

Nurturing Faith at Home

Understanding the Sacrament of Reconciliation: Why Do Catholics Confess to a Priest?

Last month, the sacrament of reconciliation was explained in a way that you as parents – and especially your children – can understand. However, one frequently-asked question remains: Why do Catholics confess to a priest? In other words, why can't a person just confess to God and seek forgiveness in the privacy of one's own heart? The question deserves a clear response.

I think there are several reasons for this practice. Firstly, we need to admit to and acknowledge our sins. For example, it is very important for an alcoholic to admit, in confidence and within the supportive presence of others at an AA meeting, that he or she is an alcoholic. That is the first step in dealing with the problem and changing unhealthy habits and behaviors. In the same way, when a person has to verbalize one's sins to a priest, and admit that one has hurt God and others, the person is more inclined to change for the better and to strive for what is good.

Secondly, our sins affect not just ourselves but other people in our community. When we cheat, slander, or steal from someone, the other person is hurt. However, that sin may have a 'ripple effect'. Sometimes we are not even aware of all who have been affected by our sins. For example, when children disrespect their parents, their younger brothers and sisters may begin to imitate the bad behavior. When we confess our sins to the priest, the priest represents the whole community: all those people we have hurt by our sins, knowingly and unknowingly. By expressing our sorrow to him, we express our contrition and remorse to the whole community ... to the Church.

The story of Adam and Eve may also shed some light on the matter. In the beginning, Adam and Eve enjoyed a good and right relationship

with God, but they chose to disobey God, eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge. That was the first – the original – sin. Like any sin, it separated Adam and Eve from a loving relationship with God. However, God sent His Son Jesus, who taught us about love and eventually died on the cross for the sins of humankind – past, present, and future. Through Jesus Christ and his death on the cross, our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God. When we confess our sins, the priest is actually taking the place of Jesus. As with any sacrament, Jesus is working through the priest, and through him, Jesus is again helping us restore a loving and right relationship with God.

Scripture also provides part of the answer to the question. In the gospels, Jesus forgave sinners. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven, he instructed his apostles to forgive sins, saying: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He then breathed the Holy Spirit upon them, saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20: 20 – 23). This power and authority to forgive sins – in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – has been passed on to the leaders of our Church – our bishops and priests – for two millennia.

Through reconciliation, there is yet another benefit that we would not receive if confessing to God by ourselves: the gift of wise counsel. After hearing one's sins and before giving a penance, the priest offers each of us words of wisdom and encouragement.

For these reasons, Catholics confess their sins to a priest. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "Individual and integral confession and absolution remain the

only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church" (#1484).

We are now approaching the season of Lent. Lent is a time to prepare ourselves for the greatest celebration of the Church year: Jesus' resurrection from the dead at Easter. It's a time to reflect on our lives and ask ourselves, "What do I need to change in my life, so that I can love God and love my neighbour better?" In this way, reconciliation and Lent have a lot in common.

During the Lenten season, some of the District schools will be offering students an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In recent years, **Alberta bishops changed the order of the sacraments for children**. The sacrament of reconciliation must now be received before one receives the sacrament of First Eucharist. This change is in keeping with Church or canon law and emphasizes the importance of purifying one's heart through the sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving the precious Body of Christ in the sacrament of Eucharist.

If your child is Catholic but has not yet received the necessary preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation, and it is your desire that your child receive this sacrament, please contact the school or your local parish for some direction and assistance. Your parish is responsible for the immediate preparation of the children for sacraments. The school plays a supportive role; the theme of reconciliation receives ongoing attention and reinforcement throughout your child's religious education program.

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