

THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY: WHY DO I HAVE TO TELL MY SINS TO A PRIEST?

“If I’m really sorry in my heart, and I ask God to forgive me, won’t He? Why do I have to go tell my sins to a priest?”

We’ve all either heard those questions, or asked those questions, or both. There are several reasons why it’s necessary for us to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance.

First and foremost, it’s because it’s a sacrament. Catholics believe that sacraments are physical, concrete celebrations of the Church that communicate God’s grace to us because Jesus is present in His Church. Without the sacramental celebration, we do not experience the grace the sacrament brings to us. Sacraments make grace effectively present in our life. Going to Confession is not simply about “getting forgiveness” from God, which, admittedly, cannot be controlled by human agency. Going to Confession is, however, about sacramental grace being effectively present in our life to have an effect on us and to bring about our conversion, and sacramental grace is not available without the sacrament.

Also, there is the very human reality that praying or asking for forgiveness internally, or mentally, is simply not enough. As physical creatures, we need to externalize things to make them real to us. Just as love, for example, cannot remain an abstraction, but must be put into concrete practice in order to really be love, so too with our experience of God’s forgiveness in our life. There is something about “getting it out” once and for all and letting our sins go by verbalizing them that is an integral part of healing and forgiveness. The *Catechism of*

the Catholic Church reminds us that the confession (verbal disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others.

It allows us to clearly confront the sins we have committed, to take responsibility for them, and to thereby open ourselves to God and to others. (CCC 1455) As Pope Francis, then Cardinal Bergoglio, remarked in 2010, “For me, sin is not a stain that I have to clean. What I should do is ask pardon and make reconciliation, not stop by the cleaner’s on my way home.”

Therefore, the sacrament is as much about being healed as it is “getting forgiveness.” Part of the healing involves being reconciled with the community, our brothers and sisters in the Church, we have sinned against. Sin damages our relationship with others, and therefore we must be reconciled with the community; it is never a simple case of “God and me.” Going to Confession brings about reconciliation with the Church.

Finally, the simple truth is that we must go to the Sacrament of Penance because we are Catholic; it’s part of our identity. The faith we have is the faith of the Church, which has been handed on to us; faith is not a matter of my own personal beliefs or philosophy. The Sacrament of Penance is part of who we are as Catholics.

Remember that the priest will never reveal to anyone else in any way anything you say in Confession; the sacramental seal is absolutely inviolable, and it is a sacred trust that all priests take with the utmost seriousness. ✠

