

# Module Five

## Confession

### Abide

*A standalone session. Run it any time.*

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## Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

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### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim.** The group discovers that the risen Christ gave the apostles authority both to forgive and to retain sins, and works out what retaining would require.

**Catholic Touchstone.** God forgives sins. The question is not whether a priest has power of his own, which he does not, but whether Christ chose to forgive through men, and John 20 says he did.

### What You Need to Know

John 20:21-23 is the centre and it repays slow reading. The risen Christ says as the Father has sent me, even so I send you. He breathes on them, and the gesture is meant to be heard against Genesis 2:7, where God breathes the breath of life into Adam, with Ezekiel 37 behind it, where the breath is commanded to breathe on the slain so that they live. Both are scenes of God making the dead alive. He says receive the Holy Spirit. And then: if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

The retaining half is what makes the passage decisive. Forgiving alone could be read as announcing a general pardon. Retaining cannot. To retain some sins and not others requires discretion, discretion requires knowing what the sins are, and ordinarily the only way to know is to be told. So the text itself establishes a real discerning authority over particular sins. It does not by itself dictate the ritual form. The Church, holding that authority from the apostles, has ordered its exercise so that the penitent discloses his sins and the priest judges; see CCC 1484 in the Catechism Connection below on why that personal form is the ordinary one.

### Concede the development

The form has changed considerably and you should say so. In the early centuries penance was often public and sometimes once in a lifetime, and the private, repeatable form familiar to us spread through Celtic and monastic practice. What is claimed as apostolic is the authority and the reality of sacramental absolution, not the confessional box or the modern schedule.

### Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

*“When a man is guilty in any of these, he shall confess the sin he has committed, and he shall bring his guilt offering to the Lord... and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.”*

**Leviticus 5:5-6**

Spoken confession of the specific sin, a sacrificial offering, and atonement made by the priest for that person. The verses do not say the confession is addressed to the priest; they do set it inside the priestly rite that the priest alone can complete. The pattern is not a Catholic innovation; under the Law it is the

ordinary appointed shape of forgiveness, confession joined to sacrifice and to priestly atonement. Israel knew contrition sought straight from God too, as Psalm 51 shows, but the cult is where God fixed the ordinary means. Numbers 5:6-8 runs the same way with restitution added: the person confesses the sin committed, makes full restitution to the one wronged, and where there is no kinsman to receive it the restitution goes to the priest, along with the ram of atonement by which atonement is made for him. What changes in the New Testament is not the pattern but the priest and the sacrifice.

## Voices of the Church

### Voice of the Church

#### The Didache

*chs. 4 and 14 (summary)*

This very early handbook instructs believers to confess their transgressions in church, and not to come to prayer with a bad conscience, and to confess before breaking bread on the Lord's day so that the sacrifice may be pure.

Note the setting. Confession here is not private self-examination before God; it happens in the assembly and it is tied to the Eucharist.

*Summary of the relevant chapters.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. Ambrose

*On Penance (summary)*

Writing against those who held that the Church could not forgive serious sin after baptism, Ambrose argues that the power to forgive was given to the Church and is exercised through her ministers, and that God granted this to no one apart from priests.

The context matters: he is arguing against rigorists who wanted the Church to withhold forgiveness. The Catholic side of that dispute was the merciful one.

*Summary of the work's argument; no section number printed.*

### Voice of the Church

#### St. John Chrysostom

*On the Priesthood, Book III (summary)*

Chrysostom writes with astonishment that priests have been entrusted with an authority God gave neither to angels nor archangels, since what they bind on earth is bound in heaven.

He treats it as awe-inspiring rather than as a privilege, and his whole treatise is about how frightening the office is. That tone is worth passing on.

*Summary of his argument in Book III; no section number printed.*

## Catechism Connection

- CCC 1441-1442: God alone forgives sins, and he has willed to exercise that forgiveness through the ministry of the apostles and their successors.
- CCC 1461-1467 on the minister, the seal of confession, and the absolute nature of that seal.
- CCC 1456 on confessing serious sins, and CCC 1458 commending frequent confession of venial sins.
- CCC 1484 on why the personal form is the ordinary one.

## THE OBJECTION BENCH

*Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.*

**"There is one mediator. Why confess to a man?"**

CCC 1441 concedes the premise: God alone forgives sins. The Catholic claim is about the means he chose, not about a rival source of forgiveness.

Then ask what the objection does with John 20:23, and specifically with the word retain.

**"James says confess to one another, which is mutual."**

Read the whole passage. James 5:14-16 tells the sick to call for the elders of the church, who pray over him and anoint him, and says that if he has committed sins he will be forgiven. The confessing sits inside an instruction about calling the elders.

Concede verse 16 outright, and concede more than they ask. The command is reciprocal, and the same sentence says pray for one another, which nobody restricts to elders. Do not claim the context supplies the officeholder; it does not settle who hears the confession. What the context does is put the confessing inside a passage where sickness, sin and forgiveness are handled by calling the elders of the church, who pray over the man and anoint him, and where the forgiveness of his sins is spoken of in that setting. That makes the presbyteral reading a natural one, not a proved one, and the honest way to say so is that James shows the early Church already joining confession, prayer and the ministry of the elders. Then move: this passage is not where the case rests. John 20:23 is, and the word retain is why.

**"1 John 1:9 says confess to God and he is faithful to forgive."**

Agree completely; that verse is true and Catholics rely on it. Nothing in the sacrament denies that God forgives the contrite.

The question is what Christ established for the ordinary life of the Church, and John 20:23 is in the same author's Gospel.

**"The confessional has been used to abuse people."**

Do not deflect this and do not answer it fast. It is true, it has happened, and the Church has failed people badly.

What can be said honestly: the seal exists to protect the penitent absolutely and is never set aside, canon law makes the absolution of an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment invalid except in danger of death, and the modern safeguarding requirements built around the sacrament, which govern the setting and never touch the seal itself, exist because of real failures. If someone in the room has been hurt, the pastoral response comes first and the argument does not come at all.

## Part Two: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know everything we have done and you came anyway. Take our fear of being known. Amen.

### Win

1. When did you last say something out loud that you had only ever thought? What did that do?
2. What keeps you from confession, when something does?

### Build

**Read aloud: John 20:19-23.**

3. List everything Jesus does in verses 21 to 23, in order.

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Sends them as the Father sent him. Breathes on them. Says receive the Holy Spirit. Gives authority to forgive and to retain.

Note the breathing. Interpreters hear Genesis 2:7 behind it, where God breathes the breath of life into Adam, and Ezekiel 37, where the breath is commanded to breathe on the slain so that they live. John is signalling that something is being created here.

4. Take the word retain seriously. What would a person need in order to retain some sins and not others?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Discretion, which requires knowledge, which requires being told.

This is the whole argument and it is worth letting the group arrive at it slowly. Forgiving alone could be a general announcement. Retaining cannot be done blind.

5. Read Leviticus 5:5-6. What is the pattern there?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The man confesses the sin he has committed, brings his offering, and the priest makes atonement for him.

Confession spoken, an offering brought, atonement made by the priest. What changes in the New Testament is the priest and the sacrifice, not the shape.

### The Steelman

#### The strongest form of the objection.

Not once in the New Testament does anyone confess a sin to an apostle. Not once. For a practice supposedly instituted by Christ on Easter evening and essential to the Christian life, the silence in

Acts and the letters is total. What we find instead is that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us, addressed to everyone, with no minister in sight.

John 20:23 is better read as the commission to preach the Gospel, which does exactly this: those who receive it are forgiven, those who refuse it are not. That reading requires no new institution and fits the sending in verse 21, which is a sending to preach.

And the practice as Catholics know it is demonstrably late. Public penance, once in a lifetime, gave way over centuries to something entirely different. What is claimed as apostolic is a medieval Irish invention with a first-century verse attached to it afterward.

## 6. What has to be granted here? And what does the text still require?

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant a great deal. No narrative of sacramental confession appears in the New Testament. 1 John 1:9 is real and Catholics use it. And the developed form is genuinely much later than the apostolic age; the private repeatable practice spread from Celtic and monastic sources.

What the text still requires is the word retain. The preaching reading handles forgive well and retain badly. A preacher who proclaims the Gospel does not retain particular sins; he announces a message and hearers respond. Christ gives the apostles a discriminating authority, and discrimination requires knowledge of particulars.

On development: the Catholic claim has never been that the confessional box is apostolic. It is that the authority is, and that the Church may order its exercise. Compare it to something they accept: the canon of Scripture was discerned over centuries and no one calls the process an invention.

On silence: note also that the letters do not narrate a great deal that everyone agrees happened, including the ordinary Sunday liturgy. The epistles are occasional documents, written to address problems, not manuals of practice.

End pastorally rather than triumphantly. The best argument for confession is not an argument. It is that people walk out of it different, and most of your group already know that.

## Send

7. What is the actual fear? Being known, or being judged?

8. When will you go? Name a day.

## Live It This Week

- Go to confession. Put it in the calendar before you leave tonight.
- Read Psalm 51 slowly.
- If it has been years, tell the priest that at the start. He will help you. It is the most ordinary thing in the world to him.

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you breathed on them and gave them your own authority to forgive. Thank you for making mercy something we can hear out loud. Give us the courage to go. Amen.

## Memory Verse

*"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

**John 20:23**

## Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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- Leviticus 5:5-6, confess and bring the guilt offering; Numbers 5:6-8, confess, make restitution, ram of atonement
- John 20:19-23, the commission (core text, memory verse at v. 23)
- Genesis 2:7, God breathes
- Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, binding and loosing
- James 5:14-16, call for the elders
- 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, the ministry of reconciliation
- 1 John 1:9, if we confess our sins (steelman)
- Psalm 51, for personal prayer

**Catechism:** CCC 1441-1442, 1456, 1458, 1461-1467, 1484.

**Patristic:** Didache chs. 4 and 14. St. Ambrose, On Penance. St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood Book III.