

## Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest? [PART 1]

By Graham Osborne

Many Protestants, and unfortunately not a few Catholics, object to the idea of confessing their sins to a priest – or anyone for that matter! The argument often goes that, only God can forgive sins and that we have one high priest [Heb 3:1] and “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” [1 Tim 2:5]. “I confess my sins directly to God”, many insist.

Now the interesting thing is that you would get no real argument from the Catholic Church on any of these points! But the Church would add that this is only half the story...

While Jesus is certainly our high priest and mediator, and only God can forgive sins, this absolutely does not preclude the possibility that Jesus Himself could share this authority with men. And that is exactly what he did!

It is very clear that while incredible authority was given to Jesus by the Father, he then turns and shares this authority with his disciples in the New Covenant. Consider Jesus great final prayer of John 17: “As you sent me into the world, so I sent them (the Apostles) into the world [Jn 17:17-18].” Listen to the authority he is giving to the Apostles here –the same authority the Father sent *him* with. Lk 10:16 is powerful too: “he who hears you hears me... Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name... Behold, I [Jesus] have given you the power to tread upon... the full force of the enemy”.

But a particularly striking example is Mk 6:7-13: “And he called the twelve, and sent them out... and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them.” But wait. Only God can drive out demons or miraculously heal, right? Not if God chooses to give that power and authority to men!

Fine, that still doesn't give us the Sacrament of Confession. Only God can forgive sins. But this is the stunner. This is exactly the authority that Jesus gives to the Apostles in Jn 20:21-23: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you”. Again, listen to the authority that Jesus is sending them out with: “as the Father sent me”. Then “he breathed on 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.” Incredible! This is the Scriptural foundation for the Catholic Sacrament of Reconciliation – and our question is unequivocally answered!

We see a similar authority echoed in Mt 16:16-20. Within the context of founding his Church upon Peter, Jesus also gives Peter the incredible authority of “the keys to the Kingdom of heaven”, and then declares [first to Peter, and then to the rest of the disciples in Mt 18:18], “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”. This “binding and loosing” was Rabbinic language of the time that applied to both the forgiving of sins and the authoritative teaching of doctrine.

But noteworthy is the fact that Jn 20:21-23, Mt 16:19 and Mt 18:18 all imply confession out loud. It follows that if the Apostles were to “retain” or “bind or loose” anyone's sins, they would necessarily have to know what they were first –they would have to be confessed. The practice of the early Church followed this to the letter, and particularly serious public sins

[like apostasy for example] often had to be confessed out loud in the assembly. But private confession to a priest still remained for more personal sins.

And in 2 Cor 5:18-21, St Paul literally describes the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession for us: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

Now some turn to James 5:16, claiming that this verse says we should confess our “sins to one another”, and not to a priest. But either way, it is calling for a verbal confession to *someone*! But the context of this verse, which is also the key Scriptural foundation for the Catholic Church’s Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick as well, indicates that “each other” refers to the presbyters –the priests: “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the *presbyters* of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” [James 5:14-16].

So who are these “presbyters”? Presbyter, is the Greek to Latin root for the English word, priest. And while the Church wouldn’t deny the primacy of Jesus’ priesthood, it would insist that Jesus himself ordained the Apostles as the first priests of the Church at the Last Supper. Presbyters were the New Covenant priests, modeled on the priesthood of Jesus, in “the order of Malchizedek” [Heb 7:17], distinguishing itself from the Jewish Old Covenant Levitical priesthood, which still had a very high profile in New Testament times until the destruction of the temple in 70AD. And we clearly see the spreading of this priestly office in the early Church in places like Act 14:23, where Paul and Barnabas “appointed presbyters for them in each church”. And again, in Titus 1:5, St Paul reminds Timothy that, “I left you in Crete so that you might appoint presbyters in every town, as I directed you”. Clearly, this priestly ministry was well established right from the time of the Apostles. And as you look to the writings of the Early Church Fathers, we see this priesthood forming a core foundation to the Sacramental life of the Christian Church .

So let us turn to the Early Church for more background on all of this. Specifically, was confession to a Catholic priest really the practice of early Christians? Without a doubt!

For example, in the Didache [“The Teaching of the Twelve”, 70AD] we read: “Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . . On the Lord’s Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure (Didache 4:14, 14:1 [A.D. 70]).

In 215 AD, St Hippolytus describes the prayer of the Bishop given during the ordination of another Bishop: “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Pour forth now that power that comes from you, from your royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles... and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, the power... by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command.”(Apostolic Tradition 3). It doesn’t get much clearer than that!

Similarly, in 251 AD, St Cyprian, martyred Bishop of Carthage wrote: Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . . I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord (The Lapsed 15:1–3 [A.D. 251]).

St John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christianity literally summarizes our whole question in 387AD with his typical Scriptural clarity: "Priests have received a power that God has given to neither angels nor archangels. It was said to them: "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose shall be loosed." Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding, but they can bind only the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond that pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? "Whose sins you shall forgive," he says, "they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." What greater power is there than this? The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men [Matt. 10:40; John 20:21–23]. They are raised to this dignity as if they were already gathered up to heaven" (The Priesthood 3:5 [A.D. 387]). Wow! Nothing more needs to be said!

So the Scriptural and historical claim for Confession is unquestionable. But let us also examine the common sense arguments for the reasonableness of Confession as well. Every person, if preparing well for Confession, would in fact confess their sins to Jesus as they prepare, asking the Holy Spirit to help them both remember and be truly sorry for all their sins –and have an intention, with God’s grace/help not to commit them again. So why do we need a priest then? Because this is what Jesus has ordained in Jn 20:22-23. God made us and he knows how best to minister to our fallen human nature.

For many, it can actually be too easy to go directly to God, and soon many find themselves not “going” at all! We need a format that encourages us to carefully examine our conscience, and then to articulate these sins in a spirit of repentance, with a determination not to sin again. And then we actually hear the words of absolution spoken to us, confirming that God has not only listened but forgiven us –through the authority that he himself has given his church, through its ministerial priesthood.

Confession also gives an opportunity to receive spiritual counsel, and be guided in making reparation through an appropriate penance, to help repair the spiritual and physical damage our sins have done. And there is always a communal aspect of sin as well. When one part of the body of Christ suffers, the whole body suffers [1 Cor 12:26]. So in Confession, the priest also represents the Body of Christ, and helps restore us to full communion with it, also helping us make reparation through a just but merciful penance for any damage our sins may have caused.

In my own personal experience, Confession to a priest remains one of the greatest gifts that Jesus left his Church. If you have denied the necessity of it, or perhaps allowed yourself to drift away from it’s practice, you owe it to yourself to “come and see”. Thank God for his merciful gift of Confession! The power of this sacrament is undeniable and unfathomable...