



RECEIVING FORGIVENESS, FREEDOM AND PEACE

This is the third in a series of articles on the “Masterworks of God.” The seven sacraments of the Church continue the work of Christ that He carried out while here on earth, providing the power to cure the wounds of sin, healing both soul and body and giving us new life.

A biblical story that helps us understand the reality of the forgiveness and love conferred by God to us in the sacrament of reconciliation involves a family situation between a father and two sons. The younger son asked for his

inheritance before the father died, which is a terribly selfish thing to do, sending the message that he wanted the money, not the relationship with his dad. This son then left home and traveled to a distant country seeking independence and

a misconceived idea of “fun.” After he spent his inheritance on wild living and was in dire straits with nothing left, he took a job feeding pigs. He was so hungry and wanted to eat the pods fed to the swine. In his misery, the son realized what he had left behind and decided he would return to his father begging only to be considered one of his hired hands. While still some distance from home, his father saw him coming and ran to greet him, embracing him with profound love and joy. The son tried to tell his father that he was not worthy to be his son and he would gladly serve as a day laborer. But the father told his employees to purchase new clothes and shoes for him and prepare a feast to celebrate the return of this son. (cf Lk 15:11-32)

Jesus told this story to help us know that our heavenly Father loves us with deep affection—unconditional love—and welcomes us back when we have left His loving care through selfishness. A major point of this story is that, after we have sinned, as we begin to turn back in the slightest manner toward the Father with sorrow for our sin, He runs to meet us, forgiving us and welcoming us home as His beloved children. This moving illustration of the sacrament of reconciliation helps us to take a different look at this much-needed but underused gift.

We know from sacred Scripture that only God can forgive sins. Jesus is the Son of God and He refers to Himself in these words: “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” (Mk 2:5) Jesus forgave many people their sins, including the paralytic, whom He healed both spiritually and physically. This forgiveness of sins continues today; the Lord is the “doctor” of our soul. The power of forgiving sins flows directly from Jesus’ Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. On the night of His Resurrection,



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Jesus gave this power of forgiving sins to His Apostles. Jesus said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (Jn 20:22-23) These words reveal that a priest, who has received this power handed on through the sacrament of holy orders instituted by Christ, needs to hear our sins spoken in order to forgive them or hold them bound if we are not sorry and not willing to amend our life with the help of His grace. We need such a sacrament because we have inherited the effects of original sin from our first parents, Adam and Eve. As a result, in our human nature, there exists a frailty and weakness, which inclines us toward our own personal, actual sin. We can act in ways that hurt other people, even offending persons who we love the most.

Our acts of selfishness, such as being unkind, judgmental, greedy, prideful, envious or “using” others, not only wound people but also are harmful to ourselves. The effects of these actions can include deeper selfishness, resentment, bitterness, loss of a desire to pray, unhappiness, lack of a trust in God, justification of sin, a critical spirit, the dwindling of faith, hope and charity, spiritual blindness and even the loss of God’s friendship through serious sin. To restore us from sin and its damaging effects, God arranged the possibility to renew His own life within us—grace—through the sacrament of reconciliation (also called confession or penance). Jesus does not want us to keep bad secrets, because holding them in leads to unresolved guilt and shame. Every person realizes, at least to some extent, the harm caused by keeping any sin a secret. Freedom comes as we acknowledge our personal sin to a priest in confession.

We may be tempted to avoid receiving the sacrament of confession

for various reasons. There can be a train of thought such as, “I am a ‘good’ person, I haven’t done anything really that bad.” Sure, we probably haven’t stolen a car or murdered anyone, but due to our fallen nature, we can judge people, gossip about others, fail to forgive, ignore opportunities to help those in need, be more present to our smartphone than our family, etc. More seriously, we might miss Mass on Sunday or not get around to spending time with Jesus in prayer on a daily basis. Another reason people may avoid confession is fearing the priest will think badly of them. This is certainly not the case, as the priest knows those approaching the sacrament have already received grace from God to acknowledge the need for forgiveness and healing. The priest is there to hear our confession. He “is the sign and the instrument of God’s merciful love for the sinner” by “standing in” for the Person of Christ. (CCC #1465) In reality, we are confessing our sins to Jesus Christ and being forgiven in His name.

We will want to pray against any temptations to stay away from confession because there are numerous healing effects from receiving this sacrament: Freedom from guilt and shame, peace, joy, growth in faith, hope and charity, etc. It is important to note that initially we may not “feel” any different. In reality, we will experience within us the power of grace made available through the sacrament that enables us to make more loving choices in daily life.

There are a few essential steps to making a good confession. In preparing beforehand, an examination of conscience is necessary along with asking the Holy Spirit to bring to mind the ways that we have offended God, others and ourselves. We also need to pray for the grace to be sorry for our sins because without true sorrow, we will not make an effort to break sinful

habits. The Holy Spirit will answer these requests. When we examine our conscience, the Holy Spirit will gently *convict* us of sin by calling to mind our faults and failures, but He will not *condemn* us in the way Satan does when he speaks lies to us that we are unforgivable and will never change, etc.

We want to confess our sins concisely and to the point. We need to mention any grave sins first, because these sins seriously break our relationship with Jesus. For a sin to be mortal, it would involve serious matter, full understanding and deliberate consent. We then confess our venial sins, which are less serious but still wound the One we love though they do not completely destroy our relationship with God. The simple steps to confess our sins can be found on a card in the confessional and the priest will walk a person through the steps, if help is needed.

There is nothing to fear in receiving this powerful sacrament. Our heavenly Father is always ready to forgive us. God restores our soul through the reception of grace, reuniting us with Christ. As we are continually subjected to the temptation to sin, we should continually cry out to the Lord in trust for His grace to help us avoid and resist sin, and confess repeatedly when we fall. Little by little, we gain freedom through this process. It is a cooperative process between our Savior Jesus and ourselves. Over time, as we continue to acknowledge both serious and less serious sin in this sacrament, we gain strength and freedom and experience the peace and joy that Jesus died to give us.

Forgiveness of sin is an amazing gift from our all-gracious God. The Church encourages us to receive this sacrament on a regular basis. May the Season of Lent be a time of personal spiritual growth in our relationship with Jesus. †



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of conscience
is available
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