

***Can a non-Catholic who doesn't go to Confession have their sins forgiven?  
If so, why do I (a Catholic) have to go?***

Yeah! What's the deal?! Do I have to go through this uncomfortable process of saying my sins out loud to a priest while someone else gets away with just throwing up a few prayers toward Heaven? Hmmmm...I think that we may need to ask how we are looking at sin, repentance, and who God really is. We may need to get away from the idea that "sin" means "breaking God's rules". It is more like "breaking God's heart". If sin only meant breaking a rule, then repentance could look like little more than "which ritual do I need to perform [hoop do I need to jump through] to un-do the break"? ["What do I owe you, officer?"]

Now, of course we know that a person cannot "accidentally" sin. We have to know what God wants and then consciously choose to reject what God wants. [Sin is rejecting God by rejecting what we know God wills for us.] Sin is basically saying, "God, I know what you want me to do. But I am going to do what I want to do. I'm going to do it my way." It is choosing what we want over what God wants.

So if sin is rejecting what we know God wants, then repentance would look a lot like choosing to do what God wants, wouldn't it? Yep, it does. We know that God has given us a direct route back into His friendship in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In fact, we know that this is the ordinary way sins committed after Baptism are forgiven. Yes, confessing our sins to a priest and receiving absolution from Jesus through the priest is the way. (If you want to know exactly why, ask Father Richard "the Apologist" Kunst whose much lengthier column is featured above mine.)

We know all of that. So where does that leave those non-Catholics who don't have the Sacrament of Confession? Are they just plain out of luck? Is there any chance that their sins can be forgiven? Well, here's another thing we know about God: He's really good. And He can pretty much do anything. Does God NEED a Sacrament to do anything? Absolutely not. But He will always act through His Sacraments. One way we Catholics express this is with the phrase, "God has bound Himself to His Sacraments, but He is not bound by His Sacraments".

Here's what I'm saying: God will always forgive a repentant sinner through Sacramental Confession (have absolutely NO doubt about that!), but God can also forgive a person without the Sacrament. For example, say a Catholic was repentant and had decided to confess their sins, but somehow died on the way to Confession...does God do a Maxwell Smart ("Missed it by THAT much!)? No, the person intended to do what God wanted them to do. So, if a non-Catholic, who doesn't know or doesn't believe in Reconciliation (through no fault of their own) is sorry but doesn't go to Confession, are they beyond God's ability to forgive? No. God can do anything. If this person chooses God to the degree that they know Him, we can be reasonably sure that God extends His mercy to them as well as to a Catholic who reaches out through Reconciliation.

“Well, if God can forgive outside of Confession, then I choose that one!”  
See, that’s the problem. If you are Catholic, you already know what God is asking of you. God has established His primary means of reconciling you to Himself and the Church: Sacramental Confession. Now you know what God wants. Therefore we don’t get to choose how we prefer to return to Him. Such a “return” wouldn’t be a return at all. It would merely be perpetuating what began in the sin: “God I know what you want, but I’m going to do it my way”. That may have been a hit for Frank Sinatra, but it really won’t fly when it comes to Heaven.