

Session 5 of 8 | Until the End of the Age

Whose Sins You Forgive

The apostolic ministry of reconciliation

How does the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross actually reach a person in a confessional?

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that only God forgives sins, that the risen Jesus nevertheless breathes the Spirit on his disciples and speaks of sins forgiven and retained, and that the Church receives this as a real ministry carried on by bishops and priests, not as a talent anyone can claim.

Catholic Touchstone. God alone forgives sins. Christ willed that his Church be the sign and instrument of that forgiveness, and he entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the apostolic ministry, continued in bishops and priests. (CCC 1441-1442; 1461.)

What You Need to Know

Mark 2 sets the terms. The scribes are right about one thing: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus does not answer by saying sin is no big deal. He heals the paralytic as visible proof that "the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Every Catholic claim about confession starts here, with the divine authority of Jesus. If that is lost, everything after it is presumption.

John 20 must be read in that light and in order. The risen Jesus says "Peace," shows his wounds, says "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," breathes on them, says "Receive the Holy Spirit," and only then says "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Sending, Spirit, then sins. The disciples do not appoint themselves judges of God's mercy. They are sent, equipped, and commissioned.

Second Corinthians 5 supplies the vocabulary. God reconciled us to himself through Christ and "gave us the ministry of reconciliation." Ministers are "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." An ambassador does not replace the one who sends him. The Church locates sacramental absolution inside this apostolic ministry. The priest acts in the person of Christ. God forgives. (CCC 1442; 1461.)

Be honest about history. The way penance has been celebrated changed a great deal, from severe public penance in the early centuries to the private form the Irish monks spread. The Catechism says so itself (CCC 1447). A changing form does not mean an invented foundation. And say the other honest thing: perfect contrition forgives even mortal sin, but it includes the firm resolve to confess sacramentally as soon as possible (CCC 1452). God is not locked out of a heart between confessions. The sacrament is not optional either.

Terms, in plain words

- **Absolution:** the words by which the priest, in Christ's name, declares the penitent's sins forgiven.
- **In persona Christi:** Latin for "in the person of Christ." The priest does not forgive by his own power; Christ acts through him.

- **Faculties:** the Church's authorization for a priest to hear confessions. Ordination gives the power; the Church governs its exercise (CCC 1462).
- **Contrition:** sorrow for sin with the resolve not to sin again. It is "perfect" when it comes from love of God above all.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Psalm 51:1-12. David asks for mercy, for cleansing, and for "a clean heart." The psalm never pretends sin is small; it asks God to do what only God can do. Pray it before the meeting. Verse numbering follows the RSV2CE; some editions number the psalm differently.

Keep this distinction | leader only

Two guardrails. First, God is the source of forgiveness and the priest is its minister; never let the group hear the priest described as its source. Second, do not suggest God cannot act outside a scheduled confession. Perfect contrition is real, and it includes the resolve to confess. No participant should be asked to name a personal sin tonight.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Summary: Chrysostom marvels that men who live on earth have been entrusted with what belongs to heaven. He applies "whatever you bind on earth" and the forgiving of sins in John 20 directly to the priest's ministry. A king can bind the body; the priest, by Christ's gift, binds and looses the soul. The power is Christ's, exercised through the minister.

On the Priesthood, III.5

Second Vatican Council

Summary: Priests, exercising Christ's office as shepherd within their authority, gather the family of God and lead it to the Father. In the sacrament of Penance they reconcile sinners with God and with the Church, acting in dependence on the bishop.

Presbyterorum Ordinis, 5

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Summary: Since Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to his Apostles, the bishops who are their successors, and priests as the bishops' collaborators, continue to exercise it. Bishops and priests, by the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive sins in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the Church regulates its exercise through faculties.

CCC 1461-1462

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1441-1442.** Only God forgives sins; Christ willed the Church to be the instrument of that forgiveness.

- **CCC 1447-1448.** The forms of penance changed across the centuries; the fundamental structure did not.
- **CCC 1452.** Perfect contrition, and the resolve to confess as soon as possible.
- **CCC 1461-1462.** Ordination confers the power; the Church authorizes its exercise.
- **CCC 1495.** Only priests with the faculty to absolve can forgive sins in Christ's name.

Session Goals

1. Identify the order of sending, Spirit, and sins in John 20 and explain why the order matters.
2. Explain why a priest is an instrument of Christ's mercy and not its source, using 2 Corinthians 5.
3. Invite a personal response toward the sacrament without asking anyone to disclose a sin.

Thread Watch | leader only

Thread A, "gift or office," gets its sharpest test tonight. Every Christian must forgive; sacramental absolution belongs to the ordained ministry entrusted with it. Keep both halves. Session 6 will show the same shape at the altar. Do not open the guesses again.

Timed Plan | 75 to 90 minutes

Clock	Segment	If you only have 60
0 to 8	Opening prayer and Win	One Win question
8 to 28	Build, Questions 1 and 2	Keep
28 to 48	Build, Questions 3 to 5, with the live discovery	Drop Question 5. Assign James 5:14-16 for home
48 to 60	The objection, built then pressed	Keep
60 to 70	Send and Live It This Week	One Send question
70 to 75	Memory verse and closing prayer	Keep

For 90 minutes, let the Build discussion breathe and add the Dig Deeper passage at the end.

OBJECTION BENCH | leader only. Answers for questions that may come up. Do not read aloud.

If someone says: *John 20:23 just means the apostles announced forgiveness when people believed the Gospel.*

You can answer: Then why "retain"? Announcing forgiveness to all who believe does not require a power to withhold it from any. The verse gives a two-sided authority, and the disciples receive the Spirit specifically for it. The early Church read it as a real judgment about actual sins.

If someone says: *I confess directly to God. Why put a man in between?*

You can answer: Keep confessing directly to God; the Church asks that of you every night. The question is whether Christ also gave a way to hear his forgiveness spoken to you by someone he sent, as he healed through hands and taught through voices. John 20 says he did. The two are not rivals.

If someone says: *James 5:16 says confess your sins to one another. That is mutual, not priestly.*

You can answer: It does, and Catholics practice that too. Notice that the same passage sends the sick person to the elders of the church, and the Church reads James 5 first of all about the Anointing of the Sick. Verse 16 is about mutual confession and prayer; it is not the text the sacrament of Penance rests on, and the study never claims it is.

If someone says: *Private confession was invented by Irish monks in the sixth century.*

You can answer: The private form spread through them, yes, and the Catechism says so (CCC 1447). Before that the Church practiced severe public penance. What changed was the form, not the claim that the Church forgives sins by Christ's authority. The Catechism traces that continuity through the changing forms (CCC 1447-1448).

Answers at a Glance

One line per question, for the leader who needs to check quickly during the night. Full answers are in Part Two.

1. Mark 2: only God forgives. Jesus heals the paralytic as proof he has that authority. Everything starts here.
2. John 20: peace, wounds, "as the Father sent me," breath, Spirit, then forgive and retain. Order matters.
3. 2 Corinthians 5: God reconciles, and gives a ministry of reconciliation. Ambassadors, not replacements.
4. John 20 with CCC 1461: bishops and priests receive the power through Orders. We receive the gift through them.
5. Psalm 51: mercy, cleansing, a clean heart. Forgiveness is God's act, and it is asked for, not assumed.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Read aloud everything marked SAY, ASK, and READ. Keep everything marked LEADER to yourself. Share each parchment box only after the group has talked.

Opening Prayer

SAY Merciful Father, give us the courage to admit our sins and the confidence to come home to you. Help us understand the ministry of forgiveness your Son entrusted to his Church. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win | Begin with experience

LEADER Invite brief responses. Anyone may pass. Take one question if time is short.

ASK 1. What is the difference between being told a wrong does not matter and actually being forgiven for it?

ASK 2. What makes it hard to ask for mercy, even when we know we need it?

Build | Let the text lead

READ Read Mark 2:1-12.

ASK 1. Why do the scribes object when Jesus forgives the man? What does Jesus do about it, and what does that reveal about him?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The scribes object because forgiving sins belongs to God alone, and they are right about that. Jesus does not argue the point. He heals the man in front of them "that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins." Forgiveness is not encouragement or a change of feelings. It is God's act, and Jesus shows he has God's authority. This is the source of everything the Church says about confession.

READ Read John 20:19-23.

ASK 2. List, in order, everything Jesus does before he speaks about sins. Why does the order matter?

LEADER Get all of it: peace, wounds, sending, breath, Spirit, then sins.

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Jesus says "Peace be with you," shows his hands and side, says "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," breathes on them, and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." Only then: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

The order matters because it rules out self-appointment. The disciples are sent as Christ was sent and equipped with the Spirit for the task. They do not become independent judges of God's mercy. They become ministers of it. And the power is two-sided, to forgive and to retain, which is more than announcing good news.

Live Discovery

SAY Look in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians for a passage about a ministry of reconciliation and about ambassadors who speak for Christ.

LEADER Allow a short search. Supply 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 only if the group is stuck. Then have someone read the passage the group found.

ASK 3. Who starts the work of reconciliation? What exactly is entrusted to the ministers, and what is not?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

God begins it: "God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." The ministers are "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." An ambassador speaks with the sender's authority and never replaces the sender. The Church understands sacramental absolution inside this apostolic ministry. The source is God's mercy. The minister serves the action Christ has entrusted to his Church. (CCC 1442.)

READ Return to John 20:19-23 and read CCC 1461.

SAY Now we ask how a commission given to the disciples in a locked room reaches a priest in your parish.

ASK 4. What connects Christ's commission that night with the ministry of bishops and priests today? Who does not receive this particular power, and why?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The Church receives John 20 as part of the enduring apostolic ministry we traced in Sessions 1 and 2. Bishops, as successors of the Apostles, and priests, as their co-workers, receive the power to forgive sins through Holy Orders. We do not each inherit the power of absolution, any more than we each inherit the Apostles' place. We receive Christ's forgiveness through the ministry he established for his people. That is the "gift for all, office for some" pattern again. (CCC 1087; 1461.)

READ Read Psalm 51:1-12.

SAY David after his sin. Read it slowly.

ASK 5. What does David ask God to do, and what does he never pretend? How does the psalm prepare a person to come to confession?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

He asks for mercy, for washing and cleansing, for a clean heart and a right spirit. He never pretends the sin was small or that he can fix it himself. Forgiveness is asked for as God's act. That is the posture the sacrament asks of us: honesty about the sin, confidence in the mercy, and a request rather than an assumption.

A Serious Objection | build it, then press it

SAY Now the objection at full strength. Most of us have heard some version of it.

THE OBJECTION | read aloud

"John 20:23 does not describe a sacrament. It describes the Apostles announcing forgiveness to those who accept the Gospel and warning those who reject it. Nothing in the verse mentions a private confession to a priest, and the New Testament never shows anyone making one."

"And even if there were such a power, why would I need it? The Bible says there is one mediator between God and men. I can confess directly to God and be forgiven. Putting a priest in between adds a middleman Christ never asked for. Private confession as you practice it did not even exist until centuries later."

ASK How should the two-sided language of forgiving and retaining be read alongside the gift of the Spirit? Does confessing directly to God compete with the sacrament? And what about the history?

LEADER *Let the group try to answer from the passages read tonight before you share the response. Do not rescue the discussion too early.*

CATHOLIC RESPONSE | share after the discussion

Announcing forgiveness is part of the Church's mission, and the objection is right about that. But John 20 gives a two-sided authority, to forgive and to retain, and the disciples receive the Holy Spirit precisely for it. Announcing good news to everyone does not require a power to withhold from anyone. The Church has always read this as a real ministry concerning real sins, long before the private form spread.

Direct prayer to God and sacramental confession are not rivals. The Church asks you to confess to God every night. The sacrament is a way Christ chose to let a sinner hear forgiveness spoken to him by someone Christ sent, as he chose to heal through hands and teach through voices. Christ remains the one mediator; the priest is his ambassador, not a second mediator. On history, the form changed and the Catechism says so (CCC 1447). What was invented later was a way of celebrating a gift the Church had claimed from the start. (CCC 1441-1448; 1461.)

Send | Respond personally

ASK 1. What would help you approach God's mercy with more honesty and more confidence? You do not need to mention any sin.

ASK 2. How would you explain confession to someone who thinks the priest is standing in God's place?

Live It This Week

Pray. Pray Psalm 51:1-12 slowly on three days, asking for both mercy and a new heart.

Prepare. Make a private examination of conscience. If you can receive the sacrament, make a concrete plan and a time. If you are exploring the faith, ask a priest for a conversation.

Repair. Take one appropriate step toward repairing a harm you caused. Get advice first if contact would be unwise or unsafe.

Scripture Memory

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

2 Corinthians 5:20 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

SAY Lord Jesus, you know our sins and still call us home. Give us true repentance and trust in your mercy. Help us receive forgiveness and become quicker to forgive. Amen.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in the order it appears. Materials: RSV2CE Bibles for everyone, this guide, the Take-Home sheets, and if possible a printed copy of CCC 1461 for Question 4.

When	Passage	Purpose
1	Mark 2:1-12	Only God forgives; Jesus proves his authority
2	John 20:19-23	Sending, Spirit, then sins
3	2 Corinthians 5:18-20	Live discovery: ambassadors for Christ
4	John 20:19-23 with CCC 1461	From the locked room to the parish
5	Psalm 51:1-12	The posture of repentance
Memory	2 Corinthians 5:20	Ambassadors for Christ

Dig Deeper | James 5:14-16

The sick person calls the elders, who pray and anoint. Then, "confess your sins to one another." The Church reads this passage first of all about the Anointing of the Sick (CCC 1510), and verse 16 about mutual confession and prayer. Do not present it as the proof text for the sacrament of Penance. Do notice that the elders of the church, not just any believer, are the ones sent for.

After the meeting

Hand out Take-Home 5. Do not distribute this answer-bearing leader guide as a participant workbook.