

Why the Sacrament of Penance? The Gift of Catholic Confession

Frequently people leaving a Catholic confessional or Penance service have a smile on their face and a look of peace about them. What is it about confession that makes these people happy or content? Is it spiritual invigoration, useful counseling, practical advice, a friendly confidant, a moral compass, sacramental grace or what? Most likely it is a little of all of these things. When we read of secular America seeking spiritual guidance, marriage pointers, expert mediators, a good therapist, a higher calling and religious alternatives to improve their lives, we can see how lucky practicing Catholics are to have all these things available for free in the form of their confessor. Secular America seeks the best value in finding professional help to enhance their personal growth and self-worth. They seek someone who is appropriately educated and experienced in providing personal counseling. It is interesting to note that Catholic priests are well trained, educated and ultimately extremely experienced with regard to their confessional duties. As a result, Catholics have at their disposal free counseling services – the same very expensive services secular America seeks and employs to improve their self-esteem! While these most practical aspects of confession indicate some of the extensive benefits related to confession, the sacramental grace associated with Penance must not be short changed.

What of sacramental grace?

To answer this question we must know what a sacrament is and what grace is. A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. There are seven sacraments – Baptism, Penance, Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders and Anointing of the Sick. Grace is defined as a gift of God that enlivens the soul. There are two types of grace – sanctifying grace and actual grace. Sanctifying grace is the grace which God has given to create an eternal soul and its holiness. Actual grace is the grace which a transient gift associated with a specific act – such as a petition to God granted for graces needed to do the Lord's will. Sacramental grace is a subset of sanctifying grace which gives the soul a specific holiness to the eternal soul. The sacrament of Penance can regain or enlarge the soul's ability to house the grace of God. Noted here is the fundamental thread of all such Grace originating from God. In addition, a fundamental precept of

the Catholic religion is that only God can forgive sin; no mere man can forgive sins. Therefore, the priest is the conduit through which God may forgive sins and give resulting grace as Jesus indicated when he said to the disciples “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:23). While many Catholics and Protestants believe that God gives grace because of our petitions, many do not believe in the practice of Penance. Is not this sacrament more likely to grant the grace of God because of the synergistic help of the penitent, confessor and Church?

Too few Catholics take advantage of the gift of the sacrament of Penance. According to the Center of Applied Research of the Apostolate (CARA) only 26% of Catholics follow the Church’s precept to confess their sins at least once per year; 45% indicate they never go to confession - while 50% of Catholics think that one can be a good practitioner of their faith without ever going to confession. Perhaps those who don’t go to confession have been influenced by their secular and protestant friends who say it’s stressful and embarrassing to confess sins. Does not self-discipline start with the admission to others that we need help? If people think they don’t need to confess to a man because they can confess to God directly, then why did Jesus charge his disciples to forgive and retain sins and provide such a glorious opportunity for his children to receive forgiveness and grace? Confession *is* good for the soul!

Reference from New American Bible