

Is an Unbound Session Good Preparation for Sacramental Confession?

By Neal Lozano

Many people experience tremendous discouragement when they continue to commit the same sins already confessed within the Sacrament of Penance. They often dedicate themselves to trying harder, only to end up falling again. If the Sacrament confers sanctifying grace, why aren't they experiencing more transformation and freedom?

One reason, among others, is that the sins we commit are fueled by spiritual darkness and bondage within our hearts. Many times, our behavior follows a pattern that is related to foundational wounds that afflict our thoughts and arise from unhealed experiences. The power of concupiscence and temptation thrives in unhealed places and can hold us in habitual patterns if these are not addressed. These patterns lead easily to occasions of sin.

An Unbound ministry session can help address the foundational issues that give rise to sinful patterns because it focuses on the human heart. For example, during an Unbound session, a person might recognize a deception he has believed, which in turn has fueled a sinful pattern of response. An individual may also become aware of resentments and lack of forgiveness, which also can lead to repeated sins. Finally, unbelief or lack of confidence in God's love might block a receptivity to God's grace. An Unbound ministry session offers a safe place where these foundations can be exposed and each area of darkness addressed through the Five Keys – responses of faith to Jesus, who delivers us from evil. Then, within the Sacrament of Penance, the individual can take fruitful responsibility for sins, express sorrow from an even deeper place in the heart, and decisively turn from sin without these added burdens causing hindrance.

Mark's Gospel underscores that **evil intentions come from the human heart**.

And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7: 20-23 NRSVCE)

Reflecting on these verses, St. John Paul II declared that the remedy for evil must begin in the heart, and this is where the Lord is leading each of us.

The wisdom of Christ makes you capable of pushing on to discover the deepest source of evil existing in the world. And it also stimulates you to proclaim to all men ... the truth you have learned from the Master's lips ... that evil comes "out of the heart of man" (Mark 7:21) ... **The root of evil is within man. The remedy, therefore, also starts from the heart** [emphasis added] ("Address of His Holiness John Paul II to Six Thousand University Students Coming from All Over the World to Participate in an International Congress," April 10, 1979).

I, like many Catholics, mostly focused upon external behavior when in Confession. Sometimes, when I tried to express deeper issues involving my heart, the priest either seemed confused or unresponsive. So instead of addressing them, I resolved to stick with my "laundry list" of committed sins.

Going to confession expresses a love for God and a desire to remain close to him. It also expresses the desire to repent, receive God's forgiveness, grace, and the power released by the words of absolution.

The big picture that surrounds each confession is the work of the Holy Spirit who is leading us towards a conversion of the heart. The Catholic Catechism calls this *interior repentance*.

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time, it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace (CCC 1431).

God will often expose the darkness that is buried in our hearts. In his providence he will use seasons of restlessness, pain, and sadness to expose the darkness. The pain of sin can prepare our hearts for the grace that enables interior repentance. We become aware of our sin and the separation it causes in our relationship to God and grow in the desire to receive his love and forgiveness.

An Unbound session is a space where God will use another person to accompany you in a conversation that uncovers things that are hidden, like patterns of self-

hatred, shame, and lies about your identity. You become aware of what the Holy Spirit is revealing to you about your heart and submit yourself to his care as the Great Physician.

Msgr. Charles Pope confirmed that for many Catholics, there is a need for this space:

For many people, the Sacrament of Confession is experienced in a rather perfunctory way. Upon preparing to go to confession many are content to look at some matters pertaining to external behavior: “I got angry with my children....I had lustful thoughts.... I was distracted in prayer, or I didn’t pray as much as I should.... I gossiped....and so forth. While the confession of these sorts of things is good and proper it also remains true that, *for confession to really heal, it is necessary to go deeper. It is necessary to examine the deeper drives and motives of sin; to examine not only what I have done, but to ponder why* [emphasis added] (spiritualdirection.com, Feb. 20, 2024).

All confession heals, in a sense. However, a deeper level of healing takes place when the roots of the sinful behavior are addressed. A priest from Ireland once told us this:

Before I understood Unbound, I was discouraged. I felt like hearing confessions was like ‘cutting the heads’ off the wheat, which would always grow back. People would deal with their sins, but they kept on returning because the roots of the sins remained. Now, with the Five Keys, I can help people to get to the roots of their sins so they don’t return.

So why is Unbound an ideal preparation for a sacramental Confession? Let me suggest a few reasons.

1. An Unbound session provides more time for the penitent to talk about key relationships, developmental circumstances, and significant events in his or her life.

This is important because people are often repeating patterns of response when they sin. When they can connect a particular pattern with a foundational experience and address it using the Five Keys, God’s grace can

flow to heal unresolved traumas, hurts, and experiences where the pattern began.

2. A conversation with a session leader who listens deeply in a compassionate, non-judgmental way provides a place for receptivity, curiosity, and openness.

When people can tell their story, not just their sins, they often feel less need to explain or justify themselves because they know they are being seen and heard. A person can open his heart in a holistic way to what God is showing him and see the bigger picture regarding his patterns of thinking and behavior.

Those experienced in Unbound ministry have learned to listen for words that reveal the heart and expose the works of the enemy. Things that lie below the surface are identified. Things like resentment, unforgiveness, self-hatred, self-justification, isolation, fear of rejection, anxiety, fears, self-contempt, or unresolved trauma.

Many priests use what they have learned through Unbound to help a penitent connect sinful outward behaviors with inner darkness. Asking a simple question can expose deeper heart motives that led to the sin. From there, the penitent is assisted in repentance by renouncing agreements with specific lies that gave rise to sinful behavior. Many lives have been changed by such a confession and years of bondage to sin have been broken.

3. An Unbound Session can facilitate deeper levels of honesty during Confession.

People who go to Confession after Unbound ministry often will share that the priest said, "This is the best Confession you ever made." And one priest told me at the end of an Unbound retreat that the Confessions heard were "terrifyingly honest."

The reason for this is that the person has already experienced the love of the Father during an Unbound session and can name his sins honestly without the fear of punishment or rejection. Knowing that he does not belong to his sins allows him to name and get rid of them in the Sacrament.

4. The Five Keys of Unbound enhance and expound upon the Act of Contrition.

During Penance, a person will make an Act of Contrition. He will express sorrow for his sins, express his intention to turn from them, and ask God for His mercy. The Five Keys can help make this more practical and relatable. The Key of Repentance and Faith can help a person express sorrow in a more specific and personal way. For example, a person might say, “Lord, please forgive me for believing that I love my kids more than you do. Forgive me for doubting Your love.” The Key of Forgiveness can help a person to fully let go of resentments that fuel outbursts of anger. The Key of Renunciation can help a person specifically turn away from deceptions, idols, sins, and evil spirits, and choose to sin no more. When a person can learn and use the Five Keys of Unbound, he has become more “fluent” in the language of repentance and conversion.

Msgr. Pope expounds:

Jesus teaches us to go deeper, into the heart and mind, to discover what causes our sinful behavior. And this leads us to the recipe for a good confession, for a confession that moves from perfunctory penitence *to compelling and transformative Confession* [emphasis added].

Many priests do not have the time to regularly allow for this kind of interviewing, listening, and prayer within the confessional. Offering a few words of encouragement, followed by absolution, can be a profound gift in itself.

However, we know of many priests, led by the Holy Spirit, who are now equipped to help reveal someone’s heart and invite a response. Many priests have confirmed their desire for this by asking us to help them develop Unbound ministry teams in their parishes.

My hope and dream is that parish culture would grow to a point where lay people pray the Five Keys for one another, and where the language of repentance, renunciation, forgiveness, confidence in the power of His name, and the invitation to encounter the Father’s love will be normal in the local parish.

In parishes like these, priests can use the Five Keys in the context of confession to help someone go deeper or can refer them to an Unbound team for more ministry after confession.

My dream is already beginning to happen. Recently Fr. Mike Schmitz, one of the most well-known priests in the world, spoke about renouncing lies, sins, and false beliefs in the name of Jesus as a normal part of individual repentance. He believes this should be done to prepare for and accompany the Sacrament of Penance. If this became a common practice, it would help millions of people be more properly disposed to receive the grace needed for deeper freedom and interior conversion. You can see his remarks here:

<https://youtu.be/82G0aAeLRJc?si=cAkvs2QWvlzMfph9>

The message of Unbound accompanied by personal ministry draws people deeper into self-understanding and repentance – a profound preparation for receiving the Sacrament of Confession in a *compelling and transformative way*.

For these reasons, Unbound is *great* preparation for the Sacrament of Confession.

Works Cited

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