

Q&A: Yearly Confession

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 23 December 2019

Q. Is there an obligation to go to confession once a year if one has not sinned mortally? The 1983 Code of Canon Law mentions mortal sins specifically, but the 1917 Code does not, so is this another manifestation of laxity on the part of the post-conciliar Code?

A. Some confusion has arisen in recent years because the 1917 Code previously stated that all Catholics who have reached the age of reason are obligated to confess all their sins accurately at least once a year (c. 906). The 1983 Code, on the other hand, makes specific mention of “serious sins” (c. 989), and the word “serious” is understood to mean the same as “mortal.” The questioner asks: is this a change from past legislation, yet another indication of laxity in the post-conciliar era?

This question cannot be definitively answered, because commentators on the 1917 Code disagree regarding the interpretation of canon 906. Bachofen argues that while the divine law does not mandate the confession of venial sins, a person who has only committed venial sins within the past year is still obliged to confess them due to the existence of a positive ecclesiastical law, making a comparison with the need to go to confession to obtain a plenary indulgence.¹ On the other hand, Woywod opines that this canon, strictly speaking, only refers to mortal sins.²

Woywod’s opinion seems to be more probable, given the principle that burdens are to be restricted and favors multiplied.³ Further, when doubt concerns the existence of a law, liberty is in possession, and it is not to be assumed that one is bound by this doubtful law (1917 CIC, c. 15; 1983 CIC, c. 14). Further, canon 906 of the old Code states that Catholics must confess “all their sins” (“*omnia peccata*”), while canon 902 clearly states that the confession of venial sins is optional; because one canon cannot contradict another within the same Code, it may be concluded that “all” in this sense refers to all sins whose confession is not optional under divine law (i.e. mortal sins).

Regardless of whether there has been a change in law, it is nevertheless imprudent and spiritually dangerous to only follow the minimum requirements of the current canon 989, even if this canon does not represent a tendency toward post-conciliar laxity. God gives everyone sufficient grace to avoid *all* sins, but how likely is it that a person can go more than a year without confession and not have committed any mortal sins? As the salvation of souls is the supreme law of the Church (c. 1752), no one should legalistically follow the letter of the law on the matter of yearly confession, but rather its spirit.

1 C. A. Bachofen, *A Commentary on the New Code of Canon Law, Volume IV* (London: B. Herder, 1921), 348.

2 S. Woywod, *The New Canon Law: A Commentary and Summary of the New Code of Canon Law* (London: B. Herder, 1918), 183.

3 *Regulae Iuris*, 15.