

CATHOLIC

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Why Do Catholics Have to Confess Their Sins to a Priest?



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The confessional is one of the distinctive marks of a Catholic Church, and non Catholics naturally wonder about the secrecy and what seems to be high drama of the confessional. They have many questions, "What if someone confesses a murder? Can the priest go to the police with the information?"

They ask, "Doesn't the priest tell other people what he's heard?" The answer is "No." One of the most serious sins a priest can commit is to break the vow of secrecy in the confessional. That seal is sacred and is in place to protect the person making confession, allowing them to have complete confidence in the priest.

There is a more fundamental question from many non-Catholics: why it is necessary to confess to a priest. "Can't you just go to Jesus in prayer and ask for forgiveness?"

The fact of the matter is that Catholics are encouraged to go directly to Jesus to confess their sins. After prayerfully considering our thoughts and actions, Catholics should include in their evening prayers a confession of the sins of that day. Our main act of worship--the Mass--begins with a corporate confession of our sins, and the Catholic Church teaches that these forms of confession in which we go directly to Jesus are sufficient for the forgiveness of the sins we commit simply through the rough and tumble of everyday life.

The kind of sins we commit by mistake, which are insignificant and which we commit through human weakness and without pre-meditation we call "venial" sins. More serious sins which go against natural law and God's law as given in the

Scriptures and the teachings of Christ's church we call "mortal" sins because they lead to death: death of the body and finally death of the soul. The distinction between venial and mortal sins is based in 1John 5:17, "All wrongdoing is sin, but there is a sin that does not lead to death."

A mortal sin is a serious sin, which by its very nature, goes against life and against God's love. If a person commits such a grave sin, and does so with full knowledge and premeditation, then they have turned away from God and are on the path to eternal death instead of eternal life with God. In his first epistle, the apostle John says that any Christian brother or sister can pray for someone who has committed venial sins and they will be forgiven, but he says about mortal sin, "There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that." (1 John 5: 15-17)

Because he is God incarnate, Jesus Christ has the authority to forgive sins. When he was on earth his actions in forgiving sins were shocking to the Jews because they knew only God had the authority to forgive sins. (Luke 5:21) Jesus shared that

God given authority with his apostles. He said to them, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21) "When He had said this, He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone it is withheld." (John. 20:22-23) Jesus gave the authority to forgive sins specifically to his apostles, and we see from the New Testament that the apostles passed on that authority to the next generation. This authority continued to be passed to those on whom their successors laid their hands in the solemn rite of ordination. (1 Timothy 4:14)

The apostle James confirms the practice of confessing our sins to one another saying, " Confess your faults one to another, praying for one another..." (James 5:17) James links this gift of forgiveness and healing with the elders of the church, " Is any sick among you? 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 shall save

the sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will

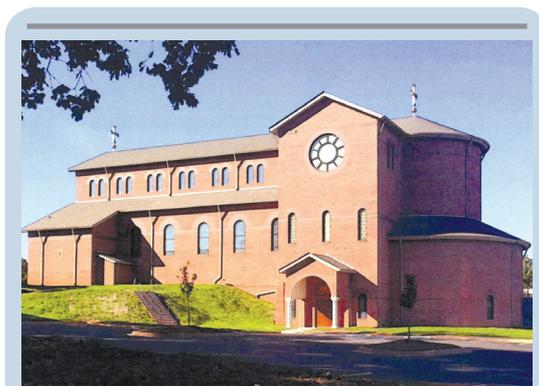
be forgiven." (James 5:14-15)

We should remember that the English word "priest" is derived from the Greek word "presbyter" which is the word for "elder" in the New Testament. That's why Catholics translate the verse in James as, "Is any sick among you? Let them call the priests of the church." This verse shows the link between forgiveness and healing. Sin is a sickness of the soul which Jesus Christ came to heal with his forgiveness. When a priest follows these Biblical instructions by anointing a person prayerfully with holy oil, the person receives Christ's healing and forgiveness.

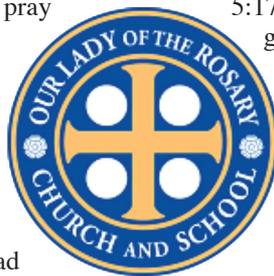
From the New Testament we see clearly that:

- Jesus has authority to heal and forgive sins.
- He delegates that authority to his apostles.
- They pass that authority to the elders (priests) of the church.
- The believers are commanded to summon the elders (priests).
- The believers are commanded to confess their sins to them.
- If they do they will receive forgiveness and healing.

Therefore, when Catholics are asked, "Why Do You Have to Confess to a Priest?" We reply, "Because the Bible tells us to!"



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