

Ask, Father James:

“How Does Receiving Holy Communion Forgive us of our Sins?”

Baptism, Eucharist, Anointing of the sick and Reconciliation or Confession are the four sacraments that impart the forgiveness of sins. When we attend Mass, we plead the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The verb that is translated as “take away” literally means “to lift up”, “to take upon oneself”. Jesus came into the world with a precise mission: to liberate it from the slavery of sin by taking on himself the sins of mankind. At every Mass, after the penitential rites and at the elevation of the Body and Blood before the reception of Holy Communion; we hear the priest say: May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and lead us to everlasting life. Our venial sins are forgiven at Mass. At the Last Supper Jesus took the cup of wine and said, “This is my blood ... which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28).

However, it is important to make a distinction when it comes to the forgiveness granted through the reception of the Eucharist and the absolution granted through the sacrament of reconciliation. The Catechism clarifies that; “The Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins. That is proper to the sacrament of reconciliation” (CCC #. 1395). And St. Paul explains that; “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:27). The Code of Canon Law #960 clearly states that; Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful, conscious of grave sin, is reconciled with God and the Church. Thus, a person with a mortal sin on their soul is not in the state of grace, and must approach the sacrament of reconciliation first, to receive sacramental absolution and then receive holy Communion.

The sacrament of anointing also forgives sins. When the priests administers the sacrament, he says, Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. And May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up. This prayer flows from St. James who says by anointing; “If they have committed any sins, their sins will be forgiven them” (James 5:15). While the venial sins [or lighter sins] we commit are forgiven at Mass, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, (CCC #1393) says; “... the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins” and when Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist, he wipes away our venial sins (CCC #. 1394). At sacramental confession, the blemishes on our souls are wiped clean and we are granted the absolution of both mortal and venial sins, and are offered God’s pardon and peace. It is encouraged to confess all mortal sins before receiving Holy Communion.



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