

The Forgiveness of Sins

Q. 189. What do we mean when we say, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”?

When we say, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” we mean that we believe in the pardon, not only of original sin, but of all personal sins, mortal and venial.

Christ died for all men. By the infinite value of His sacrifice, the sin of Adam, which we inherit, is erased.

Jesus appeared to the Apostles on Easter Sunday evening and said, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). “He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father 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’” (John 20:20-23). On this occasion Jesus instituted the sacrament of Penance.

Then Jesus gave Peter and the other Apostles the power to forgive and retain sins. This power is given not only to the Apostles, but also to their lawful successors. When the sacrament of Penance is administered, the very formula of absolution notes the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins.

Since the Apostles and their successors cannot acquire the necessary knowledge of sin unless the penitent himself gives it to them, Jesus demands a confession or an accusation of sins.

It is also true that a sinner can be restored to grace by perfect sorrow or perfect contrition. There are no sins, however serious, for which a repentant person cannot find forgiveness from God. A merciful Father has compassion on His children who want to love and serve Him.

“‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord: ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool’”(Isaiah 1:18).

“‘For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you’”(Isaiah 54:10).

Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world. Our sins are washed away in His Blood: that Blood is offered to God in the Mass.

For commentaries on each question with Cardinal Arinze, Sr. John Vianney and Fr. Straub (in Spanish), see Appendix E.

Certainly Christ did not take away the sins of future men unconditionally, but He provided the means by which our sins can be forgiven, as long as we cooperate with grace. We receive this particular grace through the sacraments of Baptism and Penance.

Christ merited for us the benefits of His Redemption. He fully satisfied the justice of God for the infinite offense of sin; He freed mankind from its slavery; He made it possible for man to be united with God on earth by regaining for him the grace of divine life, that is, sanctifying grace. Thus man became an adopted son of God and an heir to heaven.

The Catholic Church believes that sins forgiven are actually removed from the soul and not merely covered over by the merits of Christ. Only God can forgive sins, since He alone can restore sanctifying grace to a person who has sinned gravely and thereby lost the state of grace. God forgives the grave or mortal sins of the truly repentant sinner immediately through an act of perfect contrition or through a sacrament.

The sacraments primarily directed to the forgiveness of sins are Baptism and Penance, and secondarily, under certain conditions, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

987 “In the forgiveness of sins, both priests and sacraments are instruments which our Lord Jesus Christ, the only author and liberal giver of salvation, wills to use in order to efface our sins and give us the grace of justification.”¹

Splendor of Truth

Appropriate allowance is made both for God’s mercy towards the sin of the man who experiences conversion and for the understanding of human weakness. Such understanding never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adapt it to particular circumstances. It is quite human for the sinner to acknowledge his weakness and to ask mercy for his failings; what is unacceptable is the attitude of one who makes his own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good, so that he can feel self-justified, without even the need to have recourse to God and his mercy. (*section 104*)

Vatican Council II

Since human freedom has been weakened by sin it is only by the help of God’s grace that man can give his actions their full and proper relationship to God. Before the judgment seat of God an account of his own life will be rendered to each one according as he has done either good or evil. *Modern World, 17*

Summary Prayer

Father, we have wounded the Heart of Jesus Your Son, but He brings us forgiveness and grace. Help us to prove our grateful love and to make amends for our sins. Look on the Heart of Christ Your Son filled with love for us. Because of His love accept our contrition and forgive our sins.

You know our hearts, Lord, but You are slow to anger and merciful in judging. Come, examine Your Church; wash her clean of sin. Forgive the sins of our youth and stupidity, and remember us with Your love. May the fire of

Your word consume our sins, and its brightness illumine our hearts. Let us feel the healing calm of Your forgiveness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#C17-19



Doctrine • Moral • Worship Exercise (see Appendix B for answer key)

1. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. What does this mean?
2. Think of the people, situations, or circumstances that usually lead you to sin. How can you avoid these occasions of sin so that you can remain in the state of sanctifying grace? (Do not discuss your answers with anyone except with a priest in confession.)
3. Reflect on Isaiah 1:18 and 54:10. Examine your conscience to see whether you have committed any grave, or mortal, sin. If so, go to confession as soon as possible to receive God's forgiveness. Make it a habit to examine your conscience every night and conclude with a perfect Act of Contrition for the sins that you have committed during the day.

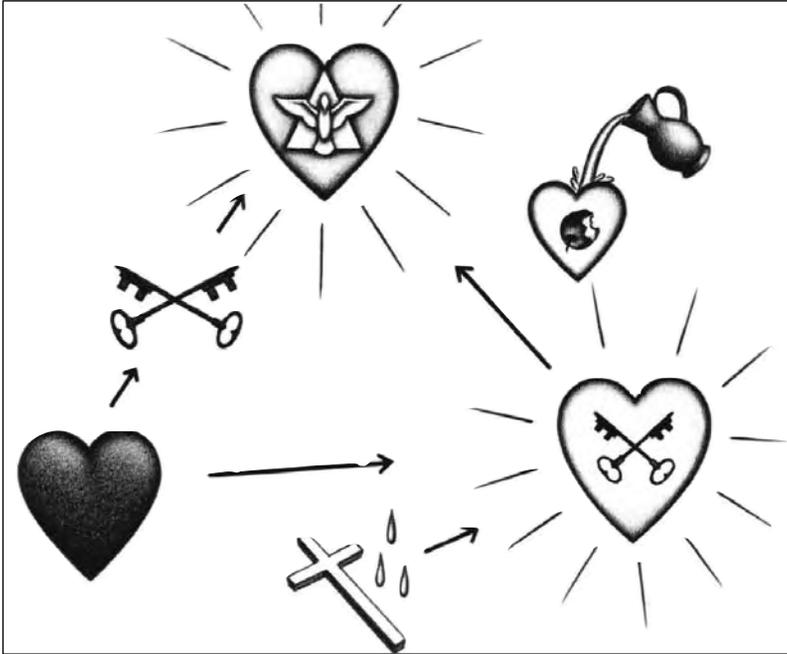
Chapter Summary Prayer

Almighty Father, apart from You there is nothing true, nothing holy on earth. Forgive our sins and give us strength in our weakness, so that we who believe in Your Son may rejoice in His glory.

Do not abandon us, Lord our God; You did not forget the broken body of Your Christ, nor the mockery His love received. We, Your children, are weighed down with sin; give us the fullness of Your mercy.

Catechism by Diagram

#C15-69



The Forgiveness of Sins. Christ provided the means by which our sins (black heart) can be forgiven, as long as we cooperate with grace (arrows to keys and to the Holy Spirit). This grace we receive through the sacraments of Baptism (water, apple—original sin) and Penance (keys). Jesus gave His Apostles the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins through the sacrament of Penance. A sinner who commits a mortal sin can also be restored to grace (white heart) by an act of perfect sorrow (tears) and penance (cross), but the Church demands that, after an act of perfect sorrow, all mortal sins be confessed in the sacrament of Penance (keys in heart, arrows from black heart to white heart to Holy Spirit).

Family Wisdom Library: Chapter 54

See Appendix A for more references.

Q. 189. What do we mean when we say, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins”?

Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), Vatican II, sect. 11;
On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, John Paul II, sect. 13, 26;
On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World, John Paul II, sect. 42, 46;
On Reconciliation and Penance, John Paul II, sect. 27;
Splendor of Truth, John Paul II, sect. 31, 86, 103–105.



Thought Provokers

Please see Appendix C for the answers.

Q. 189: What is “perfect sorrow” or “perfect contrition”?