

Should We Confess to a Priest?

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 some would say that Jesus was merely teaching His apostles to forgive those who have sinned against them. But that cannot 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 is God. And when God forgives sins, they are gone forever. 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 could not refer to our forgiving others on a personal level. 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.**" Clearly then, Jesus is speaking about something else in John 20. And that would be the sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). As the Early Church Father Tertullian said in the year 203: "The Church has the power of forgiving sins" (*Repentance* 10:21).