

*The Knights of Columbus presents  
The Luke E. Hart Series  
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

# THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

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PART ONE • SECTION EIGHT OF  
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

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*What does a Catholic believe?  
How does a Catholic worship?  
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the  
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

*by  
Peter Kreeft*

General Editor  
Father John A. Farren, O.P.  
Director of the Catholic Information Service  
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Reverend Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

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# A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

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This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

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# SECTION 8: THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

## *1. The importance of forgiveness*

It is very foolish to fear or resent the authority of the Church, for that authority is the basis on which she forgives our sins.

When he was asked why he became a Catholic, G. K. Chesterton, the great English writer, replied: “To get my sins forgiven.”

Jesus came to earth for that purpose. “You shall call his name Jesus [“Savior”], for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). And the Church, since it is his Body, continues his work. Therefore the Church’s purpose on earth is to extend through time and space this kingdom of forgiveness.

Not just forgiveness, but Christ’s forgiveness. Forgiveness, like the Church herself, is wholly Christocentric.

“After his Resurrection, Christ sent his apostles ‘so that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations.’<sup>526</sup> The apostles and their successors carry out this ‘ministry of reconciliation,’ not only by [1] announcing to men God’s forgiveness merited for us by

Christ, and [2] calling them to conversion and faith; but also by [3] communicating to them the forgiveness of sins in Baptism, and [4] reconciling them with God and with the Church through the power of the keys [the Sacrament of Penance], received from Christ<sup>527</sup>” (Mt 16:19; 2 Cor 5:18; C 981).

How important is forgiveness? Eternally important! “Were there no forgiveness of sins in the Church, there would be no hope of life to come or eternal liberation. Let us thank God who has given his Church such a gift<sup>533</sup>” (C 983).

## *2. The need for forgiveness: the reality of sin*

Why do we need forgiveness? Because we are sinners.

Sin is life’s greatest problem, for sin is separation from life’s greatest solution, God, the source of all goodness and life and joy.

Sin is real. So is justice. Sin deserves punishment. The fear of divine justice is wise because that justice is true. If it is not, every book of the Bible lies.

The work of Christ and his Church is “the forgiveness of sins.” Not imperfections, or mistakes, or immaturities, but sins. Brain damage is an imperfection,  $2+2=5$  is a mistake, and “puppy love” is an immaturity; but acts of greed and lust and pride are sins.

But the sense of sin, the conviction of sin, is increasingly absent from modern minds. This is a radically new development in the history of Western civilization. Ancient pagans took sin for granted and doubted salvation; modern pagans take salvation for granted and deny sin. Our society’s most popular prophets, the pop psychologists, see sin as a superstition, guilt as a mental illness, and “the fear of

the Lord” – which Scripture calls “the beginning of wisdom” – as emotional immaturity.

Why is it “the beginning of wisdom” (Prv 9:10)? Because the wisdom of Gospel love presupposes the wisdom of religious fear; the “good news” of the forgiveness of sins presupposes the “bad news” of sins to be forgiven.

In fact, Christ said he did not come for those who do not believe they are sinners: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt 9:12-13). If there is no confession of sin, there is no forgiveness and no salvation.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). This is Scripture’s constant assumption. Deny that assumption and everything else in Scripture loses its meaning. The prophets become quaint exaggerations, and Christ’s Incarnation and Crucifixion become unnecessary overreactions.

### *3. Seven ways to deny the reality of sin*

The very concept of sin presupposes seven other ideas which are historically derived from God’s revelation to Abraham and the three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) that stem from that; seven ideas which are denied by alternative religions and philosophies.

- 1) Atheism (“no-God”) denies *that there is a God to sin against.*
- 2) Polytheism (“many-gods”) denies *that there is only one God, who is all-good and deserves to be obeyed.*

- 3) Pantheism (“everything is God”) denies *that God has a will that discriminates* between good and evil.
- 4) Deism (a God, but an absent God) denies *that God has intervened in history* to make his will known by establishing a covenant and giving commandments.
- 5) Skepticism denies *that we can know* God’s law, God’s will, or God’s character.
- 6) Determinism denies *that we have a free will* and are therefore personally responsible for our choices of good or evil.
- 7) And naive optimism denies *that evil exists* in humanity.

#### 4. *The meaning of sin*

“Sin” means more than just bad behavior or bad habits. It means a No to God, his will, his law, and his love. It means breaking the love-covenant relationship with God. It is like marital infidelity (an analogy often used by the prophets). It concerns a *relationship*, not just an isolated individual; and a *personal* relationship, not just a relationship to an abstract principle; and a *relationship with God*, not just with man.

Forgiveness is the beginning of the restoration of the relationship. It is reconciliation.

But the “good news” of forgiveness presupposes the “bad news” of sin, as a cure presupposes a disease. Christianity does not appear as “good news” at all to the self-righteous, any more than a free heart transplant opera-

tion appears as good news to the patient who does not know he is dying.

### *5. Two kinds of sin: original sin and actual sin*

“Actual sin” is something we *do*; “original sin” is something we *have*, like a disease. The analogy is not too insulting; it is not insulting enough; sin is far worse than any physical disease.

“Actual sin” means sins, particular acts, choices to obey our own will when it conflicts with God’s will as revealed in his law, the moral law that is written both in the Ten Commandments and in our own hearts and consciences.

“Original sin” refers *not merely* to the first actual sin committed by Adam and Eve (that is a popular confusion), *but also* to the state or condition of our being deprived of supernatural life; the state of separation from God that we are born with, the fallen human nature that we inherit from our first parents’ first actual sin – much as the state of divorce results from the choice to divorce, or the state of death results from an act of killing, or the state of drug addiction results from the choice to take the first drug.

The analogy to drugs also sounds insulting, but it too is not insulting enough. For sin is worse than drugs. Drugs can only ruin our life; sin can ruin our eternity.

### *6. The meaning of Original Sin*

Original Sin could be called “original selfishness.” Our instincts are selfish. We are born with the selfishness principle in us by nature. This is observable even in infants. We do not, of course, personally blame them for being selfish, but as St. Augustine argued, “As we grow older we root out

such ways and cast them from us: which means that we hold them to be bad – for no man engaged in removing evil would knowingly cast out what is good.”

Original sin is a very unpopular idea in the modern world. But it is an essential part of the Christian gospel, and “[t]he Church, which has the mind of Christ,<sup>263</sup> knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ” (C 389). For sin is precisely what this “Savior” saves us from.

Original Sin does not mean that we are “totally depraved” (Calvin’s term), or wholly evil, or more evil than good (how could that be measured?), or that our very *being* is evil, or that we are no longer infinitely valuable and infinitely loved by God. It means that we are mortally wounded, a defaced masterpiece. The greater the masterpiece, the more terrible its defacement is.

Original sin is a difficult concept for us because we cannot appreciate the great difference between our present state and mankind’s first state of unfallen innocence, which we have never experienced. Our instincts spontaneously take our present state of selfishness as the norm rather than the abnormality. But our faith and our reason tell us that the good God could not have created us selfish by nature; that we are all now “abnormal.”

Original sin, the inborn state of all humanity, explains why all of us commit actual sins. If we were all born sin-free and innocent like Adam, surely some of us would have chosen to remain so. Yet none do. (And the better and more saintly we are, the more readily and clearly we admit it.) Why?

Because we are not born innocent of Original Sin, only innocent of actual sins. And Original Sin leads us to

commit actual sins. Our being conditions our actions. We sin because we are sinners, just as we sing because we are singers. Our nature conditions our acts, as an alcoholic's brain chemistry and chemical dependency condition his act of drinking.

This does not mean we are not responsible for actual sins, for the will's choice is also involved in the act – sometimes a lot, sometimes a little. We are not *determined*, but we are *conditioned* – led, pulled, influenced – by our sinful nature and instincts. But we also are free to choose to obey our instincts or to resist them. We *can* and often do choose contrary to our instincts – for instance, when we fast, or sacrifice.

How Original Sin is transmitted from our first parents to all their descendants is a mystery about which we have imperfect knowledge. The same is true of the mystery of our very selves, the union of body and soul. The transmission is by heredity, not just environment – a kind of spiritual heredity. Our selfishness comes from our nature, not just from society, by imitation.

The origin of sin may be mysterious, but its existence, its reality and presence now, in our individual and social experience, is very clear. The dogma is confirmed by the data. “What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn toward what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot have come from his good creator. . . .<sup>288</sup>” (C 401), or from the wholly good world he created; so it must come from his own free “fall.”

## *7. The historical background of the Christian concept of sin*

All mankind has a religious instinct, a tendency to worship something. We also have a moral instinct, a tendency to judge between right and wrong. Only one people in history joined these two instincts definitively: the Jews (and Christians and Muslims, who learned from them). For the God they worshipped, the God who revealed himself to them, unlike all other gods, was wholly good and his will was the origin of the moral law. The worship-object and the moral-ideal were the same for the Jews, unlike any other ancient people. This was not their doing, but God's. They knew the true God only because God chose to reveal himself to them, chose them to be his collective prophet to the world.

The Jews knew two relationships with this God that no other ancient people had with any of their gods, two possibilities of personal intimacy unknown to pagans: "faith" and "sin." "Faith" to them meant more than "belief;" it meant personal trust and fidelity, as in marriage. (Indeed, the "marriage covenant" is the closest human parallel to this "covenant" relationship with God.) "Sin" meant the breaking of this intimate relationship: spiritual infidelity or divorce. Since no pagan knew such wonderful intimacy with God, no pagan knew such awful alienation from God either. The height of the mountain measures the depth of the valley; the greater the treasure, the greater the tragedy when it is lost.

Christians inherited these two categories, "faith" and "sin," as the two fundamental options in relationship to God. Thus St. Paul could write: "Whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom 14:23). Christians knew an even greater intima-

cy with God because of the Incarnation, and a greater horror of sin because of the Crucifixion. When you see the murder of God, no other evil can come close.

So real and so terrible is sin that the price God had to pay for its forgiveness was his own Son's precious blood, and that terrible cry from the Cross, from the depths of Hell: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

No greater price was ever paid for anything than God paid for our forgiveness. Therefore nothing in the world is more valuable than forgiveness.

### *8. Why couldn't God just forgive our sins without Christ's death?*

Because that would mean ignoring it. And God is Truth.

Suppose you have done something real and terrible to a good friend. You know the harm you have done, and your guilt haunts you with its truth. Now suppose, when you plead for forgiveness, your victim says, "Forget it. There's nothing to forgive." That does *not* free you. The truth must be faced and dealt with. "Forget it" is not the same as "forgive it."

Sin is a reality, as death or disease or divorce are realities. It must be dealt with by a reality, not just a blinking of the eye. A real debt is owed, and it must be really paid.

And that must cost something. If I forgive you your debt of \$1000 to me, that costs me \$1000, and I must pay my creditors \$1000 out of my own pocket. If I assume another's debt, I must really pay it.

And the human debt God assumed was death.

“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22). God taught this to his chosen people for almost two thousand years by displaying before their eyes every day in the Temple the ritual slaughter of animals, especially the sacrificial lamb. It was the central act of their liturgy.

For sin involves the shedding of blood, or at least the harming of human life in some way. Nothing less than human life-blood can redeem (buy back) human life-blood.

So God, through Mary, took our blood, took human nature and human blood, so that he could give his life-blood as the price of our forgiveness.

### *9. Only Christ can forgive sins*

There can be no forgiveness without Christ. The Pharisees recognized his claim to forgive sins as a claim to divinity, and objected, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7).

No sinful man, who himself needed to be redeemed, could pay the price for mankind’s redemption. But God’s divine nature, perfect and immortal, could not die or suffer. So God assumed human nature to effect the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is the reason for the Crucifixion, and the Crucifixion is the reason for the Incarnation.

### *10. The power of the Church to forgive sins*

Only God can forgive sins. But God became man in Christ, and Christ gave the Church the power to transmit Christ’s forgiveness. She forgives in Christ’s name, not her own. She has the authority to forgive sins because Christ gave it to her: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send

you.... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:21-22).

“When . . . Baptism . . . cleansed us, the forgiveness we received then was so full and complete that there remained in us absolutely nothing left to efface, neither original sin nor offenses committed by our own will . . . . Yet the grace of Baptism delivers no one from all the weakness of nature. On the contrary, we must still combat the movements of concupiscence [sinful desire, desire to sin] that never ceases leading us into evil<sup>523</sup>” (C 978).

And when we do sin, “[I]t is through the sacrament of Penance that the baptized can be reconciled with God and with the Church” (C 980). Penance forgives all actual sins if they are confessed and sincerely repented. This sacrament gives us liberation, pardon, and peace. The Devil hates and fears the Confessional more than any place on earth outside the Eucharist itself.

St. John Chrysostom wrote: “[p]riests have received from God a power that he has given neither to angels nor to archangels . . . <sup>532</sup>” (C 983). This is the power to forgive sins.

### *11. Is there an “unforgivable sin”?*

No sin is too great for God and his Church to forgive, if repentance is honest. “There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive” (C 982). Only impenitence, only refusal to believe in and accept God’s gift of forgiveness, is unforgivable. God never withholds his forgiveness, but we sometimes withhold our repentance.

How could any finite human sin exhaust the infinite mercy of God? How could evil be stronger than good? No

sin is too great for God's forgiveness to save us from, but no sin is too small to damn us if we refuse to repent of it.

### *12. Nothing worse than sin*

There is nothing better than God. And sin separates us from God. Therefore there is nothing worse than sin.

Nothing but sin can separate us from God, in time or in eternity. For sin is departure from God's will, and God's will for us is nothing but our own happiness. In fact, it is to share his own divine life in unimaginable joy. Once you realize how great God's love is and how great the joy he wills for us, there is nothing – no pain, no failure, no horror – that can be worse than the one and only thing that can separate us from that end: our unrepented sin.

### *13. The reality of Hell*

It is difficult for modern minds to believe that the alternative to forgiveness is Hell; that to die in unrepented, unforgiven sin is to deserve eternal separation from God.

But we have free will, therefore we *can* choose to die in this state. And since there is no reincarnation, no second chance ("it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" – Heb 9:27), it follows that eternal separation from God – Hell – is really possible.

If Hell is unreal, Jesus is either a fool or a liar. No one talked more, or more seriously, about Hell than sweet and gentle Jesus.

Why did he do that? For the same reason loving parents talk more seriously than anyone else to their children about not running into a busy street, or playing with matches.

The popular *imagery* of Hell – brimstone, pitchforks, and torture – and even the Biblical imagery of fire, are not to be taken *literally* (that’s part of what is meant by calling them “images”), but it *is* to be taken *seriously*. The reality of Hell – eternal separation from God – is much *more* terrible, not less, than the imagery.

God does not force Heaven on those who refuse it. If he did, it would not be Heaven to them anyway, any more than an opera is heavenly to a captive audience who would rather be at a rock concert – or vice versa. Hell is real because free will is real. No one wants Hell to be real, and everyone wants free will to be real, but the two imply each other: if we are free, we are free to refuse Heaven.

Thus, the forgiveness of sins is infinitely and eternally important. “Salvation” means salvation from sin and its eternal consequence, Hell. If sin and Hell were myths, what would Christ’s salvation be salvation from? How could Jesus be Jesus (“Savior”)?

#### *14. Does Christ save us from sin or punishment?*

The Savior saves us from two things: the punishment for sin and sin itself.

The punishment for sin is death. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

There are two kinds of death: temporal and eternal, death of the body and death of the soul. Christ warns us, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28).

Death (of both body and soul) is the inevitable punishment for sin as a stomach ache is the inevitable punishment for an infant’s eating 20 cookies, or as ignorance is

the inevitable punishment for not studying. It is not an external, optional punishment added on by God's choice, like a spanking to the infant or a grade of F to the student.

But Christ does not just save us from sin's punishment. He was called "Savior" because "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). He is not merely an eternal fire insurance policy. We are to be perfectly sanctified as well as perfectly justified. He not only forgives our sins, but he also destroys our sins. He does not rest until he has made us perfectly holy, in this life or in Purgatory ("you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" – Mt 5:48).

### *15. Is forgiveness a legal change or a real change?*

When God forgives us, that changes not only our legal relation to God, but it changes us too. Luther taught that the result of repentance and faith was simply freedom from the penalty and punishment of God's law, or legal justification, not real sanctification. He said that God saw us *as if* we were righteous because Christ paid our debt.

But this is a very inadequate image for God. God is not a lawyer! More seriously, God cannot deceive himself; what he sees is true. We are *made* really righteous; we are sanctified as well as justified by God's grace. Baptism really wipes away Original Sin and gives us supernatural life.

Therefore sanctification, being-made-holy by doing good works, is a necessary part of the forgiveness of sins and salvation. We are forgiven *in order to forgive others*; we are given God's love *in order to pass it on*. We are justified (forgiven) by pure grace, without our deserving it; but we are justified (forgiven) *for* good works. St. Paul teaches both points at once when he writes: "For by grace

have you been saved, through faith: and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:8-10).

### *16. Catholic vs. Protestant theologies of forgiveness, faith, and works*

Protestants and Catholics agree that justification comes to us as a gift from God, a gift that we accept by faith. No one can “buy” their way to Heaven with “enough” good works. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). The way to Heaven has been bought for us by the Blood of Christ. Faith is the acceptance of that free gift.

Furthermore, Catholics agree with Protestants that, as recipients of this free gift, we have nothing to boast of before God. Out of love, God took the initiative to save us; we did not first return to God on our own. “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10; cf. Rom 5:6-10).

There is disagreement, however, with regard to how divine grace carries out our justification. Luther, and many Protestants after him, held that through the work of Christ the sinner who accepts the Gospel in faith is justified by being declared not guilty before God. In his view, the believer contributes nothing to his or her justification. Through the mercy of God, the believer is declared just by God, though he or she remains a sinner. For Luther, the Christian believer remains “simultaneously a justified person and a sinner.” This position emphasizes the dependence of the sinner upon the mercy of God, for sinners

stand before God with no merits of their own for which they might seek reward from God.

According to Catholic teaching, however, the believer is *declared* just by God because he or she *becomes* just by an interior transformation through the work of God's grace. Sanctification is an intrinsic element of justification. "Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (C 1989). Not only are our sins forgiven, but also, by the working of the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the Body of Christ and are granted participation in the life of God, the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Because of this inner transformation, the human person can do more than passively receive God's grace, and in fact is enabled to cooperate with it by an act of free will. By contrast, many Protestants argue that free will was lost through sin. This reflects the Protestant concern to uphold the idea that we can do nothing to save ourselves and that only God saves us. Catholic teaching agrees that we do not save ourselves, but maintains that our free will remains active in justification. First of all, the Church teaches that sin damages human nature (and thus free will), but does not destroy it entirely. Second, the Church holds that grace does not push aside nature, but rather perfects it, and that God's grace working in our hearts does not crowd out our free will. Since free will remains, justification necessarily includes our cooperating by free will with God's grace.

Cooperating with God's grace in turn means to do good works. For Catholics, justification requires not only accepting Christ's Gospel in faith but also living in a way that accords with his teaching. As St. James tells us: "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:17). Catholics thus

include good works along with faith as an essential part of justification.

Since our good works are acts of free will, though always in cooperation with grace, Catholics speak of them as having merit in God's sight. Many Protestants reject any talk of merit as implying that human sinners could do what is right on their own, apart from God, and thus claim a reward from God. Catholic teaching, however, is careful to point out that the initial gift of divine grace filling our hearts with love of God is in no way merited. This is a free gift of God to those who are otherwise separated from Him by sin.

Once God has made the first move, however, and touched us with the divine grace, we are able to cooperate with Him in such a way that our actions remain truly ours, even though in doing them we are sustained by God's grace. Our good actions are ours, as are the merits that belong to them, but they are always God's gifts, since we can do them only through His grace. "The merits of our good works are the gifts of the divine goodness" (C 2009).

Over the centuries, a significant part of the dispute between Catholics and Protestants has been caused by different ways of talking about the same topics. Ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Protestants has shown that there is often a good deal more agreement on important issues than was previously recognized. In 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which stated that "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics" (n. 40).

## 17. *Forgiveness must be passed on*

Christ makes our being-forgiven by him contingent on our forgiving others: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:14-15).

He even commands us, in the “Lord’s Prayer,” to pray for our own damnation if we hold back our forgiveness: “Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.” Our refusal to forgive – to do this first deed of charity – will, quite simply, send us to Hell if not repented of. Gentle Jesus says so! Why is this? It’s not that God *refuses to give* forgiveness to us until we forgive, but that *we cannot receive* forgiveness from God if we have unforgiving hearts. If our heart is closed, like a clenched fist, to giving forgiveness to others, it will also be closed to receiving it from God.

The difference between the forgiving and the unforgiving heart is like the difference between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The same water, the water of the Jordan River, flows into both bodies of water. But the Dead Sea lives up to its name – nothing can live there – because it does not pass on the living water it receives. It has no outlet. But the Sea of Galilee is so alive that it is still fished today, as it was in Jesus’ time. For the water it receives, it also gives. Forgiveness is like that.

God forgave us a far greater debt than any debt we owe to each other. We owe God far more than anyone owes us. Not only do we owe him our very existence, since he created us, and our heart’s total love, since he is completely good, but also our salvation, our hope of Heaven,

which he won for us on the Cross, at a cost no mortal can comprehend.

*18. Who are forgiven? How many?*

We do not know.

When Jesus' disciples asked him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" he replied, "Strive to enter" (Lk 13:23-24). He did not give us statistics about others, only directions for ourselves.

Whatever their number, the forgiven and saved are always far too "few" for divine love. To the Good Shepherd, 99 of 100 sheep saved was too "few," and he spent all day searching for the one that was lost (Lk 15). God revealed to us his infinitely merciful character, which we need to know, but not the comparative population statistics of Heaven and Hell, which we do not need to know.

We do know that "Everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Mt 7:8). Clearly Christ is speaking of forgiveness and salvation here, not of worldly goods. Not all who seek wealth or health or fame find it, but all who seek God with a sincere and honest heart find him, whether in this life or the next. We do not know what proportion of mankind truly seeks God in the depths of their hearts, because we do not know the hearts of men; but we do know what proportion of those who do seek God find him and his forgiveness (100 percent!), because we know the heart of God (Eph 3:14-19).

*19. How are our sins forgiven?*

Objectively, by Christ's death. That paid sin's price.

Subjectively, by our repentance and faith. That appropriates Christ's payment.

This is applied to us as individuals publicly in Baptism, which forgives Original Sin, and the Sacrament of Penance, which forgives all actual sins that are confessed and repented.

Sincere repentance is a condition of receiving forgiveness. We cannot be forgiven while we are planning to sin again. But our repentance does not cause forgiveness. All of the sacraments, including Penance, work *ex opere operato*, that is, objectively, from the power and presence of Christ in them, not just from the power of our soul's right subjective dispositions. We are like faucets; we need to turn the handle, turn our wills around, to turn on the faucet of forgiveness; but the living water of forgiveness and salvation comes to us not from within ourselves but from the sacraments themselves, from the power of Christ in them.

God has given this incredible power to his Church: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:23). "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

## *20. How does God's forgiveness work?*

Theologians have different explanations. The Church does not dogmatically assert any one of them to the exclusion of others. Like electricity or gravity, we do not need to know how it works, we just need to know that it works.

Some explanations, or human analogies, given by Scripture are:

- the legal: Christ satisfied the demands of the law;

- the financial: Christ paid the price;
- the military: Christ defeated the Devil;
- the mathematical: Christ restored the balance sheet;
- the emancipation: Christ released us from the slavery into which we had sold ourselves;
- the laundry: Christ washed us clean in his blood;
- the scapegoat: Christ became our substitute; and
- the shield: Christ endured God’s just wrath and shielded us from it.

If any of these analogies is helpful to us, we are invited to use it in our thinking; if not, not. What we know is not the spiritual technology, so to speak – the theory of how it works. What we know is something much more practical: what God did and what we must do (paragraphs 21 and 22, below).

*21. What did God do to forgive our sins?*

He died.

Christ’s death caused our sins to be forgiven. That is our divinely revealed data. How it worked is theological explanation.

What God did was to become a man and suffer the Hell we deserved (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”), in our place, for us. God got us off the hook by putting himself on the hook, on the Cross. The price of our soul was his body.

*22. What must we do to receive the forgiveness of sins?*

Here God has given us clear answers, for this is a practical question, something we need to know.

- 1) Subjectively, psychologically, in the depths of the individual's heart, including the unconscious, it's *not* totally clear. We can't judge with certainty whether any individual has in his subjective heart fulfilled the requirements that are objectively laid out clearly, like a map.
- 2) But the map is clear. To the world's most practical question, "What must I do to be saved?" there is a clear answer: repent, believe, and live in charity.
  - a) We must repent of sin, reject sin, convert, turn around, turn to God, seek God, say (and mean) "Your will, not mine, be done."
  - b) We must believe in Christ, accept God's forgiveness and salvation as a free gift.

This faith has an intellectual component, for we must know what Christ we believe. The Creeds define who this Christ is who saves us. However, merely intellectual belief is not enough to save us. For "even the demons believe – and shudder" (Jas 2:19).

Saving faith also has a personal component: we must really open up our souls to Christ, choose him, commit ourselves to him, accept him with an act of will, "just say yes." This is so simple that it is hard to define. It is what Mary did when God asked permission to come into her womb; she said, "Let it be done to me according to your word." And when we do this, we really receive him, receive his supernatural life, into our souls. "Believing" equals "receiving" (Jn 1:12).

When do we receive Christ? In Baptism. Faith includes Baptism. They are not separated. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27).

Baptism is more than a symbol or ceremony. “Baptism... now saves you” (1 Pt 3:21). “Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us to Christ, who died for our sins . . .” (C 977).

c) We must then live this new life of charity we have received in Baptism. “Faith without works is dead.” “If you do not forgive your brother, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.”

These three requirements for salvation correspond to the three “theological virtues,” faith, hope and charity (1 Cor 13:13). Repentance means hope in God’s forgiveness, seeking God’s forgiveness. Baptism means faith in Christ, accepting God’s forgiveness. Charity means love of Christ and the members of his Body, love of the forgiven ones.

### *23. Why forgive?*

We *should* forgive others because God forgave us.

We *must* forgive others because God will not forgive us if we don’t.

We *can* forgive because we know Christ – not just as a figure in history, but as a present and permanent resident of our souls. We can forgive because we have his Spirit and his divine life (supernatural life, sanctifying grace) in our souls, which *is* the life of *agape*, charity, unselfish love. We have the power.

### *24. The power of forgiveness to save the world*

It worked once. It can work again. What Christ did, his Church can and must do, both institutionally and personally, both sacramentally and individually. She has always done it sacramentally; Baptism and Penance have always

been available. If her people do it more resolutely, like the saints – if we become saints – we can win the world again.

It is costly to forgive. When we forego justice and forgive, it means giving up something. But it can never cost us a fraction of what it cost Christ.

The Christian does more than work for “peace and justice,” necessary as those two things are, in hearts as well as in society. The Christian works for peace through *forgiveness*.

Pope John Paul II has given us an example of forgiveness: by forgiving the man who tried to assassinate him, and by asking forgiveness from all who have been harmed by members of the Church in the past when Catholics failed to live up to Catholic principles: e.g. heretics, Protestants, Jews, women, Galileo. Forgiveness is a two-way street; we must ask and give forgiveness.

If we follow the Pope’s Christlike lead, the world can be won again for Christ. If not, not. There is no other way. It is God’s way.

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### Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

<sup>526</sup> *Lk 24:47.*

<sup>527</sup> *2 Cor 5:18.*

<sup>533</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermo 213, 8: PL 38,1064.*

<sup>263</sup> Cf. *1 Cor 2:16.*

<sup>288</sup> *GS 13 § 1.*

<sup>523</sup> *Roman Catechism I, 11, 4.*

<sup>532</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *De sac. 3, 5: PG 48, 643.*