

# Confession

by Sebastian R. Fama

"Peace be with you. **As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.**' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to 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**'" (John 20:21-23).

In this passage Jesus empowers his apostles and their successors to forgive the sins of men. But there are those who disagree. They would say that Jesus was merely teaching His apostles to forgive those who have sinned against them. But that can't be right. Jesus starts off by saying: "**As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.**" Jesus is sending the Apostles to forgive as He was sent to forgive. And how was He sent to forgive?

And when **Jesus** saw their faith, He **said** to the paralytic, "My son, **your sins are forgiven.**" Now some of the Scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! **Who can forgive sins but God alone?**" Jesus, knowing what they were thinking, said in part, "But that you may know that **the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins,**' – He said to the paralytic, 'I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.'" And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all (Mark 2:5-12).

Jesus was sent to forgive sins. Plain and simple! His clear words and the reaction of the Scribes leave no doubt. That Jesus is delegating some of His authority to forgive sins is evidenced by what He does and says next; "He breathed on them, and said to them, '**Receive the Holy Spirit.**'" Jesus said and taught a lot of things. However, He was not in the habit of saying "receive the Holy Spirit" before each lesson. He says it here because he is empowering them to do something. And He reveals what it is in the next sentence: "**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.**"

This obviously couldn't refer to our forgiving those who have sinned against us. And that is because we are never given the option to retain anyone's sins. In fact, our own forgiveness is dependent on our forgiving others. Jesus tells us this very thing in Matthew 6:14-15: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you. But **if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**"

The only time a priest would retain anyone's sins is when there is an obvious lack of repentance. And of course, that is to be expected as repentance is necessary for forgiveness. "**Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out**" (Acts 3:19).

The fact that the apostles could forgive or retain sins meant that they would have to know what the sins were and the disposition of the person in question. That could only happen if the person were to tell or confess his or her sins. Furthermore, if this function was necessary in the first century it would be necessary today. For the Church is to last until the "close of the age" (Matthew 28:20). And so, the practice would have to be passed down to the apostles' successors. Early Church writings indicates that it was.

The Didache which was written between 70 and 120 A.D. records the following: "**Confess your sins in church,** and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life" (14). Cyprian of Carthage wrote: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But [the impenitent] spurn and despise all these warnings before their sins are expiated, **before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at the hand of the priest**" (*The Lapsed* 15:1-3 [A.D. 251]).

Hippolytus of Rome a third century theologian, wrote:

The bishop conducting the ordination of the new bishop shall pray: God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . pour forth now that power which 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] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, **and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command** (*Apostolic Tradition* 3 [A.D. 215]).

Origen, another early Christian theologian wrote likewise:

[A filial method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when **the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest** of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, "I said, to the Lord, I will accuse myself of my iniquity" (*Homilies in Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]).

Are we saying that only those confessing to a priest can be forgiven? Certainly not. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) is the normal means of obtaining forgiveness. However, it is not the only means. If someone were to die suddenly without confessing to a priest, all would not necessarily be lost. If the person died truly sorry for his or her sins, forgiveness would be granted. So why bother with confessing at all? Well for one because Jesus says so. But also, because the Sacrament of Reconciliation, like any other sacrament, is an occasion of grace. It is true that we go to confession after sinning to obtain forgiveness. But we also go to confession to obtain grace to avoid sinning in the future. If we are willing to accept it, God's grace can empower us to be exactly who He wants us to be. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Some object to the idea of confessing to a priest because the priest is "just a man" and a "sinner." And that is true. But the Bible is full of examples of God working through sinful men. And that should not surprise anyone because all men are sinners. We need to remember that When God works through someone, it is God doing the work and not the individual. The individual is just a vessel. When the apostles would heal the sick or raise the dead, it was Jesus working through them. They could not take, nor would they even think of taking credit for something God did.

Human beings seem to have a natural need to confess even if at times we are hesitant to do so. It is not unusual for people to seek out friends or family when something is bothering them. "Getting it off our chest," as the saying goes, is often very therapeutic. Confession offers us this and much more. A good confessor is not only a good listener but an experienced counselor who can help us to properly address the problem areas in our lives.

Some people are reluctant to confess because they are afraid that the priest will be disappointed in them. And from the human standpoint, that is understandable. But as we said before, he too is a sinner so there is nothing to fear. Besides he has probably heard it all. Rare is the individual who can shock a priest in the confessional. We also need to remember that humility is a Christian virtue. As the scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Satan does everything in his power to discourage people from taking full advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. According to St. Alphonsus Liguori he does this in two ways: "The devil does not bring sinners to hell with their eyes open: he first blinds them with the malice of their own sins. Before we fall into sin, the enemy labors to blind us that we may not see the evil we do and the ruin we bring upon ourselves by offending God. After we commit sin, he seeks to make us dumb, that, through shame, we may conceal our guilt in confession."

Confession is not something that we should avoid. Rather it is something that we should look forward to. For every gift of God is given for our benefit.