

The Power of Absolution

Is there conclusive biblical evidence for the sacrament of penance? Jesus' commission to the apostles immediately springs to mind. After his resurrection, he appeared to the disciples and said to them: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:23).

But does this verse really prove sacramental absolution as many Catholics assume? The plain answer is, no, it doesn't.

Essential elements of the sacrament -- confession to a priest and penance to make satisfaction for sin -- are not mentioned. It does not even demonstrate that Jesus gave the apostles the power of absolution (i.e. the power of a judge to pronounce a judicial sentence).

Jesus most certainly did authorize the disciples to forgive and retain sins, but he did not specify, in this sentence, what *kind* of authority or power he gave them.

Why can't we take Jesus' words as the commission to the apostles to proclaim the Gospel message, and to declare forgiveness to those who believe? Why do we have to understand them as granting judiciary power to dispense absolution to penitents?

In other words, did Christ constitute his apostles *judges* or *messengers* of the gospel?

This question cannot be answered directly from John 20. Other scriptures must be cited for supporting evidence; indeed, that is exactly what the Catechism of the Catholic Church does. Quoting from 2 Corinthians 5, the catechism states:

"[Christ] entrusted the exercise of 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'" (paragraph 1442).

Is the apostle Paul here speaking about the confessional? Is he speaking about the power of absolution? Please read his words and see for yourself:

"Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

What was Paul's "ministry of reconciliation"? What was the "word of reconciliation" committed to him? Did he go about hearing confessions and giving absolutions? Or did he rather go everywhere preaching the gospel? Paul pleaded with Jews and Gentiles alike, imploring them to be reconciled to God on account of Christ. He preached!

Elsewhere he summarized his mission, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:38); and again, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel ... it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

It is highly significant that the scripture carefully chosen by the writers of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to prove the power of absolution fails to do so; on the contrary, it demonstrates that the apostles' power primarily consisted of preaching the Gospel.

The apostolic word echoes to this day and applies to us with equal strength. God will not count our sins against us if we are in Christ. To Him we must go; to Him we must confess; in Him alone we must trust for forgiveness.