NOTES



Chapter V

Confession, Forgiveness, and Healing

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
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focus
fellowship of Catholic university students

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

God Loves Us Where We Are (But He Doesn't Leave Us There)

Jesus Receives the Sinful Woman

> *One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Lk 7:36-39).*

Consider this woman's difficult situation. All we know about her is that she is "a sinner." While her specific sin isn't mentioned, we can be sure her faults are serious. Jesus says later that her sins are "many" (v. 47).[1] Not only this, but her sins are also publicly known. As if it weren't challenging enough for her to bear the guilt in her own heart, she must also endure public shame. Just imagine her hopelessness and despair. This is a woman struggling with serious personal sin, while at the same time suffering rejection from her society.

Jesus, however, responds very differently than the crowds. Not only does Jesus *not* reject her. Amazingly, He allows her to lavishly pour out her tears upon Him. More than merely offering Jesus basic hospitality, she anoints his feet with ointment, and even dries them with her hair. Her gesture is so profoundly generous that it causes the Pharisee in the story to murmur to himself, "How can this man allow such a woman to do this!" Yet Jesus receives her without reservation.

Jesus' receptivity to this sinful woman teaches us something essential about the process of forgiveness and healing: God welcomes us first. He is willing to come to us, even in our sinfulness. In the words of St. Paul, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). St. Peter Chrysologus summarized this passage in this way: "Christ came to the Pharisee's table not to be filled with food for the body but to carry on the business of heaven."[2] The Catechism describes this reality beautifully,

> God calls man first. *Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person.... [T]he faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response (CCC 2567).*

Repentance

This woman's response, her lavish outpouring of love toward Christ, shows us how to answer an important question we often face: "How

[1] The phrases "sinner" and "of the city" may indicate the sin of prostitution or some other public sexual sin, but this is somewhat uncertain.

[2] Just Jr., Arthur A. (Editor), and Oden, Thomas C. (General Editor). Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol III: Luke. Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois. 2003, p. 126. Copyright Institute of Classical Christian Studies.

should I respond to my sin?" Unfortunately, ever since the Fall, we face a perennial temptation: hiding from God. As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they immediately hid themselves from God (Gen 3:8). We often do the same. We are tempted into believing that we can only approach God when we are "being good" or "living a holy life." We think that maybe once we amend our lives or solve our own problems, then we'll be able to approach God and come back to the Church. In the meantime, however, while we are still struggling with our sin, we feel we must keep our distance. We often commit a "second sin," hiding from God in our shame, rather than opening ourselves up to His mercy.

This woman shows us a better path. Despite her sinfulness, she reaches out to Jesus. Instead of hiding, she courageously approaches Christ and pours out her love upon him. You can just imagine her bursting into tears of sorrow at her sinfulness, aware of how desperately she needs Christ's mercy. Face to face with perfect love, she turned back to God in repentance. We would do well to follow her example.

The truth is we don't need to "put our lives in order" to approach God; we need to approach God so that He can put our lives in order. We could never be so good or so holy that we could deserve God's forgiveness. Rather God freely pours out his mercy upon us. This woman didn't anoint Jesus' feet and dry them with her hair to earn Jesus' favor. She was turning to Christ in repentance—the same repentance we are called to today. When we find ourselves in sin, rather than hiding in shame, we should come to Christ with contrite hearts. The Catechism defines repentance this way, "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431). This is our sure path back to God.

Further, interior repentance is something we all need. St. John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Repentance isn't only for grave offenses; it is also for everyday faults. We have all done things that have damaged our relationship with God and others. Therefore, we are all in need of mercy and forgiveness. Moreover, repentance isn't a "one-and-done" activity either, something we do once and then move on. Rather, we are called to a "constant…path of penance and renewal" (CCC 1428). Indeed, regular repentance is a key habit of the Christian life.

Healing: A New Heart

> *And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."*
>
> *Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."*

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Lk 7:40-50).

There is an essential spiritual principle at work in this passage. While Jesus certainly comes to meet us in our sinfulness, He never leaves us there. Notice what Jesus doesn't say to this woman. He doesn't say, "no big deal," "that's okay," or "don't worry about it." He doesn't minimize the gravity of her offenses. He acknowledges that her sins are indeed serious. In fact, that's what makes her story so powerful. She really is mired in sin. And Jesus really does forgive her. And because of Jesus' forgiveness, her heart really is transformed. She is capable of loving much *because* she has been forgiven much.

The same is true for us. Sin is the greatest tragedy of our lives. The Catechism states, "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world" (CCC 1488). Similarly, St. John Henry Cardinal Newman once wrote, "better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail…than that one soul…commit one single venial sin."[3] And yet, amazingly, Christ generously pours out His forgiveness.

He also goes a step further. He not only forgives us, but He also makes us a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:7). Like this sinful woman, He desires to not only take away our sins, but to give us a new heart, a heart capable of loving "much" (CCC 1432, Ez 36:26, Lk 7:47). He wants to make "all things new" in our lives (Rev 21:5). "We love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). This is the healing and forgiveness Christ wants to graciously bestow upon us.

Finally, consider Jesus' parting words to this sinful woman: He says both, "Your sins are forgiven," and "Go in peace." Can you imagine how moving those words must have been? How long had it been since this woman experienced the freedom of forgiveness or true peace? Surely, a long, long time. This peace wasn't simply emotional relief, either (though it likely included that too). It was the deep peace that only comes from God—the peace of being known, loved, and restored to right relationship with God and others.[4]

We too desire to hear these same words from Christ: "Your sins are forgiven" and "go in peace." Are you burdened by your sins? Are you lacking peace? Are you hiding in shame, afraid to approach God? Or are you struggling with a heart that is "heavy and hardened" (CCC 1432)? Turn to Christ in repentance and He will forgive you, give you a new heart, and fill you with a peace that only He can give (see Jn 14:27).

The Sacrament of Confession

The woman in this passage experienced a profound transformation of heart. How can we experience the same? How can we repent, receive Christ's forgiveness, and allow our hearts to be changed? While many things could be said, there is one thing that is essential: Confession. Jesus gave us this sacrament to free us from our sins and make us new.

[3] Newman, John Henry. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Chapter 5, accessed at https://newman-reader.org/works/apologia65/chapter5.html

[4] See Hahn, Scott. *Peace*, Catholic Bible Dictionary, p. 688.

That said, it is not uncommon to encounter some challenging questions when considering this sacrament: Isn't it God alone Who forgives sins? Then why do we need to go to a priest? Doesn't God already know my sins? Then why do I need to confess them aloud? These are reasonable questions. Let's unpack what Scripture has to say about the Sacrament of Confession so that we can both respond to these objections and open ourselves to the many graces Christ wants to give us through this sacrament.

First, Scripture and the Church affirm that God alone forgives sins (CCC 1441). Every sin is an offense against God (CCC 1850). Therefore, it only makes sense that, ultimately, forgiveness must come from the person offended, that is, God Himself. We see this in the Old Testament. King David confesses, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps 51:4). And we read of multiple instances of God forgiving His people (Ps 85:2, Is 6:7, Deut 21:8).

Forgiveness is central to the ministry of Jesus also. To the sinful woman, Jesus says explicitly, "your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). Perhaps understandably, this causes the people to marvel, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" (Lk 7:49). In another passage, the crowds are amazed that God has "given such authority to men" (Mt 9:8). Indeed, forgiving sins was a hallmark of Jesus earthly ministry (see CCC 1443). If Jesus forgives our sins, then why is it that we confess our sins to a priest? The answer is that Jesus entrusts His Church with His "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). All throughout the Bible, God is constantly inviting His people to participate in His work. From the very beginning God asked our first parents to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Was God capable of creating each human being without human cooperation? Of course. But as a loving Father, He wanted humanity to share in His creative action. He even asked that some people participate in His work in a unique way through their leadership. We see this repeatedly in Old Testament figures like Moses and David, who acted as God's mediators.

The same thing is true in the Church today. Is God sufficient in and of Himself to forgive sins and accomplish all the work of salvation? Of course. In fact, as Catholics, we recognize God is never bound by His sacraments. He is sovereign and free to act as He pleases. As a good Father, however, He continues to invite His people to participate in His work—evangelizing in His name, serving the poor, loving others, and, for those ordained to the sacramental priesthood, forgiving sins in His name. The Catechism states it this way,

> *Christ has willed that…his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted…the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the "ministry of reconciliation." The apostle is sent out "on behalf of Christ" with "God making his appeal" through him and pleading: "Be reconciled to God" (CCC 1442).*

Jesus makes this apostolic ministry explicit in the Gospel of John: "'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). Truly, Christ intended for His apostles to be His instruments of forgiveness.

This is why St. James encouraged the Christians of his day to "confess your sins to one another" and why St. John reminds us that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (Jas 5:16, 1 Jn 1:9). When we confess our sins, we allow ourselves to honestly face the failures

in our lives. Instead of carrying these burdens, we can bring them to Christ, through His priest. St. Faustina, a mystic who frequently conversed with Christ in prayer, heard Him speak these words to her, "When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I Myself act in your soul."[5] What an incredible gift to be able to approach Christ through His priest in the Sacrament of Confession.

Finally, how many of us need to hear the words that the sinful woman heard: "Your sins are forgiven," and "Go in peace." The Church, in Her wisdom, asks the priest to say these same words at the end of Confession: "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace."[6] We are physical creatures, made of both body and soul. Therefore, the experience of confessing our sins with our lips and hearing these words with our ears can be incredibly powerful. In Confession, we can be certain that our sins are forgiven. That is why those who receive this sacrament usually experience "peace and serenity of conscience along with strong spiritual consolation" (CCC 1468).

Making a Great Confession

Even once we accept Christ's teaching on Confession, sometimes we still find ourselves hesitant to approach this incredible sacrament. Whether it is fear, a bad past experience, uncertainty about what to do, or even just nervousness about how it might go, such trepidation is not uncommon. What should we do in these situations? What steps can we take to make a great confession? Here are a few important points to consider:

[5] Diary of St. Faustina, paragraph 1602, p. 568.

[6] https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/rite-of-reconciliation-for-individual-penitents-2173

First, interior repentance is of primary importance. While we certainly don't want to neglect the specific steps necessary to make a good confession, we must remember that God "looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). Before we get too caught up in the practical aspects of Confession, we ought to come to God with a "contrite heart" (Ps 51:17). We should strive to "return to the Lord [our] God…with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul" (Deut 30:2). Confession anticipates the "merciful judgment of God, [and] anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which [we] will be subjected at the end of [our] earthly life" (CCC 1470). In these moments, what is most important is what is in our hearts.

Next, we should consider the specific sins we have committed by making an examination of conscience. We can use the Ten Commandments or another guide to reflect on the concrete ways we have failed to love God, ourselves, or others. As disciples of Christ, we are called to continually develop our consciences, to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of how we are called to act (CCC 1784). Quite simply, we need to learn what is and isn't a sin and understand how serious those sins are. Developing our conscience enables us to avoid both *scruples* (seeing sin where there is no sin or exaggerating its seriousness) and *permissiveness* (not recognizing our sin or minimizing its gravity).

As you examine your conscience, first take note of those sins that are serious in nature. These are the sins that St. James refers to as "full-grown" that "bring forth death" (Jas 1:15). These are spiritually deadly, or mortal, sins (see 1 John 5:16). These sins break our relationship with God and deprive us of divine life. If left unrepentant, these sins can separate us from God forever. When we confess these sins,

however, our relationship with God is restored and we can experience a “spiritual resurrection” to new life (CCC 1468).

After recalling our serious faults, it can also be helpful to consider other, more minor, or venial, sins. These are the sins which are “not deadly” (1 Jn 5:16). While these sins do not deprive us of divine life, they do injure our relationship with God. These sins can also make it more likely that we will commit serious sins in the future. Therefore, it is important to bring these sins to Confession also, so that we can receive the grace we need to overcome them and renew our hearts to love God and neighbor more perfectly.

It can also be helpful to consider why we fall into particular sins. Am I falling into sins of chastity because I am lonely? Or because I am bored? Or because I am feeling hurt or am jealous of someone else? Uncovering the roots of our sins can help us realize why we fall into them and learn, with the help of God’s grace, to overcome these faults.

Next, if you have concerns about how to practically go to Confession, there are many guides available. Find one from a trusted source to guide you in making a great confession. Don’t let a practical difficulty prevent you from receiving this amazing sacrament.

Finally, don’t allow your excuses or hesitations to prevent you from approaching Confession. Know that the false reasonings that often pop into our heads—it’s not a good time, I’m not ready, it doesn’t matter, I can go later—don’t come from God. The same can be said about feelings of fear and anxiety. Confession breaks the hold that sin has on our lives. That’s why the enemy uses these subtle tactics—he wants to keep us enslaved. Don’t give in to these temptations. Come to Christ and be set free.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 7:36-39, John 20:21-23

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Have you ever had to apologize for something that was really serious? What was that experience like? Did you face the person you had hurt and did they receive you?

   Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Last time we took a look at the deeper meaning of the words Jesus says and the acts he performs at the Last Supper and grew in our knowledge of the richness of the Eucharist and the Mass. Today, we are considering the path to forgiveness and healing Jesus lays out for us by zooming in on his encounter with a sinful woman in Luke's Gospel.

God Loves Us Where We Are (But He Doesn't Leave Us There)

Jesus Receives the Sinful Woman

Read Luke 7:36-39

2. Consider this woman's difficult situation. All we know about her is that she is "a sinner." While her specific sin isn't mentioned, we can be sure her faults are serious. Jesus says later that her sins are "many" (v. 47).[1] Not only this, but her sins are also publicly known. What do you imagine she must have been experiencing, given her state and the Pharisee's reaction? Is Jesus' reaction surprising given what we know about her situation?

   Allow the group to discuss.

   Answer: As if it weren't challenging enough for her to bear the guilt in her own heart, she must also endure public shame. Just imagine her hopelessness and despair. This is a woman struggling with serious personal sin, while at the same time suffering rejection from her society.

   Jesus, however, responds very differently than the crowds. Not only does Jesus not reject her. Amazingly, He allows her to lavishly pour out her tears upon Him. Jesus receives her without reservation.

3. What does Jesus' reception of this woman reveal to us about the heart of God receiving us in our sinfulness?

[1] The phrases "sinner" and "of the city" may indicate the sin of prostitution or some other public sexual sin, but this is somewhat uncertain.

Answer: Jesus' receptivity to this sinful woman teaches us something essential about the process of forgiveness and healing: God welcomes us first. He is willing to come to us, even in our sinfulness. In the words of St. Paul, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

Please read aloud: The Catechism describes this reality beautifully, God calls man first. *Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person.... [T]he faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response (CCC 2567).*

So, what does our "first step" in response look like? Let's consider this woman's response to Jesus and discover how it can inform our own experience.

Repentance

4. This woman's response, her lavish outpouring of love toward Christ, shows us how to answer an important question we often face: "How should I respond to my sin?" How does she respond to Christ? Is this the way we respond to our sinfulness? What has kept you from responding as this woman does?

   Allow the group to discuss.

   *Answer: Unfortunately, ever since the Fall, we face a perennial temptation: **hiding from God**. As soon as Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, they immediately hid themselves from God (Gen 3:8). We often do the same. We are tempted into believing that we can only approach God when we are "being good" or "living a holy life." We often commit a "second sin," hiding from God in our shame, rather than opening ourselves up to His mercy.*

Please read aloud: This woman shows us a better path for responding to our own sin. Despite her sinfulness, she reaches out to Jesus. Instead of hiding, she courageously approaches Christ and pours out her love upon him. You can just imagine her bursting into tears of sorrow at her sinfulness, aware of how desperately she needs Christ's mercy.

We don't need to "put our lives in order" to approach God; we need to approach God so that *He* can put *our* lives in order. We could never be so good or so holy that we could deserve God's forgiveness. God pours his mercy out freely. So how ought we to approach him? With a heart of repentance.

5. What is repentance? What does it look like in our lives? Why is it a necessary disposition of heart to approach God and to receive his mercy?

   Allow the group to discuss.

   Answer: In Scripture, repentance is associated with the image of "turning back" or "turning around" towards the proper destination. As the Catechism puts it, "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431).

   Further, interior repentance is something we all need. St. John tells us, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Repentance isn't only for grave offenses; it is also

for everyday faults. Repentance isn't a "one-and-done" activity, rather regular repentance is a key habit of the Christian life.

Please read aloud: Repentance can't be manufactured. It is a movement of the heart born out of sadness and sorrow for our offenses towards God and others. But it's not the end of the story. God isn't looking for us to be sad over our shortcomings and failings. He's offering so much in return for our "turning back" to Him. Let's keep reading to unpack what God offers us in return for our repentance.

Healing: A New Heart

Read Luke 7:40-50

Please read aloud: There is an essential spiritual principle at work in this passage. While Jesus certainly comes to meet us in our sinfulness, He never leaves us there. Notice what Jesus doesn't say to this woman. He doesn't say, "no big deal," "that's okay," or "don't worry about it." He doesn't minimize the gravity of her offenses. He acknowledges that her sins are indeed serious. In fact, that's what makes her story so powerful.

6. We shouldn't underestimate the seriousness of sin. The Catechism states, "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world" (CCC 1488). How have you seen this grave evil or damaging effect of sin in your life, in the Church, in the world? Where can you see it most clearly?

   Allow the group to discuss.

7. But we also shouldn't underestimate the efficacy and power of God's mercy! What does Jesus say to Peter about this woman's capacity to love (see v. 47)? How is this the case? Why does forgiveness lead to a greater capacity for love?

   Allow the group to discuss.

   Answer: And because of Jesus' forgiveness, her heart really is transformed. She is capable of loving much because she has been forgiven much. Christ generously pours out His forgiveness, but he also goes a step further. He not only forgives us, but He also makes us a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:7). Like this sinful woman, He desires to not only take away our sins, but to give us a new heart, a heart capable of loving "much" (CCC 1432, Ez 36:26, Lk 7:47). He wants to make "all things new" in our lives (Rev 21:5). "We love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). This is the healing and forgiveness Christ wants to graciously bestow upon us.

Please read aloud: God's forgiveness and mercy are truly transformative in the lives of those willing to receive it with a repentant heart. And what is the lasting fruit of our repentance? Consider Jesus' parting words. He says both, "Your sins are forgiven," and "Go in peace." In our repentance we receive both forgiveness and peace. This peace isn't simply emotional relief or the release of guilt; it was the deep peace that only comes from God—the peace of being known, loved, and restored to right relationship with God and others.[3]

8. Do you desire to hear these same words from Christ? Have you experienced the freedom and peace that comes with repentance? What has kept you from hearing these words spoken over you?
   Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The woman in this passage experienced a profound transformation of heart. How can we experience the same? How can we repent, receive Christ's forgiveness, and allow our hearts to be changed? When we desire to know God's forgiveness and peace, there is one sure place of receiving them: the Sacrament of Confession.

The Sacrament of Confession

9. Before we dig into what Scripture tells us about Confession, what has your experience been with this sacrament? Are there any difficulties you've encountered?

   Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's unpack what Scripture has to say about the Sacrament of Confession so that we can both respond to these objections and open ourselves to the many graces Christ wants to give us through this sacrament.

First, Scripture and the Church affirm that God alone forgives sins (CCC 1441). Every sin is an offense against God (CCC 1850). Therefore, it only makes sense that, ultimately, forgiveness must come from the person offended, that is, God Himself. We can see this in Jesus' ministry, even in this passage we just read, when the people marvel and say, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" (v. 49).

10. If we truly sin against God, and God alone forgives our sins, why should we confess our sins to a priest?

    Answer: The answer is that Jesus entrusts His Church with His "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). All throughout the Bible, God is constantly inviting His people to participate in His work. The same thing is true in the Church today. Is God sufficient in and of Himself to forgive sins and accomplish all the work of salvation? Of course. In fact, as Catholics, we recognize God is never bound by His sacraments. He is sovereign and free to act as He pleases. As a good Father, however, He continues to invite His people to participate in His work—evangelizing in His name, serving the poor, loving others, and, for those ordained to the sacramental priesthood, forgiving sins in His name.

Please read aloud: The Catechism states it this way: *Christ has willed that…his whole Church should be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood. But he entrusted…the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry which he charged with the "ministry of reconciliation." The apostle is sent out "on behalf of Christ" with "God making his appeal" through him and pleading: "Be reconciled to God" (CCC 1442).*

Jesus makes this reality explicit in John, Chapter 20.

Read John 20:21-23

11. How do you see the ministry of the apostles being related to the ministry of our priests today? What does this passage teach us about approaching a priest for confession?

    Allow the group to discuss.

    Answer: Jesus makes this apostolic ministry explicit in the Gospel of John: '"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 20:22-23). Truly, Christ intended for His apostles to be His instruments of forgiveness.

When we confess our sins, we allow ourselves to honestly face the failures in our lives. Instead of carrying these burdens, we can bring them to Christ, through His priest. St. Faustina, a mystic who frequently conversed with Christ in prayer, heard Him speak these words to her, "When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I Myself act in your soul."[4]

12. We hear the same words spoken to us in Confession that the woman receives from Jesus: "Your sins are forgiven" and "Go in peace". Why is it important that we hear these words actually spoken to us by another person? Why do you think God has chosen for us to confess our sins out loud to another person, rather than just telling them to Him in our hearts?

    Allow the group to discuss.

    Answer: We are physical creatures, made of both body and soul. Therefore, the experience of confessing our sins with our lips and hearing these words with our ears can be incredibly powerful. In Confession, we can be certain that our sins are forgiven. That is why those who receive this sacrament usually experience "peace and serenity of conscience along with strong spiritual consolation" (CCC 1468). This is why St. James encouraged the Christians of his day to "confess your sins to one another" and why St. John reminds us that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (Jas 5:16, 1 Jn 1:9).

Making A Great Confession

Please read aloud:

Even once we accept Christ's teaching on Confession, sometimes we still find ourselves hesitant to approach this incredible sacrament. What should we do in these situations? What steps can we take to make a great confession?

13. What are some ways that can help us approach God in this sacrament so that we can receive the grace he so generously offers through it? Any practical steps or things you've learned from experience you'd like to share with the group?

    Allow the group to discuss.

Note to leader: Do your best to ensure your group knows how to make a great confession. Here are some practical steps and formative topics you can cover to help do that. You don't have to cover all of them, but make sure, given the needs of your group, you offer the most relevant and helpful information from below.

Answer: First, interior repentance is of primary importance. While we certainly don't want to neglect the specific steps necessary to make a good confession, we must remember that God "looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). Before we get too caught up in the practical aspects of Confession, we ought to come to God with a "contrite heart" (Ps 51:17).

Next, we should consider the specific sins we have committed by making an ***examination of conscience****. As disciples of Christ, we are called to continually develop our consciences, to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of how we are called to act (CCC 1784). Quite simply, we need to learn what is and isn't a sin and understand*

how serious those sins are. Developing our conscience enables us to avoid both scruples (seeing sin where there is no sin or exaggerating its seriousness) and permissiveness (not recognizing our sin or minimizing its gravity).

It's important to first take note of those sins that are ***serious in nature (mortal)****; these sins break our relationship with God and deprive us of divine life. It can be also helpful to consider other,* ***more minor (venial) sins****. It is important to bring these sins to Confession also, so that we can receive the grace we need to overcome them and renew our hearts to love God and neighbor more perfectly.*

It can also be helpful to ***consider why we fall into particular sins****. Am I falling into sins of chastity because I am lonely? Or because I am bored? Or because I am feeling hurt or am jealous of someone else? Uncovering the roots of our sins can help us realize why we fall into them and learn, with the help of God's grace, to overcome these faults.*

Next, if you have concerns about how to practically go to Confession, there are many guides available. Find one from a trusted source to guide you in making a great confession.

Finally, ***don't allow your excuses or hesitations to prevent you from approaching Confession****. Know that the false reasonings that often pop into our heads—it's not a good time, I'm not ready, it doesn't matter, I can go later—don't come from God. The same can be said about feelings of fear and anxiety. Confession breaks the hold that sin has on our lives. That's why the enemy uses these subtle tactics—he wants to keep us enslaved. Don't give in to these temptations. Come to Christ and be set free.*



Chapter VI

Prayer

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 132 - 143

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 144 - 154

focus
fellowship of Catholic university students