

The Theology and Practice of the Sacrament of Confession with Teens

by Father J.D. Jaffe

“Sin is what puts distance between the believer and God, and it's the sacrament of confession that brings the two back together.” Pope Benedict XVI

Confession is a real encounter with Jesus Christ, producing a true knowledge of self that inspires one to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with Him who is Love. It ultimately aids in the practice of virtue here on earth so that one may live eternally with the source of all virtue in heaven.

“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, whose sins you retain are retained.” John 20:21-23

Jesus bestows on the Apostles the power to forgive sins. He even charges them to go out and to do so. If they are charged with the task of forgiving sins, then, by extension, are not the faithful charged with confessing their sins to the apostles for forgiveness? The direct commandment of Christ to His Apostles to forgive sins is an indirect commandment to the faithful to seek that forgiveness. The question often arises - why one must confess to a priest? The answer lies here in this passage. Jesus asks his faithful to do so by asking his Apostles to be sources of that forgiveness.

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into his nail marks, and my hand into his side, I will not believe.” John 20:25

If the faithful pray quietly, in their own heads, for the forgiveness of God, and they are sincere in their request, would a good and gracious God deny them His loving mercy? It would seem likely that they are indeed forgiven, but how do they know it to be so? They cannot know it to be true; they must assume or presume upon the mercy of God. Whereas, the faithful who go to the very person to whom Christ gave authority to forgive sins, would hear concretely the words of the priest that they are forgiven and that the sin is not retained. They would hear, “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” Certainty of forgiveness is attained because one's own flesh and blood has encountered the mercy of the Risen Lord through His lawfully appointed minister. Much like doubting Thomas, the faithful who doubted or even despaired in the forgiveness of God would, after the sacrament of confession, be able to confidently proclaim, “My Lord and My God!” John 20:28.

“My Grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Cor 12:9a

Human certainty is not the primary reason for going to the priest for the sacrament of confession. Penance, like all sacraments, provides much needed grace. Grace is God's divine life dwelling within us. There are two basic graces that are received during confession. Sanctifying grace is the grace that saves us, drawing us to the kingdom of heaven. In the sacrament of penance, this grace takes the form of the forgiveness of sins. Actual grace is the other grace received during the sacrament of confession. It is the grace that helps us in a given situation. In the sacrament of penance, the faithful receive more than just forgiveness for their sins; they also receive, for every sin that is confessed, the grace to sin no more and avoid the near occasion of sin.

Confession is too often taken as a moment of shame, rather than a moment of love. The sacrament of penance is not intended to be an opportunity to dwell on weakness. Rather, it is a moment to accept and to embrace weakness and thus realize the need for Christ, our Savior.

“I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses ... for when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Cor 12:9b-10.

Growing up is about overcoming failures and mistakes; it is about dealing constructively with faults. Nobody learns to walk without falling, and nobody learns to read aloud without a mispronunciation. Learning is often achieved through trial and error. Growth occurs by pushing and testing ourselves to be the best that we can be. This is the concept of homework, practice for sports, and rehearsals for plays. The more the task is practiced or exercised the better one becomes at accomplishing it.

The same is true for spiritual growth. Virtue, like most any behavior, is a habit. It is a habit towards the good; whereas, vice is a habit towards evil. Humans grow in virtue by exercising virtue. The better Christians become at handling a given situation by responding properly in grace, the better formed they become in the habit of responding properly. Therefore, it is only in encountering weakness that they are then made stronger. Just as the athlete’s training for competition is continuous, or the soldier’s preparation for battle unceasing; so too must the Christian constantly strive to grow in virtue. The only way to continuously strive to grow in virtue is to identify those areas that need growth, those areas of the spiritual life where there is weakness. Then, and only then, is one able to be strengthened by the grace of God. It is essential that we arrive at this true knowledge of ourselves if we have any hope of being faithful witnesses of Him in whose image and likeness we have been created.

“When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man I put aside childish things. At present I see distinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully as I am fully known.” 1 Cor 13:11-12

Confession, in conclusion, is a real encounter with Jesus Christ, a private and intimate moment directly between the penitent and the Lord of Mercies.

When celebrated properly, it will not only produce a truer knowledge of self that inspires one to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with God, who is pure love; but it will also aid in the daily practice of the Faith. Often, confession is seen only as the sacrament needed to keep one out of hell; but the reality is that it is also the sacrament that enables one to live daily for heaven. Confession aids one in the practice of virtue here on earth, so that, ultimately, one may live eternally with the source of all virtue in heaven.

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