

Confession in the Life and History of the Church

It was a very poignant scene in Matthew's Gospel: Jesus asks the disciples "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?... But who do *you* say that I am?" [*Emphasis added.*] It is here that Simon confesses Jesus as the Messiah; it is here Jesus gives Simon a new name—Peter ("Rocky"), and says "upon this rock I will build my church... Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:13-20).

We fast forward now to the end of Matthew's Gospel. They gathered together for the Passover meal—that great remembrance of God rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt by painting the blood of a sacrificed lamb on the doorposts of the houses so that death will pass them by. It is at this meal that our Lord institutes the celebration of the Eucharist and reminds us what his Passion is for: "Take and eat; this is my body... Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

Then, after the Resurrection, the Lord appeared again to the disciples when they were still locked in the Upper Room, which is traditionally the same place that they celebrated the Last Supper together, as well as the place where the Holy Spirit descended upon them at Pentecost. He offers them peace, they rejoice it is the Lord, and he sends them out, reminding them of the power they have in his name: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:19-23).

Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit at the great event of Pentecost, gives a lengthy exhortation on how Christ is the Messiah and has been raised from the dead as a witness to this. The people ask what to do in response, and he tells them "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:14-41). From the very beginning of the history of the Church, she has proclaimed the same message as our Lord: Repent and be reconciled to God (see, for example, Luke 15, Luke 5:20, Luke 7:48). This is further evident by the Letter of James: "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

From the above, it must be noted that confession is a Sacrament of *healing*, not of punishment! Although there is pain in acknowledging our faults, it is much like breaking a bone. The bone will attempt to mend itself. We can ignore the problem, and the bone will mend at a wrong angle, or we can have it reset (which causes pain), but then protected by a cast and allowed to mend in its correct position again. Similarly, confession allows us to reset our lives,

and receive a “protective cast” in the form of Sacramental grace to continue growing in the spiritual life. This has long been the route chosen by the Church.

That being said, there has been some evolution in the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance—and more than simply changing its name from Confession to Penance to Reconciliation and allowing people an extra level of confusion! It started out as something only done for the most serious sins—murder, adultery, and apostasy (rejecting the belief of the Church—much more common under the heavy persecution brought down at times by Rome). Early on, the practice only allowed reception one time after baptism, which is why people waited so long to be baptized. Furthermore, all sin is recognized as fracturing us, our relationship with God, and the community as a whole, so confessions were generally made to the entire community at once. Luckily, by the time of St. Cyprian of Carthage (~210-258), this was changed to a private confession between the penitent and the priest.

As with all things, developments of Confession have not always been wholesome additions to the Sacrament. Eventually a hyper-legalist approach infiltrated, and books called “penitentiaries” came into practice. These prescribed exact penances for each sin committed (an illustrative example: each time one took the Lord’s name in vain was 7 Hail Marys; each time they missed Mass was a rosary and three Our Fathers). Instead of allowing the priest to use his best judgment in terms of counseling people to reach their full potential in the life of grace, it fell into lengthy penances that could become obsessive and lead to scrupulosity. It is no wonder, then, that over time we developed an understanding of confession simply as divine punishment, with notions of St. Peter at the pearly gates with ruler in hand much like the stereotypical nun of Catholic schools lore! And it almost certainly did not help that stories abound of people in line for confession on a Saturday afternoon when the priest would echo through the church from the confessional box “YOU DID WHAT!?”

Luckily, one of the stated goals of the Second Vatican Council was a return to the sources, especially when it comes to the liturgical and Sacramental life of the Church. For this reason, there has been a renewed interest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as just that: reconciliation with God and an opportunity for spiritual healing. Gone are the days of needing to go to Confession every week (perhaps so that the penance would be more manageable), but instead is a desire to give ourselves the best opportunity to receive divine grace. The priests still recommend once a month as a good frequency to go to Confession, as it allows us to receive the grace God desires to give without forgetting too much of what we struggle with.

And, perhaps most importantly, never forget that when you see the light on in the confessional, it is not simply the priest waiting to hear gossip. It is Christ Himself, through the person of the priest, who is waiting for you, to tell you as he told the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more!” (John 8:11).