



The Sacrament of Reconciliation (i.e., the Confessional) is not like a revolving door. We need to intend to amend (i.e., change) our life, so as to not repeat the same mortal sin(s).

## THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION

DOES THE PENITENT'S "INTENTION OF AMENDMENT" AFFECT ABSOLUTION?

The following are a few relevant citations from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC):

### INTERIOR PENANCE

**1430** Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.

**1431** Interior repentance is a radical reorientation [or *amendment*] of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time, it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness, which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Question: Can absolution be granted to a person, where or when there exists no firm ***purpose*** (intent, resolve) ***of amendment*** [an interior change] on the part of the penitent regarding the confessed sin(s)?

Answer: No. (Yes, absolution can be withheld or denied.)

In normal circumstances, when there isn't any danger of death, in order to absolve a penitent who is *sui compos* (conscious and able to make a confession), the priest must be *reasonably certain* that the penitent: (1) Has actually confessed a sin (even a previously confessed and absolved sin is sufficient); (2) Has, in that moment, at least an imperfect sorrow for their sin (attrition – fear of punishment (the loss of heaven)); and (3) Has a ***purpose of amendment*** at that time. If any of these three conditions are lacking, the priest ***MUST*** withhold absolution.

Since the Council of Trent (1545-1563 CE), Holy Church has consistently taught that the essence of the Sacrament of Penance, includes acts of/by the penitent, that is: (1) The confession of sins, (2) The expression of sorrow, and (3) A sincere desire for amendment and atonement. On the other hand, we have also the action of the priest [*in persona Christi capitis* (acting in the Person

of Christ, the Head of the Church)], that is, the granting of absolution. The actions of the penitent and of the priest do relate to each other; as the matter of a sacrament relates to its form.

We would all admit, priests do not have psychic powers to read minds and few have the gift from God to read souls. They have to listen to what the penitent says and then discern the truth. A confessor may, at times, try prudently and carefully to “tease out” or elucidate, so to speak, any of the necessary elements that are apparently lacking, such as: “Do you know an Act of Contrition? No? Okay, are you truly sorry for your sins and do you intend not ever to commit the sin(s) confessed here today again? Very good. Now for your absolution...”

If finally a person evinces *no firm purpose of amendment* – that is, the penitent **clearly doesn't intend to avoid the confessed sin(s) again – then the priest cannot and must not, give absolution.** (Examples: Someone confesses cohabitating and having intimate relations with another person outside the sacramental bond of Holy Matrimony (including being only civilly married outside the Church) and/or in the commission of adultery, and has no intention to end the behavior.) The priest's absolution would be, in effect, improperly given and would therefore be sacrilegious. He would abuse the Sacrament; to the offense of Christ, the detriment of the whole Church and his own soul, as well as the soul of the penitent. He would be, in effect, faking or simulating the sacrament. (YES! Absolution can be denied or withheld—it is not automatic.)

Please keep in mind that, after confession of at least all mortal sins (in kind and number), the offering of the required, classic “Act of Contrition” to God (not the priest as the confessor) expresses clearly both sorrow for sin (attrition and contrition) and a purpose of amendment. Contrition consists of three acts of the human will, which form a unity: grief or sorrow, detestation, and intention.

O my God, I am **heartily sorry** for having offended Thee, [**grief**] and I detest all my sins [**detestation**] because of Thy just punishments, [**attrition, imperfect, based on fear**] but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. [**contrition, more perfect, based on love**] I **firmly resolve**, [**intention**] with the help of Thy grace, **to sin no more** [**amendment**] and to avoid the near occasions of sin. [VARIATIONS INCLUDE ... to sin no more, to do penance, and to *amend* my life.]

Sorrow, detestation and intention or amendment. If one of these is lacking, then an essential element of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is lacking or absent, and if the priest knows the matter is lacking, he **may not** proceed with absolution, because he would simulate or erroneously give the appearance of conferring a valid sacrament (when clearly it cannot be given).

*[Please recall that God's Church is not driven or swayed by secular objections or trends.]*

The priest cannot assume that every penitent has the necessary sorrow, detestation and intention or amendment by the simple fact that they showed up in the confessional! It must be expressed.

The confessional is a tribunal of mercy, but it is a *tribunal*. There is a *juridical* character to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The *facts* of each case must be truthfully and honestly brought before God (the Divine Judge). The fact that the person has come is a sign that grace is at work. Coming to the confessional is a *really good start*. But coming is not, in itself, enough.

**Be truly sorry for your sins and firm in your intent and resolve to change ourselves.**