

Why Confess to a Priest?

So why do Catholics confess sins to a priest rather than straight to God? Some people quote Scripture to explain that Christ is the one true mediator between God and man: *“For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all.”* 1 Tm 2:5-6. They therefore feel that the Church does not have the authority to require confession of sins with a mediator, a priest.

Well it's a fair question, and is certainly a loaded one. What it comes down to is that Christ is the one true mediator between God and man. But how Jesus accomplishes the mediation is His choice.

Upon ascending into heaven Christ instituted the Church as our community of believers that would be His earthly guide for all mankind. A Church that would be protected and guided by the Holy Spirit, to preserve His truths and guide all men to Himself for our salvation. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus tells Simon after his confession of faith: *"Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* --Matthew 16:17-19

In this passage, Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter. Peter translated into Aramaic is Kepha, or rock. So what Jesus did was to say that Peter is the rock. Not just any rock, but the rock on which He will build his Church. Jesus also gives Peter binding and loosing powers, as well as the keys of heaven (strong symbols of authority), thus giving Peter (and his successors) ultimate teaching authority over the Church.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation the Church teaches is the necessary means by which we receive the forgiveness of God and reconciliation with our Church community. The Bible records Christ's institution of the Sacrament following His resurrection from the dead when He first appeared to the assembly of apostles *“On the evening of the first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, Peace be with you. When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And when he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”* John 20:19-23

This moment, when Jesus breathed on his apostles, constituted both the institution of the Catholic ministerial priesthood and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Christ gave the apostles, His first priests, the authority to forgive or retain sins. We should realize that in Scripture God breathed on man only twice: once when He breathed life into the clay of earth to create man (Genesis 2:7) and the second time when He breathed the life of Grace into His Church. Both instances were that of intimate, riveting moments between God and man. It is clear that the ability to forgive or retain sin that God gave resides in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As

Christ well knew, confession of sins to a priest requires humility, trust in God and the Church, and contrition of heart. Confession to a priest allows us to both hear ourselves as we confess our sins and hear the response that gives us the assurance that our sins are forgiven.

So can we confess to Jesus directly? Sure, and we probably do often, whenever we recognize the residue of sin in our lives. And, don't forget the confession we say to God and each other at the beginning of Mass. So why is the Sacrament of Reconciliation so important? In fact, it may seem like a frightening, humiliating act, especially if we have neglected the Sacrament. Over time, however, Confession become less frightening; and does always require a measure of humility and resolve. Yet, nothing in the world can compare to the joy we experience after Confession. The veil of sin falls away and the light of God's Grace fills our souls and our community. In the end, few things in the world are as precious as the forgiveness of sin through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

I thought it would be a good idea to read the teaching from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, PART TWO: THE CELEBRATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY, SECTION TWO THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH, CHAPTER TWO THE SACRAMENTS OF HEALING, Article 4 THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION, VIII. The Minister of This Sacrament:

1461 Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

1462 Forgiveness of sins brings reconciliation with God, but also with the Church. Since ancient times the bishop, visible head of a particular Church, has thus rightfully been considered to be the one who principally has the power and ministry of reconciliation: he is the moderator of the penitential discipline. Priests, his collaborators, exercise it to the extent that they have received the commission either from their bishop (or religious superior) or the Pope, according to the law of the Church.

1463 Certain particularly grave sins incur excommunication, the most severe ecclesiastical penalty, which impedes the reception of the sacraments and the exercise of certain ecclesiastical acts, and for which absolution consequently cannot be granted, according to canon law, except by the Pope, the bishop of the place or priests authorized by them. In danger of death any priest, even if deprived of faculties for hearing confessions, can absolve from every sin and excommunication.

1464 Priests must encourage the faithful to come to the sacrament of Penance and must make themselves available to celebrate this sacrament each time Christians reasonably ask for it.

1465 When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and

impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. the priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner.

1466 The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. The minister of this sacrament should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ. He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behavior, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy.

1467 Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry and the respect due to persons, the Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "sacramental seal," because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains "sealed" by the sacrament.