

# Finding Forgiveness. Remembering the Purpose of Mass

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"I know I have been forgiven because I've been to confession, but I don't *feel* forgiven! How can I find peace and know that I'm forgiven? "

This is one of the most frequent questions I get as a priest. A similar question comes up with the problem of forgiving others, "Father," the person asks, "my business partner screwed me real bad. I've tried to forgive him, and I've given it all to God, but I still feel resentment and bitterness. I still want revenge. How can I find peace?"

Assuming that you have already taken the sin to God in the sacrament of reconciliation, the first step to finding the peace of forgiveness is to remember the fact of forgiveness. If you have confessed and received absolution you are forgiven. It's a fact. The first step is to claim that fact. Make it an act of your will and intellect. You might even say out loud to yourself, "I am forgiven. It's a fact." Imagine that resentment, sin, guilt and anger being washed away by a tsunami of God's mercy.

The next step in finding forgiveness is to take the guilt, the memory, the nagging resentment and bitterness with you to Mass and offer it up. There are various practical ways of doing this. First of all you need to ask yourself what Mass is actually for. What's the purpose of Mass? Many Catholics have never asked that basic question, and if pressed they might say, "It is a chance to worship God together." or "We come together to sing hymns, praise God and listen to his word and receive the Bread of Life." or "Mass is the gathering place of the people of God around his Word and his table."

What's missing is the idea that Mass is a sacrifice. It is an offering. From the beginning of religious instinct in man the action of worship was the action of sacrifice. Humans offered to God the best gifts they had. However, in the Jewish religion this idea was expanded and the sacrifice also became a sin offering. The effect of sin was death, but the person's sins were projected on to the animal which was sacrificed, and so the sins were forgiven. The price had been paid.

This primitive idea still lives within the idea of sacrifice of the Mass. The primary meaning of the Mass is that it is an offering of Christ's once for all sacrifice, and that this offering applies the benefits of Christ's sacrifice to our lives. Christ's death was the payment for our sin. Once we see that the Mass is a sacrifice we can participate in the action of the Mass in a new and deeper way.

Therefore, when you come to Mass with a burden of guilt or a nagging desire for revenge or a sense of resentment and anger, you should bring that as part of your offering. See every

## To Live Is Christ

Philin 1:21

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part of the Mass as part of a greater offering to God.

When you say the confession at the beginning of Mass imagine those resentments, that guilt and that feeling of not being forgiven gathered up into the prayer. When the collection is taken, don't just put money in the basket—imagine that you are putting your negative feelings in the basket too. When the offertory gifts are brought forward in procession imagine that the person you resent is being brought forward and offered to God. Place all your dark feelings into those gifts being brought forward. Give God your frustration and fear and worry and anxiety. As the priest lifts the bread and wine see him lifting all the unresolved negative emotions to God.

In the action of the Mass the bread is taken, blessed, broken and transformed. So it is with the negative feelings that you offer up. Through the priest God will take them, offer them to God, bless them, break them and then they will be transformed.

To get rid of those negative feelings of not being forgiven see that first of all the priest takes them as you offer them up. Standing in the place of Christ the priest symbolically takes your burdens. As he does, think of Christ Jesus himself saying, "Come to me all who labor and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest." Through the action of the Mass Christ will take those burdens.

When I say Mass I make a conscious act of the will to bring to the altar all the sins I have heard in the confessional. Of course I don't remember the individual sins. Instead, in a moment of silent prayer I ask that God will take them and forgive them and remember them no more, and that the penitent will be set free, forgiven and healed.

Then the priest blesses the bread. Imagine that he is blessing the burdens you have. "Bless the burdens?" Yes, the dark times of our life will become blessings as they are transformed by grace. But first, like the bread, they need to be broken. The dark feelings have you in bondage, and as the bread is broken see the bonds being broken. Then the transformation of the bondage into blessing will be completed.

Finally, as you receive the body of Christ imagine that you are receiving in the most powerful way the peace and strength and knowledge of forgiveness from Christ himself.

This "liturgy therapy" might take some time to sink in. If your mind has been circling around and around over particular grievances it is possible that you have got into a destructive mental pattern. This negative downward spiral can only be reversed and countered by repeated positive cycles of receiving God's forgiveness week by week.

I am convinced that faith works. In other words, our Catholic faith really does bring us to an abundant life—a life that is transformed from the inside out by God's grace.

Our part is to come to God with an open heart, an open mind and an active will so that as we co operate with his grace we will be transformed into his likeness.

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