

Catholic

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The Benefits of Reconciliation

THE HIDDEN TREASURE THAT IS CONFESSION

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While news outlets and office gossip are rife with discussions of the perceived sins of others, no one wants to talk about the uncomfortable matter of his or her own sin. However, there's no denying that it exists. "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). The remedy for our failures is heartfelt confession.

Once we are baptized, the sacrament of reconciliation is the Church's channel for accessing the immense forgiveness of God. The Lord's Prayer itself reminds us that forgiveness is not something we can receive once without needing to solicit it again. The phrase "forgive us our trespasses" prompts us to continue seeking God's mercy as long as we persist in falling into sin.

A frequent, comforting, and incredible fact we hear stated over and over again at Mass is that God happily forgives even our worst sins. "If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing" (1 John 1:9). With that promise in mind, we may be tempted to hide ourselves in a closet to whisper our sins to God outside the earshot of any other person.

Yet, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his frightened disciples and bestowed on them the immense power of forgiving sins in God's name. What benefit does the sacrament of reconciliation give to us? Why do we force ourselves to face our misdeeds, stand in lines of penitent parishioners, and share our most private failings not only with God but with the priest in the confessional? Instead of privately seeking God's forgiveness, why do we take part in this sacrament?

Forgiveness of Mortal Sins

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts two points that support our understanding that our venial sins do not require a visit to the confessional to meet with God's forgiveness: "Holy Communion augments our union with Christ (CCC 1391) and "Holy Communion separates us from sin" (CCC 1393). It is true that the Mass—specifically the holy Eucharist—represents Christ's redemptive sacrifice. Thereby our participation unites us with our Lord and, we can conclude, purifies us from venial sin and offers protection from future sin. However, mortal sins necessitate the sacrament to repair our relationship with God and receive his forgiveness. In fact, one who is conscious of having committed a mortal sin and receives Communion commits a sacrilege. As St. Paul warns: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27). According to the catechism, mortal sin is "a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God" (CCC 1855). As such, a contrite Catholic bearing the weight of one or more mortal sins must visit the confessional in order to be absolved and made right with God again. "When the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial" (CCC 1856).

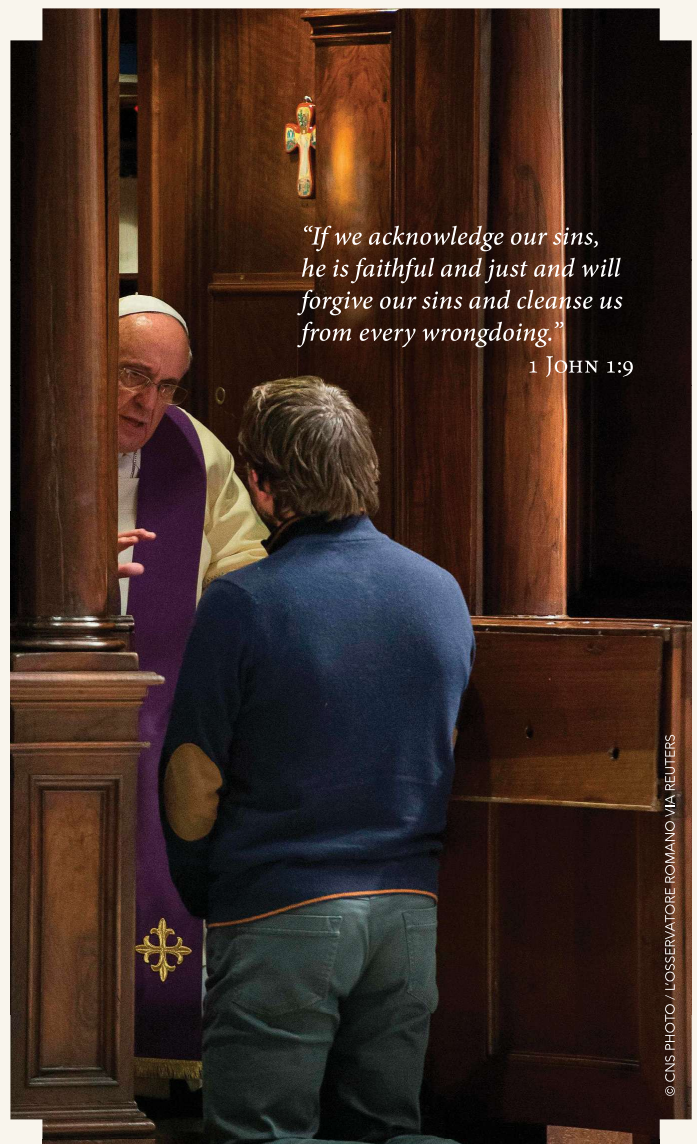
Cooperation With God's Plan

Still, even for venial sins, we benefit from frequent reception of reconciliation because we are cooperating with God's plan for forgiveness. The catechism quotes St. Augustine: "Whoever confesses his sins...is already working with God. God indicts your sins; if you also indict them, you are joined with God" (CCC 1458). By seeking absolution from a priest, we affirm and respect the gift that Jesus gave us in conveying the powers

of absolution to his apostles. "Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'" (CCC 1461).

Certainty of Forgiveness

We also can find great comfort in knowing with absolute certainty that God has truly forgiven our sins. While we may confess our sins in private and trust in God's promises of mercy, there's no mistaking the audible voice of a priest, God's appointed representative, in telling us, "I absolve you from your sins." The clarity of these words can elicit a sense of spiritual freedom unlike any other. Centuries ago, this feeling of a lifted burden was described at the Council of Trent: "For those who receive the sacrament of penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation 'is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation'" (CCC 1468).



*"If we acknowledge our sins,
he is faithful and just and will
forgive our sins and cleanse us
from every wrongdoing."*

1 JOHN 1:9

A Necessary Reality Check

While the effect of the sacrament can be extraordinarily freeing, we also benefit from the jarring and sometimes uncomfortable nature of a reality check. Reconciliation forces us to face ourselves, face God, and—perhaps most frightening to many Catholics—face another human being with our weaknesses exposed. It's difficult to delude yourself and be complacent in your sin when you are in the confessional. Your confessor may ask you compassionate but candid questions, offer you challenging and necessary advice, and demand of you some form of restitution in the form of a penance.

The Power of Penance

The exact form of your penance can be a tough pill to swallow, but it offers you the opportunity to attempt to right the wrongs you've done—an opportunity you may not have created for yourself in confessing your sins outside of confession. Sin weakens us, so our particular penance fortifies our souls again while allowing us to repair the harm we've done to our relationship with God and our fellowship with our neighbors.

Humility and Grace

Owning up to our failings before God, our confessor, and those we've wronged gives us the often unpleasant but always essential virtue of humility. At the same time, in seeking out God's forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, we open ourselves to the unique gift of sacramental grace.

The catechism quotes St. Augustine as saying: "The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. You do the truth and come to the light" (CCC 1458). Let us begin anew today in ridding ourselves of the weight of our sins at confession while devoting ourselves to spreading God's kingdom.

Megan Nye is a professional lifestyle writer and a catechist to inquisitive eighth-graders. Her work has appeared in The Huffington Post, Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly, Focus on the Family Magazine, The Penny Hoarder, Money Saving Mom, and Parent Co.

DIG DEEPER

Do we fully embrace the gift of reconciliation?

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Are we falling prey to excusing ourselves from seeking God's mercy?

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How can complacency toward this sacrament bruise our soul?

TOP 5 EXCUSES FOR NOT GOING TO CONFESSION

1. I have nothing to confess.

A governor once spoke to prisoners at the state prison. They all asked him for a pardon, insisting they had been unjustly convicted. Hearing the same plea over and over again, the governor had the warden call all the inmates together and then said to them, "If there is anyone here who believes he was guilty and justly sentenced, please stand up." Only one man rose, and the governor said, "Sir, I am going to pardon you because I don't want you, a guilty criminal, here in prison corrupting all these innocent men." It's very easy for us to believe—contrary to reality (and to the opinions of those who know us best)—that we're innocent and have nothing to confess.

2. My sins aren't that big or important.

Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) entered the Carmelite order at a young age; unfortunately, her initial fervor for convent life soon subsided. Teresa didn't have any serious sins, but she wasn't taking her religious duties seriously or trying to overcome her venial sins. In other words, she was guilty of tepidity, a lukewarm faith. Tepidity has also been defined as "making a truce with venial sin"—convincing ourselves that our little sins don't really matter or telling ourselves, "*That's just who I am.*" If we're to reach heaven, however, God expects us to make an honest effort to continue growing in his grace—and the sacrament of reconciliation is an important step in that direction.

3. I'm too uncomfortable or ashamed.

A priest giving a parish mission had a rewarding experience when a woman told him, "Father, I was always timid and ashamed in confessing my sins, and for many years I did a bad job of it." Whether you're embarrassed because it's been so long since your last confession or because of the particular sins you have to confess, you can be sure the priest has heard it all before. He won't be shocked or scandalized by anything you tell him.

4. I've forgotten the procedures and prayers.

It's not necessary to follow an exact formula. If need be, the priest can help you through the process. Also, many times a copy of the *Act of Contrition* is available for you to read in case you forget the words. Rather than trying to recite everything perfectly from memory, it's much better—once you've reflected on your sins—to ask for the Holy Spirit's help and then enter the confessional in a spirit of humble trust.

5. I'd just be confessing the same sins again and again.

If your body were in chronic pain, would you stop using your medication simply because you were "just taking the same pills again and again?" Would you let your children get by with saying, "We're not going to take baths any more, since we're just going to get dirty again?" The same is true of our souls: They need regular cleansing and care.

PSALM 32:1–11

1. Blessed is the one whose fault is removed,
whose sin is forgiven.
2. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no guilt,
in whose spirit is no deceit.
3. Because I kept silent, my bones wasted away;
I groaned all day long.
4. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength withered as in dry summer heat.
5. Then I declared my sin to you;
my guilt I did not hide.
I said, "I confess my transgression to the LORD,"
and you took away the guilt of my sin.
6. Therefore every loyal person should pray to you
in time of distress.
Though flood waters threaten,
they will never reach him.
7. You are my shelter; you guard me from distress;
with joyful shouts of deliverance you surround me.
8. I will instruct you and show you the way you should walk,
give you counsel with my eye upon you.
9. Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding;
with bit and bridle their temper is curbed,
else they will not come to you.
10. Many are the sorrows of the wicked one,
but mercy surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
11. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous;
exult, all you upright of heart.

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Theology of the Body
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and Karee Santos

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