

What We Believe... Why We Believe It

By
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The Forgiveness of Sins

All pardon for sins comes, ultimately, from Calvary, but how is this pardon to be received by individuals? How are people who sin today to obtain forgiveness? Did Christ leave us any means within the Church to take away sin? The Bible says he gave us two means. Baptism was given to take away the sin inherited from Adam (original sin) and any sins (called actual sins, because they come from our own acts) committed before baptism. For sins committed after baptism, a different sacrament is needed.

It has been called penance, confession, and reconciliation, each word emphasizing one of its aspects. During his life, Christ forgave sins, as in the case of the woman taken in adultery and the woman who anointed his feet. He exercised this power as man, to convince people he had the authority to forgive sin while on earth. Since he wouldn't always be with the Church visibly, Christ gave this power to other men so the Church, which is the continuation of his presence throughout time, would be able to offer forgiveness to future generations.

The first Easter Sunday night, Jesus appeared to His apostles in the upper room. He said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I sent you." And when he said this, he breathed on them, and he 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."

In this special commission to the apostles we find several interesting elements. The first is that Christ makes Himself clear that what He is giving the apostles is indeed a commission-mandate when He tells them that He is sending them as the Father sent Him. In other words, He's passing on to them His own mission of redemption.

The second important element is that he breathed on them. In all of human history, this is only the second time that God breathed on man. The first time God breathed on man was when He gave life to Adam (Genesis 2:7). God is giving a new type of life to man here, as He is telling the apostles that they now have his power to forgive the sins of those who are repentant and sorrowful, or not to forgive the sins of those who are not repentant and sorrowful.

Anti-Catholic writer Loraine Boettner (really, this was a guy), author of *Roman Catholicism*, a book that Catholic apologist Karl Keating calls the anti-Catholic bible, writes that "auricular confession to a priest instead of God" was invented by Pope Innocent III and the bishops of the Fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215. This is the most generally held position by those who claim the Church invented the sacrament of Penance. Even if the Church's opponents were to completely discount the scriptural references to confession—which they do—we should expect a find no historical evidence of the sacrament's existence prior to 1215. This is not the case.

So let's take a look at what the early Christians had to say and what they believed. There are many, many writings of early Christians dating to hundreds of years before the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. These writings are called patristics, and there are so many of these early Christian writings that in print they fill thirty-eight encyclopedia sized volumes.

St. Gregory the Great (A.D. 590-604) in his homily on John 20:23 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 judgement; 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."

St. Caecilius of Arles (A.D. 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." In a sermon on the final judgement, 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."

St. Leo the Great (A.D. 390-461) writes: "God in His abundant mercy has provided two remedies for the sins of men; that they may gain eternal life by the grace of baptism, and also the remedy of penance. Those who have violated their vows of baptism may obtain the remission of their sins by condemning themselves; the divine goodness has so decreed that the pardon of God can only be obtained by sinners through the prayer of priests. Jesus Christ has himself conferred upon the rulers of the church the power of imposing canonical penance upon sinners who confess their sins, and allowing them to receive the sacraments of Christ, after they have purified their souls by a salutary satisfaction. Every Christian, therefore, must examine his conscience, and cease deferring from day to day the hour of his conversion; he ought not to expect to satisfy God's justice on his deathbed. It is dangerous for a weak and ignorant man to defer his conversion to the last uncertain days of his life, when he may be unable to confess and obtain priestly absolution; he ought, when he can, to merit pardon by a full satisfaction of his sins."

The great bishop and philosopher St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) tells his flock "not to listen to those who deny that the church has the power to forgive all sins." And St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-397) declares that priests pardon all sins, not in their own name, but as "ministers and instruments of God."

Origen (A.D. 185-254), in his commentary of Psalm 28, writes: "When you have eaten some indigestible food, and your stomach is filled with an excessive quantity of humor, you will suffer until you have gotten rid of it. So in like manner sinners, who hide and retain their sins within their breasts, become sick, therefrom almost to death. If, however, they accuse themselves, confess their sins, and vomit forth their iniquity, they will completely drive from their souls the principle of evil. Consider carefully whom you choose to harken to your sins. Know well the character of the physician to whom you intend to relate the nature of your sickness... if he gives you advice, follow it; if he judges that your sickness is of such a nature that it should be revealed publicly in church for the edification of the brethren and your own more effective cure, do not hesitate to do what he tells you."

The great preponderance of evidence shows that confession was not a 13th century invention of the Church, but that it had already been in place centuries before the Fourth Lateran Council was convoked. Regarding the forgiveness of sins, that's What We Believe... Why We Believe It.