



Absolution

(*Ab* = from; *solvere* = to free) is the remission of sin, or of the punishment due to sin, granted by the Church. (For remission of punishment due to the sin. Absolution proper is that act of the priest whereby, in the Sacrament of Penance, he frees man from sin.) It presupposes on the part of the penitent, contrition, confession, and promise at least of satisfaction; on the part of the minister, valid reception of the Order of Priesthood and jurisdiction, granted by competent authority, over the person receiving the sacrament.

That there is in the Church power to absolve sins committed after baptism the Council of Trent thus declares: *"But the Lord then principally instituted the Sacrament of Penance, when, being raised from the dead, He breathed upon His disciples saying, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.'*" By which action so signal, and words so clear the consent of all the Fathers has ever understood that the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the Apostles, and to their lawful successors for the reconciling of the faithful who have fallen after baptism" (Sess. XIV, i). Nor is there lacking in divine revelation proof of such power; the classical texts are those found in Matthew 16:19; 18:18, and in John 20:21-23. To Peter are given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Sin is the great obstacle to entrance into the kingdom, and over sin Peter is supreme. To Peter and to all the Apostles is given the power to bind and to loose, and this again implies supreme power both legislative and judicial: power to forgive sins, power to free from sin's penalties. This interpretation becomes more clear in studying the rabbinical literature, especially of Our Lord's time, in which the phrase to bind and to loose was in common use. (Lightfoot, *Horæ Hebraicæ Buxtorf*, *Lexicon Chald.*; Knabenbauer, *Commentary on Matthew*, II, 66; particularly Maas, *St. Matthew*, 183, 184.)

The granting of the power to absolve is put with unmistakable clearness in St. John's Gospel: "He breathed upon them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins ye shall forgive they are forgiven them; and whose sins ye shall retain, they are retained" (20:22-23). It were foolish to assert that the power here granted by Christ was simply a power to announce the Gospel (Council of Trent, Sess. XIX, Can. iii), and quite as unwise to contend that here is contained no power other than the power to remit sin in the Sacrament of Baptism (*Ibid.*, Sess. XIV); for the very context is against such an interpretation, and the words of the text imply a strictly judicial act, while the power to retain sins becomes simply incomprehensible when applied to baptism alone, and not to an action involving discretionary judgment. But it is one thing to assert that the power of absolution was granted to the Church, and another to say that a full realization of the grant was in the consciousness of the Church from the beginning

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