

Take-Home

Confession

Abide

Module Five

What We Found

On Easter evening the risen Christ sends the apostles as the Father sent him, breathes on them in an act that echoes Genesis 2:7 where God breathes life into Adam, and gives them authority to forgive sins and to retain them.

The word retain is where the argument turns. Some read the verse as the commission to preach, so that those who receive the Gospel are forgiven and those who refuse it are not. That reading handles forgive well and retain badly, because a preacher announces a message; he does not retain particular sins. Retaining some sins and not others requires discretion, discretion requires knowing what the sins are, and knowing requires being told.

And the pattern is older than the New Testament. In Leviticus 5 a man confesses the sin he has committed, brings his offering, and the priest makes atonement for him. What changes in the New Testament is the priest and the sacrifice, not the shape.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

The Didache

chs. 4 and 14 (summary)

Confess your transgressions in church, and do not come to prayer with a bad conscience, and confess before breaking bread on the Lord's day. Not private self-examination: it happens in the assembly and is tied to the Eucharist.

Voice of the Church

St. Ambrose

On Penance (summary)

Against rigorists who held the Church could not forgive serious sin after baptism, he argues that the power to forgive was given to the Church and exercised through her ministers. The Catholic side of that dispute was the merciful one.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

On the Priesthood, Book III (summary)

He writes with astonishment that priests were entrusted with an authority God gave neither to angels nor archangels, and his whole treatise is about how frightening the office is.

Ready Response

“Why confess to a man?” Give the premise away at once, because you believe it. God alone forgives sins, and the Catechism says exactly that at 1441. Nothing you are about to say puts a rival in his place. What you are asking about is the means he chose, so read John 20:23 together and ask your friend what they make of the word retain.

“James says confess to one another.” Your friend is reading the verse correctly, so say so. On its own, verse 16 does read as something Christians do for each other, and you are not going to pretend otherwise. What you can do is ask to read James 5:14-16 whole rather than the one line, because the sick man there calls for the elders of the church, they pray over him and anoint him, and the forgiveness is spoken of before the confessing is. Read it together and let your friend see where the sentence sits.

“1 John says confess to God.” Agree completely, and lean on it rather than working around it. That verse is yours as much as theirs, and nothing in the sacrament denies that God forgives a contrite heart. Say that you have relied on it yourself, and let the agreement stand for a moment before anything else gets said.

If It Has Been a Long Time

Tell the priest at the start that it has been years and that you do not remember how it goes. He will walk you through it. This is the most ordinary thing in the world to him, and there is nothing you can say that he has not heard. The seal is absolute and there are no exceptions to it.

Live It This Week

- Go to confession. Put it in the calendar before you leave tonight.
- Read Psalm 51 slowly.

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

In the Catechism

CCC 1441-1442, 1456, 1461-1467.