

Who Can Forgive Sins?

Confession, the Keys, and the Authority Given to Men

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I. The Fastest Objection

"Why confess to a priest? I go straight to God." No Catholic practice draws the objection faster, and it comes armed with real texts: one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), a promise that God forgives those who confess to him (1 John 1:9), and the plain truth that only God can forgive sins—a principle the scribes of Capernaum stated and Jesus did not deny. This essay grants the principle at once and then asks the question the objection skips: God, who alone forgives, has he chosen to forgive *through men*?¹

II. The Objection at Full Strength

When Jesus told the paralytic his sins were forgiven, the scribes reasoned, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7)—and Jesus answered not by denying the principle but by proving his divine authority through the healing. Sin is against God; God alone absolves it. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins" (1 John 1:9)—confession is made to *him*, and no verse commands a Christian to enumerate his sins to another man in order to be forgiven. Moreover, "there is one God, and there is one

mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5); the New Testament calls no Christian minister a priest (*hiereus*) but calls the whole Church "a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). James does say "confess your sins to one another" (Jas. 5:16)—but that is mutual, brother to brother, not penitent to priest. And private auricular confession has a documented history: public penance in the early centuries, private confession spreading from the Irish monasteries, and the obligation of annual confession imposed only in 1215. A requirement twelve centuries in the making, the objection concludes, is church law, not gospel.²

III. The Words in the Upper Room

Grant the principle fully: only God forgives sins, sin is against him, and no priest has a milligram of power that is his own. The question is whether God has chosen to forgive through men—and the risen Christ answered it in a locked room, in words the reduced reading cannot absorb. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, 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 20:21–23).³

Every clause resists the objection. The commission is modeled on Christ's own sending: "as the Father has sent me, even so I send you"—and Christ did not merely announce forgiveness, he conferred it. The breath deliberately recalls Genesis, where God breathed life into man: something new is being made. And the grant is two-sided—forgive *or retain*—which is unintelligible as generic preaching, because preaching retains no one's sins. A power that can either forgive or withhold, depending on the state of the sinner, is a power that must *know* the case, and knowing the case means hearing the sinner. That is all confession is: the exercise of a power to bind and loose that, by its own terms, requires the sinner to be heard.

IV. Authority Given "to Men"

Matthew had prepared the reader for this. When Jesus forgave the paralytic and healed him to prove the forgiveness real, the crowds "were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority *to men*" (Matt. 9:8)—a plural the evangelist chose, writing for a Church in which that authority was already being exercised. Paul describes his own ministry the same way: God "gave us the ministry of reconciliation," and made the apostles "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:18–20). And Paul acts on it: he forgives a repentant offender at Corinth, "what I have forgiven... I have forgiven in the presence of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10). One mediator, yes—and the one Mediator has ministers, ambassadors through whom he himself appeals, or Paul's

sentences are empty. The ambassador does not rival the sovereign; he is the appointed means by which the sovereign's pardon reaches the province.⁴

V. James, and the Elders

The "one another" of James 5:16, pressed as a refutation, has a context the objection omits. Two verses earlier: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord... and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas. 5:14–15). The confession of verse 16 follows directly, in a passage where the Church's *ordained elders* are already at the bedside, exercising a ministry explicitly tied to the forgiveness of sins through prayer and anointing. James gives us both mutual confession among believers and a ministerial act of forgiveness by the elders, in one paragraph—which is exactly the Catholic arrangement, not an alternative to it.⁵

VI. What Developed, and What Did Not

The history is conceded, and read rightly it testifies for the power rather than against it. The early Church's penance was not absent; it was *harder* than the confessional. Grave and public sinners—apostates, murderers, adulterers—confessed and were reconciled by the bishop only after a public penance that could last years. Tertullian describes the discipline of *exomologesis* around the year 203; Cyprian, writing of those who lapsed under persecution, treats the bishop's power to reconcile them as beyond dispute in 251. No community invents so demanding an apparatus around a power nobody believes it has.⁶

What changed across the centuries was the *form*, not the reality: from public to private, from once in a lifetime to frequent, from the bishop to the priest he delegates. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 required annual confession—and one does not legislate the frequency of a thing that does not yet exist; the canon regulates a sacrament the Church had exercised since the upper room. This is development in Newman's exact sense: the same power, unfolding into forms suited to the Church's changing life, "in the same doctrine, in the same sense." The gift was given when Christ breathed on the Eleven; the confessional is one of its mature shapes.

VII. What Confession Is From the Inside

The last word belongs to what the sacrament actually is for the sinner, because the objection pictures a barrier and the reality is a mercy. What the penitent meets in the confessional is not a man judging him but Christ absolving him through a man sworn to secrecy under the gravest obligation the Church imposes. The verdict is not in doubt; for

every penitent it is already purchased on the cross. And it is spoken—aloud, in the second person, to *you*: "I absolve you from your sins." That spoken word is exactly what a guilty conscience needs and cannot supply to itself. The silent assurance of 1 John 1:9 is true and precious, but a wound heard confessed and answered with an audible pardon heals in a way that private resolution does not—which is why God, who knew his creatures, gave the pardon a voice. For a reader coming from the Watchtower, the contrast is sharpest here: what he knew as a judicial committee weighing his continued membership, the Church offers as a tribunal of mercy whose only verdict, for the contrite, is release. That comparison is drawn in full on this site's discipline page.⁷

Endnotes

1. Mark 2:7; 1 John 1:9; 1 Timothy 2:5 (RSV). Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. 1 Peter 2:9; James 5:16 (RSV); Fourth Lateran Council (1215), canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*.
3. John 20:21–23 (RSV); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1441–1445, 1461.
4. Matthew 9:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; 2:10 (RSV).
5. James 5:14–16 (RSV).
6. Tertullian, *On Repentance* 9–10; Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*.
7. On the seal of confession, *Code of Canon Law* canon 983; the comparison with the Watchtower judicial arrangement is drawn on this site's discipline page.

For Further Reading

On Repentance, by Tertullian, c. A.D. 203—the ancient discipline of exomologesis. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0320.htm>.

On the Lapsed, by St. Cyprian, A.D. 251—confession and reconciliation after grave sin. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050703.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1422–1470 on the sacrament of penance.

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"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

—John 20:23

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*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the sacrament of penance*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.