

Absolution and Confession

The word *absolve* comes from Latin roots meaning “to free from”. Within the context of the sacrament of reconciliation or confession, absolution is, then, the process of being freed from sin. It isn’t forgiveness, a priest doesn’t forgive sins; sin is an offence against God and therefore only God can forgive sin. The priest absolves, he frees you from the guilt of sin, acting in God’s name within the context of the sacrament. “Through the sign of absolution God grants pardon to the sinner”¹ The priest is the channel through whom you hear that you are forgiven; by the words of absolution you receive forgiveness *through* him not *from* him.

Somewhat confusingly, the old “penny catechism” used to speak of “the priest forgiving sins by the power of God when he pronounces the words of absolution”. It might have been better if it had said that the penitent is forgiven by God when the priest says the words of absolution. The current catechism teaches “the Church, through the bishop and his priests, forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction” – still a little ambiguous as, again, it is actually God who forgives, but, as the words of absolution remind us, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins through the ministry of the Church. This is the authority he gave to his Church through the Apostles and their successors. So in a sense the words pronounced by the priest bring the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit into the situation of the sacrament. The priest speaks as if Christ were speaking and forgiveness is ministered as if Christ were ministering, but it is Christ/God who actually forgives, not the priest.

In that respect the words of absolution are the essential sign or external expression of the sacrament – like water and the Trinitarian formula in baptism, the bread and wine in the eucharist, etc. But even here there is some confusion – at least from the priest’s point of view. The words of absolution are:

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 from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Introduction to the *Rite of Penance* says that even when pastoral need dictates that a shortened rite be used “the essential structure [of the sacrament] and the entire form of absolution must be kept” (para 40). The rite says that while the “essential words” of the formula are “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, these may only be

¹ Introduction to *The Rite of Penance*

used in an emergency situation; in all other circumstances “the entire form of absolution must be kept” (para 21).

What has always been a cause of some concern to me is that, because of what we have just said, no adaptation of the words of absolution is provided for celebrating the sacrament with children. If you re-read the formula, there are some pretty tricky words in there if you are a seven or eight-year-old just making your first confession, and yet priests are given no official latitude to change the wording to something that children might more easily understand so making the process of being absolved more meaningful to them. Via the bishop, I did write to our Bishops’ Conference on the subject but no one seemed able to offer any advice or suggestions, or any hope for change, and so we continue to use the given wording because that’s what the rite says we have to do.

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Another area of the sacrament which for those “of a certain age” has also become equally fixed is the wording that people use as they make their confession. Interestingly the rite itself provides no official formula, all it says is “it is proper for the penitent to indicate his² state of life [if he is unknown to the priest], the time of his last confession, his difficulties in leading the Christian life [in other words the sins he has committed], and anything else which may help the priest in exercising his ministry [meaningfully celebrating the sacrament with the person].” So there is no requirement to use the official formula you were probably taught as a child and in fact making your confession in your own words might actually be better, more helpful, more natural. Having said that, old habits die hard.

As priests move from parish to parish, it’s interesting to discover how various generations in different communities were prepared for their first confession in terms of the formula they use. By and large they reflect who prepared them, particular religious orders who once taught in so many of our schools, and how they themselves were prepared for the sacrament. As their numbers diminished and lay teachers took over, and as RE syllabuses and sacramental preparation became increasingly varied, this tends to be reflected in the different ways in which younger generations make their confession - or don’t (given how many are strangers to the sacrament these days!).

One of the more common and widely taught formulas ends with: “For these and all my other sins which I cannot now remember, I ask penance and absolution of you my ghostly father” – words addressed to the priest. I have never quite understood what that means, given that I have never felt particularly “ghostly”!

² or her, of course

It occurred to me to look up the word “ghostly” in the dictionary and one of the meanings offered is *pertaining to the spirit or to religion; spiritual*. So perhaps it should be “spiritual father” rather than “ghostly father” acknowledging the spiritual relationship that exists between the penitent and the priest? If you were taught this formula, is that how you understood it or, being honest, did you never really know what it meant either but continued to use it because “Sister said”?

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Finally, just a word about preparing for, and celebrating, the sacrament.

Q.297 in my copy of the “penny catechism” asks:

How many things have we to do in order to prepare for confession?

The answer is (and we all had to learn these answers by heart remember?):

We have four things to do: first, we must heartily pray for grace to make a good confession; secondly, we must carefully examine our conscience; thirdly, we must take time and care to make a good act of contrition; and fourthly, we must resolve by the help of God to renounce our sins, and to begin a new life for the future.

One of the most important and often overlooked parts of that answer is the need to pray for the grace to make a good confession and to carefully examine our conscience.

When I hear someone come into church and come straight into the confessional (or reconciliation room) if no one else is waiting, I hope they have been praying and examining their conscience as they walked to church given that they didn’t stop to do it in church. However that really isn’t a very adequate preparation, and neither is not spending any time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament first. Whenever we come into church - whether for the celebration of Mass, to go to confession, or for some other celebration - we should arrive early enough to spend time in prayer, detaching ourselves from the hustle and bustle of the world outside, making both the physical and spiritual transition from the things of the world to the things of God. It would therefore be far better to do all of our preparation for confession in church, in prayer, before the Blessed Sacrament rather than “saving time” by doing it on the way. That reflective time before we celebrate the sacrament should be important to us.

Then, as the catechism said, while it is a time to pray for the grace to make a good confession, it is also a time to spend in a thorough examination of conscience which is the basis of a good confession. If we haven’t really thought long and hard, with the help of God’s grace, about all aspects of our relationship with God *and* neighbour, how can we possibly expect our confession to be as thorough as it should be?

Then, too, we are not at the doctor's or the barber's where we claim a place in the queue and zealously guard it at all costs. Our priority should be a proper preparation for the sacrament we are there to celebrate, not what our place is in line. It would be better to prepare ourselves quietly away from everyone else and then join "the queue" than to rush our preparation so we are ready when our turn comes along.

You then have a choice: your right to an anonymous confession, or to take a seat facing the priest. Let me emphasize that your sins are not the priest's concern in the sense that they are between you and God – they are his concern, of course, in the sense that he needs to know what they are so that he can offer spiritual help and advice and celebrate the sacrament with you in a way that would not be possible otherwise. Remembering the seal - the total and absolute secrecy - of confession, it would be a much more positive way to celebrate the sacrament sitting face-to-face with the priest and talking with him as you would do with anyone with whom you were trying to have a personal and meaningful conversation, as opposed to hiding behind a grille.

Absolution is conditional upon the penitent being truly sorry for and confessing the sins they have committed; having a firm purpose of amendment, that is, the intention to do all they can with the help of God's grace to avoid those (and all other) sins; being willing to accept the penance given by the priest; and saying they are sorry in an act of contrition. It would invalidate the sacrament to deliberately not mention a sin you were aware of. To accidentally forget a sin is a different matter but this emphasizes all the more the need for a proper examination of conscience in preparation for the sacrament. Listen to the words of absolution and the assurance they offer that your sins are forgiven.

Back in church spend time in prayer once again as you say the spiritual penance that the priest may have given you; thank God for, and allow yourself to experience, the reconciliation and healing that has taken place; and ask him for the graces you need as you go back out into the world and try to live out the good resolutions you made in the sacrament.

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