

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Confession

One of the most misunderstood practices in the Catholic Church is confession. The proper name for this practice is the “Sacrament of Reconciliation.” The root of the confusion is a misunderstanding about source of all forgiveness. Many non-Catholics mistakenly think that the *priest* is the one forgiving sins in the confessional. In reality, Jesus Christ is the one and only source of forgiveness. He did, however, give to the Apostles, and, therefore, their successors, the authority to forgive on His behalf. In the Gospel of John we read, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (John 20:23). Jesus did not give them the *power* to forgive; He gave them the *authority* to forgive.

In order to properly understand the Sacrament of Reconciliation and its necessity, we first have to understand sin and community. Since Jesus and the Apostles were Jewish, their understanding of sin was very communal. While Jews believe that an individual can sin, sin can never be merely individual. Sin always affects others, even if no one but the sinner knows about the sin. This is because we are all spiritually joined together. To use the language of Saint Paul, we are the Body of Christ, when one suffers we all suffer when one rejoices, we all rejoice (Romans 12:15). In this way, our sins not only “offend” God, but they separate us from the community of believers. They sever our spiritual union with the Body of Christ. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the priest is representing both Christ and the community of believers, the Church. It is not enough for us to seek God’s forgiveness; we have to be reconciled with the Body of Christ. Let there be no mistake—as soon as we feel contrition in our hearts and we turn to the Lord in prayer for forgiveness we are forgiven. But, God offers us more than just forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Regardless of our understanding of the communal nature of sin and the need for reconciliation with the community, the benefits of Sacrament of Reconciliation speak for themselves. There are three important blessings that are associated with this Sacrament. They are similar to the blessings found in the medical profession. This is because in the Sacrament of Reconciliation the priest is called by God to be a spiritual doctor. Having heard a person’s sins, the priest tries to discern the root of the problem. Without a confessor, most people stay on the superficial level of simply asking God for forgiveness for the obvious *symptoms* of sins, not the *root cause* that needs to be healed. For example, if a man feels remorse for telling a lie at work, he might bring that to Reconciliation. In this scenario, the priest will want to probe a little more into the situation. “Why did you tell the lie?” “Because I wanted my co-workers to like me.” With just one simple question, the reconciliation moves from “lying,” to a more obvious sin of pride, with possibly a need for healing regarding the penitent’s self-image. Like a doctor, the priest hopes to “diagnose” the situation so as to appropriately pray for healing and reconciliation.

Next, like a doctor, the priest offers a “prescription,” called a penance. This is meant to help the penitent find healing. Continuing the example given above, the priest might invite the penitent to pray through Psalm 139, listening to how wonderfully God created each of us. This will hopefully begin to let God heal the poor self image and let the penitent grow in his or her understanding of being made in the “image and likeness of God.”

Lastly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation offers people the opportunity to *hear* the words of forgiveness. Like doctors who give their patients reassurance through their words, the priest offers the penitents the opportunity to *audibly hear* Christ’s forgiveness. This, in and of itself, can bring tremendous healing.

Whether Catholic or non-Catholic, everyone should ask God for forgiveness as soon as they are sorry for their sins. Having asked for forgiveness privately in prayer, Catholics then have the opportunity to grow in grace, humility and accountability, search for deeper healing, and hear concretely the words of God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.