

# Old St. Joseph's Church

Est. 1733 | Philadelphia's Jesuit Parish

321 Willings Alley  
Philadelphia PA 19106  
215-923-1733  
www.oldstjoseph.org

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## An Encounter with Jesus Christ

The law of supply and demand is one of the most basic principles of economics. An ample supply reduces the price because the item is plentiful. On the other hand, when the supply is limited and an item is scarce, the price goes up. If you want to increase the price of gasoline, just get Saudi Arabia to cut back on production for a week or two. It's the way things work.

I've never heard anyone invoke the law of supply and demand in Catholic theology. But in fact many people act as if the law applies even in religion, and specifically, with regard to forgiveness. The thinking goes like this: If forgiveness becomes too readily available, more plentiful, then the value of forgiveness will go down. People will just take it for granted. So it's best to limit the supply and make forgiveness hard to get. That will make people value it more and not take it for granted. Furthermore, if forgiveness is kept in short supply, people will be less prone to commit sins because they will know how hard it is to get back in God's good graces.

What do you think of this idea? It's exactly one of the main arguments Jesus' opponents used against him in the Gospels. As you know, Jesus is very easy on sinners and that got him in a lot of trouble. Too easy, as far as his opponents were concerned. They strongly objected when Jesus let someone off with "Go and sin no more" whom they thought should be condemned to hellfire.

Ironically, in the history of the Church, the practice

of Christians at times sided more with Jesus' opponents than with Jesus himself, adopting the law of supply and demand. For centuries the Church made it exceedingly difficult for sinners to be forgiven in what we today call the sacrament of reconciliation. Granted, they were talking about really serious sins. But years of severe penances and public humiliation were required before you could merit forgiveness – and that was your one and only chance in your lifetime to utilize the sacrament. If you sinned again, you had no further recourse. In the early Church, forgiveness was made deliberately hard to get. You had to earn it.



Sadly, the notion that you have to earn forgiveness opened up a lot of abuses, like the selling of indulgences, which was the big scandal that led to the Protestant Reformation. It was thought you could get the soul of a loved one out of purgatory if you were willing to pay for it. Preaching about God's infinite mercy and gratuitous love would have had a depressing effect on business.

Fortunately, the sacrament of reconciliation was gradually reformed. Forgiveness became a lot more available, but still it wasn't cost-free. Instead of severe penances or payment of money, forgiveness was

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Old St. Joseph's is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are in the rear of the church.

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tied to confession. You had to appear before a judge, in the person of the priest, and secretly confess your sins, precisely recounting their nature and frequency so that an appropriate penalty could be affixed. This juridical model insured the price of forgiveness would be kept relatively high, though to be honest it wasn't too high a price to pay for something as valuable as forgiveness.

Unfortunately, the market changed rather abruptly. People apparently decided that confessing their sins was too unpleasant or inconvenient, so relatively few people availed themselves of sacramental absolution. Some felt the personal embarrassment of confessing was too great a price. Others didn't know what they were supposed to say in confession. They didn't know exactly what their sins were, unlike in former days when the rules were clear and sins were simple infractions. So people looked to other places to find forgiveness or simply ignored the whole need for forgiveness. The traditional Catholic teaching about sin and guilt and going to confession became largely the butt of jokes and mockery in our popular culture.

So that's where we are. And it's not a good place to be.

That God is merciful and offers his forgiveness is a central tenet of our faith and a critically important grace that the world desperately needs. All the sacraments rely on God's merciful love, but one in particular specifically celebrates this reality of grace. We need to recover this sacrament of reconciliation and restore it to our religious lives. But we can't do that simply by trying to restore past practice or by appealing to some distorted attitudes.

What does our faith tell us about God's mercy and forgiveness?

First, God's forgiveness isn't cheap. It cost dearly. It had to be earned—but not by us. It is rooted in the paschal mystery, which is centered on the sacrificial offering Jesus made of himself and the Father's response in raising Jesus from the dead.

Second, we can't earn God's forgiveness. It is a gift from God, freely offered. Confessing our sins or doing penances does not merit forgiveness. God forgives our sins because God's nature is to forgive, not because of what we do.



Third, our sins are not just breaking rules, but failing to love. That's why confessing our sins is not the same thing as reciting the proverbial "laundry list" of infractions. Of course, the rules are meant to point us in the right direction, so we should follow them. But as Scripture

frequently reminds us, if you follow all the rules but do not have love, you've missed the whole point.

Fourth, our task is to open ourselves to God's love and receive his freely offered forgiveness. That's not some liberal watering down or weaseling out of our responsibility. It means renewing our commitment to follow Jesus as a disciple and reforming our lives under the impetus of God's grace.

So the way we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation as a celebration of God's forgiveness should express what we really believe. In other words, the old style of whispering your sins in a dark corner behind a screen, all by yourself, reciting an act of contrition by rote (if you could remember it under pressure) and getting on your way is not the outward sign of what the mystery of redemption is all about.

Immediately after the Second Vatican Council, in the early 1970's, the Church tried to change the way we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. It was an effort to make the ritual more expressive of the mystery of God's forgiveness and God's action in forgiving us. But unfortunately, people have not embraced this reformed ritual. So you still hear Catholics talking about "going to confession" with all the emphasis on what they are to say to the priest and little reference to the encounter with Jesus in the

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sacrament or what God has done for us. It's all about misplaced emphasis.

So on this Tuesday evening, December 11, we will celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation at Old St. Joseph. We will come together as a community, pray together, hear the Scriptures once again that proclaim what God has done for us, open our hearts to encounter Jesus our Redeemer and express our sorrow for our sins. Part of this time together will include, for those who wish, an opportunity to come before a priest, confessing and acknowledging our sinfulness. And then the priest will raise his hand over you and say

*God, the Father of mercies,  
Through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus,  
Has reconciled the world to himself  
And sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of our sins.  
So through the ministry of the Church  
May God grant you pardon and peace.  
And I absolve you of your sins,  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*—Father Walter Modrys SJ  
Pastor*

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