

Confession to a Human Being

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. ~ Proverbs 28:13



AT ONE TIME or another, we have probably heard questions, or asked them ourselves, concerning the Catholic practice of confessing their sins to a priest. “Why,” some will ask, “do Catholics *have* to go to confession?” while others say, “Who needs confession when I can go straight to God?” Some may even ask, with the scribes listening to Jesus, “*Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (Mk 2:7). These questions pose essentially the same objection: confessing sins to another human being may be therapeutic, as some psychologists tell us, but it cannot bring about the forgiveness that God alone can grant.

The answer to this objection lies in the proper understanding of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the role of the priest. The sacrament is a *real encounter with Jesus*, who healed and forgave the sins of many to the astonishment of the religious leaders surrounding him (see Mt 9:2-7; Lk 7:48-49). Before ascending into Heaven, he breathed the Holy Spirit on his apostles and said, “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*” (Jn 20:23). This power of Christ given to the apostles expressed his will to institute the sacrament of Reconciliation and to extend the ministry

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of forgiveness throughout the world and down through the centuries.

When a Catholic walks into a confessional to confess his or her sins, Christ is there in the priest because the priest acts not in his own name but *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”). Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, Christ has configured the priest to himself in this way specifically so he (the priest) can carry out this sacrament and the other functions given to him by Christ. When the priest absolves the penitent, it is Christ himself who speaks although the voice is that of the priest. Unless this power to forgive sins is real, confession to a priest would be a sham and, worse, an offense against God. No one can forgive sins except God; but likewise no one can decide whether to mediate this power through an earthly priesthood except God. Christ revealed the Father’s will in this matter, instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation, and thereby set out God’s plan to extend his mercy and forgiveness to the whole world through the ministry of his priests.

(CCC 1455-1456, 1464-1467)

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A child receives absolution from a priest, making the sign of the cross with him

