Lesson Overview

What is the origin of the Sacrament of Confession? What is its Scriptural basis? What is the church's traditional understanding and practice of the sacrament? Jesus established the sacrament when He gave his disciples the authority to forgive or retain sins in His name. As the Father had sent him, He now sent them (John 20:21). And in His teachings on prayer, Jesus said: “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.” (Matthew 6:14-15). Confession was practiced in the church from its earliest days. In this lesson, students read short excerpts from the writings of early Church Fathers, including Ignatius of Antioch, Tertullian, St. John Chrysostom, and others, in order to begin to trace the understanding and practice of this special sacrament.

Lesson Details

Subject area(s): Religion, Core USCCB Curriculum, Sacraments as Privileged Encounters with Jesus Christ

Grade Level: Middle School

Resource Type: Close Reading/Reflection

Special Learners

This resource was developed with the following special learners in mind:

- Traditional Classroom
- Homeschooled Students
- CCD/Parish-Based Education

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Lesson Plan
The Early Church Fathers on Confession

What is the origin of the Sacrament of Confession? What is its Scriptural basis? What is the church's traditional understanding and practice of the sacrament? Jesus established the sacrament when He gave his disciples the authority to forgive or retain sins in His name. As the Father had sent him, He now sent them (John 20:21). And in His teachings on prayer, Jesus said: “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.” (Matthew 6:14-15). Confession was practiced in the church from its earliest days. Read over the following quotations and re-write each in your own words. Then select one that best helps you understand the Sacrament and write a paragraph explaining how it has improved your understanding.

1. The Letter of Barnabas - AD 74
You shall judge righteously. You shall not make a schism, but you shall pacify those that contend by bringing them together. You shall confess your sins. You shall not go to prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of light

2. Ignatius of Antioch - AD 110
For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ....For where there is division and wrath, God does not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop.

3. Tertullian - AD 203
[Some] people flee from [confession] as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness....The Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge and adjudge.

4. Hippolytus - AD 215
God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your...
Royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles. . . and grant this your servant [the new bishop], whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command.

5. Cyprian - AD 251

Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . I beseech you, brethren; let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord.

6. John Chrysostom - AD 387

Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed." Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding: but they can only bind the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? "Whose sins you shall forgive," he says, "they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men. They are raised to this dignity as if they were already gathered up to heaven.