

The Awesome Power of Confession

By Jim Seghers

“If we say we are without sin we deceive ourselves” (1 Jn 1:8).

Introduction

Andy Capp replied indignantly, “You can’t call me a failure. I’m not a failure; I never tried!” Even cartoon characters don’t like to admit their shortcomings,. It is much easier to make excuses for our failings or to simply deny. The last thing we want is for other people to discover our failings and confront us with them.

It is only natural that we feel bad when we do things that hurt others or wound our relationship with God. We are intrinsically wired to be connected to God, our creator, and to one another because we are linked together in the Father’s family.

The human tendencies of denial and avoidance can make going to confession difficult, even an ordeal. Ultimately, we must recognize that our excuses and denials do not make our failings go away; rather they only distance us further from those we injured. This not only makes us unhappier here on earth, it can also lead to eternal separation from God after we die.

God never wants to be separated from us, nor does he want us to be distant from one another. He understands our limitations and our sinfulness. That is why God gave the members of his Church specific ways to repent from sin. Jesus instituted the sacrament of confession so that we can experience God’s abundant mercy and have our relationship with him restored.

This essay will develop key points:

- how sin entered the world through Adam and Eve
- God wants us to accept responsibility for our mistakes
- the Old and New Testaments show how God has given his people specific rituals to confess and repent from sin
- Jesus gave Peter the power to bind and loose sin on earth
- the power of confessing our sins to a priest
- how to prepare for the Sacrament of Penance.

Confession is a Hidden Treasure

Three penniless knights were lost on their return home from their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They were caught in a violent rainstorm that lasted for seven days. During the first day of their ordeal they crossed a creek bed in the inky, black of night. Suddenly they heard a voice that commanded, “Pick up some of the pebbles and you will be glad and sad.” The first weary knight thought this directive was ridiculous, so he refused. The second knight reached down, picked up a hand full of the stones and put them in his pack. The third knight dismounted and then stuffed an empty saddlebag with the stones.

Six arduous days later the weather broke. Finally they were able to make camp and rest. On opening his saddlebag, the third knight discovered that it was filled with precious jewels. His joy was boundless. The second knight found a handful of precious stones in his pack. He was glad he had them, but sad he did not have more. The first knight was very sad because he was still penniless.

The sacrament of confession is like a hidden treasure when we have lost our way in the storms of life. We will be sad, sad and glad, or overjoyed depending on our willingness to claim its riches.

The Reality of Sin

From the dawn of civilization until the present time, human history illustrates the painful reality of sin. The Bible tells us that sin first came into the world when Adam and Eve rejected God's perfect plan for their lives (Genesis 1-3). They were disobedient because they yielded to the devil's temptation to do things "their way" and the result was disastrous.

The devil's cunning message questioned God's fatherhood. His deceptive lie said: "God does not love you. He is not to be trusted. He's really a tyrant selfishly trying to protest his privileged position. He does not want you to be like him. He has deceived you. He never intends to give you the gift of his life. Look how he's withholding it from you by forbidding you to eat of 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (Gen 2:17). God is an enemy from whom you must protest yourself. If you want to be like God, be free like me. Reach out and take what you want. God will never give it to you." Therefore John Paul II teaches: "Original sin attempts, then, to abolish fatherhood"¹ by denying the fundamental truth that God is love and can be trusted.

Through their sin, Adam and Eve lost the gift of the divine nature God had placed in their souls. They were driven from their earthly paradise and experienced within themselves a separation from God. Because of this first or original sin they lost their claim to an eternal life of happiness, peace, and union with God. Instead they experienced suffering, and both physical and spiritual death. St. Paul tells us, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom 5:12).

The Tragedy of Original Sin

The original sin was also disastrous for Adam and Eve's descendants because we inherited their ruptured relationship with God causing us to:

- be inclined to sin,
- experience physical suffering and death,
- have a diminished intellect,
- have a weakened will, and
- have disordered appetites

Choosing a Created Good Over God.

¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 228.

The inclination to sin that results from our diminished intellect, weakened will, and disordered appetites is called concupiscence. This inclination to evil entices us to choose a created “good” over God.

We rarely chose evil as evil, but for the good we see in it. Snow White would never have taken a bite out of the poison apple if she could have seen the harm that lay hidden beneath its exterior loveliness. Likewise, our desire for food, acceptance, attractiveness, success, sexual intimacy, physical safety, and material possessions are good in themselves as long as they are ordered toward God as they were intended by him. However, when we become overly attached to them or our desire for them becomes disordered, we begin to favor created goods over God. When that happens, these desires can turn into the sins of gluttony, pride, lust, envy, sloth, covetousness, or basically any sin.

Personal sin has three negative consequences

- It destroys or injures the divine life God infused in us.
- It wounds relationships within the body of Christ – the Church
- It fosters unhealthy attachment to created goods.

Further, when we deny our responsibility for our sins we blind ourselves to the harmful impact of sin has in our lives. Then we more easily slide further and further into sin, and thus become more separated from God and others. We may also begin to influence others to fall into sin as well. Sin like goodness loves company.

It’s not private.

How often have we heard or even personally said:

- My sins are personal matters between God and me.
- It’s nobody’s business what I do in my personal life.

The truth is sin is never only a matter between the individual and God. The human race is a family, God’s family. The Church is depicted as the Mystical Body of Christ. (1 Cor 6:15; 12:12; 12:27; Eph 4:12; Rom 12:4-5) Therefore what we do, good or evil, impacts the other members positively or negatively.

Consider the personal sin of Adam. Because he was the biological father of the human race, the evil consequences of his disobedience have negatively affected all of us. In contrast the obedience of Jesus, the new Adam, has brought all of us countless benefits. “For by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” (Rom 5:19).

The Ripple Effect of Sin.

Every sin has a ripple effect that reaches out with harmful tentacles to those closest to us. Sin does not only break God’s laws, it fractures lives – families and civilizations. This is easy to perceive in the case of drunkenness or drug addiction, because of the obvious injurious side effects to the addict, families members, and society as a whole. However, every sin in some way and in different degrees injures others. Sin breeds more sin.

Consider acts of selfishness. If left unrepented, they easily lead to anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, discord, slander, envy, quarrelling, and even violence. These behaviors tear apart families and societies.

Sexual sins cause us to deny the inherent dignity God created within each of us by making an object of oneself and others. These sins twist the beautiful procreative act, in which God joins with man and woman to form another human life, into a selfish act of pleasure disconnected from its dimensions of self-donating commitment. The result of these sins can be readily seen in our world today in the large number of divorces, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and violent crimes against women and children.

God wants to restore our relationship with him.

Despite our sinfulness, beginning with the first sin of Adam and Eve, God has always sought to restore our relationship with him. The process of restoration has always involved confessing what we have done and repenting from our sin so that we may grow closer to him.

Confession and Repentance in the Old Testament

Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8-13)

After their sin Adam and Eve hid when they heard the sound of God walking in the garden. It is interesting, that like us, Adam and Eve, immediately tried to hide from the reality of their shameful deed. God's response is likewise interesting because, instead of simply confronting them with their disobedience, he asks them where they stood in their vital relationships and how they know they are naked. As an all-knowing God, he certainly didn't need them to provide the answer to his questions. He led them to "confess" what they have done and to own up to their failings. Sadly, they tried to deflect their responsibility by blaming each other.

Cain²

Cain's murder of Abel illustrates the danger of unrepented sin. When Cain's offering was rejected God asked him: "If you do well will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen 4:7). Instead of accepting responsibility and changing, Cain's envy led him to murder his brother. When God asked, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain replied with a lie: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

God gives his people specific rituals and ways to confess their sins.

For many generations God revealed the ways in which he wanted his people to live. In the Law of Moses (Lev 5:5-6 and Num 5:5-7), he gave very specific rituals for confessing their sins. The Mosaic Law provided specific instructions on how God's people must repent: (Lev 5:5-6)

- They must confess their sin.
- They must perform a ceremonial act of sacrifice and penance.
- They must use the intercession of a priest.

² Genesis 4:1-15.

In Numbers, the Law not only commanded that they need to confess their sin, but they were required to make full restitution, and give an additional fifth to the person wronged.

A Sacrifice Acceptable to God

In Psalm 51, we discover King David's moving confession. It reveals that God desires us to have sincere sorrow for our sins and an authentic conversion, described as a *'broken spirit, a broken, contrite heart'* (Ps 51:17). We also learn that a renewed zeal for God can come from confession as David resolves to help sinners return to God. "Then I will teach transgressors their ways, and sinners will return to thee" (Ps 51:13).

Repentance in the Old Law

Repentance in the Old Covenant was a humbling and costly process that highlighted the seriousness of sin. In this difficult process of repentance the sinner only had the hope that his confessed sins were forgiven. There was no guarantee. The Old Testament system of confession merely foreshadowed the sacrament of forgiveness given to the Church by Christ. The Old Covenant's repentance rituals finds its fulfillment in the New Testament.

Jesus Gives His Church the Gift of Confession.

Christ formed the Church with Peter as its visible head, "You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." He then went on to say to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, *and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" (Matt 16:19).

This power to bind and loose was rooted in Old Testament. God chose Moses to communicate and interpret God's Law. God mediated to his chosen people through Moses. Likewise, Jesus was conferring upon Peter God's own authority in ruling God's family.

In the time of Moses, others would also be designated judges of what was prohibited (*bound*) or what was permitted (*loosed*), or when people were "absolved" or "condemned" for specific violations of the law. Years later St. Matthew recorded that Jesus also said to the apostles, "*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" (Matt 18:18).

Jesus empowered the apostles to forgive sins.

Jesus had the authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt 9:6). Because he knew he was not going to remain visibly with the Church on earth, Jesus gave his Church a wonderful gift so that he would be able to offer the guarantee of forgiveness to future generations. After Jesus rose from the dead, he empowered the apostles to forgive sins.

"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And when he said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*'" (Jn 20:21-23)

God breathed on humans twice.

On both occasions God's breathing was life giving.

- **At the moment of creation** God breathed his life into Adam, who was given the vocation to transmit human life (Gen 2:7).
- **Jesus breathed His life-giving potency into the Apostles.** He entrusted them with his mission to restore their brothers and sisters to supernatural life and spiritual health through the sacrament of forgiveness. (John 20:21-23).

The apostle's mission was to remove sin.

It is important to recognize that Jesus did not merely commission the apostles to preach about forgiveness. He gave them the awesome power to forgive sins. Obviously, the proper use of this power required the apostles to learn of a person's sins through oral confession. Thus, St. James wrote: "*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed*" (Jas 5:16). Similarly, St. John wrote: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 Jn 1: 9).

Only God can forgive sins.

However, in giving his disciples the ability to forgive sins, Jesus gave the priests of his Church a marvelous share in his divine power (Matt 18:18). Thus, St. Paul affirmed that Christ "*gave us the ministry of reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation*" (2 Cor 5:19).

It has always been God's plan to involve his earthly children in the Family business of the Blessed Trinity, the saving of souls. The forgiveness of the priest does not diminish God's sovereign authority; rather it demonstrates its power. Jesus is always the eternal High Priest forgiving us through his priests. Through their ministry he returns us to the Father. It has always been understood that this power comes from the Father alone through Jesus. In the words of St. Paul said, "*All this is from God, who from Christ reconciles us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation....So we are ambassadors for Christ*" (2 Cor 5:18-20).

But why confess to a priest? Why not go to God directly?

The answer is simple. We must confess our sins in the manner Jesus established. We don't have God's permission to pick-and-choose what we like or don't like. When we do that, we are worshipping ourselves, not God!

Of course, when we sin, we should repent immediately and directly to God, but we only have a guarantee of forgiveness when we confess our sins in the way God intended.

Priests have Jesus' power and authority to forgive sins. He wants us to make use of it. Therefore when a priest gives absolution, the penitent has Jesus' guarantee that his sins are forgiven. We have Jesus' word for it!

Confession can help us eradicate habits of sin.

Sometimes without even recognizing it, we can ease into a habit or pattern of sin. Our natural tendencies to deny or to avoid looking at our sins can make the next time we commit a sin easier. It can lead us to fall into even greater sin. Living in habitual sin weakens our ability to recognize sin, and sometimes to redefine evil as good and good as

evil. The prophet Isaiah specifically warned of this danger: “*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil*” (Is 5:20). Yet, when a penitent continually and humbly confesses addictive or habitual sins, the day will come when that evil habit is removed from his life. When we are humble and obedient, God is faithful.

Confession helps us to grow in holiness.

Jesus described himself as the “true vine” and the Father as the “vine grower.” We are the branches (Jn 15:1-17). Branches that do not bear fruit are cast off. However, the fruitful branches are pruned so they will bear more fruit. Pruning is done by cutting. This pruning is the painful process as our selfishness is cut away so we can be transformed into Christ. Confession is one of the knives the Father uses to bring about a greater fruitfulness in us. In the words of St. Paul: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24).

Jesus created the sacrament of reconciliation because he knew we need it. It can be very embarrassing to tell our sins to a priest. Pride, in its many disguises, is at the root of most sins. Making excuses comes easy, as we tend to deny all or part of our responsibility. Disobedience is an element in every sin. When we submit to the sacrament of confession that Jesus established we receive a vital remedy for our pride and disobedience.

Protestant Recognition

The Protestant minister Earl Jabay acknowledges both the benefits and the Biblical basis for Confession. We Protestants have not had the grace to admit that we made a serious mistake in abandoning the confessional at the time of the Reformation. Our Roman Catholic brethren have since corrected whatever problems there were with the confessional. It is now time for Protestants to return to the discipline of the confessional. Let the confessional first be established among Protestants and later, perhaps, this may serve as pare to the bridge which will end our unhappy division.”³

A sacrament known by many names.

In the Church, this sacrament has been referred to by several different names, each one highlighting one of the powerful elements contained within it.

The *Catechism*⁴ tells us it is called a:

- **Sacrament of Conversion** because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom we have strayed by sin.
- **Sacrament of Penance** since it consecrates the Christian sinner’s personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.
- **Sacrament of Confession** for the disclosure of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is also a “confession”—acknowledgement and praise—of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward a sinful man.
- **Sacrament of Forgiveness** since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent “pardon and peace.”

³ Earl Jabay, *Precisely How to Take Care of Yourself*, p. 67.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #s 1423-1424, henceforward cited as CCC.

- **Sacrament of Reconciliation** because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

One of the sacraments of healing.

Though we receive new life through the sacraments of Christian initiation, Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, we are still human beings subject to the consequences of original sin. As a result, this “new life can be weakened or even lost by sin.”⁵ Just as Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health (Mk 2:1-12), so too Jesus wanted the Church, through the Holy Spirit, to continue his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members.⁶ Therefore Jesus gave his Church two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick.

The Essential Elements of a Confession.⁷

Over the centuries, the Church has permitted great flexibility in the form of administering this sacrament of healing. In the early centuries, for example, the forgiveness of grave sins was administered through public penance that sometimes lasted many years. Subsequently, confession was made in secret between the penitent and a priest. Regardless of the concrete form, certain essential elements have always remained.

- *Contrition*
- *Confession*
- *Reparation and Penance*

1. Contrition⁸

To be forgiven for our sins, we must be truly sorry for our sins. Genuine sorrow goes beyond the *feelings* of remorse. It always includes the determination to avoid sin in the future together with the people and places that might tempt us to sin. This idea is aptly expressed in the Act of Contrition.

“I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.”

Personal sin is something deep within us because it springs from our desires, our understanding and our choice. “*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witnesses, slander*” (Matt 15:19). Therefore it is important that our sorrow reach deep within us.

The *Catechism* clearly teaches the importance of repentance.

“There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept His mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation

⁵ CCC # 1420.

⁶ CCC # 1421.

⁷ CCC #s 1491-1494.

⁸ CCC #s 1451-1453.

offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss.”⁹

The Tale of Two Sinners

Judas -

During the Last Supper Jesus warned Judas that he knew he would betray him. It was an effort to save this fallen apostle whom Jesus loved from a terrible fate. *“It would have been better for that man if he had not been born”* (Matt 26:24). Ignoring his profound feelings of hurt and betrayal, Jesus again reached out to Judas in Gethsemane. He called him “friend” and used his personal name, “Judas” in order to rekindle their former closeness. Then he asked, *“Why are you here?”* (Matt 26:50). In other words, consider the foulness of your deed and the precarious state of your soul. Even at that moment had Judas repented, his apostleship would have been restored. He would have become a saint and a martyr – a perpetual example of God’s loving mercy. Judas would have none of it. Tragically, when the full realization of his awful deed crashed upon him, Judas foolishly judged that his sinfulness was bigger than God’s mercy. Judas readily admitted his sinfulness to his hardhearted accomplices, but not to the Lord of Mercy. Having already murdered the life of grace in his soul, it was a short step to slaughtering his body. *“He went out and hanged himself.”* (Matt 27:5) Judas’s miserable end paints a graphic picture of unrepented sin.

Peter -

Peter’s denial is recorded in all four Gospels. When Jesus informed the apostles that they would abandon him, Peter boasted: *“Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.”* Jesus answered, *“Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times”* (Matt 26:33-34). Jesus subsequently tried to strengthen Peter in Gethsemane. *“Watch and pray,”* he said, *“that you may not enter into temptation.”* (Matt 26:41). Jesus knew that it would be hard for Peter to stumble if he was down on his knees in prayer. Unfortunately, Peter relied on Peter. Peter loved Jesus, but he was not yet the stuff from which martyrs were made. He declared his willingness to die with Jesus in the safety of the upper room, but on the field of combat he trembled at the question of a servant girl. St. Luke added the touching detail that, after his third denial, *“the Lord turned and looked at Peter”* (Lk 22:61). It was the same look of love, hurt, and compassion that Jesus had given Judas. Unlike Judas, Peter *“went out and wept bitterly”* (Matt 26:75). He was no longer self-confident and boastful. Peter was a model of repentance, a humbled sinner weeping at the feet of Jesus. Unlike Judas, Peter bathed his sins in tears, not despair. He trusted God’s mercy.

The sins of Judas and Peter serve as both warnings and lessons to us. God wants us to avoid sin because it always brings unhappiness in this life and endangers our eternal life. These examples poignantly illustrate the importance of remorse and repentance when we do sin. Peter repented, but Judas did not. It was from Peter’s brokenness that Jesus formed a saint. It was in this spirit that St. Augustine lamented, “How late have I loved Thee.”

⁹ CCC # 1864.

2. Confession¹⁰

The *Catechism* teaches that in confessing our sins “man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God.”¹¹ It is only after we look honestly at ourselves and take ownership of our sins that the process of conversion can truly begin. That is why confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance.

We must confess all mortal sins committed since our last confession because it is these sins that seriously hurt the soul and can eternally separate us from God. However, “confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is strongly recommended by the Church” because it “helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit.”¹²

Sacred Scripture makes a distinction between mortal sins that kill the life of grace in the soul, and sins that do not kill the life of grace in the soul (1 Jn 5:16-17). These sins are called venial sins. While venial sins do not kill the life of grace in our soul, they leave us weaker, scared, and wounded. Venial sins are not necessarily little sins. Consider those offenses that hurt you most deeply. Usually, they are of a venial variety, but they can hurt a lot. A venial sin might be compared with a slap in the face as contrasted with an attempt on your life. When we reflect that it is Jesus’ face we slap by sin, no venial sin will seem small.

Mortal Sin

There are three essential conditions that make a sin mortal. If any of them is lacking, the sin is venial not mortal.

- *Grave Matter* – The object of our sinful act must be serious. For example, it is a sin to steal. The matter is grave if one steals a car, but it is not grave if one steals a pencil.
- *Sufficient Knowledge* – One must know that the evil act is gravely sinful.
- *Full Consent of the Will* – The evil act must be consciously and deliberately chosen. Force, being half asleep, and stress are among the factors that may diminish the full consent of the will. No one steps into mortal sin by accident or unaware.

3. Reparation and Penance¹³

Along with giving absolution, the priest-confessor assigns an act of penance. It might be an act of kindness, self-denial, or a prayer. These acts are often connected with the gravity and nature of the sins confessed. Clearly, these small acts of penance of themselves could never make full restitution for our sins, but they are effective because they plug into the infinite merits of Jesus Christ. They also serve as a reminder to us that we need to do what we can to repair the damage of sin.

¹⁰ CCC #s 1455-1456, 1458.

¹¹ CCC # 1455.

¹² CCC # 1458.

¹³ CCC #s 1459-1460.

Many sins directly injure others. Asking forgiveness and determining not to harm others again is not enough. We have an obligation to mend the damage we have done to the degree that it is possible. This includes the restitution of stolen property, repairing the reputation of someone we have slandered, and reimbursing the injured person for the damage we have caused.

It is important to perform these acts promptly. If we forget the acts of penance assigned in confession, our sins are still forgiven, but we have missed this opportunity to share in the healing work of Christ.

When are we required to go to confession?¹⁴

- The Church commands that after having attained the age of discretion, each person is obligated to confess serious sins at least once a year.
- Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive the Blessed Eucharist without first receiving sacramental absolution.
- Children must go to the sacrament of reconciliation before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

Spiritual effects of the sacrament of Penance.¹⁵

1. Reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace

“The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship.”¹⁶ It brings about a true restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God.¹⁷

2. Reconciliation with the Church

Our sin not only injures us individually, it negatively harms the life of the Church and “damages or even breaks fraternal communion.” The sacrament of Penance has “a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church...and reestablishes or strengthens [the sinner] in the communion of the saints”¹⁸

3. Additional benefits

- eliminates the fear of eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins
- removes, at least in part, the temporal punishment resulting from sin
- brings peace, serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation
- gives an increase of the spiritual strength to avoid sin in the future.

The joy in heaven over repentant sinners.

In the Gospels, Jesus shows us the compassionate heart of the Father, and in the process he reveals his own heart. In every encounter with repentant sinners Jesus was tender, loving, and forgiving. He rejected no one. Through his priest and the sacrament of Penance, Jesus offers us the same tender, loving forgiveness. Never hesitate to repent and flee into your heavenly Father’s waiting arms. Jesus told us “*there will be more joy in*

¹⁴ CCC # 1457.

¹⁵ CCC # 1496.

¹⁶ *Roman Catechism*, II, V, 18

¹⁷ CCC # 1468.

¹⁸ CCC # 1469.

heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:7).

God’s Mercy

There are many stories in the New Testament showing God’s limitless mercy, and Jesus’ tender, loving forgiveness. Reading them reminds us of the forgiveness and mercy awaiting us.

Matthew 9:10-13 – Eating with tax collectors & sinners

Mark 2:3-12 – Healing the paralytic

Luke 7:36-50 – The sinful woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair.

Luke 15:1-7 – Parable of the lost sheep

Luke 15:11-32 – The prodigal son

Luke 23:32-43 - The thief on the cross

John 8:3-11 – Woman caught in adultery

The Big Fish

Jesus makes his priests fishers of men. Priests live to catch the big ones. In his book, *The Gift of the Church*, Monsignor Bob Guste describes what it means to a priest when he hears the confession of someone burdened with mortal sin. “It’s one of the happiest times in my life as a priest. That’s why I became a priest! It’s like being a doctor. You didn’t go through all that training just to put band-aids on people. When someone comes along who is really hurting and you’re able to help that person in a significant way – you feel it’s worth it all.”¹⁹ But, you might ask, what would the priest think of me? Father Guste gives the answer: “I would feel so much respect for that person’s honesty and courage. I would feel a special reverence in the company of that person and a greater bond of closeness and love. I would feel very humble and have a deep sense of gratitude to God for what happened that day when that burden was laid down and God’s grace broke through in such a wonderful way!”²⁰

The Little Fish

Let’s face it, we are all sinners. Even when there is no mortal sin in our life, we can recognize the need for repentance because we have a heart divided with many attachments. We love Jesus, but not totally. It is hard to give up the attachments that prevent us from surrendering to Jesus alone. The rich young man who faithfully kept the commandments sought to have a genuinely successful life. He wanted to be perfect. He came to the correct person for guidance, Jesus. St. Mark informs us that Jesus looked at him with love, then Jesus offered him an amazing exchange. If he would voluntarily give up the material wealth that has no lasting, he could become Jesus’ disciple and receive a heavenly reward that would never be lost. However, the young man went away very sad. He wouldn’t surrender his attachment to his riches (Lk 18:18-23).

The Church in her wisdom recommends that we go to confession once a month. However, this is not an obligation. The confession of venial sins helps to heal our divided heart so we can surrender completely to Jesus. It strikes at the root of the

¹⁹ Monsignor Bob Guste, *The Gift of the Church*, p. 35.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 36.

selfishness and the attachments that hold us back from truthfully saying with St. Paul, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20).

Preparation: the Examination of Conscience

▪ **Start with a prayer to the Holy Spirit.**

Begin with a brief prayer asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten your heart with inward sight of truth so that you can more fully recognize and repent from our sins. The guidelines below are offered as an aid. The first focuses on devotional confession where mortal sin is not an issue. The second is more suited for those who have not made a confession in a long time or they are grappling with issues of mortal sin.

Devotional Confession

Where mortal sin is not the issue the following considerations may prove helpful.

Love one another

During the Last Supper Jesus said, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (Jn 14:34-35).

How faithfully do you fulfill this commandment? Examine yourself by reading St. Paul’s hymn of love with this alteration. Every time the apostle refers to love, italicized below, substitute your name. The uneasiness you will experience will indicate the areas you need to examine and confess.

“*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*” (1 Cor 13:4-7).

▪ **Choosing life in the spirit over life of the flesh**

In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul makes a distinction between those who live by the flesh and those who live by the spirit. Read the passage reflectively to discover what areas apply to your life.

Works of the flesh:

“immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery (literally taking drugs), enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like” then St. Paul added, “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal 5:20-21).

Fruits of the Spirit:

“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22).

▪ **Getting to the root of the problem**

Strive to uncover the underlying cause of your sinful patterns. For example, it doesn’t take great insight for a parent to confess: “I have been impatient with the children on the

average of three or four times daily.” However, it is a very different to admit, “The reason I am so impatient with my children is because I am selfish, or proud, or I resist the self-discipline needed to guide them consistently!”

• **Identifying the root cause of sin**

Busyness and Noise – Excessive activity crowds God out of your life. Anyone is in spiritual danger when he is over worked, over busy, and under prayed. Excessive noise prevents you from hearing the voice of God.

Worry – Worry and anxiety may indicate that you live in the delusion that you are in control. Jesus gives you the grace for today’s challenges, not tomorrow’s difficulties. Anxiety never comes from God. It may be an indication that something is amiss in the way you are living. What is it?

Forgiveness – Any lack of forgiveness is a poison that destroys your ability to love. Who have you not forgiven?

Prayer – Prayer is the most important activity of every day. The battle of prayer and the battle of the spiritual life is the same battle. Your commitment to prayer is a good indication of your commitment to Jesus.

Distraction in prayer – Pay attention to what distracts you in prayer. It may reveal the things to which you are attached. Distractions also afford the opportunity to acknowledge our helplessness to God and to surrender into His arms.

Humility – Humility is rooted in the absolute truth that without God we can do nothing truly worthwhile (Jn 15:5). The one thing for which we do deserve all the credit is our sins. Prayer is the great school in humility, because imbedded in every prayer is an acknowledgment of your vulnerability and a plea to God that cries, “Help!”

Where mortal sin is an issue

▪ **The Ten Commandments**

This section of the Examination of Conscience is based on the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17 and Deut 5:1-21). This is the place to start when mortal sin is the issue, especially if one has neglected God for a long time.

First Commandment – I am the Lord your God: you shall not have false gods before me.

- Did I receive the Eucharist in the state of mortal sin? How often?
- Did I fail to declare a mortal sin at my last confession?
- Have I been involved in any superstitious or occult practices?
- Have I abandoned all or part of my faith?
- Do I worship false gods: self, sex, power, influence, and wealth.

Second Commandment – You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- Have I used God's holy name with irreverence?
- Have I used the name of Mary or the saints in an irreverent manner?
- Have I lied under oath?
- Have I broken a vow?

Third Commandment – Remember to keep holy the Lord's day.

- Have I missed Mass on Sunday or a holy day of obligation? How often?
- Did I fail to fast or abstain on a day commanded by the Church?
- To what degree have I performed unnecessary work or become involved in other activities on Sunday that hinders the celebration of the Lord's Day?
- Have I failed to be generous in supporting the Church and the poor with the material blessings God has given to me?
- Have I neglected the spiritual formation of my children by word or example?
- Do I fail to supervise the things my children see and read?
- Have I failed to see that my children make their first confession, first Communion, and confirmation?
- Do I take my children to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days?
- Do I form my children in their faith?

Fourth Commandment – Honor your father and mother.

- To what extent have I been disobedient and disrespectful to my parents?
- Do I help my parents when it is needed?
- Am I respectful of legitimate authority?

Fifth Commandment – You shall not kill.

- Do I have angry and violent outbursts?
- Have I injured or killed anyone?
- Have I been an occasion of mortal sin to others?
- Have I gotten drunk?
- Have I used illegal drugs?
- Have I consented to direct sterilization?
- Did I consent to, advise, support, or take part in an abortion?

Sixth & Ninth Commandments – You shall not commit adultery. You shall not cover your neighbor's wife.

- Have I willfully entertained impure thoughts?
- Have I consented to desires against the virtue of purity?
- Have I participated in forms of entertainment that place me in a proximate occasion of sin?
- Do I view pornography?
- Have I participated in any impure acts with others or myself?
- Have I used any form of artificial contraception?

Seventh & Tenth Commandments – You shall not steal. You shall not cover your neighbor’s goods.

- Did I Steal?
- Have I made restitution?
- Have I conducted business with fraud or deception?
- Have I knowingly accepted stolen property?
- Do I squander money by gambling?

Eighth Commandment – You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

- Do I lie?
- Have I accused others without the facts?
- Have I harmed another reputation by telling lies or the truth?

What do I say and do in the confessional?

For those who are making their first confession or who have been away from the sacrament for a long time, the following guidelines will prove helpful.

1. Entering the confessional

The choice is yours. You can go to confession face-to-face or behind a screen. Generally if you go behind the screen you will kneel. Usually, when going to confession face-to-face you will sit facing the priest, but kneeling is an option.

2. The confession

After you are settled in your chosen place, the priest will give a greeting. For example, he may say a brief prayer like:

“May God enlighten your heart to help you know and acknowledge your sins, and trust in His great mercy.”

If you are very unsure of what to do next, because you have been away from the sacrament for a long time, you might simply say,

“Father I am nervous because I have not made my confession in ____ years. I am not sure what to do. Please guide me through the sacrament.”

If that is not the case, simply say:

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned. My last confession was (two months, five years, etc) ago. Since that time the following are my sins.”

Then confess your sins. Depending on the situation the priest may ask tactful questions to determine the kind of sins you are confessing or to make sure you have made a decision to avoid this sin in the future.

3. The advice and penance

Once you have named all your sins the priest may give you encouragement and advice. Giving you a penance will follow. For example, he may ask you to say the Rosary or reflect on Jesus passion and death for 20 minutes.

Then he will ask you to make a good act of contrition.

An Act of Contrition

O my God, I am sorry for my sins because I dread your just punishment, but most of all because I have offended you who are all good and deserving all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin, to do my penance, and to amend my life. Amen.

This will be followed by absolution. You can reply, “Thank you.” Leave the confessional.

4. Completing your penance

If possible complete your penance immediately. Enjoy the experience of having all your sins removed. When God forgives, your sins have disappeared.

5. Pray daily to avoid the occasion of sin.

Because of our human tendency to sin, we must strive for holiness each and every day. Pray daily to avoid sin, particularly those sins that you recently confessed

The Residue of Sin

Jesus perfectly redeemed us through his obedient death on Calvary. The application of his infinite merits is the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through the Church. Thus in the sacrament of confession the guilt of sin is taken away. In the case of mortal sin, the very real danger of eternal damnation is also removed. However, even after the sacrament of penance has repaired our torn relationship with God, the obligation of temporal punishment may remain.

Why is there temporal punishment after we’ve gone to confession?

The temporal punishment caused by our sins is not an expression of God’s anger, nor does it indicate that God’s forgiveness is deficient. Instead it results from the harmful attachments to sin we cling to even after the sin is forgiven. When we confess our sin we not have a complete repentance because we still adhere to something connected with that sin. A man, for example, may sincerely repent about watching pornography, but he may still be attached to the stimulation those images provided. A difficult battle may await him. As a result temporal punishment remains. Our loving Father allows temporal punishments to cleanse us of our sinful attachments because these sinful ways harm our relationship with him and may jeopardize eternal life with him in heaven.

Perfect love

Perfect sorrow is the complete repentance of sin that flows from our ardent love of God. When perfect love accompanies sacramental forgiveness, the sinner is so completely healed that no temporal punishment remains. In contrast, when our sorrow is less than perfect, our deformed attachments demand purification before we go to heaven. This cleansing must occur during our journey on earth or after death in the state called Purgatory.

Purgatory²¹

Purgatory is not a second chance for those who die in the state of mortal sin. Rather, it is the final purification of the elect. In the words of the *Catechism*

“All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”²²

There is a radical difference between the punishment of hell and the purification of Purgatory. Hell is a place of despair, hatred, and eternal torment. The fire that burns in hell is the flame of God’s wrath. Purgatory is a place of sorrow, acceptance, and hope where we experience the purifying fire of God’s love. Nevertheless, the suffering in Purgatory is very real. On earth we experience many distractions that dull the powerful longing for God that is deeply imbedded in every soul. Once we die the intense desire to possess and be possessed by God consumes our whole being. Any delay in this embrace of eternal Love is indescribably painful.

Scriptural Basis for Purgatory

Although the word “Purgatory” is not in the Bible, the idea is clearly taught in Sacred Scripture.

New Testament:

1. The Book of Revelation teaches that “nothing unclean” shall enter heaven (Rev 21:27).
2. St. Paul speaks of our judgment in terms of a cleansing fire: “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor 3:15).
3. St. Peter similarly wrote: “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which through perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:7).
4. Peter also tells us that Christ visited a place for the dead that is not hell and not heaven, and preached to them the good news so that heaven would be open to them (1 Peter 3:19).
5. Jesus also talks about the sinner who “will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt 12:32). It implies that some sins, venial sins, can be forgiven in the next life.
6. The Book of Hebrews commands: “pursue peace with everyone, *and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*” (Heb 12:14).

Old Testament:

Further evidence of purification after death is found in the Old Testament:

²¹ CCC #s 1031, 1032.

²² CCC # 1030.

1. Praying for the dead is a practice mentioned in Sacred Scripture. Judas Maccabeus prayed for his fallen comrades “that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out... Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Macc 12:42, 46)
2. The Book of Sirach teaches, “Give graciously to all the living, and withhold not kindness from the dead” (Sir 7:33).

Indulgences²³

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. An indulgence is either *partial* or *plenary* according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin.

Key Points

- An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasure of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for their sins.
- The Church attaches indulgences to specified prayers or good works, for example, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, reading Sacred Scripture, and saying the Rosary.
- Indulgences can be applied either to the living or the dead.

Reflection

Sin thrives in darkness. It seeks to remain hidden and unacknowledged. In the sacrament of forgiveness, Jesus breaks down this barrier of silence that can easily lead to denial and excuses. Confession to a priest brings us the light of Christ’s truth. It compels us to face the evil we have chosen and admit that we have failed our Lord. This sacrament also invites us to weep with a profound regret and repentance! Through the power of this sacrament Jesus heals those who are afflicted with the leprosy of sin. Jesus gently and lovingly tells us to sin no more without reproach, just as he did with the unfortunate woman caught in adultery. He also gives us His strength to lean on so we can be faithful to our determination to avoid sin in the future. Finally, through the authority he gave to His Church, Jesus applies His merits to purify us from the attachments of sin. When we leave the confessional it is with the absolute certitude that our sins are forgiven. We have Jesus’ word for it. Jesus wants our death to be the happiest day of our life because on that day we can fly into the eternal embrace of His loving arms.

“And Jesus answered them, ‘I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance’” (Luke 5:32).

²³ CCC #s 1471, 1472, 1473