

# The Forgiveness of Sins

*Catholic Answers*



All pardon for sins ultimately comes from Christ's finished work on Calvary, but how is this pardon received by individuals? Did Christ leave us any means within the Church to take away sin? The Bible says he gave us two means.

Baptism was given to take away the sin inherited from Adam (original sin) and any sins we personally committed before baptism—sins we personally commit are called actual sins, because they come from our own acts. Thus on the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowds, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), and when Paul was baptized he was told, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). And so Peter later wrote, "Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21).

For sins committed after baptism, a different sacrament is needed. It has been called penance, confession, and reconciliation, each word emphasizing one of its aspects. During his life, Christ forgave sins, as in the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) and the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:48). He exercised this power in his human capacity as the Messiah or Son of man, telling us, "the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 8:6), which is why the Gospel writer himself explains that God "had given such authority to men" (Matt. 9:8).

Since he would not always be with the Church visibly, Christ gave this power to other men so the Church, which is the continuation of his presence throughout time (Matt. 28:20), would be able to offer forgiveness to future generations. He gave his power to the apostles, and it was a power that could be passed on to their successors and agents, since the apostles wouldn't always be on earth either, but people would still be sinning.

God had sent Jesus to forgive sins, but after his resurrection Jesus told the apostles, "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" (John 20:21–23). (This is one of only two times we are told that God breathed on man, the other being in Genesis 2:7, when he made man a living soul. It emphasizes how important the establishment of the sacrament of penance was.)

Christ told the apostles to follow his example: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). Just as the apostles were to carry Christ's message to the whole world, so they were to carry his forgiveness: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). This power was understood as coming from God: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). Indeed, confirms Paul, "So we are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Some say that any power given to the apostles died with them. Not so. Some powers must have, such as the ability to write Scripture. But the powers necessary to maintain the Church as a living, spiritual society had to be passed down from generation to generation. If they ceased, the Church would cease, except as a quaint abstraction. Christ ordered the apostles to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." It would take much time. And he promised them assistance: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20).

If the disciples believed that Christ instituted the power to sacramentally forgive sins in his stead, we would expect the apostles' successors—the bishops—and Christians of later years to act as though such power was legitimately and habitually exercised. If, on the other hand, the sacramental forgiveness of sins was an "invention" foisted upon the young Church by ecclesiastical or political leaders, we'd expect to find records of protest. In fact, in early Christian writings we find no sign of protests concerning sacramental forgiveness of sins. Quite the contrary. We find confessing to a priest was accepted as part of the original deposit of faith handed down from the apostles.

The earliest Christian writings, such as the first-century *Didache*, are indefinite on the procedure for confession to be used in the forgiveness of sins, but a verbal confession is listed as part of the Church's requirement by the time of Irenaeus (A.D. 180). He wrote that the disciples of the Gnostic heretic 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 themselves from the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses" (*Against Heresies* 1:22).

The sacrament of penance is clearly in use, for Irenaeus speaks of making an outward confession (versus remaining silent) upon which the hope of eternal life hangs, but it is not yet clear from Irenaeus just how, or to whom, confession is to be made. Is it privately, to the priest, or before the whole congregation, with the priest presiding? The one thing we can say for sure is that the sacrament is understood by Irenaeus as having originated in the infant Church.

Later writers, such as Origen (241), Cyprian (251), and Aphraates (337), are clear in saying confession is to be made to a priest. (In their writings the whole process of penance is termed *exomologesis*, which means confession—the confession was seen as the main part of the sacrament.) Cyprian writes that the forgiveness of sins can take place only "through the priests." Ambrose says, "this right is given to priests only." Pope Leo I says absolution can be obtained only through the prayers of the priests. These utterances are not taken as novel, but as reminders of accepted belief. We have no record of anyone objecting, of anyone claiming these men were pushing an "invention."

Note that the power Christ gave the apostles was twofold: to forgive sins or to hold them bound, which means to retain them unforgiven. Several things follow from this. First, the apostles could not know what sins to forgive and what not to forgive unless they were first told the sins by the sinner. This implies confession. Second, their authority was not merely to proclaim that God had already forgiven sins or that he would forgive sins if there were proper repentance. Such interpretations don't account for the distinction between forgiving and retaining—nor do they account for the importance given to the utterance in John 20:21–23. If God has already forgiven all of a man's sins, or will forgive them all (past and future) upon a single act of repentance, then it makes little sense to tell the apostles they have been given the power to "retain" sins, since forgiveness would be all-or-nothing and nothing could be "retained."

Furthermore, if at conversion we were forgiven all sins, past, present, and future, it would make no sense for Christ to require us to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," which he explained is required because "if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:12–15).

If forgiveness really can be partial—not a once-for-all thing—how is one to tell which sins have been forgiven, which not, in the absence of a priestly decision? You can't very well rely on your own gut feelings. No, the biblical passages make sense only if the apostles and their successors were given a real authority.

Is their ways in which it is more beneficial to confess one's sins to a priest than simply confessing them directly to God? Yes. First, one seeks forgiveness the way Christ intended. Second, by confessing to a priest, one learns a lesson in humility, which is avoided when one confesses only through private prayer. Third, the sinner receives sacramental graces; through the sacrament of penance sins are forgiven and graces are obtained. Fourth, one is assured that his sins are forgiven; he does not have to rely on a subjective feeling. Lastly, one can also obtain sound advice on avoiding sin in the future.