

**“For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven.”**  
*Jn 20:23*

We usually think of the Apostles as being ordained as the first priests at the Last Supper when Our Lord commands them, “Do this in remembrance of me.” And indeed so they were. But here, on the evening of the first day of the week, when Our Lord appears to His Apostles for the first time since His resurrection, He breathes on them with the breath of the Holy Spirit, and gives them the sacramental power to forgive sins. He completes their ordination, as it were, and in the old rite of ordination that is exactly what the bishop used to do: lay hands on the man being ordained priest, and then later in the ceremony (after Communion in fact) the bishop breathed on him and conferred upon him the sacramental power to forgive sins. It is a very dramatic moment.

But why does Our Lord give power to His priests to forgive sins? Why can't we just say sorry to God in our hearts and leave it at that? The answer lay in what God Himself has revealed to us about the very nature of the Church.

When St Thomas doubted the resurrection He was told by Our Lord to touch Him, to place his fingers in the holes where the nails once were, his hand into Our Lord's side where the lance had pierced Him. St Thomas touched the physical body of Christ.

The Church is the *mystical* body of Christ; it is the continuation in time of Christ's physical presence. The Church *is* the Body of Christ every bit as much as the body that was nailed to the Cross was the *physical* body of Christ and every bit as much as the Holy Eucharist is the *sacramental* Body of Christ.

And because the Church is the continuation in time of Christ's physical presence, the Church must do – and can only do – that which Christ Himself did when He was on earth.

Christ prayed, the Church prays; Christ taught, the Church teaches; Christ healed, the Church heals in the Sacrament of the Sick; Christ nourished His disciples with food from Heaven, the Church nourishes us with the Blessed Sacrament, food for our souls; and Christ forgave sins, the Church forgives sins.

Christ is the mediator between, on the one hand, God the Father, and, on the other hand, fallen mankind who has distanced himself by sin from his Creator. Christ is the bridge which spans the gap between the Creator and fallen creatures. Man cannot lift *himself* up from his fallen state; he cannot restore *himself* to the supernatural life lost by sin, anymore than someone lying in a coma can restore himself to full health. It requires external intervention.

So, the Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, came down to earth from Heaven, to act as a go-between, to plead to the Father on our behalf, to offer Himself up as a sacrifice to make amends for our sins, and to appease the wrath of so violent an injustice. And having won from the Father all the grace needed to wash away our sins and restore us to a participation in God's life, He set about administering that grace and love and forgiveness to countless generations of sinners. And He did this by giving certain of His followers a very particular and sacramental form of participation in His priesthood such as would enable them to continue in time the very work that He had accomplished on the Cross: "Do this in remembrance of me."

When Christ's priests forgive sins, they are continuing in time what Christ Himself did on earth. In and through her priests the Church is doing what Christ did.

And what a truly beautiful and rich Sacrament Confession is. We come – and I say *we* because priests go to Confession too – we come and kneel before the figure of Christ crucified, humbling ourselves as we say sorry for our sins and ask for forgiveness; we see the sufferings He endured for us and witness His compassion; we confess our sins and we confess our need of His mercy and love and grace; we receive forgiveness in the form of absolution; our hearts are filled with grace as we make a firm purpose of amendment and declare that we at least *intend* not to sin again, that we will at least promise to *try* not to sin again; we become reconciled to our Father in Heaven; and each time we go to Confession we receive a share in His strength so that we can grow to be just a little bit more like Christ than we were before we went to the Sacrament.

Just as on that first Easter Sunday evening when Our Lord met His Apostles for the first time since they betrayed and abandoned Him, so now, in the Sacrament of Confession, there is no finger wagging, to rebuke, no harsh words, no accusations. There is only Christ's gentle blessing: "Peace be with you".