

*Father Mateo, I was raised as a Baptist and converted to Catholicism in 1992. My question is this. How important is it that we confess our sins to a priest. I have real problems with this. Can we not just go to God in prayer and confess our sins and be forgiven? Donna*

Dear Donna,

You ask how important it is for us to confess our sins to a priest. In this and all other questions about our Faith, its doctrines, and its practices, I hope that you and all our other correspondents will obtain and read prayerfully and often the ["Catechism of the Catholic Church"](#) (CCC). It will answer most of your questions with a depth and breadth I cannot equal. About the Sacrament of Confession, you should also read Pope John Paul II's exhortation, ["On Reconciliation and Penance"](#) (RP).

We confess our sins to the representative of God and the Church, our bishop or one of our priests, the bishop's collaborators, because they are the successors of the Apostles, to whom the power of forgiving and retaining sins was first entrusted by Christ our Lord: "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 20:22-23). By confession of sins, the sinner enables the priest to know what he has done and what his dispositions are. Only in the light of this knowledge can the priest decide whether to absolve the sinner or to defer absolution (to "retain" the sins) until the sinner is properly disposed.

In this sacrament, as in all the other six sacraments, Christ is the agent. It is he who forgives. He does so through his chosen and Spirit-empowered instruments the confessor. Read again the empowerment-language of John 20: 23-23 --- the promise given the apostles is clear, emphatic, and prophetic. The happy result for us is that, in receiving absolution, we receive ASSURANCE that we are forgiven. This greatly contributes to our inner peace.

The advantages of the sacrament are many and great. Confession produces humility and self-knowledge, honesty and courage (cf. CCC 1455). The Pope tells us: "The individual confession has the value of a SIGN: a sign of the meeting of the sinner with the mediation of the Church in the person of the minister ... of the person's revealing of self as a sinner in the sight of God and the Church, of facing his own sinful condition in the eyes of God" (RP, 31, III)

In this way, also, the sinner complies with the directive of Holy Scripture in James 5:16 "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed."

In receiving sacramental absolution from our confessed sins, we also receive God's special graces to turn firmly away from these and all other sins, and so to move forward in our spiritual journey. The confessor can give us excellent advice about fighting temptation and growing in the love of Jesus Christ.

Confession at least once a year (normally during the Lenten and Easter season) is obligatory if one has had the unhappiness of committing a mortal sin. The Church also urges us, though without obligation, to go to confession regularly and frequently and to confess our venial sins and daily faults, "for we all make many mistakes" (James 3:2).

You further asked: "Can we not just go to God in prayer and confess our sins and be forgiven?" The Pope writes: "Though the Church knows and teaches that venial sins are forgiven in other ways too --- for instance, by acts of sorrow, works of charity, prayer, penitential rites --- she does not cease to remind everyone of the special usefulness of the sacramental moment for these sins too. The frequent use of the Sacrament ... strengthens the awareness that even minor sins offend God and harm the Church, the Body of Christ" (RP, 32).

Certainly, we prepare for confession with prayer to God; and certainly, the intensity of sorrow the sinner feels may be a perfect contrition, which "remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible" (CCC 1452, Council of Trent).

"The Sacrament of Penance is the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after baptism ... The same Savior desired and provided that the simple and precious Sacraments of faith would ordinarily be the effective means through which his redemptive power passes and operates. It would, therefore, be foolish as well as presumptuous, to wish arbitrarily to disregard the means of grace and salvation which the Lord has provided and, in the specific case, to claim to receive forgiveness while doing without the Sacrament which was instituted by Christ precisely for forgiveness" (RP, 31, I).

As you have been a Catholic now for four years, it would be both salutary and enjoyable, I'm sure, for you to treat yourself to a complete review of Catholic teaching. For this, I recommend you by and read ["The Teaching of Christ" by Wuerl, Lawler, and Lawler \(3rd edition\)](#), ISBN 0-87973-850-2.

Sincerely in Christ, Father Mateo