



# Can every sin be FORGIVEN?

so-called “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” also known as “final impenitence.”

For many years, almost every priest in the world has had the power to forgive the sin of abortion if the person urgently desired absolution, expressed true sorrow, promised not to sin again, and wanted to be reconciled to God and the Church. Likewise, priests can forgive other grave sins such as murder, perjury, devil worship, and so on. No limits apply.

## Forgiveness and church penalties

Now, let’s look at a second biblical text about Confession and forgiveness. On Easter night, the Risen Christ appeared to the apostles, minus Thomas. Saint John wrote: “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins they are retained.’” (John 22:23) This passage touches upon a key source of confusion: the distinction between forgiveness and being released from Church penalties. Priests have the capacity to forgive the sin of abortion but only bishops have the capacity to release individuals from certain Church penalties.

For centuries, the Church has had a wide range of disciplinary tools to promote order and accountability, especially with regard to bishops, priests, consecrated religious, theologians, and people who work for Church institutions. These tools include excommunication, interdict, suspension, removal from office, and censure. Unlike some penalties imposed by civil authorities, Church sanctions never cause bodily harm, imprisonment, or loss of money, except if someone loses employment.

## Excommunication and abortion

These carefully calibrated penalties identify specific sinful acts as more or less grave, relative to others. Hence, a very serious sin receives a very severe punishment: excommunication.

Canon 1398 states: “A person who procures a completed abortion incurs an automatic (*laete sententiae*) excommunication.” Please note that this law also applies to everyone directly involved in the abortion: the ones who perform the abortion, those who pay for it, and anyone who compels a woman to abort her child.

Strange as it may seem, canon law does not impose an automatic excommunication on those who commit or assist in homicide. Why? Because abortion is always directed against a completely innocent and defenseless human being. By imposing an automatic excommunication, the Church

**D**ear Father Kerper: A few months ago I heard that Pope Francis had given all priests the power to forgive the sin of abortion. I’m confused. I was taught that every sin could be forgiven in Confession. Was I wrong? And why is abortion treated as a special case?

Last September, Pope Francis issued a letter proclaiming the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, which extends from Dec. 8, 2015, to Nov. 20, 2016. At the same time he granted to all priests the power to forgive the sin of abortion. Like you, many other Catholics found this confusing. So let’s sort out three distinct matters: first, the unlimited power of forgiveness through the Sacrament of Penance; second, the purpose of penalties that the Church can impose on people who commit grave sins; and third, the Holy Father’s passionate desire to proclaim God’s Mercy to all people.

## All sins can be forgiven in Confession

First, you are perfectly correct: all sins, even the worst, can be forgiven by any priest who hears a person’s confession and grants sacramental absolution. Here, the Church simply imitates the forgiveness of Christ, who once said, “And so I say to you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven.” (Matthew 12:31) The Lord excludes no sinner from forgiveness, except those who adamantly refuse forgiveness, the

wraps a mantle of maternal protection around unborn children who today have no legal protections in most Western societies.

The tricky word here is “automatic.” The excommunication occurs only if the person knows about it. Since many women have no idea that they face excommunication and many today may not even know that they are killing their children, the excommunication never happens.

As to those who knew about the excommunication and actually incurred it, the Holy Father’s initiative allows all priests to reconcile them to the Church. Of course, in the United States, almost every priest has enjoyed this privilege for many years.

### What is the Holy Father’s point?

So, what’s new here? Why did the Holy Father bother “legalizing” a practice already in wide use?

First, his move drew vast media attention to the Church’s desire to extend God’s mercy to everyone through the Sacrament of Penance. After all, many people, even well-instructed Catholics, were surprised that abortion could be forgiven.

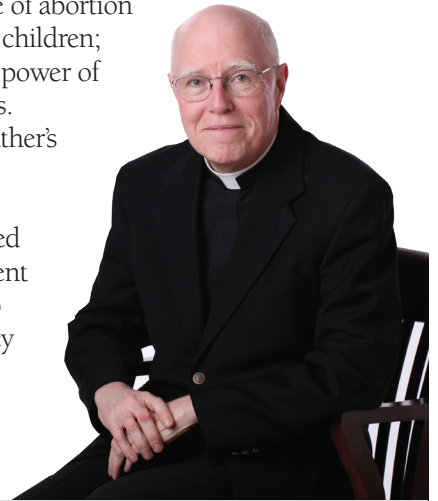
Second, the Holy Father’s words about abortion were deeply pastoral, not legalistic. He wrote as a compassionate father, not an icy cold prosecutor. Here’s what he said:

“I think in particular of all the women who have resorted to abortion. I am well aware of the pressure that has led them to this decision. I know that it is an existential and moral ordeal. I have met so many women who bear in their heart the scar

of this agonizing and painful decision. What has happened is profoundly unjust; yet only understanding the truth of it can enable one not to lose hope. The forgiveness of God cannot be denied to one who has repented, especially when that person approaches the Sacrament of Confession with a sincere heart in order to obtain reconciliation with the Father.”

The Holy Father’s beautiful words strike perfect balance between mercy and justice; concern for women caught in the snare of abortion and their precious unborn children; terrible sin and the greater power of God’s grace and forgiveness.

Yes, perhaps the Holy Father’s unexpected decision last September did cause some confusion, but it also offered a profound teaching moment and became an occasion to hear sincere words of mercy and to witness a powerful gesture of compassionate forgiveness. ■



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