

Catholic

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The Benefits of Reconciliation

THE HIDDEN TREASURE THAT IS CONFESSION

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While news outlets and office gossip are rife with discussions of the perceived sins of others, no one wants to talk about the uncomfortable matter of his or her own sin. However, there's no denying that it exists. "If we say, 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). The remedy for our failures is heartfelt confession.

Once we are baptized, the sacrament of reconciliation is the Church's channel for accessing the immense forgiveness of God. The Lord's Prayer itself reminds us that forgiveness is not something we can receive once without needing to solicit it again. The phrase "forgive us our trespasses" prompts us to continue seeking God's mercy as long as we persist in falling into sin.

A frequent, comforting, and incredible fact we hear stated over and over again at Mass is that God happily forgives even our worst sins. "If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing" (1 John 1:9). With that promise in mind, we may be tempted to hide ourselves in a closet to whisper our sins to God outside the earshot of any other person.

Yet, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his frightened disciples and bestowed on them the immense power of forgiving sins in God's name. What benefit does the sacrament of reconciliation give to us? Why do we force ourselves to face our misdeeds, stand in lines of penitent parishioners, and share our most private failings not only with God but with the priest in the confessional? Instead of privately seeking God's forgiveness, why do we take part in this sacrament?

Forgiveness of Mortal Sins

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asserts two points that support our understanding that our venial sins do not require a visit to the confessional to meet with God's forgiveness: "Holy Communion augments our union with Christ (CCC 1391) and "Holy Communion separates us from sin" (CCC 1393). It is true that the Mass—specifically the holy Eucharist—represents Christ's redemptive sacrifice. Thereby our participation unites us with our Lord and, we can conclude, purifies us from venial sin and offers protection from future sin. However, mortal sins necessitate the sacrament to repair our relationship with God and receive his forgiveness. In fact, one who is conscious of having committed a mortal sin and receives Communion commits a sacrilege. As St. Paul warns: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27). According to the catechism, mortal sin is "a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God" (CCC 1855). As such, a contrite Catholic bearing the weight of one or more mortal sins must visit the confessional in order to be absolved and made right with God again. "When the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial" (CCC 1856).

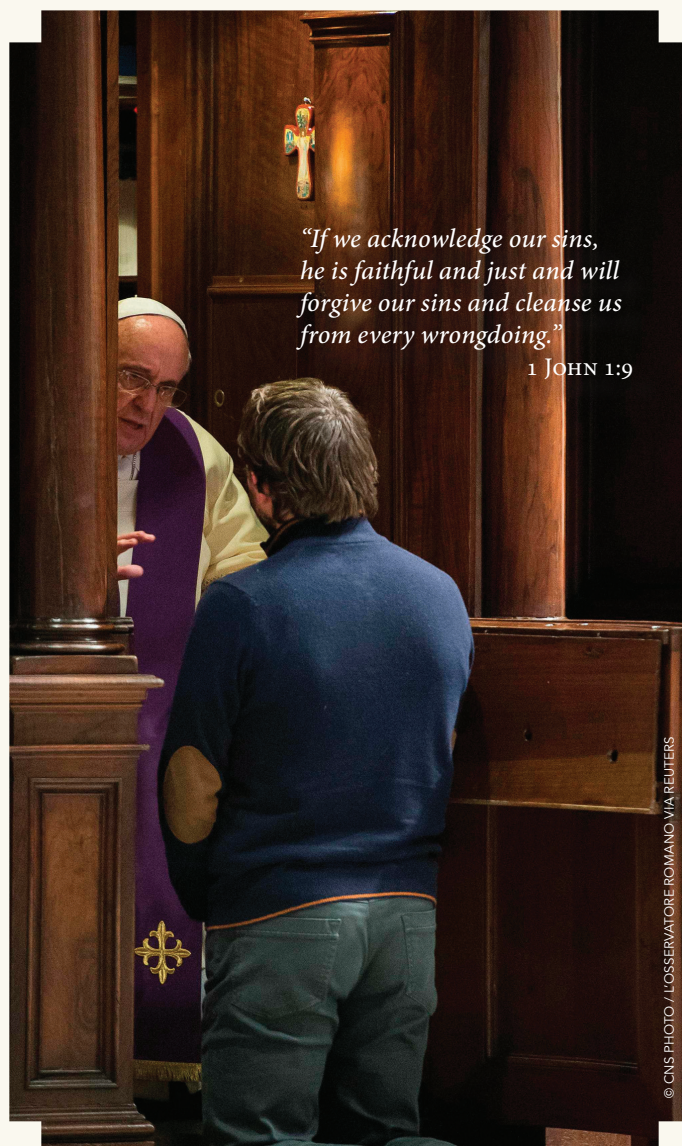
Cooperation With God's Plan

Still, even for venial sins, we benefit from frequent reception of reconciliation because we are cooperating with God's plan for forgiveness. The catechism quotes St. Augustine: "Whoever confesses his sins...is already working with God. God indicts your sins; if you also indict them, you are joined with God" (CCC 1458). By seeking absolution from a priest, we affirm and respect the gift that Jesus gave us in conveying the powers

of absolution to his apostles. "Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'" (CCC 1461).

Certainty of Forgiveness

We also can find great comfort in knowing with absolute certainty that God has truly forgiven our sins. While we may confess our sins in private and trust in God's promises of mercy, there's no mistaking the audible voice of a priest, God's appointed representative, in telling us, "I absolve you from your sins." The clarity of these words can elicit a sense of spiritual freedom unlike any other. Centuries ago, this feeling of a lifted burden was described at the Council of Trent: "For those who receive the sacrament of penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation 'is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation'" (CCC 1468).



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1 JOHN 1:9