



**“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”**

**JOHN 20:23**

**Forgiveness and Reconciliation are distinct, though inseparably linked, concepts in Catholic teaching.**

### **1. What the Church means by forgiveness**

- **Forgiveness is the remission of sin.**

- It is an act of **God alone**, who, by His infinite mercy, wipes away the guilt and punishment owed to Him.
- In the Sacrament of Penance the priest, acting *in the person of Christ*, declares this divine forgiveness (the “absolution”).

- **Forgiveness is personal.**

- It restores the sinner’s relationship with God, even before any outward sign of repair with other persons.

- **The essential conditions** are contrition (sorrow for sin) and the intention to amend one’s life; the sacramental sign (confession and absolution) makes the forgiveness **effective**.

### **2. What the Church means by reconciliation**

- **Reconciliation is the restoration of communion with the Church** (the People of God) **and with others**.

- The Catechism teaches that “reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God”.

- **It has an external, communal dimension:**

- The sinner is readmitted to the “full communion of the Eucharist” and to the “sacramental life of the Church”.
- This readmission is the **sign** (the *res et sacramentum*) of the renewed communion with God.

- **Reconciliation also implies repair of broken relationships** with brothers and sisters, with one's own conscience, and with creation.

### 3. How the Sacrament of Penance expresses both realities

Aspect	Forgiveness (remission of sins)	Reconciliation (restoration of communion)
<b>Matter</b>	Contrition, confession, satisfaction (acts of the penitent)	Same acts <i>plus</i> the Church's official declaration of absolution and readmission
<b>Form</b>	The priest's words of absolution ("I absolve you...")	The priest's absolution <i>together with</i> the gesture of welcoming the penitent back into the community (e.g., sign of peace)
<b>Effect</b>	God's forgiveness, cleansing of the soul	Full communion with the Church, the ability to receive the Eucharist, and a renewed relationship with others.

John Paul II explains that the **most precious result** of the sacrament is reconciliation with God, which *necessarily* leads to reconciliation with the Church, with one's own self, and with others.

### 4. Why the two are not identical

#### 1. Different objects of restoration

- *Forgiveness* heals the breach **between the sinner and God**.
- *Reconciliation* heals the breach **between the sinner and the ecclesial community (and other persons)**.

#### 2. Different expressions in the life of the Christian

- A person may receive *God's forgiveness* in the sacrament yet still need to **re-establish relationships** (e.g., apologize to a person they have hurt).
- Conversely, one may **seek reconciliation** with a neighbor (e.g., ask for forgiveness) even before receiving the sacramental forgiveness, because human relationships require concrete steps of repair.

#### 3. Theological sources

- The International Theological Commission stresses that "the reconciliation of the sinner with God takes place **by** the

reconciliation with the Church”, showing the **causal link** but not identity.

- The Catechism’s separate paragraphs (1440 on forgiveness, 1445 on reconciliation) treat them as **distinct but complementary** dimensions of conversion.

## 5. Practical implications for the faithful

### • In confession:

- **Ask for forgiveness** (“Father, I am sorry for my sins”) – the priest declares absolution, granting God’s forgiveness.
- **Seek reconciliation** – confess the particular harms done to others, express a sincere intention to make amends, and, when appropriate, ask the priest to guide you in restoring those relationships.

### • In everyday life:

- **Accept God’s forgiveness** as a personal assurance of salvation.
- **Actively rebuild** broken ties: apologize, offer restitution, and foster charity, because true conversion is both **interior** (forgiveness) and **extrinsic** (reconciliation).

## 6. Summary

- **Forgiveness** = God’s merciful remission of sin, received in the Sacrament of Penance.
- **Reconciliation** = the restoration of full communion with the Church and with those we have harmed, also effected in the same sacrament but extending beyond it.
- While they **always go together** in authentic conversion, they address **different dimensions** of the human person: the relationship with God versus the relationship with the ecclesial community and fellow humans.

Understanding this distinction helps the faithful **receive God’s mercy fully** and **live it out** by repairing the bonds that sin has broken.