

# FORGIVENESS THROUGH A PRIEST

By Richard Bennett

Sins are forgiven, as people believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, “Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.”[1] In believing on the finished work of the Lord Christ Jesus, a soul has both one hundred percent right standing with God credited to him and the forgiveness of sins. “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested.”[2] “In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.”[3] Thus the Gospel is the power of God to salvation as the Apostle Paul proclaimed. If one does sin after salvation, it is a relationship problem with the Father in heaven to be resolved, as one directly confesses his sin to God. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”[4]

## Catholic Forgiveness

In stark contrast to this clear teaching of the Lord, the Catholic is taught to look for forgiveness by confessing his sin to a priest. Forgiveness through a priest is what a Catholic is taught and what the devout Catholic practices. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, forgiveness is defined as follows, “It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament... It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent ‘pardon and peace.’”[5]

Forgiveness through a priest is the sacrament of Penance, another name for Confession, and declared to be necessary for salvation. The official words of Rome are, “It is through the sacrament of Penance that the baptized can be reconciled with God and with the church... This sacrament of Penance is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after Baptism, just as Baptism is necessary for salvation for those who have not yet been reborn.”[6]

Forgiveness for literally everything is proclaimed to be in the power of the priests of the Church. In the Vatican’s own words, “There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. “There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest.”[7]

“Priests have received from God a power that he has given neither to angels nor to archangels... God above confirms what priests do here below. Were there no forgiveness of sins in the Church, there would be no hope of life to come or eternal liberation. Let us thank God who has given his Church such a gift.”[8]

The Church of Rome claims a Biblical base for forgiveness through a Priest. The Scriptural backing claimed by Rome for the priest purportedly being able to absolve others of sin is found in Para. 1485 of her Catechism, “‘On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,’ Jesus showed himself to his apostles. ‘He breathed on them, and 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.’ (John 20:19, 22-23).”[9]

The biblical response to this claim is found in a study of the actual words of John 20:23, “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” This confirms that rather than anything judicially enacted through any “sacrament”, the forgiveness spoken of is that which is proclaimed by the Gospel. Here, unquestionably, the Lord has declared, in a few words, the sum of the Gospel. The Lord gave authority to His disciples to declare forgiveness to those whom God had already forgiven. The commission given in this passage in John is a parallel to similar passages such as Luke 24:47, Matthew 28:18-20, and Mark 16:15-16.

This is the way the Apostles understood and obeyed the commission, as evidenced throughout the Acts of the Apostles, for Christ did not appoint confessors to probe intimately into each sin of people in whispers in a confession box. Rather He commissioned preachers of his Gospel and He caused their voice to be heard. Thus the Apostle Peter proclaimed, “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.”[10] The manner of forgiving sins in Scripture is the proclamation of the Gospel, not the whispering of sins committed, into the ear of a man in a confession box.

### **The Obligation to Confess**

Rome’s insistence that her people confess is seen in her Catechism and in her laws.

“One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience.”[11]

“Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church.”[12]

“A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.”[13]

Auricular confession that is obligatory does not even have an old tradition to commend it. Ignaz von Dollinger, one of the most respected Roman Catholic historians in Germany declared that the sacrament of penance was unknown in the West for one thousand one hundred years and never known in the East. He wrote, “... So again with Penance. What is given as the essential form of the sacrament was unknown in the Western Church for eleven hundred years, and never known in the Greek.”[14]

### **Divine absolution?**

The rite has necessary words going with it that the priest must use. The prescribed words are, “The formula of absolution used... God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church. May God give you pardon and

peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”[15]

This absolution that is necessary for the Catholic to obtain is taught by Rome, not to be a declaration that God has forgiven the person confessing, but that the priest who says, “I absolve you from your sins,” is himself forgiving the sins as judge in a judicial act. In the words of the Council of Trent, “However, although the absolution of the priest is the dispensation of the benefaction of another, yet it is not a bare ministry only, either of an announcing the Gospel or declaring the forgiveness of sins, but it is equivalent to a judicial act, by which sentence is pronounced by him as a judge [can 9].”[16]

This divine power for priests judicially to forgive sins is claimed in the Catechism, “Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, ‘The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ and exercises this divine power: ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name.” (Para. 1441)

It is mind-boggling arrogance to claim that divine judicial power is given to sinful men to forgive sins. It is made worse in that the false basis for such claim is cited as in the Lord’s personal commission to the Apostle Peter in Mathew 16:19. Thus the Catechism continues in paragraph 1444 in teaching, “In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ’s solemn words to Simon Peter: ‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ ‘The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head.’” The Lord said to the Apostle Peter, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). “Unto thee” relates this promise to Peter alone. This prophetic declaration of our Lord was literally fulfilled to Peter, as he was made the first instrument of opening the kingdom of heaven preaching the Gospel to the Jews (Acts 2:41) and to the Gentiles, (Acts 10:44-47). This commission to be the first to open the kingdom of heaven by the Gospel gave no judicial divine power to the Apostle Peter.

The power of the keys was twofold, to the Jews and to the Gentiles. It was fulfilled in the Apostle Peter and in him alone. There can be no successors to this prophetic commission, since there was but one first opening of the kingdom for the Jews as for the Gentiles. The binding and loosing of Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, has to do with the decisions of a church congregation in matters of discipline reached through prayer, the Word, and the Spirit, that will be ratified in heaven. It does not include the divine right of Lord to forgive sins. The concept of a sinful human being having divine authority judicially to forgive the sins of others is totally offensive to God and a denial of the truth of the Written Word of the Lord. Nonetheless this is exactly what Rome claims for her Priests. The claim is for an identical ministry for the Roman Catholic priest, with all the authority and power of His person. The exact words of this preposterous assertion are the following, “All priests share with bishops the one identical priesthood and ministry of Christ. Consequently the very unity of their consecration and mission requires their hierarchical union with the order of bishops.”[17]

In a similar way, Rome teaches in her Catechism, “Now the minister, by reason of the sacerdotal consecration which he has received, is truly made like to the high priest and possesses the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ himself (*virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*). Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ.”[18]

The basis for Rome’s claim amounts to the outrageous concept of a Roman Catholic priest’s ministry being identical with the divine Christ Jesus the Lord. That there is no other Savior, or mediator between God and man, is abundantly taught in the New Testament; and it is, indeed, the main design of revelation to prove this. In the word of the Lord, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”[19]

To assert seriously that the Roman Catholic priest can forgive sins as the Lord did, and that the priest has an identical ministry to the Lord Jesus Christ is, in the strictest sense of the word, a blasphemy against the person of the Lord. Scripture did speak of the one who would make such a claim as “the son of perdition”, “Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.”[20]

## **Biblical Forgiveness**

In Scripture, however, forgiveness is mediated through Jesus Christ alone, the only mediator between God and man (John 14:6; Acts 4:12, I Timothy 2:5). The instrument of forgiveness is not a church but rather faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”[21] “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”[22] The boundaries of forgiveness are all of God and not that of any church to demonstrate, in the words of the Apostle, that He is “just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.”[23]

The precincts of salvation are outlined in Romans 3:24, “being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” showing that God’s grace is the efficient cause, and the payment is “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” To attempt to bring the Roman Catholic priest and the sacrament of confession into the nature of the salvific work of the Godhead, indeed to make the priest and the sacrament the fount of forgiveness is gross blasphemy. In Scripture, forgiveness and acceptance are in Christ Jesus alone, “to the praise of the glory of his grace.”[24]

## **Conclusion**

In spite of clear Biblical teaching, the Roman Catholic Church claims that a mere man, with the right formula of words, is an effective means of grace in the judicial act of forgiveness. This assertion for the sacrament of confession is in the vein of Rome’s claim that all seven sacraments are necessary for salvation and the means of grace. This teaching is so emphatic that the “sacramental grace” alleged to be conveyed through her physical sacraments is declared to be the grace of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Church of Rome officially teaches, “The [Roman Catholic] Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are

necessary for salvation. 'Sacramental grace' is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament." [25]

Looking to physical rituals and signs to give "sacramental grace" and calling that "the grace of the Holy Spirit" is literally a blasphemy against the all Holy God. It not only demeans the Person and ministry of the Holy Spirit, but it presupposes that His power is bound within the Roman Catholic Church's seven sacraments. The rite of confession, in particular, claiming that "by virtue of his [Christ's] divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name" [26] is sufficiently serious to merit the full wrath of God for those who have invented and practice this evil parody on the forgiveness of the Lord.

In Scripture "the God of all grace" [27] by means of His Word directly seeks, finds, and saves His people. Forgiveness is God's gift to the believer. It is granted to the believer based on Christ's finished work on the cross, [28] "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." [29] God's direct action shows His graciousness to believers so that their eyes of faith are fixed on Him. "For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ." [30]

### **The Dangers involved in Confession**

The real sadness that breaks the heart is the emptiness and wickedness that comes out of what claims to be the means to forgive sin. The engineered artifact of a confessional box, with two sinners inside one claiming to be the overlord of conscience, is substituted for that interior and spiritual communion with God through the faithfulness of Christ Jesus seeking mercy and grace.

Souls have been trained to forsake the preciousness of true faith and grovel before another creature in a dangerous ritual. Salvation and forgiveness are no longer flowing through the pure Word from the very heart of God, but rather men are attempting to siphon them off and to dispense them to the "faithful" through a soiled waste pipe overflowing with religious debris. In the Catholic system, intimate proximity to a man that can be an occasion of sin has been substituted for the unction of the Holy Spirit and the joy of knowing forgiveness before the living God. The real vulnerability of boxed confession becoming a time of solicitation to sin and scandal, and even of false accusations that can be equally dangerous, are all admitted in the rules that go with the sacrament in Catholic system.

Canon 977 declares, The absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is invalid except in danger of death. ["Thou shalt not commit adultery" is counted as the sixth commandment in Roman Catholic Church] Canon 979 declares, In posing questions, the priest is to proceed with prudence and discretion, attentive to the condition and age of the penitent, and is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice. Canon 982 declares, Whoever confesses to have denounced falsely an innocent confessor to ecclesiastical authority concerning the crime of solicitation to sin against the sixth commandment of the Decalogue is not to be absolved unless the person has first formally retracted the false denunciation and is prepared to repair damages if there are any.

Canon 984 §1 declares, A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded.

This is just a sample of the grim laws designed to anticipate and limit the potential moral chaos arising from the practice of boxed private confession. If the ordinary rules of Christian counseling were observed, and the priest not left alone with someone to solicit or to be solicited, things would not be so hazardous.[31]

The Word of God teaches by precept and example that the knowledge of good and evil is always polluting to a creature who possesses it. One of the principal joys of heaven toward which true believers yearn in the depths of their being is to be finally free from the presence, power, and knowledge of sin. The very reason why the Lord God reserved the knowledge of good and evil to Himself in the Garden of Eden was because only an All-Holy, Infinite Being of unlimited Power and Goodness can retain that knowledge without contracting pollution from it.[32]

It is therefore the height of spiritual stupidity and silly presumption to devise and mandate a private a ritual wherein the depths of human depravity and weakness are explored under a cloak of seeking forgiveness and grace.[33] In the Church of Rome it is even the law that confessions be heard in the confessional box and not in another place.[34]

It is a tremendous burden to see that under the pretense of forgiving sins, there is the undermining of the unique office of Christ Jesus, which can end up as a serious occasion of sin. Sincere priests doing their duty, and devout Catholics seeking to alleviate guilt, can find themselves prey to sin in the very rite through which it is purported they may delivered from sin. The scandals that have resulted from Confession, and other close encounters within the Roman Catholic system, has reached such horrendous proportions that it is difficult to keep up with the documented evidence.[35]

Our hearts ought to grieve in anguish and our desire increase to give the pure Gospel to Catholics so that they can come to the Lord himself, and know the freedom and joy it is to be His very own. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." [36]

It is a gracious promise of the Lord, to all who continue in His Word, that they shall know the truth and that truth will set them free. The Gospel truth frees one from the yoke of the ceremonial rites that routinely deceive and ensnare. The soul trusting on the Lord for salvation, and for His mercy day by day for forgiveness, beholds the glory of the Lord, and is changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. Our prayer is that God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, would shine forth into the hearts of those sitting in the gloom of man-made traditions to give "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." [37] "

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## **Endnotes:**

- [1] Acts 13:38-39
- [2] Rom3:21
- [3] Eph 1:7
- [4] I John 1:9
- [5] Catechism of the Catholic Church (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), Para. 1424. (Hereafter Catechism).
- [6] Catechism. Para. 980
- [7] Catechism Para. 982
- [8] Catechism Para. 983
- [9] The present day Roman Catholic New American Bible does not make such a glaring mistranslation of the John 20:23 passage as Para 1485 of the Catechism. In the NAB, while the “if” clause is missing, “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained”, the footnote on the verse states “The Council of Trent defined that this power to forgive sins is exercised in the sacrament of penance.” New American Bible, The Catholic Study Bible Edition, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1990).
- [10] Acts 10:43
- [11] Catechism, Para. 1493. Bolding in any quotation indicates emphasis added in this paper.
- [12] Canon 960, Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Ed. (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983) New English Tr.,1999. All canons are taken from this source unless otherwise noted.
- [13] Canon 988 §1.
- [14] von Dollinger, The Pope and the Council by Janus, Authorized tr. from the German “Janus”: Der Papst und das Concil (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1870) p.50.
- [15] Catechism, Para. 1493.
- [16] Denzinger, Henry, The Sources of Catholic Dogma, Tr. By Roy J. Deferrari, 30th Ed. of Enchiridion Symbolorum, Rev. by Karl Rahner, S. J. (St Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1957) # 902.
- [17] Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, No. 63, Presbyterorum Ordinis, 7 December 1965, Austin Flannery, O.P., Editor (Northport, NY: Costello Publ. Co., 1975) Vol. I, Sec. 7, p. 875.
- [18] Catechism, Para. 1548
- [19] John 14:6
- [20] II Thessalonians 2:3-4
- [21] Acts 16:31.
- [22] Romans 4:5.
- [23] Romans 3:26.
- [24] Ephesians 1:6.
- [25] Catechism, Para 1129.
- [26] Catechism Para1441
- [27] I Peter 5:10.

[28] Romans 4:5-8, II Corinthians 5:19-21, Romans 3:21-28, Titus 3:5-7, Ephesians 1:7, Jeremiah 23:6, I Corinthians 1:30-31, Romans 5:17-19.

[29] Romans 3:24.

[30] Romans 5:17.

[31] James 5:16, II Corinthians 13:1, I Timothy 5:19.

[32] Genesis 2:17

[33] 1 Samuel 2:22-25, Psalm 51 1-13

[34] Canon 964 §1: Confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional without a just cause.

[35] <http://www.iconbusters.com/iconbusters/lechery/current-lechery1.htm> That source links also to Roman Catholic sources that show the bad fruit that arises from wrong doctrine and practice.

[36] John 8:36

[37] 2 Corinthians 4:6