

## **CONFESSION AND PENITENCE**

Sacramental confession consists of the avowal of one's sins and faults, accompanied by genuine contrition, made to a priest for the purpose of obtaining absolution.

Before [Christ](#) instituted this sacrament, He had given His disciples two relevant promises. When Peter [recognized](#) the true nature of Jesus Christ as the Messiah and acknowledged Him to be the Son of God, Christ conferred upon him the authority of loosing and binding (Mt. 16:19).

When [Christ](#) taught the disciples the [proper](#) procedure to be applied in the case of a brother who has committed a sin, that is, eventually reporting the matter to the [church](#) when other conciliatory [measures](#) have failed, He reiterated His previous promises according to which they were empowered to forgive penitents their sins or to retain them (Mt. 18:17-18).

After the resurrection, [Christ](#) breathed on His disciples, saying: "As the Father has sent me, even so, I send you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn. 20:22-23). This authority became the prerogative of the disciples and the apostles and was passed on to their successors in the episcopate and the presbytery.

### **Confession in the Old Testament**

Mosaic law prescribed confession of sins with a view to expiation and atonement. When a man incurred guilt and confessed, he was required to bring a sin offering, and the priest would make expiation for him, after which he would be pardoned (Lv. 5:1-6).

The theme of John the Baptist's preaching in the Judaeian wilderness, as a prelude to the coming of Christ, was the exhortation of people to repent,

in view of the imminence of the kingdom of heaven. Later, the apostles, having received the authority from Jesus Christ, exercised the power of loosing and binding and urged Jews and Gentiles alike to repent and obtain forgiveness (see Acts 8:22; 17:30; 26:20). When Ananias and his wife Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and to Peter, they were punished with instant death (Acts 5:8-10).

Ever since the early days of the church, the sacrament of confession formed a [prominent](#) part of Christian worship. The DIDACHE stipulates: "In the church, thou shalt acknowledge thy transgressions, and thou shalt not come near for thy prayers with an [evil](#) conscience. This is the way of life" (*The [Teaching](#) of the Twelve Apostles* 4. 14).

The Apostolic Canons prohibited the [clergy](#) from denying this sacrament to any penitent: "If any bishop or presbyter does not receive him who turns away from his sin, but rejects him, let him be deposed; for he grieveth [Christ](#) who said, "There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

The APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTIONS, recognizing this God-given authority, enjoin upon the congregation the duty of honoring the priesthood: "Reverence these, and honor them with all kinds of honor; for they have obtained from God the power of life and death, in their judging of sinners, and condemning them to the death of eternal life, as also of loosing returning sinners from their sins, and of restoring them to a new life" (*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 3.33, 1951, p. 412).

With regard to forgiveness through penitential acts the Council of Laodicea (341-381) stipulates: "They who have sinned in divers particulars, if they have persevered in the prayer of confession and penance, and are wholly converted from their faults, shall be received again to communion, through the mercy and goodness of God, after a time of penance appointed to them, in proportion to the nature of their offence" (*The Canons . . .*, Canon 2, 1956, p. 125).

The efficacy of penitence is dependent on the following elements: wholehearted contrition for having sinned against God; determination to improve one's way of life; firm belief in Jesus [Christ](#) as the sole Redeemer; and disclosure of sin or fault to the [Church](#) in the person of a priest who can grant sacramental absolution.

The [church](#) has ordained various prayers of absolution, which all refer to the authority given to the priesthood by [Christ](#) through the apostles.

Besides private confession, made by a person to his confessor alone, the early [church](#) adopted another practice, which required penitents to make a full, public confession to the congregation. This practice, entailing some measure of public humiliation, gradually disappeared, giving way to private, auricular confession, which proved to be an adequate vehicle for obtaining absolution.

Like all sacraments, confession has its outward signs and its inward graces.

The outward signs consist in the actual verbal confession, as well as the [absolution](#) given by the confessor after he has ascertained the genuine contrition of the penitent and his firm intention to make amends.

The inward spiritual grace lies in: (1) forgiveness of sin (Jn. 20:23, 1 Jn. 1:9); (2) complete effacement of the sin (Acts 3:19); (3) exculpation from guilt (Lk. 18:14); (4) salvation (Lk. 19:9, 1 Cor. 5:5); (5) release from penalty of sin (Mt. 3:7, 10; Lk. 13:3); (6) reconciliation to God (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14); and (7) reaffiliation to God (Lk. 15:17-24).

According to the [teaching](#) of the Bible, all sins may be forgiven providing they have been sincerely confessed and genuinely repented. Christ, however, specified a certain sin as unforgivable, namely blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; "every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men; but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Mt. 12:31).

Likewise John the [Apostle](#) says: “All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal” (I Jn. 5:17).

In the view of most interpreters of Scripture, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is condemned by [Christ](#) because it is willful opposition to the Holy Spirit. When Jesus cast out devils by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees imputed to Him the use of Satanic methods in the process. This is tantamount to substituting Satan for the Holy Spirit, and, accordingly, the Pharisees were guilty of blasphemy, which was an unpardonable sin.

As indicated earlier, a confessor must be an authorized priest, with a pious character, spiritual integrity, and a firm grasp of [church](#) doctrine. He should have insight into human nature, and show perception, discernment, and cooperation with a fellow human being who wants to make a clean breast of his personal wrongdoing.

Above all he must be trustworthy, discreet, and able to command confidence. He must be willing to fast and pray for and on behalf of those who confess to him. In particular, he should treat all penitents, rich and poor, with patience, without fear or favor or expectation of material reward.

As a rule, except in cases of disability or inability to attend, [confessions](#) must be received on the [church](#) premises.

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