

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.**"

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).

That God desires to forgive sins through the ministry of men can be further evidenced in James 5:14-15. There we read: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, **he will be forgiven.**"

The passage in John 20, 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 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 indicate 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]).

Confessing sins has its roots in the Old Testament. In Numbers 5:5-7 we read: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the people of Israel, 'When a man or woman commits any of the sins that men commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person is guilty, he shall confess his sin which he has committed.'" Leviticus 5 backs up what we read in Numbers 5: "When a man is guilty in any of these, he shall confess the sin he committed, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the Lord "(5:5). It also specifies what type of sin and guilt offerings were required for the various sins. Logically, one would need to confess in order to be told which sin offering would apply.

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 having a chance to confess, he or she would be forgiven provided they were truly sorry for their sins. So why bother with confessing at all? Well for one, because Jesus says so. But also, because the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an occasion of grace. And grace can help us to avoid sinning in the future. "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." But God chooses to work through sinners. When the apostles healed the sick or raised the dead, it was Jesus working through them. In James 5:14-15 we are told: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and **if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.**" If God chooses to use men to forgive sins in time of sickness, why would anyone doubt that He would do it under normal circumstances?

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 are reluctant to confess because they are embarrassed or 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). 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.