



RECONCILIATION

Why is this sacrament necessary? Why not confess your sins directly to God? Why go to a priest, or any human being?

It is appropriate and necessary to repent directly to God for one's sins. In fact, when Catholics participate in this sacrament they are primarily expressing their repentance and sorrow for sin to God, and seeking to be reconciled to Him. Catholics believe that Jesus had a purpose in granting particular persons the authority to forgive sins in God's name.

God chooses to use human beings to continue His work on earth. When our sins are forgiven by one who has been set apart by the church to represent Jesus Christ, we can experience the mercy of Jesus himself through that person.

Confessing sins to a person reminds them of the social dimension of sin. When someone sins, he not only offends God, but his sin also has an effect (either direct or indirect) on other people. The priest who grants God's forgiveness not only represents Jesus Christ, but also the whole Christian community, the church. Hence, the priest has the authority to reconcile a sinner to the body of Christ, the church.

The priest or minister is often able to counsel, encourage, or even pray with the penitent for healing of some area of sin or brokenness in the person's life. Jesus often uses His representative, the priest, to minister to the needs of people in remarkable ways through the sacrament of reconciliation.

CONFIRMATION

Why do we have to be confirmed? What is the purpose?

Through the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Holy Spirit empowers God's people to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, to live that message, and to continue Jesus' mission and ministry to the world. Just as the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry and transformed the fearful disciples at Pentecost, the Spirit equips every Christian for a life of service and witness. Catholics believe and have witnesses that God desires to send the fullness of his Holy Spirit through confirmation, and that the manifestation and gifts of the Holy Spirit will be evident when this sacrament is approached with expectant faith and prayer.

EUCCHARIST

Is the bread really the body of Jesus, and the wine really His blood, or are they symbols?

When Jesus said to His followers, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), He was speaking about them receiving His body and blood in bread and wine of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. This was no "symbolic" reception, according to John, but was actually eating the real body of Christ and drinking his real blood. This teaching is as much of a challenge to the faith of Christians today as it was to the readers of John's gospel. Catholic Christians accept this challenging teaching at its face value, and believe that when they receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist, they are actually partaking in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This presence of Jesus can only be accepted in faith, since



the outward appearance of the bread and wine does not change. Catholics do not “worship the host”, but worship Jesus Christ whom they discern by faith to be present in the host.

MARY

Why do we refer to Mary as “our mother”, the mother of Christians?

Obviously, Mary is not a “physical” mother to all Christians, but she is recognized as a mother “in faith”. This is because of Jesus’ words while He was on the cross: “When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing near, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother.’” (John 19:26-27). This is also true because of her special relationship with Him. Christians have become the body of Christ and brothers and sisters to Jesus through His grace. In the same way and by the same grace, Mary has become the spiritual mother of every Christian, since she is the mother of Jesus Christ.

Are we, as Catholics, supposed to worship and pray to Mary?

Catholics honor Mary and look to her as our mother in faith but they do not worship Mary or “pray to Mary” as they pray to God. Worship belongs only to God. Catholics do ask Mary to pray for us, and believe that her intercession has a great effect in calling forth God’s grace and mercy. But this is because of her special relationship with Jesus, not because of her own merits.

Why do Catholics ask Mary to pray for them?

God himself accomplishes and provides everything that mankind needs, but in the richness of his plan He also chooses to entrust His creatures with a share in His work. Jesus is the one great high priest (Hebrews 8:1), and yet he calls Christians a “priestly people” and invites them to share in His priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Catholics believe that Mary has a special role of intercession because of her special role in God’s plan of salvation. Jesus and Mary are not in competition. Jesus is the source of all God’s grace and salvation, and Mary directs her prayers and our attention to Jesus. Catholics believe that God has chosen to use Mary as a unique channel of the grace of her Son because of her special relationship with Him. He has given her a motherly concern for all His sons and daughters.

SAINTS

What is the “communion of saints”?

The phrase “the communion of saints” refers to the bond of unity among all those, living and dead, who are or have been committed followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed that His followers would be united to each other just as closely as He was united to the Father (see John 17:20-23). This close, living in unity among all who belong to God through Jesus is what the Apostles’ Creed calls “communion”. When Catholics profess that they believe in the communion of saints, they are professing their unity with all the faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

What about seeking the intercession of saints?

Another way that the members of the communion of saints can support one another is by praying for each other. Most of us have asked another Christian (“saint”) to pray for us when we have had a particular need. Prayer seems to be a normal way for the saints on earth to support each other. Catholics believe that if we ask our fellow saints on earth to pray for us, we should also be able to ask for prayers from the saints who are already united with the Lord. If the prayers of certain Christians here on earth seem to have special power because of their great faith or holiness, how much more powerful and effective are the prayers of those who are fully united to God in heaven!

What about the worship of saints?

The practice of honoring the saints in heaven and asking for their prayers can be abused. In the fifth century A.D., St. Augustine warned against any devotion to the saints becoming a form of worship. Following his teaching, Catholics venerate and honor those saints but do not worship them (again, worship belongs only to God). The saints in heaven can pray or intercede to God for us, and we can ask them to pray for us, just as we can ask a fellow Christian to pray for us. The intercession of the saints and of Mary on our behalf does not detract from the unique mediation of Jesus, any more than would asking someone here on earth to pray for us. All Christian prayer, whether the prayer of saints in heaven or Mary, the mother of the Lord, or of us the saints here on earth, is directed to the Father through Jesus, who is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5).



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH & SALVATION

Why is Catholicism different from other world religions?

There is no denying that the Catholic Church is unique. The Catholic Church proclaims the unity of God (distinguishing it from Hinduism, Buddhism, etc). The Catholic Church also believes in a Triune God, and with that, Jesus Christ is the Messiah and the 2nd Person of the Trinity (distinguishing it from Islam and Judaism). The Catholic Church was instituted by Christ. He founded it through his words and actions (most explicitly in Matthew 16:18, when he said to Peter “upon this rock I will build my Church”). In his death and resurrection, in Christ’s total self-gift for our salvation, the Church was truly born. Any other Christian religions have splintered off from the Catholic Church.

The Church is the “sacrament of salvation.” This means that it is a sign of our salvation, but also an instrument of our salvation. So yes, it symbolizes the fact that God wants to save us, but we’re also saved through the Church. The Church is a sacrament (in the above sense) of the “inner union of men with God” as well as “the unity of the human race” (CCC 775). The Church “is the visible plan of God’s love for humanity” (CCC 776). For these reasons, the Church not only occupies a unique place in God’s plan, but also a unique place in human history.

Are only Catholics saved?

No. God “wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The Church says “Since Christ died for all men...we must believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery” (Gaudium et Spes 22). Basically, in ways known and unknown, God is reaching out to everyone, no matter what religion they are, or even if they have no faith at all.

Here is what the Church says regarding our relationship with specific world religions:

- Non-Catholic Christians: The Church acknowledges that “she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian” (CCC 838). In fact, “those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church” (CCC 838, emphasis added).
- Jews: The Church recognizes our shared heritage. In fact, the Jewish faith began as a response to God’s revelation. St. Paul writes that to the Jews “belong the

sonship, the glory, the covenants...for the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” (Romans 9:4, 11:29).

- Muslims: The Church teaches “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God” (CCC 841).
- Other World Religions: For most of the great world religions, Catholicism shares with them “a common destiny, namely, God” (CCC 842).

Overall, “the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions” (Nostra Aetate 2). In fact, the Church “looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rulers and teachers” (NA 2). Yes, there are real, legitimate differences between the Catholic faith and other world religions. However, anything that is good, true, and holy in other religions is “a preparation for the Gospel” and “a sort of secret presence of God” (CCC 843, Ad Gentes 9).

Obviously, there are a lot of people who don’t have the opportunity to enter the Church, or even know the Gospel in the first place. Bl. John Paul II writes about this in *Redemptoris Missio*. For many people, “the social and cultural traditions in which they live do not permit this [entering the Church]” (RM 8). For these people, God gives a special grace that “while having a mysterious relationship to the Church,” the Holy Spirit “enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation” (RM 8). God wants everyone to be saved, and He’s going to work with the individual circumstances people are born into.

Is the Church necessary for salvation?

Yes. Christ is the one mediator of salvation. All salvation comes through him. Christ is present in the Church in a unique way. The Church is the Body of Christ, with Christ himself as the Head.

How does this fit with what was said earlier? Yes, God works in individual circumstances. However “forms of mediation [of grace] of different kinds and degrees...acquire meaning and value only from Christ’s own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his” (RM 5). Yes, people can receive grace outside of the Catholic Church, but all grace is mediated through Christ. God works in various ways to reveal Himself, but everyone who is saved is saved through the redemptive work of Christ made present in His Church.

