

THE TWO SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

2. RECONCILIATION - *renewing the grace of holy Baptism*

(The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1422-1498)

A. MANKIND IN SIN: waiting for the forgiveness of God

1. Adam to Abraham: God begins His work (Gen. 1-24)

From the time of the Fall, and the expulsion of mankind from Paradise, recounted in the first three chapters of Genesis, mankind and the whole of creation has looked forward to the total restoration of harmony between God and his creation - the forgiveness of sin. The history of Israel, viewed through the eyes of faith - which we call the Sacred Scriptures, shows the gradual growth within the holy people of the realisation that the human race is out of synchronisation with its creator, and that the actions they perform are significant: human beings are capable either of *contributing* to this alienation from God (and making it *worse*), or somehow of helping to restore what had been lost - man can make a difference.

The people of Israel saw the emergence of their nation as part of God's plan to reconcile all men to Himself, beginning with an individual who would be the Father of a multitude of nations (the literal translation of "Abraham", God's new name for Abram - see Gen. 17:5). Through him, God would (and, the text of the Sacred Scriptures show, did) raise up a new people, with a new relationship with Himself - the relationship of the COVENANT FAMILY. Adam was created in a father/son relationship with God, but at the Fall he proved to be the first 'prodigal son', a run-away. The process of forgiveness is about the Father restoring the unity of his fractured family - this can only come about when the prodigals come to their senses and realise how far they have run from their Father. BUT, regardless of what has happened, we need to hold in the forefront of our minds that forgiveness is a **Covenant action**: this means it is a *family action* rather than a court-room drama. It is about the children taking responsibility for what they have done and the Father of the family forgiving and restoring them as soon as this is realised.

Through the Covenant, Abraham and his descendants become children of God, members of God's family, incorporated into the household of God by the single-

handed election of God Himself and the ritual of circumcision marks this on their very bodies. They are children of God but incompletely so - this only becomes fully possible when human beings were given the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Adoption that made us sons by perfect adoption (and this is given in holy Baptism). Nevertheless, the Covenant forged with Abraham significantly begins the process. By incorporating Abraham, however incompletely, into the divine family God renders him worthy (righteous, justified - these are very similar terms): and thus in a human way begins the work of establishing a new people who have a privileged relationship with Him.

Is this the forgiveness of sin? No - BUT it is the first step in God's work of cleansing his people. The sins they commit are still with them, they can not cleanse themselves of guilt, and none of the sacrifices Abraham or his family offer are effective enough to wipe away their sins, BUT the first step is in place. Man, who is unworthy because of his sin, needs a mediator who will speak for him to God and ask for forgiveness on behalf of his client (us) - and be in a position to be heard by God: this disqualifies the human race so far, because all have sinned. But a mediator is in the process of being formed: the priestly nation of Israel.

2. Moses and the Covenant at Sinai: God lays the foundations (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

In Moses, God furthers His purpose by giving the People of Israel the first taste of His final plan: He gives them a two-fold saviour: the leadership of Moses and the written Law.

1. MOSES - Teacher, Saviour, Intercessor: In Moses, God reveals his desire to save his people through the instrumentality of a human being. God inspires Moses, Aaron and Miriam (later adding Joshua to the group) to be leaders and prophets to his people. Is this forgiveness from sin? Not yet - but we are closer: Moses leads God's people by *instruction in how to live*, not just by guiding them out of Egyptian slavery and safely through the desert. He teaches them the Law of God, primarily in the Ten Commandments, so that mankind would no longer be living in the dark but will know how to avoid actions that will only worsen man's relationship with God and with his community. In all of this, Moses prefigures Christ who will lead us out of slavery to sin and will teach us the fullest expression of the Law in the commandment of love. Moses and Christ share one more quality - both are intercessors: Moses stands before God on several occasions to plead with God for the pardoning of Israel. What matters here is that *God listens to Moses when he pleads*, so that after the idolatry of Israel in the episode of the Golden Calf, for instance (*Exodus 32*), Moses secures the forgiveness of the people even though according to the Law the whole people should die. Moses saves Israel from the consequences of its sin - this is an important foretaste of what God is building up in Israel: the perfect intercessor who will plead for mercy and forgiveness. This will be Christ, but Israel is not ready to accept him at this stage. Although, like Abraham, Moses is unable to win forgiveness of sins for the people, he is able to plead for them, and God hears and accepts his plea because of the devoted service he has offered and pure heart that Moses preserves for God. Moses is God's gift to Israel: because they have such a worthy intercessor, God stays his hand and does not punish their sins with annihilation. God gives the people Moses so that through him, God can give his people mercy.

2. THE LAW OF THE COVENANT (*Exodus 21-23*). In the Law, God reveals the ceremonial, ritual, moral and social actions which mark His people out as the new race, chosen as the eldest of many brothers, distinguished by the purity of their worship and the exemplary nature of their acts. The Law still binds Jews today, and although Christ freed his disciples from the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the Old Law, many of the prescriptions of the Law are still binding on the Church today as well (for instance the prohibition of theft, idolatry, fraudulent business). None of this forgives sin, as St. Paul makes strikingly clear in his letter to the Galatians, BUT it sets the parameters of living the holy life. Psalm 119 calls the Law “*a lamp for my steps and a light for my path*”: it is a sure guide, given to us by God, which illuminates the path of virtue and distinguishes it from that of sin. Anyone who lived in accordance with the Law (not just in its ritual, external prescriptions but in the spirit of the Law as well) and thus fulfilled it, would be avoiding sin and maintaining his communion with God. Mankind was not ready yet to receive the means through which the sinful become sinless - BUT had reached the maturity to understand how the already sinful could act and therefore, with the strength of the Holy Spirit, keep from falling into greater sin.

Sin is still not being forgiven yet - but now mankind has a better knowledge of what is sinful, and what to avoid so as to ensure that man does not inadvertently slip further away from his creator.

3. The Prophets, exile in Babylon, more Prophets: God prepares His People to receive the means of forgiveness (the rest of the Old Testament)

After the entry into the Promised Land, things went downhill for Israel (spiritually) in inverse proportion to their success in conquering their new home and establishing their kingdom. Each success in battle and period of greater political and economic stability made the people less aware of their sinfulness and more convinced of the goodness of their actions. (Isn't it good to know how much things have progressed since then - at least today we don't fall into the trap of forgetting about God and the need for holiness and integrity when we are doing well - nor do we grow less willing to acknowledge that we need to repent the more knowledgeable and advanced we become as a culture! Plus ça change, n'est-ce-pas?!). For this reason, God raises up a series of Judges, Kings and Prophets whose function was to bring the people back to God through repentance, conversion and change of life (and this was usually only possible when the people had suffered a dramatic and catastrophic defeat).

The Judges and prophets repeatedly stress that Israel's military triumphs and political security were all achieved by the power of God, present in their midst. Thus, they proclaim, to turn from him and abandon him was analogous to unplugging a cooker from the gas supply: not only would the cooker cease to function because it was cut off from its source of power, but it was also very dangerous and potentially lethal - the same power source which had made them so powerful could become a destructive force, working against them (for this reason, I believe the Gas Board strongly urge people NOT to rip their cookers away from the mains pipes!)

They emphasise that the animal sacrifices of the Law were powerless to remove one iota of guilt from the people, since the sheep, goats and bulls that were offered were already the property of God since he had made them. They underline that sin causes a breach between God and his people which man is absolutely powerless to bridge. The pretence of devotion to God through the offering of animal sacrifices in the Temple without any resolution to reform life, root out sinful ways, walk in the path of the Law and offer God the sincere devotion of the “humble and contrite heart” is harshly criticised.

- *“Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?” (Psalm 50:7-13)*
- *“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation¹ -- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (Isaiah 1:10-17)*
- *“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)*
- *“Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the*

¹ Note of explanation: the references to the “new moon” are about the date of Jewish feast days. They were calculated by the cycle of the moon and so when God says he is sick of their ‘new moons’ he refers to the special sacrifices offered on these feast days.

ephah small and the shekel great², and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and every one mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?” (Amos 8:4-8)

The prophets berate Israel for lip service, for going through the motions of religion without the slightest intention of letting it guide the way they lived. The offering of thousands of animals on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem could never make up for the people’s lack of integrity or wash away their sins. The more they abused the worship of God by offering these sacrifices while inwardly plotting how they could further abuse each other, make money out of the poor and debase the Covenant, the more God is repelled by the ritual worship they offer. The sacrifices themselves are powerless and they are offered by a people whose hearts are far from him and are only after the admiration of the wealthy and influential. This is the kind of hypocrisy Christ observed in the Pharisees and to which he added his own words of criticism:

- *“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18)*

This kind of hypocrisy is as big a temptation for us today as it was for the people of Israel then. God's forgiveness is given freely *BUT it is only available to those who seek him in sincerity of heart*, not to those who would manipulate his generosity and mercy by asking for pardon but without any resolve to amend the path of their lives or simply for the impression of holiness that it gives to people around us.

² On feast days, trade was suspended (as if it was the Sabbath) and so merchants are constantly pressing for fewer feast days so that they can get back to making money, swindling the poor by making the measurement of flour (the “Ephah”) small so that you get less grain for your money and the shekel great (so that when the merchants buy from the farmers, they get more grain for their coins).

An army of Prophets in the Old Testament focus the minds of the people on the central issue of forgiveness and the restoration of creation to its first state, in two principal ways.

- Firstly, they attempt to remind the people of *their absolute need for God's forgiveness*. The Covenant does not free them from their sin and make them sinless, but they are called to reform their lives, return to sincere observance of the Mosaic Law in its fullness, not simply its ritual prescriptions. Prophets such as Amos challenge the people to obey the social chapters of the law, requiring generosity towards the widow and orphan, the periodic liberation of slaves, provision for the sick, the poor, the exile etc. Other prophets focus on different areas - Elijah on false worship offered to idols, Jeremiah on the lip service of ritual worship when not backed up by purity of lifestyle, Isaiah on humility before the creator, Ezekiel on personal responsibility for sin, Hosea on prostitute-like unfaithfulness to God the spouse of Israel, etc. Reading through the Prophets from earlier (Elijah, Amos), to later (Joel, Obadiah, Malachi), there is a manifest and powerful build-up in intensity - God will not wait forever and his judgement is coming for those within Israel who make no effort to reform their lives and renew their commitment to him.
- Parallel to this is the growth of the understanding that *God is not simply a casual observer*: one who sees his creation go off the rails and then, having told them how they ought to be living (through Moses, the Law and the Prophets), simply expects them to listen to his words, snap to attention and obey the rules by their own initiative and with their own strength. There is a growing feeling that *God is at work within his people*, giving them the power to make the changes in lifestyle and attitude that the Law demands. This can be seen especially in the later chapters of Isaiah (the “suffering servant” passages - Is. 42, 49, 50, 52-53, of which we hear parts on Good Friday) and towards the end of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Here, the view emerges that *God will save his people because they are too weak, from the poison of sin, to help themselves - the idea that someone with a cataract is actually incapable of performing the operation which will give him sight. The simply unattainable holiness which the Law demands of mankind will one day be within our reach because God, not man, will renew human nature from within through the gift of the Spirit. Thus Ezekiel has God declare that since the shepherds he appointed to lead Israel have proved useless, “I, I myself will search for my sheep, & will seek them out ... I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Ezekiel 34:11,12. See also Jeremiah 31:10, Isaiah 1:18). And then the climax: Ezekiel 36 - where God takes responsibility for utterly cleansing His people from their sin and restoring them to their rightful relationship with Him: “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.” (Ezekiel 36:24-25)*

This states not simply that God will declare us righteous and free from sin, but that he will somehow *make* us righteous, washing away the stain of sin and re-creating us in his image. This implication is confirmed in the next sentence:

- *"A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26)*

The promise here is to effect a radical internal change within the People: they are to be re-made. Unlike the Old Law of Moses which simply states how we should live but does not convey the ability or strength necessary to be able to live that way, in this scenario man is to be *changed in his very nature*, healed from the damage he has caused to himself through his sin (which he is able to realise is sinful because the Law tells him this – BUT he is unable to put it right because the sin has weakened him so dramatically).

This inner alteration will be manifest in external actions: man now will have the strength placed within him by God, to carry out the heart of the Law. This is stated explicitly immediately after:

- *"And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." (Ezekiel 36:27)*

Is this the forgiveness of sin? Yes - but it at this point it is still a promise. It has not yet been given. Ezekiel and the prophets can only build up in the people a great longing for this gift - hence the proliferation of water-cleansing rites in later Jewish Temple worship. Their whole faith was now focused on the coming day when God would re-make his people, restore them to union with him, pour out his spirit on them and therefore obliterate the alienation between them and him which is the essence of sin. Just read the later prophets to see this longing and expectation almost on every page. The only questions to be answered were: *"When?"* and *"How?"*

B. Christ: the 'when' and 'how' of the Father's forgiveness

A cursory reading of the Gospels will reveal how often Christ talks of his mission in terms of restoring man to a proper relationship with the Father: *"I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full"*, *"I have come to seek out the lost ones of Israel"*, *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"* etc. In addition, more explicitly, there are countless references to Christ specifically applying the forgiving power of God to those who show faith. To the paralysed man lowered into Christ's presence, he says, *"My son, your sins are forgiven."* (Mk. 2:5). Speaking of the woman, probably a prostitute, who anointed His feet in the house of a Pharisee, he said, *"I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much."* (Lk. 7:47) **JESUS CHRIST FORGAVE SINS**. Perhaps we are not aware of the incredible meaning of that statement - we did not deserve forgiveness because we were guilty of the sins of humanity, and yet Jesus Christ simply forgave the sins of those who were sincere. This marks the absolute fulfilment of the yearnings of every human heart since the fall of Adam and the expulsion from Eden. Until the coming of Christ, forgiveness was a pipe dream, an impossible ideal solution for the bold to hope and wish for.

Christ, especially in St. John's Gospel, is presented as the one who is in perfect unity with the Father, obeying the Father's will by choice of love not obligation of law. In his high priestly prayer (John 17), Christ anoints himself as the victim whose death will reconcile the world to the Father, and specifically desires that those who are united fully with him (the disciples, especially the Apostles) may therefore share Christ's unique unity with the Father.

- *"May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us, as You are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me. I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one. With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me." (Jn. 17:21-23)*

This is a passage densely packed with meaning and needs careful thought and prayer. It is not simply about Christian unity and ecumenism: it is about something far more profound, of which ecumenism is certainly a part, but is not the whole. Christ is praying for the absolute unification of creation with the Father - this is salvation.

Christ is the answer to "When?" and to "How?" - he is the sinless one: i.e., the one who is so totally united to the will of the Father that he freely chooses to subordinate himself to the Father in all things because this is the only way of expressing the love he feels for the Father. He is the only one qualified to take on sin and defeat it. He is the only one who has not ruptured his relationship with the Father - and so he is the only one for us to turn to if we desire to be reunited with the Father.

Yet Christ is not simply the role model of the disciple - 'act this way and you will avoid further sin'. That was the system of the Old Law of Moses - a set of principles by which we could be certain we were living in a moral way. Christ is, in addition to being the exemplary disciple, also the dispenser of the forgiveness of God. Christ is the ultimate defence counsel - like Moses, he stands before the Father, pleading for a lenient hearing for mankind. But unlike Moses, he himself is absolutely sinless and has no need to plead for himself. The Letter to the Hebrews makes much of this point - the priests of the Old Covenant needed to offer sacrifices for their own sins before pleading for the sins of the people (*Hebr. 5:1-3*), but the true priest should be unfettered by his own sin, and able therefore to offer a perfect prayer of sacrifice and win forgiveness for the people

- *"For it was fitting that we should have such a High Priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those High Priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people; he did this once and for all when he offered up himself ... Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a High Priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebr. 7:26-27, 8:1)*

The old sacrifices offered in the Temple did not cleanse the people of sin - if they had done so, they would not have been repeated daily:

- *“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered? If the worshippers had once been cleansed, they would no longer have any consciousness of sin. But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. **For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.**” (Heb 10:1-4)*

Again referring to the priests of the Temple, the writer goes on:

- *“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God ... for by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” (Hebr 10:11-12, 14)*

Christ's offering is actually effective, and does wash away our sins because it is a perfect gift - his life is sinless and therefore of infinite value, unlike our own offerings, which are imperfect because we are imperfect:

- *“When Christ appeared as a high priest ... he entered one for all into the Holy Place [a part of the Temple in Jerusalem, open only to the priests, where sacrifices of incense were burned and where the Minora, the seven-branched candlestick, stood], taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” (Hebr 9:11, 12)*

Being innocent, Christ's blood speaks powerfully and his prayer is answered. When Abel was killed by his brother, Cain, Abel's very innocence made the murder all the more heinous. God tells Cain that Abel's innocent blood demands justice - and therefore punishment on his murderer: *“The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.” (Gen. 4:10)*. Christ's innocent blood cries out, not for vengeance on his murderers, but for purification - for the forgiveness of their sins - but being God as well as man, the voice of his murdered blood has a louder and more authoritative voice (*Hebr 11:24*). Abel's voice was heard, and Cain was punished. If God answered the call of his innocent blood, how much more would God the Father listen to the pleas from his own Son, also murdered innocently, but who calls instead for mercy and forgiveness not vengeance and punishment?

But what of the "how?" - in what way does God, through Jesus Christ, forgive my sins? It is not just a matter of Jesus saying, "Your sins are forgiven." Christ does not simply order sins to be cancelled out - Christ is the forgiveness of sins. This needs explaining - Christ forgives because forgiving means re-uniting with the Father, and Christ is unity with the Father: those to whom Jesus Christ fully unites himself by the gift of his Spirit, are given the gift of sharing in his unity with the Father - this means the obliteration of the distance between God and man, or the forgiveness of sin. In other words, the more we unite ourselves with Christ, the more we are restored to communion with the Father and the less that communion is damaged or warped. Read the Catechism, and you will see that this sort of language is exactly the language of forgiveness of sin. Christ establishes a new Abraham-like Covenantal family, which

draws from the Old, but far out-strips it in authority and power. This new communion is headed by himself - the sinless one - and therefore draws its character from him. Whoever is in full communion with this new covenantal family, is fully united with its head, Christ, and therefore with the Father, who sent the head of this family precisely to set it up. So, we have the "How?" - we are forgiven our sins by being fully united with the new covenantal family, because this family is fully united with Christ.

- ***Forgiveness of sins occurs when we are drawn into communion with Christ's mystical Body - the Church – for this is to be drawn close to Christ by sharing his Holy Spirit, residing in the Church.***

C. Christ today: the forgiving ministry of the Church

How do we achieve this unity? First we need to find the family of the New Covenant. Which one of the 20,000+ Christian denominations bears the marks of the community Christ founded during his lifetime on earth?

- Christ characterised the community of the New Covenant with the sacrifice of the Covenant: *"Drink all of you from this, for this is my Blood, the Blood of the Covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* (Mt. 26:28). The new family of the New Covenant is the one marked out by the sacrifice of the Covenant - the Mass - from which flows the forgiveness that Christ promised. The Mass unites us with the one united with the Father - this in itself is forgiveness.
- The new family of the New Covenant was also empowered by Christ with the authority to forgive the sins of her members, because there must be no division between Head (Christ) and members (us) - he said to the Apostles *"Receive the Holy Spirit: if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* (Jn. 20:22-23). The New Covenant family can only be found where these two elements are at the heart of the community. From what Christ told us his family has, we know that the only truly qualified candidate can be the Catholic Church.

Therefore, to be forgiven our sins, we need:

1. ***to immerse ourselves fully in the New Covenant family*** - the Catholic Church - because in doing so, we appropriate to ourselves the unity (forgiveness) of its Head, Christ. For this reason we teach that Baptism, *entry into the Church*, forgives our sins.
2. In addition, we must ***constantly renew our unity with that family*** - that is what Christ achieves in us through the Mass.

3. And finally, we must *restore our unity with the same family when that has been impaired or actually fractured through our own sin* - this is sacramental Confession.

The Catechism makes these links explicit: forgiveness is offered to us through complete union with Christ (C.C.C. 519-521, 1088-1089, 1129). This is achieved for us primarily through the sacraments (1084-1085) and specifically through **Baptism** which enters us into him (1267) and through the **Sacrifice of the Mass** which deepens our unity with this New Covenant family and therefore *"separates us from past sins and preserves us from future sins"* (1393-1395) and finally through the **sacrament of Reconciliation** whereby the sins of those already incorporated into Christ through Baptism are washed away (1443-1449).

- *"In every liturgical action the Holy Spirit is sent in order to bring us into communion with Christ and so to form his body."* (C.C.C. 1108)
- *"'Sacramental grace' is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament. The Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God. The fruit of the sacramental life is that the Spirit of adoption makes the faithful partakers in the divine nature by uniting them in a living union with the only Son, the saviour."* (C.C.C. 1129)

The Catechism makes some critical points about the sacrament of forgiveness, or Confession:

- **Only God forgives sin:** but He does so through human ministers of forgiveness. He did this in Christ, most powerfully, but continues that ministry in the Apostles: *"Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained."* (Jn. 20:22-23) This ministry is passed through them to the bishops, and they have entrusted it to the priests of the Church. Yet it is always God who forgives sins, through them. C.C.C. 1441-1442.
- **Confession renews the forgiveness of Baptism** - it is Baptism that is the primary forgiveness of sins, and Confession recalls us to our baptismal purity. Baptism is the gateway to the sacraments: if we have completely lost the grace of Baptism through serious (mortal) sin, then the renewal of Baptismal grace (i.e., sacramental Confession) is the only appropriate gateway to the sacraments again. C.C.C. 1425-1426.
- **Sin retards (or, if mortal, destroys) the life of grace in the soul.** It also weakens or destroys our unity with the family of the New Covenant, the Church (C.C.C. 1462, 1469). Thus, reconciliation with God is not sufficient on its own - we need to be reconciled with the body God has established through which we become a forgiven people. This restores the bond of communion we have broken with the Church, and the restoration of that communion is the way that God restores the bond of communion with himself. The Catechism puts it better than I can:
"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 Apostles united to its head. The words **bind and loose** mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. **Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.**" (C.C.C. 1444-1445)*

- **Sacramental absolution from our sins requires of us a certain disposition of mind** and therefore certain actions which demonstrate this:

We must be **contrite** (i.e., sincerely sorry for the sin) – it needs to be an action of the whole person who is choosing to turn back again to God and to convert their life. (C.C.C. 1450-1454)

We must **confess our sins to a priest** with the power to forgive sins, given through ordination from a bishop who has himself received this power from the apostles. This means only a Catholic priest. (C.C.C. 1455-1458)

We must **make restitution** to the members of the New Covenant family we have injured by our sin, if that is possible. (C.C.C. 1459-1460)

We should be careful to **examine our consciences regularly** so as to grow in co-operation with God's grace. (C.C.C. 1454)

We must be **resolved with the help of God to avoid sin** through sincere inner renewal and penance. (C.C.C. 1430-1433)

- **The Commandment of the Church to receive sacramental absolution once a year is clarified.** No one can oblige us to seek God's forgiveness, and if we are forced to it, it cannot be genuinely sought and therefore not given. BUT, by the very meaning of the sacrament of the Mass (being a statement of our unity with the Church and with Christ), we may not receive Holy Communion if our relationship with God is so battered by sin as to be dead. That would be to lie with the sacrament. The God-designed means of restoring our communion with him if we are in mortal sin is Confession, where Baptism is renewed. Since we are only obliged to receive Holy Communion once a year (around Easter time), the only obligation to Confession is for those in mortal sin who wish to receive Holy Communion at that time. C.C.C. 1457.
- **Confession of lesser (venial) sins is not obligatory but most strongly urged on all the Church** (priests included!) because this helps us grow in the life of holiness, deepen our formation of conscience and fight against temptation. Confession is a life-giving encounter with Christ, the Good Shepherd, who died in order to win forgiveness for us. We should be anxious to meet him in

the sacrament of Reconciliation, because he died in order to give it to us - and because it is the path of forgiveness, new life and grace. If our faith in Christ is truly genuine, we will see Confession as God's invitation to receive his life - and there can be no greater invitation. *C.C.C. 1458.*

- ***Sacramental Confession is an on-going part of our Christian calling to holiness and repentance.*** We should always be turning away from our sins and trying to embrace holiness and virtue - but in sacramental Confession, God reaches out to us to eradicate the sins which block that path, to restore the grace of our Baptism which our sins have diminished, and to encourage us to take up once again the path of the Christian life - turning away from sin and believing the Gospel.

We could do a lot worse than to think of Confession in terms of St. Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. St. Augustine applies the analogy to all the sacraments, but it works particularly well with Confession. The Jew travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho stands for us, a pilgrim people journeying in a dangerous world towards our heavenly reward. The brigands he falls foul of are our own evil desires, which lie in ambush within us and overpower us with their force, leading us into sin, which leaves our souls battered, wounded and almost dead. The Good Samaritan is Christ who responds to the disaster of sin in which we find ourselves. Christ binds up the injured soul through the sacrament of Reconciliation, in this case represented by the oil and water with which he tends the wounds, The sacrament is also represented by the donkey on which he places the Jew because the donkey is the means by which the Samaritan carries the injured Jew to the inn, in our case, the Church, where he can be more fully ministered to through the sacraments of the Church. The Jew is entrusted to the innkeeper, as the souls of all the faithful are entrusted to the ministers of the Church. To assist them, the Samaritan gives the Innkeeper sufficient money to enable the innkeeper to begin the healing of the Jew, and promises to return and pay any outstanding debt. In the same way, having entrusted the sacraments to the Church as the means of encouraging the growth of the soul in holiness, Christ promises to return at the end of time to complete what the sacraments prefigure and initiate but are still to be fulfilled in the Kingdom.

I find this analogy helpful for a number of reasons:

1. It puts at the centre of the action the person of Christ who is the healer of the soul. We should remember that in Confession we encounter Christ in the person of the priest. It is Christ who recognises our weakness in sin, Christ who bandages our wounds through Confession and Christ who gives us advice in the moral and spiritual life to help us avoid the occasion and temptations of sin. We are not simply talking to another human being.
2. It places Confession within the context of the whole of Christ's ministry of reconciling mankind with God. It is too easy to see Confession as a kind of "holy time-out" when we step back from our lives, repent for a moment and then plunge back in again. Confession and reconciliation with God is an on-going part of our Christian lives, which we are reminded of when the Church repeats to us Christ's call for us to do penance and to repent.

3. Finally, this analogy presupposes that God is not just willing to receive our repentance, he is actually the cause of it - he leads us to Confession, gives us the desire to seek God's grace, and gives us the spiritual insight to turn away from our sin. We should beware of seeing Confession as our way of persuading God to be merciful to us. Quite the contrary, the fact that Christ instituted sacramental Confession within the Church is a powerful demonstration that God urgently desires the reconciliation of all peoples, even to the extent of providing the human means of such reconciliation. The Catechism is adamant that when we come to Confession, we are drawn and invited there by God who is already at work within us, leading us to want and choose reconciliation with God (*C.C.C. 1426-1428, 1432, 1484, 1489*). *Confession from beginning to end is primarily a work of **God**; man's contribution is simply to acknowledge the need for God's mercy!*

We should never be afraid to come to the Lord in Confession - it is the forum he has specifically designed to welcome us to the fullness of his love, and to restore us to the full communion of his holy people. No Catholic has any reason to suffer the burdens of guilt (the famous so-called "Catholic guilt-complex") because we are the only ones to teach and believe that Christ absolves our guilt in the here and now through the medium of the Church.

An Appendix: the Rite of Confession

Confession needs to be prepared for, because we are coming before God and seeking his mercy. It must not be an act of flippant condescension but a heartfelt and sincere quest for the loving forgiveness of almighty God. Sincerity is essential - but that is as far as the burden is placed on the penitent: the priest is there for many purposes, one of which is to help you if you forget what to do next or your mind goes blank!

BEFORE CONFESSION

We need to spend some considerable time examining our consciences. We are seeking God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church through the priest. We need to care enough about being forgiven to bring to mind what we are seeking absolution for. Remember, we will confess specific sins rather than tendencies. This is not about confessing to God that I have a weakness for chocolate éclairs - but that because of that weakness I stole some from the market. Equally, it is not about saying "I tend to get cross" but to state what we have actually done for which we acknowledge responsibility - "I *did* get cross several times without justifiable reason and I took out my anger on several people who were not to blame."

If you ever plan to go to Confession and realise that you are going to confess to not saying your morning prayers and that is all you can remember since your last confession over a month ago - then I would suggest you look at a member of your family full in the face and say "*the only bad thing I have done in the last month is to forget to say some prayers*": then see what the reaction is! This is a hard part of Confession, but it can't be skipped over: we must be aware of the ways in which we

are falling short of the Gospel and of Christ before we can do anything to reverse this trend.

IN CONFESSION

- Go in, kneel (or sit), make the sign of the cross and say “*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.*” Then tell the priest how long it has been since your last confession: this is important because it gives him an idea of your progress in the spiritual life (obviously, if you confess to getting drunk on three occasions it will make a difference if the last time you went to confession was three months ago or last Tuesday!)
- Tell the priest the sins that you have been able to remember that you have committed since the last time you went to confession. Remember, you are not here to be told off - the priest won't round on you, or gasp in horror. He won't be cross because you have sinned – since that is the precise reason you are there. The only thing likely to anger a priest in confession is the person who comes in having made no real effort to examine their conscience and then confesses “*I don't really do anything wrong - I think I live a good life, really.*” (Don't laugh - it happens!) SO - never be afraid of what the priest will say to you. He is not angry with sinners, only with the self-righteous who believe, like the Pharisee in the Temple, that he is already perfect and in no need of repentance.
- In addition, never be afraid that he will repeat what you have told him in the confessional. The priest is absolutely forbidden in every circumstance from revealing who said what in the confessional. Even a bishop or the Pope could not order a priest to reveal what he has been told. This “seal” is so absolutely protected that priests have been martyred for refusing to repeat the sins they have been told (such as St. John Nepomucene).
- When you have told the priest all the sins you can remember, tell him: say “*for these and all the sins of my past which I can't remember, I ask forgiveness of God and penance and absolution of you, Father.*”
- The priest may give you some advice or some encouragement that he feels you may need in the light of what you have said. His words are important, because he is drawing on all his knowledge and understanding to offer you help in the spiritual life. In addition, he is assisted in this work by the Holy Spirit - so his words may have a meaning and significance unknown even to him and often not immediately apparent to the penitent. Listen to what he says; it may be of use to you.
- The priest will then give you your penance: this may come in the form of a prayer or sometimes of an action. Pences have a two-fold purpose. They are symbols of our repentance and desire to reform our lives (such that performing the penance demonstrates and underscores our desire to return to God and to reject the sins that have wrenched us from him). In addition, penances are remedial - they ought to respond to the sins that have been committed in such

a way as to help you overcome the temptation again. They should encourage us to the formation of good habits which will root themselves in our thinking and behaviour and counterattack the effects of the sins we habitually commit.

- After he has given you a penance, he will ask you to make an Act of Contrition. This is very important, because it is the only thing which prevents the confessional from becoming a farce: we state solemnly that we turn away from sin, regret what we have done and make a firm commitment to amend our lives along the lines of the Gospel. There are many different forms of the Act of Contrition, but one short and favourite one goes like this, "*O my God, because you are so good, I am truly sorry that I have sinned against you, and with the help of your grace I will not sin again.*" What matters is the sincerity with which we say these words. If they are not truly meant by us, then the absolution is ineffective and our sins are not forgiven - so it is critical that the Act of Contrition be prayed with honesty and integrity.
- The priest will now absolve your sins - Christ absolves us through the ministry of the priest. He says "*God the Father of mercies, through the death and 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 of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" Your sins are now forgiven by Christ. Say "Amen" in thanksgiving.
- As you leave the Confessional, the priest may give you words of encouragement. Thank the priest, your Father before God, for the gift he has given to you from Christ.

AFTER CONFESSION

You will need time to offer your thanksgiving. Remember, you have been brought to life through the loving mercy of your heavenly Father, mediated through Christ. If your penance has been given in the form of a prayer, you ought to offer that prayer as soon as possible. Do not always expect it to be as easy as three Hail Mary's! And if this is what you are given, remember what the penance is for - as a symbol of your true repentance and conversion (so offer the prayer, whatever it may be, in that spirit - repentance from sin and conversion to God through the Church) AND as a remedy to help you in the future (there may be something in the prayer which you could particularly do with contemplating for a while - if you have been given Hail Mary's, the priest is pointing you towards Mary for some reason and this could become the focus of your prayer for the next few weeks). Whatever your penance may be, ask God to make it fruitful in your life, and not simply a dead letter, forgotten as soon as it is spoken.

And remember, you have just experienced what all the prophets longed for and spoke about - but never received. You have received what the angels of God worship without receiving as we do - the life-giving and healing presence of Christ the Saviour.

This is truly a Faith worth dying for.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford