

The Sacrament of Confession

By Greg Witherow

The Sacrament of Confession is practiced by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. In the confessional, sins are repented of and the Priest offers absolution; granting the forgiveness of sins *in persona Christi*¹. Opponents of this Sacrament list at least three objections. A Protestant would word them as follows. First, Scripture plainly says that God alone has the right to forgive sins². Second, Scripture states that if the Christian confesses his sins, He [God] is faithful and will forgive him³. Third, the Bible says there is **one** mediator between God and Man, Jesus Christ. Inserting a Priest between the Confessor and God is a contradiction to Scripture. These are fair points. If we are going to explain the Catholic faith we must provide worthy answers. We will attempt to do so here. Note that this essay is not an exhaustive explanation of the Sacrament. Instead it is an attempt to prove the Sacrament is ordained by God for the Church.

Christ Gives Authority to Disciples

When presented with a lame man (lowered through a roof), Christ declared the man's sins forgiven. The Pharisees took offence that a man claimed to forgive sins (as with Christ, many are offended today when Catholic Priests claim to forgive sins). Christ responded,

“But that you may know that the Son of man **has authority on earth to forgive sins**, (he then said to the paralytic) rise, take up your bed and go home. And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid and they glorified **God who had given such authority** to men.”

The crowds recognized (correctly) that it was God who had given Christ the authority to forgive sins. Christ attested to what the crowds surmised.

“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and **has given him authority to execute judgment**, because he is the Son of man.”⁴

Christ had been sent by the Father with authority. *In the same manner* Christ would send his disciples with authority, including the authority to forgive sins. Scripture explicitly tells us so.

¹ The Latin term means, “In the person of Christ”.

² Mark 2:7 and the Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 1441

³ 1 John 1:9 – all scripture passages are taken from the Revised Standard Version

⁴ John 5:26-27

“Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. **As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.** And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, **they are forgiven;** if you retain the sins of any, **they are retained.**⁵”

No Christian lay man has the authority to retain the sins of another person. This authority is granted only to the apostles and their successors. It can be nobody else. But in granting authority to forgive, Christ did something that did not have an obvious reason. Did you catch it?

The Breath of Life

In the above passage Christ breathed on the disciples and granted them the Holy Spirit. This seems out of place. After all, pre-Pentecost believers had the Holy Spirit (in a lesser sense) as without the Holy Spirit it was impossible to be saved – even in the Old Testament⁶. This is why King David prayed, “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me”. Additionally, Pentecost was only days away. The Church would soon get an increased dosage of the Holy Spirit and the disciples would be visibly changed with a new boldness. The question begs, if this was not a private Pentecost for the disciples, what did Christ’s breath do **and how was it related to forgiving sin?**

There are two other times in the Bible that God breathes⁷ on men to instill his Spirit. The first is in Genesis. God breathed “the breath of life⁸” into the nostrils of Adam. The result; Adam became a living person. The second account is in Ezekiel. In this case, dead men come alive.

“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know. Again he said to me, Prophecy to these bones and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, **I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.** And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, **and put breath in you,** and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD. So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God:

⁵ John 20:21-23

⁶ Old Testament believers were saved in anticipation of Christ’s merits. Salvation by works was never an option.

⁷ The Hebrew word for Spirit and breath is the same word, “Naphach”. The point here is that God only breathed on men to instill his Spirit on three occasions in the Bible.

⁸ Genesis 2:7

Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.⁹”

The significance for our topic is this. In breathing on the disciples (**while authorizing them to forgive sins**), Christ is empowering the disciples to restore souls to spiritual life. As God breathed life into Adam, Christ seeks to breathe life into fallen souls via the Sacraments. We can summarize as follows. First, Christ sent the apostles into the world with authority - as Christ was sent by the Father. Second, in breathing on the disciples he endowed them with a Sacrament to forgive. By the power of the Holy Spirit the Priest can therefore forgive sins *in persona Christi*.

Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 387)

“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” (*The Priesthood* 3:5).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Paragraph 1441: Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, "The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" and exercises this divine power: "Your sins are forgiven." Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name.

Paragraph 1448: Beneath the changes in discipline and celebration that this sacrament has undergone over the centuries, the same *fundamental structure* is to be discerned. It comprises two equally essential elements: on the one hand, the acts of the man **who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit**: namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction; on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church. The Church, who through the bishop and his priests forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction also prays for the sinner and does penance with him. Thus the sinner is healed and re-established in ecclesial communion.

⁹ Ezekiel 37:1-6

Summary

In one of his epistles, the apostle John says something that sounds very odd. He states,

“If any one sees his brother committing what is not a deadly sin, he will ask and God will give him life for those whose sin is not deadly. There is sin which is deadly; **I do not say he should pray about that.** All wrong doing is sin, but there is sin which is not deadly^{10,}

What? John says we should **not pray** for the brother who has fallen into the graver sin? Wouldn't it make more sense for him to say we should pray **doubly** hard for such souls? This makes no sense – unless you are a Catholic. Something is going on here. Here we see that grave sins are a special matter; the intercession of friends is hindered. Do we flee to Christ? Always! But Catholics understand the brother should go to the Priest who forgives sins *in persona Christi*. When confessing our sins to a Priest we are **in fact confessing our sins to Christ himself**. In the Confessional, Christ forgives us through the Priest. So says the Apostle John.



We should note this Sacrament does not nullify the role of Christ as the sole mediator. In his letter to Timothy, Paul commands Christians to intercede (mediate) for all men while in almost the same breath he also insists Christ is the sole mediator between God and Man¹¹. In delegating labor, Christ is not superseded. This point is lost on Protestants. But R.C. Sproul (a Calvinist theologian) writes (emphasis mine),

“Speaking as a Protestant, I think **something very precious has been lost** in the Protestant world in our ceasing the confessional practice. I have yet to meet a Christian who does not yearn to hear ‘your sins are forgiven’. And I think that authority, **as the Roman Catholic Church believes, was indeed given to the church.** That’s why even in Protestant churches we have ministers stand up and giving the assurance of pardon. People need the assurance that the sins they have confessed have indeed been forgiven.... I’ve talked to psychiatrists who say that the biggest burden in term of mental illness of people in the United States is the burden of unresolved guilt. A psychiatrist said to me, Most people who come to see me need a priest more than they need a psychiatrist.^{12,}”

This is sad to write. But as Catholics we have the Sacrament as Christ gave us. Let us use it.

¹⁰ 1 John 5:16, 17

¹¹ 1 Timothy 2:1-6

¹² Now That’s a Good Question, R.C. Sproul page 360 - 361. He rejects Catholic Confession because of its role in justification.