



## Sacraments 26/35: Introduction to the Sacrament of Reconciliation

All sacraments have a natural/earthly meaning that is made supernatural. The natural meanings remains, it is not replaced, but enhanced. In Confession, the Natural Meaning is how we have learned the benefit of admitting, out loud, our short-comings, mistakes, and sins. If your daughter steals her sister's toy, you make her say she is sorry. There is also a natural benefit to actually hearing the words: I forgive you. These natural ways of saying we are sorry are the basis for the supernatural purpose of Confession. The Supernatural Meaning of Confession is seen in saying out loud our sins to God's representative, saying them and accepting our fault in these sins. The response then is the forgiveness of sins. This is not just a psychosomatic result of hearing forgiveness. There is a real grace involved. The grace helps us to begin to do penance for what we have done and to be able to avoid, and fight, future sin.

There is also a social and communal nature to sin that explains why we need to go to a priest. All of our sins have an effect on others, either directly or indirectly. We can lead others astray, harm them, or remove ourselves from joy, which can harm them too. Confession then involves a restoration of a relationship. Sin involves either a rupture or a complete break with God and the Church. So repairing this relationship must also involve the Church as well as God. On behalf of the Church, the priest welcomes you back into communion.

Originally, this Sacrament was only available once in your life and only for serious sins committed after Baptism. It was believed that the seriousness of conversion in Baptism would take care of all lesser sins. The original order of the Sacrament was: sorrow, confession, penance, absolution. Only after you completed the penance, which could be bread and water 2 days a week for a number of years, could you be welcomed back to receive Communion at Mass. As time, practice, and experience went on, the order was understood to be more in line with what we have today: sorrow, confession, absolution, penance. We don't know how to do penance for our sins properly until we have been forgiven and given the grace necessary to perform it. We don't know how to forgive others or even ourselves until we have first been forgiven. The move from public to private also went through a development. At first, confession and penance were much more public; publicly known and publicly performed. The Irish monks brought in the idea of an *anam chara*, or "soul friend." Confession then was done in private. With time, we saw that it needed to be limited to the priest, and in private.

While not explicitly seen in the form we have today, Confession has biblical roots:

- And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Mt 16:18-19)
- Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained. (Jn 20:23)
- Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. (Jas 5:16)

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Essentials of the Rite of Reconciliation