



The Power to Forgive Sins by Joe Sixpack

It was a dramatic event. It was Easter Sunday night, and the apostles were hiding in the upper room where Jesus had given them the Holy Eucharist just a few days earlier. They were hiding for fear of being arrested and murdered as Jesus had. Suddenly, Jesus stood in their midst. He said, “Peace be with you.” After saying this, He showed them the wounds in His hands and His side. “Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”¹

This is one of the most astonishing events in the Gospel story! Let’s examine it closely.

After greeting the apostles, Jesus gave them a special commission. He said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” Wow! What did the Father send Jesus to do? He sent Jesus to redeem mankind. That redemption was done on the cross, but now it had to be applied, so Jesus was sending the apostles to continue His work of redemption. He emphasized that point with what He did next.

Jesus next breathed on them. There are only two times in all of human history when God breathed on man. The first was when He breathed life into Adam. It was in the upper room when He did it a second time, but this time He breathed a different kind of life into the apostles. Indeed, He actually gave them a life enabling them to give life to us all for the sins we commit after Baptism.

After breathing a new life into the apostles, Jesus said one of the most profound things He’d ever said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Many people claim Jesus was merely repeating His oft stated command that we are to forgive one another. They base it on the fact that He had said it so often that Peter finally asked Him how many times we must forgive. Jesus’ reply was that we must forgive seven times seventy, which means infinitely. But if you’ll read those many passages in the Gospels you’ll find Jesus was talking about sins committed by others *against us*. This is altogether different. Jesus isn’t saying the apostles have to forgive; He’s actually giving them a *choice* whether to forgive or not forgive.

In this passage of John, Jesus is giving the apostles a power never given to man before. He is telling the apostles that they have the *power to forgive sins*, not merely telling people they are forgiven.

¹ John 20:19-23

Many non-Catholics opposed to the sacrament of Penance claim the Church invented the sacrament at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Even if the Church's opponents were to completely discount the scriptural references to Confession, which they do, we should expect to find no historical evidence of the sacrament's existence prior to 1215. That is not the case.

Apart from further biblical references beyond the Gospels, there are many writings of the early Christians dating hundreds of years prior to 1215. St. Gregory the Great, who reigned from 590-604, writes: "The apostles, therefore, have received the Holy Spirit in order to loose sinners from the bonds of their sins. God has made them partakers of His right of judgment; they are to judge in His name and in His place. The bishops are the successors of the apostles, and, therefore, possess the same right."²

St. Caesarius of Arles (470-542) writes: "It is God's will that we confess our sins not only to Him but to men, and since it is impossible for us to be free from sin, we must never fail to have recourse to the remedy of Confession."³ In a sermon on the last judgment the saint tells us "to escape damnation by making a sincere confession from the bottom of [our] hearts, and to fulfill the penance given by the priest".⁴

We could go on and cite many other early Church Fathers: Leo the Great (370-461), Augustine (354-430), Ambrose (340-397), Paulinus of Milan (395), and Origen (185-254). The point is, the evidence shows Confession has existed from that first Easter night in the upper room.

Because of the power Jesus gave to the priesthood, the priest actually does forgive our sins. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that "[s]ince Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops 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.'"⁵

In any sacrament in which a priest or bishop is the minister he acts *in persona christi*; that is, in the person of Christ. For a better understanding, bishops and priests hold a sort of special ambassadorship. If the U.S. Ambassador to Japan works out a certain agreement and signs it, it is the ambassador's negotiations and signature which make the agreement binding. However, the ambassador has acted in the person of the President of the United States.

So, too, does a priest or bishop act in the Sacrament of Penance. He hears the penitent's sins and makes a judgment call regarding those sins—a power granted by Christ in John 20:23—then grants absolution of those sins.

We will examine this sacrament in much greater detail in next week's installment of What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

Got a question? Go to JoeSixpackAnswers.com

² Gregory the Great, *Homily 26*

³ Caesarius, *Sermon 253:1*

⁴ Ibid. *Sermon 211*

⁵ CCC, 1461 (emphasis added)