

Dear Fr. Kerper

Why do I have to go to Confession?



► **Dear Father Kerper:** I've never really understood the point of Confession. If God knows my sins and forgives me, why do I need to confess them? And why involve a priest in all this? He's just a human being, not God.

Your well-stated question opens the door to an entirely new way of understanding the sacraments, especially Confession: The sacraments exist *for us*, not for God.

Confession, also known as Penance and Reconciliation, is a perfect example of how the Lord provides us with a special way to enhance our relationship with him by gradually “repairing” ourselves through self-knowledge and his healing forgiveness.

Let's begin with your point about God's knowledge of sin. Yes, God knows everything, not just superficially as we do, but in an infinitely deep and comprehensive way. All the necessary “data,” in a sense, resides in the Divine Mind. As such, God has no need of our confessions.

However, our act of confessing specific sins in the presence of a priest is *not* a futile act. Not at all. It does two things *for us*.

First, it compels us to see ourselves as we really are – “warts and all.” While one can easily say, “I'm a poor sinner,” it's much more difficult – and painful – to admit, “I'm an angry, dishonest, spiteful, foul-mouthed, and/or spiritually negligent person.” Confession, then, is like a mirror to the self. We may be shocked by our true appearance.

Second, when we acknowledge specific sins that afflict us, especially serious ones, we finally begin to see the grandeur of God's loving forgiveness that heals us and conquers even the greatest evil.

What I've just said comes from basic Catholic sacramental theology, which has its roots in Scripture. Allow me now to put some “flesh” on this theological skeleton by telling you a personal story that helped me years ago to understand how Confession works.

When I was 18, I borrowed my father's beloved 8-cylinder silver Oldsmobile to go to an event with some friends. On the way home, we ran into a blizzard. Not knowing how to drive in snow, and unwilling to display my ignorance to my friends, I shifted into the lowest gear. The snow soon stopped, but I continued driving for 20 miles at high speed in the lowest gear. My stupid act began the gradual ruination of the car's transmission. A few months later, my father, seemingly mystified by the car's sudden illness, reluctantly got rid of his cherished Oldsmobile.

Fifteen years later, when I was 33 and a priest, I finally confessed my “sin.” Quite casually, I said to my father: “Remember that beautiful silver Oldsmobile with the mysterious transmission problem? Well, I think I ruined the transmission by speeding in low gear in a snowstorm in December 1970.”

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My father, a man of very few words, simply said: “Of course, I knew you ruined the car. Thanks for finally telling me.”

My “confession” added nothing new to my father's knowledge. He had known of my “sin” for 15 years. But my “confession” added two items to my *knowledge*. First, I recognized my own continuing ignorance about mechanical things, like cars. More important, I gained new knowledge about my father: namely, that he *always* knew my “sin,” that he instantly forgave me, and that he loved me enough to put aside my “sin” and to give up his favorite car. If I had not eventually “confessed” to my father, I would have lost precious opportunity to see so vividly his patient, quiet, and unassuming love for me.

This brings us to the role of the priest. For sure, you can confess your sins to God in the privacy of your own room, just as I could have muttered to the walls about my father's Oldsmobile. But there's one big problem: You'll probably never hear an audible voice saying, “I forgive you.”

Because human beings crave certitude expressed in a clearly intelligible way, the Lord kindly gives us that certitude, namely through the voice of the priest, a fellow human being, empowered to act as the Lord's agent.

After you confess your sins, the priest will always respond on behalf of God, our true Father, with the words of Absolution: “I absolve from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” With this absolution comes the restoration of God's grace to begin anew.

In effect, God, through the priest, simply says, “Of course, I knew you ruined the car. Thanks for telling me.”

Confession, then, gives us deeper self-knowledge of sin, renewed knowledge of God's infinite forgiveness, and reception of the special grace from this sacrament. Combined, these two forms of knowledge, together with the renewal of God's grace, give us something truly grand: a deeper love of God who knows everything, forgives all sin, and loves us more than we can ever know.

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