

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Protestant Perspective Protestants say they confess their sins directly to God and deny that Christ gave His disciples the power to forgive sins.

Catholic Perspective Catholics confess their sins to God directly as well as through His ministers because that is what God requires. It is called the sacrament of penance, or confession, or reconciliation in which one receives forgiveness of one's sins.

Authority to Forgive Sins

In Matthew 9, we read that Jesus forgave a paralytic and then healed him so *"that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"* (Matt. 9:6).

Apparently, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. But, did He intend to pass the authority to His disciples? There is a subtle indication in Matt 9:8, in which after Jesus exercised this power as a man, the crowds glorified God for having given *"such authority to men"*. Notice that Matthew indicates this power to forgive sins had been given to *men* and not simply a man.

Jesus' intention is much clearer in John 20:19-23. On Easter Sunday, Jesus breathed on the apostles. It is only the second time in the Bible where God breathes on anyone. The other instance was at the moment of creation, when God breathed his own life into the nostrils of Adam (Gen 2:7). This should tell us that something of great importance is taking place. Upon doing this, Jesus said, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

In the same way that Jesus gave His apostles other supernatural powers (such as raising men from the dead), He gave them power to absolve sins (raising men from spiritual death). In 2 Cor 5:17-20, Paul explains how the apostles are ambassadors of Christ's work of reconciliation, bringing His forgiveness to the world through the sacrament. Also, in James 5:13-16, James makes clear that the sins of the sick are forgiven in this sacrament of anointing. He specifies that the presbyters (priests) must be called. They obviously had a power the ordinary Christian did not: the power to forgive sins. Otherwise, why didn't James simply ask ordinary, fellow Christians to pray over the sick as in the case in numerous other passages?

"Jesus was only commissioning his disciples to preach the Gospel. Those who believed the Gospel, their sins would be forgiven. Those who refused to believe the Gospel, their sins would be retained. There is nothing about giving the authority to men."

Jesus did not say, "When God forgives men's sins, they are forgiven." He uses the second plural: "you". He talks about the apostles forgiving, not preaching – that is handled elsewhere, such as in Matt 28:19 and related verses. The only logical explanation of John 20:22-23 is the sacrament of penance.

Confession to Priests

Catholics believe that the priest is used by God as His instrument for the forgiveness of sins in three sacraments, and one of them is confession. Note that Jesus gives the disciples the authority to forgive, *and not to forgive*. Therefore, having the power to forgive and retain sins implies that the priest knows what a person's sins are, which in turn implies oral confession.

In the early Church, publicly known sins (such as apostasy) were often confessed openly in church, though private confession to a priest was always an option for privately committed sins. Still, confession was not just something done in silence to God alone, but something done "in church," as the *Didache* (A.D. 70) indicates. Slightly later Christian writers, such as Origen (*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]), Cyprian (*The Lapsed* 28 [A.D. 251]), and Aphraates (*Treatises* 7:3 [A.D. 340]), are quite clear in saying confession is to be made to a priest. Ambrose makes things clear, saying, "this right is given to priests only" (*Penance* 1:1 [A.D. 388]).

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) more specifically defined the already-existing duty to confess one's sins by saying Catholics should confess at least once a year.

Is Confessing to a Priest Better Off?

Yes. Because

1. one seeks forgiveness the way Christ intended it to be sought.
2. by confessing to a priest, one learns a lesson in humility, which is conveniently avoided when one confesses only through private prayer
3. one receives sacramental graces
4. one is assured that one's sins are forgiven, and does not rely on a subjective "feeling".
5. one can obtain sound advice on avoiding sin in the future

READING

How to Talk About Confession (*This Rock*, October 1998)

Further Research

- In the Old Testament, was confession of sin a private affair? (Leviticus 5:14-26) In John the Baptist's ministry, was confession of sin a private affair? (Mark 1:4-5) In the New Testament, is confession of sin only a private affair? (James 5:16)
- Is there any sin too great to be forgiven in the confessional? (Catechism 982)
- When was the last time you went to confession? How frequently should you go? (Catechism 1457-1458)