

“WHOSE SIN YOU FORGIVE ARE FORGIVEN THEM”

Jesus spoke the above words to the Apostles on Easter Sunday (John 20:23), and in doing so He clearly established the Sacrament of Penance, also call Confession or Reconciliation. Some Christians (including some Catholics) are heard to say, *I don't need to confess to a priest, I tell my sins to God*. The two are not mutually exclusive. It is an excellent habit to take a few minutes every night before going to bed to think of our sins of the day, and tell God we are sorry for them. But we should also tell our sins to a priest in Confession regularly, and we should confess serious sins as soon as possible. Jesus gave the Apostles, His first priests, the power to forgive sins in this Sacrament. Yet, if died on the cross to forgive our sins, so why do we need to go to confession?

The answer is that this Sacrament is the means by which Jesus' death on the cross touches us personally. Jesus is the person we should love more than anyone else, since it is His death that allows us to get to heaven. In any human relationship, there are times when we commit small offenses against another; when we do so we apologize in some small way. If we commit a serious offense, we should give a more serious, more formal apology. If a husband doesn't tell his wife that he will be getting home from work an hour late, a small and sincere apology may be enough. But if a husband is caught in an adulterous relationship, the apology will require a lot more. The same is true of our relationship with Jesus: serious sins require a more serious apology, which is the Sacrament of Penance or Confession.

Obviously Jesus already knows everything we have done; He doesn't need us to tell our sins aloud to a priest in order to hear them. Like everything that Jesus did, He gave us the Sacrament of Penance for our good. If we don't believe in confessing our sins, there are a few ways that we may try to deal with them, but none of them work. They lead to what the Bible calls *hardening the heart*, becoming comfortable with our sins; or they leave us stuck with shame and guilt.

- (1) We may deny that they are sins, saying *the Church says it's wrong but I think it's OK*. This leads to hardening of the heart, becoming comfortable with our sins.
- (2) We can try to forget about our sins; if we succeed, again, we harden our hearts. If we are not able to forget our sins, especially the serious ones, we go through life feeling guilty.
- (3) We can rationalize, saying that our sins are not our fault, or that everyone does them; again, this leads to hardening the heart.
- (4) We can fully recognize and accept our responsibility, but be too ashamed to tell anyone, and once again get stuck in shame or guilt trips.

How does the Sacrament of Penance help us through all of this?

- (1) Rather than deny they are sins, we accept the teachings that Jesus has given us through the Church.
- (2) Rather than try to forget sins, we call them to mind by making an examination of conscience.
- (3) Rather than rationalize and blame others, we take responsibility for our sins in the Act of Contrition.
- (4) Rather than live with the shame and guilt, we tell our sins aloud to a priest, and we get to hear the priest say aloud: *I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.*

If we think of sin as a disease of the soul, we can think of the Sacrament of Penance as both a cure and a vaccine. Like a cure, the grace of the Sacrament forgives sins after we commit them. Like a vaccine, if we go to Confession regularly (try once a month), the grace we receive helps us avoid committing sins.