

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

Last week we began to look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as *Confession* or *Penance*). As a follow up to my article and homily last week, let's look at the "how-to" of the Sacrament. Why we have to go to a priest to have our sins forgiven? The short answer is because Jesus set it up that way. Confession is the ordinary way of having serious sins forgiven (God is not limited by His Sacraments, but it would be foolish to disdain His gifts that are available to us). In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear how Jesus gave Peter the Keys of the Kingdom and the ability to bind and loose sins (Mt 16:19). Later, He gave that same gift to all of the Apostles ("**whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven**" Mt 18:18). After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the Disciples in the Upper Room and breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. He then said to them, "**Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained**" (Jn 20:23). The obvious question is how can they know what to bind and loose, what to forgive and retain unless people confess to them? As the Church grew, the Holy Spirit led her to see that this gift was passed down through Holy Orders to the priests. In the Letter of James, when someone is sick, they send for the priests to pray over them for healing and the forgiveness of sins (James 5:13-15). James immediately then writes of "**Confess[ing] your sins to one another**" (James 5:16), which, in context, we see as directed to the priests.

So now that we have the Scriptural basis for why we go to Confession, and last week we heard about the relational reason for Confessing sins, now let's look at how it's done. As I mentioned in my homily, it is best to come to Confession prepared. When we go to a doctor, we need to tell the problems afflicting us in order to find a cure. When we go to the Soul Doctor, we also must speak of the sickness of our souls. So we examine our lives – what are the ways that I have said, "No" to God's Grace and love, to His call to love Him and our neighbor?

After we have a sense of our sin and have worked up contrition (sorrow) in our hearts, we enter into Confession. The priest may greet you (for instance, with the Sign of the Cross or with a Scriptural verse). We then begin, "*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been* (an approximate length of time) *since my last Confession, and these are my sins.*" Then you tell the priest your sins. Remember that the priest is *in persona Christi capitis*, in the person of Christ the head, and so **it is Jesus** you are speaking to. Remember, also, to tell the priest your sins. This is not a time to speak of everybody else's sins. It is also not counselling (though there may be some spiritual counsel given to you), and so we speak of our sins – how we have hurt God, others, ourselves.

Confession is not a time for excuses (though we may speak of the trends of sin in our lives in order to get at where the healing needs to happen), but to take responsibility. Adam and Eve shirked responsibility after they were called out (Adam pointing to Eve, and Eve to the serpent, Gen. 3:12-13). If they had simply accepted responsibility and asked for forgiveness, things may have been very different for us! We are called to reverse the scapegoating by taking responsibility, "I did it. I'm sorry." It's that simple.

After this the priest may give some spiritual counsel and then will give a *penance*. The penance is not meant to be a punishment, but a way to help rebuild the relationship with God. It may be prayer or an action (or both) which helps to reestablish relationships. The penitent (the person confessing) then makes an *Act of Contrition* – a verbal acknowledgement of sorrow. There are various formulas, but at the heart of them all is the fact that "I am sorry, and, with God's help, I won't do it again." Contrition is necessary for the Sacrament – we have to be sorry that we have sinned. Perfect Contrition is when we are sorry, not because of the punishment, but because we hurt God who loves us. Sometimes, though, we are not at that point. The beautiful thing about the Sacrament is that it makes up for what is lacking – it makes our contrition perfect! Do you see how beautifully God reaches out to us: even when we can't go all the way, He reaches to us! Once the Act of Contrition is done, the priest will give *Absolution*, and with these words, all the sins are forgiven!

Some other considerations: Absolution forgives all of our sins, not just the ones we confessed (for instance, if we have forgotten something). But if we purposely withhold a serious sin, the Confession isn't valid – it didn't work. Why? Because we are trying to reestablish a relationship. It is not legalism (I broke this rule), but making us right with God. If I have not been made right in all areas, I'm not really right with Him. Also, if I don't plan to change my life, I am not forgiven – for I am planning to hurt God again. In weakness I may fall, but I can't *plan* to sin again.

Some final words: Do not be afraid. Confession is an opportunity to run into the arms of our loving God and be embraced by His mercy. All that is said in Confession is sealed (the priest cannot speak of it... ever!), and *forgotten by God!*