

Question: Why is reconciliation a sacrament in the Catholic Church?

Answer: Sin is something that we are constantly suffering from and fighting against. What is sin? We learn from the Old Testament and especially from the creation account in Genesis 2-3 that sin is an act we willingly choose to commit that disconnects us from our covenant with God. We see this when Adam and Eve choose to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Because of their choice they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and their relationship with God was fractured. Reconciliation is as old as the Church herself. To be reconciled to God means to be reunited, restored, and to re-establish the relationship that has in some way or another been damaged due to our own choices. If one has sinned there is disconnect between the individual and God.

The rite of confessing sins for forgiveness has been a present feature of the church both in Old Testament and New Testament times. Many Old Testament passages allude to people doing penance for sins they have committed. The Mosaic Law outlines certain repenting acts that one should do after sins were committed, “And you shall bring to the LORD, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, a female from the flock, a sheep or a goat, as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for your sin.” (Leviticus 5:6) When something is atoned, it means that it is amended or fixed.

Like the church of the Old Testament, Jesus put great weight in the forgiveness of sins and the movement from a life of disconnect to a life of unity with God. Jesus had the power to forgive sins. He shows this authority in Mark 2:1-12 when he forgives the sins of the paralytic at Capernaum giving him the power to walk again, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus goes from countryside to city forgiving sins, healing the ill, and proclaiming the good news.

Jesus knew that his presence on earth would not last forever and that he needed to give others the power to forgive sins as well. After the resurrection in John 20:21-23, Jesus appears before the disciples and breathes on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Christ gave the Holy Spirit to the apostles and to their future successors. Through this act of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were given the authority to forgive sins. This is why the Catholic Church states that professing sins should be done in the presence of a priest. Through the means of apostolic succession the Church holds that the priest continues to be the one given authority by Christ to forgive sins on earth. This is why the sacrament of reconciliation has continued and will continue to be a practice that the Church as an institution is responsible for.

Unlike baptism that occurs once in a person’s lifetime, the sacrament of reconciliation can be repeated (according to the Church, a Catholic should go to confession at least once a year (*Catechism*, 1457)). We are taught that baptism cleanses us of our original sin and is our spiritual birth. The act of reconciliation, something that we should conceivably do several times in our life, cleanses our souls of the sins we commit ourselves. The Church teaches that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven provided that the person who is confessing the sin is doing so to a priest or bishop, and that his confession of the sin or sins is honest. (*Catechism*, 982) One who is preparing to confess their sins should, “willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction.” (*Catechism*, 1450) The actual act of professing sins should free us from the burden that our sins bear on us. It allows for the individual confessing to honestly look inside themselves, take responsibility for their own sins, and then reopen their inner being to God. (*Catechism*, 1455-1456)

The sacrament of reconciliation is called a sacrament because Christ commissioned it. He forgave sins, and then bestowed the authority to do the same to his disciples and successors. The act of penance is a “masterwork of God” (*Catechism*, 1116) because the forgiving actions of the Holy Spirit work through the Church and wipe away the sinful burdens that we bear.