

What we see happening today may at first appear to be rather strange. People are going up to John the Baptist in the Jordan River and they're confessing their sins to him.

Odd as it may seem, the confession of sins is not something unique to us as Catholics. This practice was well-established by the Jews.

According to the instructions God gave to Moses in the Book of Numbers (Num 5:6-8), a sinner had to offer an animal as a sacrifice for his sin.

When the penitent gave this animal to the priest, the priest decided – according to the gravity of the sin – whether the animal presented for sacrifice was of sufficient value or not.

Animals that were sacrificed could range anywhere from as small as a dove to as big as a bull calf.

This practice was prescribed in the Book of Leviticus (Lev 5:10-11,18; 6:2-7).

How else would the priest know if the animal that was given to him was of sufficient value or not, unless he knew what sin the animal was being offered for?

So, as you can see, when Jews confessed their sins before St John the Baptist and were symbolically washed clean by him, there was no shock at the ritual; rather, something like it was already a part of Jewish life, and was carried over into the New Testament.

As you can also see, to the early Jewish converts to Christianity, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (otherwise known as the Sacrament of Penance or Confession) didn't appear as a startling innovation. A ritual accompanied by confession of sin was one of the many Jewish practices which passed over quite naturally into the religious life of Christians.

A Jewish convert could see at once how the New Law fulfilled the Old: he still had to go to a priest and admit his need for forgiveness; and still had to hope for pardon in the blood of a Victim – no longer a beast of the herd, but Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, offered once and for all – possessing a *power to redeem* available at every moment. Add to this development Jesus' own

words about Confession, and you can see why it's one of the seven Sacraments.

To His Apostles, Jesus said: ***“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” (Jn 20:21-23).

These words of Jesus imply that He expects sins to be confessed. *How would the priests of the Church know which sins to forgive and which sins to retain if they didn't hear them?*

Upon providing this explanation, some people have asked, *“Why did Jesus tell His Apostles that some sins are to be retained?” What does He mean?”*

Since Jesus forgives sins through the ministry of the priest, the priest can't do anything that Christ Himself can't do; namely: absolve our sins if we aren't sorry.

Not being sorry means: not believing what we did was wrong;

or not having a firm purpose to avoid sin or the *occasions of sin* (occasions of sin can be persons, places, things, or any act that previously led us into sin or made us susceptible to sin).

For this reason, the Church teaches that in order to receive absolution we must first confess all of our serious sins and the number of times we committed them (as far as we can remember without turning this encounter with Christ into a memory test) and express the dispositions by which forgiveness can be received; namely: sorrow and firm purpose of amendment.¹

Despite this clear teaching of the Catholic Church, you may have come across some people who have said, **“Oh, you Catholics are hypocrites!** You have this crazy, so called sacrament that you foolishly think gives you God's pardon and peace; yet, you go off and commit the same sins again!”

If anyone tells you this, you can say,

¹ cf. *Council of Trent*, Session XIV, ch. 5; *Rite of Penance*, 6 b, 7 a; *Code of Canon Law*, 1983, can. 988, §1; John Paul II, *On Certain Aspects of the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (Misericordia Dei)*, nos. 1, 3.

“I agree that a person would receive this sacrament in vain if he or she had no intention of avoiding sin. After all, Jesus told His Apostles that such sins had to be *retained*. But we do believe that if a penitent is repentant in this sacrament, he will indeed be forgiven. We believe this on account of Our Lord’s own words.”

On this point, you may recall what St John the Baptist said to the Pharisees and Sadducees. As they were approaching him while he was baptising in the River Jordan he shouted, “**Brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the retribution that is coming?**”

In other words, Jesus was saying, “Are you coming here to have your sins cleansed without truly being sorry for them?”

Another teaching of the Church which many people are ignorant about is this.

God is not restricted to the sacraments in forgiving sins. We can receive God’s forgiveness through a perfect act of contrition, especially at the point of death. Still, we receive far more abundant graces from the sacraments than we

would obtain by making the same acts without the sacraments because Christ Himself is at work in them. This reality is especially true of the Sacrament of Reconciliation because the Church teaches that imperfect contrition *without* the Sacrament of Reconciliation – cannot obtain the forgiveness of serious sins; whereas, imperfect contrition is enough to dispose us to obtain God’s

forgiveness *in* Confession.² Let me explain this difference and then provide an example.

An *imperfect* contrition differs from a *perfect* contrition in this manner. Although an imperfect contrition is a sorrow for sin prompted by the Holy Spirit and born of the consideration of the ugliness of sin or the fear of eternal damnation, this degree of sorrow is inferior to perfect contrition.

Sorrow is perfect when it’s born of the consideration of God’s love for us.

If fear is associated with perfect contrition, unlike imperfect contrition, it’s not a *servile* fear but a *filial* one, that is, it’s a fear that comes from not

² cf. CCC, no. 1453.

wanting to offend the one that we love rather than a fear of being punished.

This difference can be well-appreciated with the assistance of the following true story.

A priest came to the bedside of a Catholic man who was dying. When the priest asked if the man would like to make his peace with God, the man said, “Oh, Father, you’re wasting your time. I don’t think there’s any hope for me because I’ve been too attached to sin all my life. The priest replied, “God is more powerful than your sin. You can trust that if tell God you’re sorry, God will forgive you.”

“That’s the problem,” said the man, “my whole life has been characterised by loose living – I’ve been promiscuous throughout my entire life – I’ve been so attached to sinning, that I’m not even sure if I’m sorry.”

If you were this priest, what would you say to help this man? When I heard this story, I considered how helpless I would feel in not knowing what to say because the man had no contrition.

My heart was heavy, for there are eternal repercussions that weigh in the balance between being able to help this man or not.

Given that this priest was well-seasoned with many years of pastoral experience, he knew exactly what to say. I was amazed by his wisdom. The priest kept calm and simply said: “Are you sorry that you aren’t sorry?” The man paused for a moment and then said, “Yes.”

Consequently, the priest was able to give the man absolution because he had evoked from him at least an imperfect contrition.

When I heard this true story, if your response is anything like mine, I was moved in awe and wonder in knowing that this man died in God’s pardon and peace.

Knowing that an imperfect contrition is sufficient to receive God’s forgiveness in this sacrament is indeed very reassuring.

Many appear to be unaware of this teaching, for some Catholics are known to think, “I don’t need to go to Confession. I’ve told God in prayer that I’m

sorry.
God has forgiven me already.”

On this point, we’d do well to note the stern words St John the Baptist said about presumption to the Pharisees and Sadducees today.

While it’s true that our venial sins can be forgiven without Confession, thinking that serious sins are forgiven through prayer alone is complacent. For we can never be sure if we have perfect contrition for our sins.

This understanding does not mean we shouldn’t strive to have perfect contrition when we go to Confession. Ultimately, the more perfectly disposed we are to this sacrament the more graces we receive.

As for how much sanctifying grace is given,

St Thomas Aquinas said that since the effects of Confession are always in proportion to the excellence of our dispositions with which we receive this sacrament, we have the opportunity to arise to an even greater grace than that which we had before we sinned, as was the case with Mary

Magdalene.³
During the lifetime of the Apostles we can see that Jesus’ instructions about confessing sins were put into practice because both St John and St James tell us that those who confess their sins will receive God’s forgiveness (Jam 5:16; 1 Jn 1:9).

St James’ words provide particular clarity because he prescribes “self-help” for everything other than sin.

For example, he says, “**Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray**” (Jam 5:15).

But for the forgiveness of sins, The Apostle St James said “presbyters” (i.e., priests) should be called upon (Jam 5:14-15).

Just as the Jews went to St John the Baptist to be washed clean of their sins to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah, going to Confession during Advent to prepare for Christmas is a common practice in the Church.

Have you ever wondered what being in the shoes of John the Baptist would be like?

³ cf. *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 89, art. 2.

Calling people to repent would’ve been no easy task. He would have had no problems from those who were sincere; in fact, they would’ve esteemed him greatly, but those who were not would’ve easily become defensive.

Likewise, in our contemporary society, I think it’s fair to say that many are rationalising the areas of their lives which are not in conformity with Christ.

Perhaps the following analogy may help, then.

Remember when you were a kid... It’s Christmas Eve and you’re looking forward to the following day when you open your presents.

Did your parents ever say things like, “Santa Claus won’t come into your bedroom if he sees it all messy... Quick, clean your room!”

When I was a little boy, cleaning my room often felt onerous; but, it never felt like a chore on Christmas Eve because the longing and excited expectation of receiving those gifts brought about a fervour to prepare myself to receive them. Repentance is something like that.

We’re making room for Christ in our lives.

If you haven’t been to Confession for a long time because you’re afraid of misrepresenting the good in you if you talk about your weaknesses and that it takes too much humility to do so,

then you have not contemplated the significance of Christmas! When Christ lowered Himself by taking upon Himself our human nature, do you think He was misrepresenting His goodness; the goodness of God?

Have you considered that in becoming man – by taking upon Himself the weight of our own sinfulness – have you not considered how much God had to be humble? A beautiful movement in our soul takes place when we are inspired to reciprocate Christ’s humility in this sacrament.

So much peace is engendered upon doing so, together with a deeper yearning to be more intimately united to Him.