

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Why Confess to a Priest?

Once I got into a lively discussion about confession. And a question came up: Why do we have to go to a priest for confession? Can't we just tell God we're sorry on our own?

Pope Benedict once answered that question beautifully during a visit to a prison in Rome. In an unprecedented move, the inmates were allowed to ask him some questions. A partial transcript of the conversation follows:

Your Holiness, I was taught that the Lord sees and reads inside of us. I wonder why absolution is delegated to priests? If I asked for it on my knees alone in my room, turning to the Lord, would he absolve me? Or would it be another kind of absolution? What would the difference be?

You are asking me an important question. I would say two things. The first: Naturally, if you kneel down and, with true love for God, pray that God forgives you, He forgives you. It has always been the teaching of the Church that [if] one, with true repentance ... asks for forgiveness, he is pardoned by God. This is the first part. If I honestly know that I have done evil, and if a love for goodness, a desire for goodness, is reborn within me ... and I ask forgiveness of God ... He gives it to me.

But there is a second element: Sin is not only a "personal," individual thing between myself and God. Sin always has a social dimension, a horizontal one. With my personal sin, even if perhaps no one knows it, I have damaged the communion of the Church, I have sullied the communion of the Church, I have sullied humanity. And therefore this social, horizontal dimension of sin requires that it be absolved also at the level of the human community, of the community of the Church, almost physically. Thus, this second dimension of sin, which is not only against God but concerns the community too, demands the Sacrament, and the Sacrament is the greatest gift in which, through confession, we can free ourselves from this thing and we can really receive forgiveness in the sense of a full readmission to the community of the living Church, of the Body of Christ.

And so, in this sense, the necessary absolution by the priest, the Sacrament ... is an expression of the goodness of God because it shows me also concretely, in the communion of the Church, [that] I have received pardon and can start anew.

Thus, I would say, hold onto these two dimensions: the vertical one, with God, and the horizontal one, with the community of the Church and with humanity. The absolution of the priest, the sacramental absolution, is necessary to really absolve me of this link with evil and to fully reintegrate me into the will of God, into the vision of God, into his Church, and to give me sacramental, almost bodily certitude: God forgives me, He receives me into the community of His children.

At the end of discussion with Pope Benedict, another inmate read the following prayer:

Oh God, give me the courage to call you Father.

You know that I do not always give you the attention you deserve.

You do not forget me, even though I so often live far from the light of your face.

Come close, despite everything, despite my sin however great or small, secret or public it may be.

Give me inner peace, that which only you know how to give.

Give me the strength to be true, sincere: Tear away from my face the masks that obscure the awareness that I am worthy only because I am your son. Forgive me my faults and grant me the possibility to do good.

Shorten my sleepless nights: Grant me the grace of a conversion of heart.

Remember, Father, those who are outside of here and still love me, that thinking of them, I remember that only love gives life, while hate destroys and resentment turns into hell long and endless days.

Remember me, O God.

Amen.