest. As one teenager put it, "I didn't know how to put my sins into words." And a college student: "My sins became more complex They didn't fit into any of the simple Ten Commandment patterns."

Moreover, people fear they don't have enough time to explain the "whole story" about the sin if there is a line outside the confessional.

- **No sense of efficacy of confession**

One respondent said: “I lost my temper ..., confessed it, and the next week, I was back in the confessional again for the same sin.” “I seemed to be staying at the same level of sinfulness,” another one said. “Although I was receiving grace from the sacrament, I kept falling into the same holes. So I gave up and stopped receiving the sacrament.”

- **Who needs a middle-man?**

Many Catholics see no need for confessing to a priest. “Other Christians ... don’t go to confession. Why do Catholics need a go-between (priest)?”

- **PRIESTS’ REPLIES**

After speaking with the Catholics above who, like you, have various reasons for not receiving the sacrament of reconciliation, **Catholic Twin Circle** then asked five priests to anonymously respond. This is what they said:

The laity should not think of priests as saintly men without stain of sin. They should give priests credit for understanding their motivations to sin because priests are made of the same frail human flesh as other people. “That is the very reason why most priests resist a call to the priesthood,” said a Pennsylvania priest. “Priests are aware of their own sinful urges and they wonder how they can ever measure up.”

These priests stressed that they have had several years of moral theology and are better acquainted with sin than most Catholics. Said one, “We know about every sin that it is possible to commit, so people shouldn’t be afraid of shocking us.” Said another: “There are only a certain possible number of variations of sins against the Ten Commandments.”

As for the fear that a priest will despise people for their sins, a priest who used to hear 600 confessions a month in Boston said: “If only people realized that most priests feel admiration and respect for people who confess. The worse a sin is, the more respect I feel for the penitent.” An Iowa priest added: “There is only one reason why a person confesses and that is because he or she desires to be holy. That is a wonderful, touching thing. It makes me ashamed of my own apathy.”

The priests said it was rare to find a confessor who would “chew people out” these days. Said one: “As priests, we know that penitents are sensitive to our attitude.”

But another priest stressed that he had also heard complaints that priests **weren’t strict enough**. He pointed out that some young people were asking for tougher penances because they wanted to assuage their guilt.

“They don’t want a soft word and an easy penance. They want to do something to make reparation.”

Regarding the problem of how to put one’s sins into the right words, the consensus is that it is best for adults to drop childhood formulas and put the sin simply in their own words. For instance, saying, “I was impure,” is not as good as saying, “I just slept with a girl I had only just met.” The priests suggested that penitents also try to give the reason **why** they committed the sin. This makes it easier to counsel a person if that is what the person wants.

Said a Milwaukee priest: “Don’t be put off by the fact that others are waiting outside the confessional. If you need counseling, tell me. If I am running out of time, I will ask you to come back at another time to really talk.”

But what about Catholics committing habitual sins who feel they aren’t “getting anything out of confession?” A Los Angeles priest had this advice: “Don’t give up. Confession is not going to make you perfect. You still suffer from the effects of original sin. Don’t be disappointed that you are human, but remember that the worst sin is to stay down once you fall. It doesn’t matter how many times you pick yourself up, as long as you **do** keep picking yourself up.”

This brings us to the final complaint: Why do we need a middle man to confess our sins to? When St. John the Baptist was preaching repentance, people came “confessing their sins,” before they were baptized. And St. James in his epistle tells us: “Confess therefore your sins one to another.” People recognize today the need to “get it off your chest” by telling someone else your sins. Moreover, having to recount your sins to a priest forces you to consider them more closely, on a regular basis, so that you know what you must work on the most.

But above all, the reason we confess to a priest is because Christ told us to do it that way. Christ’s mission was redemptive – from forgiving sins to healing people. And Christ appointed his Apostles to do the same, telling them, “Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you retain, they are retained.” (John 20:21-23).

When the priest absolves us, he is acting in the place of Christ through the ministry of his ordination. Said St. Paul: “What I have pardoned ... for your sakes you have I done it in the person of Christ.” (2 Cor. 2:10). The blessing we receive is Christ’s own blessing; the grace we receive is God’s grace, without which we cannot hope to become like Him and obtain everlasting life.

Go ahead, make a New Year's resolution. Give your soul a bath. It's about time.

(Large portions of this article were reprinted by permission from Catholic Twin Circle.)

Why Go To Confession?

People sometimes ask, “why go to confession?” How would you answer them?

- A reader in Fairfax

Jesus entered this world to forgive sins. Recall the words of our Lord: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). During His public ministry, Jesus preached about the forgiveness of sins: remember the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11ff) or the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1ff), and His teaching that “there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent” (Lk 15:7). Jesus Himself forgave sins: remember the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1ff) or the woman who washed His feet with her tears (Lk 7:36ff). He also taught us to pray for forgiveness in the “Our Father”: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Mt 5:9ff). His mission of reconciliation would climax in His passion, death and resurrection: Jesus suffered, died and rose to free us from sin and death.

However, Jesus never trivialized sin nor rationalized it. No, for Jesus, sin is sin, a violation of love against God and neighbor. However, in His divine mercy, Jesus called the sinner to realize the sin, to repent of it, and to be reconciled with God and neighbor.

Jesus wanted this ministry of reconciliation to continue. On that first Easter Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to His Apostles, “breathed on them,” and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven them, if you hold them bound, they are held bound” (Jn 20:21-23). Only twice in sacred Scripture do we find God breathing into human beings. First, in the Genesis account of creation, God breathes the life of a soul into the man He has created (2:7). Now, Jesus, the Son, breathes His life into His Apostles, His priests, so that through them He will “breathe” life into the souls of contrite sinners. In this scene, Christ instituted the sacrament of penance and made His Apostles the ministers of it.

At the Ascension, Jesus again charges His Apostles with this ministry: “Thus it is written that the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. In His name, penance for the remission of sins is to be preached to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witness of this” (Lk 24:46ff). Clearly, Jesus came to forgive sins, He wanted that reconciliation to continue, and He gave the Church a sacrament through which priests would continue to act as the ministers of this reconciliation.

We see this ministry of reconciliation lived-out in the early Church. St. Paul wrote, "God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). The *Didache* (or *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*), written about 80 A.D., stated, "In the congregation you shall confess your transgressions" and, "On the Lord's Day, come together and break bread ... having confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure." St. Cyprian in his "De Lapsis" (c. 251), concerning the reconciliation of Christians who had succumbed to offering pagan worship rather than face martyrdom, wrote, "Let each confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession can be received, while satisfaction and the forgiveness granted by the priests is acceptable to God." At this time of persecution, when local "parishes" were small, individuals publicly confessed their sins at the beginning of Mass (as mentioned in the *Didache*) and received absolution from the bishop or priest.

After the legalization of the Church by Constantine, the Church fathers continued to emphasize the importance of confession. St. Ambrose (d. 397) wrote, "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance; Christ granted this power to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests" ("De Poenitentia"). Similarly, St. Athanasius (d. 373) asserted, "As the man whom the priest baptizes is enlightened by the grace of the Holy Ghost, so does he who in penance confesses his sins, receive through the priest forgiveness in virtue of the grace of Christ" ("Contra Novatus"). By the mid-400s and the pontificate of Leo I, private confession under the seal of secrecy became the norm to safeguard the reputation of the penitent and to attract others to the sacrament.

Therefore, we go to confession because it is a sacrament given to us by Christ, and it has always been a practice of the Church. This sacrament of penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with Him in an intimate friendship" (*Catechism* No. 1468). Secondly, the sacrament reconciles us with the Church: "It must be recalled that ... this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. 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" (Pope John Paul II, "Reconciliation et Paenitentia").

This sacrament is so important in our sharing in the life of Christ, the Church has even mandated its practice. To prevent laxity, the Fourth Council (1215) required that every faithful of either sex who has reached the age of discretion should at least once a year faithfully confess all his sins to his own priest. He should strive as far as possible to fulfill the penance imposed on him and with reverence receive, at least during Easter time, the sacrament of the Eucharist." This rule is still a precept of the Church, commonly called the "Easter Duty." The Council of Trent in 1551, in its "Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance," asserted that since mortal sin "kills" the life of God in our souls, these sins must be confessed and

absolved through the sacrament of penance (a principle repeated by Pope John Paul II in "Veritatis Splendor"). Trent also said, "It is right and profitable" to confess venial sins.

We could end the answer here. However, regular confession is a healthy spiritual practice. Each sincere Catholic needs to periodically – every month or two – do a good examination of conscience, holding himself to the standard of Christ. Each person should reflect on how well he has lived a "Christ-like life" by following the commandments and the teachings of the Church. Perhaps one's failures are not so much commissions as they are omissions. For all of these, we bring our soul to the Lord and receive forgiveness. The healing grace of the sacrament of penance washes away sin and gives us the strength to avoid that sin again. The more we love the Lord, the more we are aware of the smallest sins and the more we want to say, "Lord, I am sorry. Please forgive me." I am sure this is why Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II go to confession weekly. As we continue our Lenten preparation for Easter, may we take full advantage of this beautiful sacrament which draws us closer to the Lord.

Fr. Saunders is president of Notre Dame Institute and pastor of Queen of Apostles Parish, both in Alexandria.

Why Confess Your Sins to a Priest?

By Msgr. Richard M. McGuinness and Rev. John A. Quill

Why confess your sins to a priest?

The forgiveness of God flows into individual human souls from Christ's redemptive death on the Cross. His sacrifice made divine mercy readily available. The question is "How?"

Catholics believe the Sacrament of Baptism takes away Original Sin, that is, the sin inherited from Adam. It also takes away all personal sins.

What about sins committed after Baptism? The Church teaches that Christ forgives sins, mortal or venial, in the Sacrament of Penance (Confession).

During his earthly life, Christ preached God's mercy toward sinners. He said there was more happiness among the angels in heaven over one converted sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who had no need to repent. He said repentant tax collectors and harlots would attain the Kingdom of God before the high priests and elders. He used three parables – the Lost Sheep (Lk. 15:1-7), the Lost Coin (Lk. 15:8-10) and the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32) – to show the Father's love and concern toward all who cry to Him for mercy.

We know, also, that during his public ministry, Christ forgave the adulterous woman (Jn 8:1-11), the woman who anointed his feet (Lk. 7:48) and the paralyzed man (Lk. 5:17-25).

God's Power to Forgive Sins

The power of Christ to forgive sins belongs to Him as God, but He exercised it as a "man." The Scribes and Pharisees were shocked when Christ pardoned the sins of the paralyzed man. They exclaimed: "Who is this man talking blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Lk. 5:21). They were right in that only God can forgive sins. They were wrong, however, because they did not recognize Jesus as God. They did not realize He actually could forgive sins since He was God. For this reason Christ's response was: "But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the paralyzed man, 'I order you: get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'" (Lk. 5:24). Christ not only manifests his divine power by forgiving the paralytic's sins, but by curing him of his paralysis. Whenever in the Gospels Christ cured someone of a physical malady, it was always a sign pointing to the spiritual cure of souls He would make available by means of his sacrificial death on the Cross.

Before Christ ascended into heaven He shared his power of forgiving sins with his Apostles. Because Christ is God He can share his powers with whomever He pleases and in whatever way He desires.

On the day of his Resurrection He conferred on the Apostles the power to forgive sins. The words Christ used were: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (Jn 20:23).

Although this verse does not mention that Christ gave the power to forgive and retain sin explicitly to the Apostles, this is clearly implied in the very next verse (24): "Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came." This would exclude Christ's having conferred this power on all his disciples. Thus, only the Apostles, minus Thomas, were present.

Just as Christ gave the Apostles the power to change bread and wine into his Body and Blood at the Last Supper, when He said: "Do this as a memorial of me" (Lk. 22:19), so now, by his words in Jn. 20:23, He gives them another power, that of forgiving sins in the name of God. The Apostles, in turn, would pass on both of these powers, as well as others, to the men they would eventually ordain bishops and priests. The bishops, who are the successors of the Apostles and who possess the fullness of Christ's priesthood, would ordain other bishops and priests and thus pass on to them these special powers.

Let us be clear. In Jn. 20:23, the word "retain" gives the Apostles and their successors, the bishops and priests, the right to refuse forgiveness to a person because, in the judgment of the priest, the person does not have real sorrow or firm purpose of amendment. In such a case, forgiveness would have to be "retained" or withheld until the person had the dispositions to receive forgiveness.

How would the Apostles know whose sins to forgive or retain, unless they knew what these were, which implies a confession of some sort.

If all Christ wanted his Apostles to do was to proclaim that He had forgiven sins and that all people had to do was to indicate their sorrow to be forgiven, why, then, did He distinguish between forgiving and retaining? He could have just said: "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk. 16:15-16). This text tells us we must believe and be baptized to attain eternal salvation. But Jn. 20:23 has Christ saying something different. He really gives the Apostles the power to forgive or retain sins. There is a big difference between Christ telling the Apostles to preach the availability of forgiveness and actually giving them the power to forgive sins in his name.

Empowered by Christ

Just before Christ gave his Apostles the power to forgive sins, He told them: “As the Father sent me, so am I sending you” (Jn. 20:21). The Apostles were to be, in the words of St. Paul, “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20), announcing the Good News that Christ made reconciliation possible (v. 19) and entrusting to them the handing on of this reconciliation (v. 18). Paul goes on to say: “It is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ’s name is: be reconciled to God” (v. 20). How? By seeking out an Apostle or those who took their place and asking for forgiveness.

Another indication that Christ intended to give his Apostles the authority to forgive sins is found in Mt. 18:18: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.” The power to “bind” or “loose” which Christ gave Peter individually, He now gives to the rest of the Apostles. To “bind” is to impose a penalty for grave sins; to “loose” means to lift a penalty. The Apostles and their successors, could forgive grave sins, as well as punishment for them, but they would have to know the sins and that the person was sorry for them.

When we confess our sins to a priest we are confessing them to God. It is God’s forgiveness that we seek because our sins offend God. No priest would dare forgive sins in his own name. The priest forgives only in the name of God: “And I absolve you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” When we hear these words we have the assurance that our sins are forgiven. This brings us great peace of mind, heart and soul.

Early Christian writings clearly teach that confession is required for the forgiveness of sins. Tertullian (d. A.D. 240) implies that confession is to be made bowing “before the presbyters” (priests) (*Treatise on Repentance*, 9,1). A clear reference to confession to a priest appears in the writings of Origen (d. A.D. 253), especially in his *Homilies on the Psalms*, 2,6. More explicit is Cyprian of Carthage (d. A.D. 258) who speaks about the reconciliation of apostates: “But (certain apostates) spurn and despise all these warnings; and before their sins are expiated, before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at the hand of the priest, before the offense against an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, they do violence to his Body and Blood; and with their hands and mouth they sin against the Lord more than when they denied Him” (*Treatise on the Lapsed*, 15).

Confession to the Clergy

In the fourth century, Ambrose and Aphraates the Persian emphasize that confession is to be made to the clergy.

During the first few centuries of the Christian era, the Church required public confession and public penance for the sins of adultery, murder, apostasy and heresy. A person could be absolved from these offenses only once in his lifetime. Because the penances were severe many delayed receiving the Sacrament of Penance until they were near death.

Nevertheless, the private confession of other sins was quite common and repeatable. Soon, the Church urged bishops to mitigate the discipline of public confession and public penances. Cyprian, in a letter to his clergy, mentions the confession of “lesser sins” as opposed to the sin of apostasy: “Although for lesser sins it is required that sinners do penance for a just time, after which, according to the rule of discipline, they may come to confession and, through the imposition of hands by the bishop and clergy, may receive the right of communication, now, in an unpropitious time and while the persecution continues, when peace is not yet restored to the Church itself, they are being admitted to communication, and the offering is made in their name; and, not yet having made a confession of sin, not yet having hands imposed upon them by the bishop and clergy, the Eucharist is given to them ...” (*Letter of Cyprian to His Clergy*, 16, [9], 2).

That private confession and absolution were practiced is evident from a letter written in A.D. 459 by Pope Leo I, in which he censures those clergy who act “against the apostolic regulations” and demand public confessions. “It is sufficient,” said Leo, “that the guilt which people have on their consciences be made known to the priests alone in secret confession.”

If the confession of sins to a priest were not from Christ we should be able to find protests against this innovation in early Christian writings. Instead, we find confession to a priest universally accepted.

What had been the common practice of the Church from Apostolic times became mandatory on an annual basis in the Fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215): “Let everyone of the faithful of both sexes, after he has reached the age of discretion, devoutly confess in private all his sins at least once a year to his own priest, and let him strive to fulfill to the best of his ability penance enjoined upon him.” This remains the discipline of the Church even today.