

101
Inspirational
Stories
of the
Sacrament of
Reconciliation

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*Inspirational
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of the
Sacrament of
Reconciliation*

Sister Patricia Proctor, OSC



A Called by Joy Book

Franciscan Monastery of Saint Clare
Spokane, Washington

www.calledbyjoy.com

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Dedication

to Father George Morbeck

Before I entered the Monastery, Father Morbeck was our parish priest. I was impressed by his solid faith and fearlessness in proclaiming God's message. Didn't matter whether the topic was popular or not—he preached solid Catholic doctrine in season and out of season. At one point he decided to preach the sacraments. Each week he covered one in his sermon. That's what I am doing...working my way through the sacraments, one book at a time.

When I was discerning entering religious life, I went to talk to Father about it. After some very helpful discussion and as I was getting ready to go, I suddenly remembered to ask him to bless a miraculous medal I was wearing. So he blessed it and then I said, "Oh! I should have asked you to bless me as well." He smiled and said, "I already did. I blessed the whole package."

Our Church is full of many good, Catholic priests; strong men who lead prayerful, quiet lives of faithfulness, in season and out of season. In my opinion, Father George is one of the best.

Thank you, Father Morbeck.

With Prayerful Thanks

When I was a child, I read a book about a little red hen who tried to get the duck, the cat and the dog all to help her plant and harvest some wheat. She didn't have any luck—they all said, "Not I." No matter what she asked of them, they couldn't help her, so in the end she would say, "Very well, then I will do it myself!" And she did.

Well, that didn't happen with this book! Every step of the way I got, "Sure, I'll be glad to help," or "No problem, I can do that" or "Thank you for the opportunity, I would love to help!"

So this is my page of prayerful and grateful thanks to all who made this book possible.

The beautiful sisters I live with: the most generous and loving women on the earth. I am so blessed to be a Poor Clare Sister in community with you!

The friends who subscribe to my daily mailings and respond time and time again with stories, suggestions, information, and lots of prayer. So many wonderful people responded to my efforts, and though I could not use everything that was submitted, I appreciate each and every one so much. The hardest thing with this series of books is not being able to use each story that comes in. Everyone is so special and puts so much prayerful time and energy into contributing, that I feel like a heel having to say, "Yes" to this one and, regretfully, "No" to another. What makes it easier is the love and understanding from those who receive a "No" but respond with prayers and support anyway. You are so appreciated! You are the unsung heroes in the book, and I hope your story will be used next time!

My book production friends who pull each book together from start to finish—Barb Ries, Anne Marie Schroeder, Virginia Schmuck, Dale Duncan, and Cynthia Landeen—my faithful friends who are always willing to go the extra mile to make it happen on schedule when I'm not!

For the beautiful cover and illustrations by Theodore Schluenderfritz, and for Kathy Czech and all the printing people at POS—THANK YOU!

All the great people at Saint Anthony Messenger Press, our Franciscan Family in Ohio! God bless you over and over for your help, support, care, and willingness to work with all the new ideas I come up with! I know that every Catholic publishing house is doing the work of God, but in my book you stand out above the rest!

With grateful thanks,

I ask God to bless each of you with, “All Peace and All Good!”

Sister Patricia Proctor, OSC

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Foreword

In my practice of counseling, I have been most amazed at the opportunities for counseling that confession offers to the penitent, and for free! I have seen the benefits as I performed my humbling duty of hearing confessions in Rome, where I now work at the Pontifical Biblical Institute; in India, where I am originally from; in Germany and the U.S. where I studied; and in Zambia in Africa where I worked for many years.

Many practicing Catholics have moved away from the rigid notion of “no communion without confession,” to one of asking God’s pardon for their sins as being enough, without seeking absolution from a priest. To this I can only repeat the words I heard from a born again pastor on the radio telling his congregation that, “Even if God has forgiven you, you still need to find a friend, even if he lives a thousand miles away, and tell him what you did, so that your forgiveness is not just from God but also in community.”

Catholic teaching, understood from the words of Christ to Peter in which He asked Peter to forgive in God’s name with his power to bind and loose both on earth and in heaven, integrates both the concept of forgiveness of God and that happening in community in the rite of confession.

The sacrament of reconciliation, or confession, has gone through a lot of changes in its presentation in recent years thanks to the stimulus given by the Second Vatican Council. With the attempt to move away from the confession box and bring in a more pastoral and face-to-face approach, there has been a lot of learning going on. However, many Catholics miss the point of these changes, and so they do not benefit from the powerful gifts that the sacrament of reconciliation has to offer both for their spiritual growth as well as for better lives at home and at work.

Sr. Patricia Proctor, OSC, in her book, *101 Inspirational Stories of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, looks at what is actually happening in the use of the sacrament of reconciliation in the life of the Church today; through her collection of personal narratives and teaching she brings those stories into their theological perspectives. They will help those seeking to know more or to practice a more fruitful Christian life to see reflections of their own lives in these stories, and also changes that the

sacrament can bring into them once they look at their own states of souls in a deeper light.

May God bless all those who read through this book, and may it bring them peace, joy, and unity in love, which the sacrament of reconciliation is all about.

Fr. Eustace Sequeira, SJ
Pontifical Biblical Institute
Rome

Preface

Ever wish you could be perfectly *at rights* with God, yourself, and all beings?

This book brings forth the light of peace available through the sacrament of reconciliation, given to us by Jesus Christ and extended to us in our lifetime by the Catholic Church.

It has been a joyful effort of the Poor Clare community and of our Sister Patricia Proctor in particular, to present these stories of effectual and graced use of the sacrament of reconciliation.

May they find an extended fulfillment in your renewal discovery of the wellsprings of peace waiting to be poured into your life!

*Sister Rita Louise McLean, OSC
Monastery of Saint Clare
Spokane, Washington*

Introduction

*By the Most Reverend William S. Skylstad
Bishop of Spokane*

Memories of celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation remain strong for all of us. I still can remember my first time going to confession. My mother would frequently remind all of us children in the family of the need to go to confession. It was a reminder we heeded, and one for which I'm grateful. Later, during my twelve years in the seminary, we had the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation twice a week, during study hall on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons.

In my years as a priest and bishop, the humbling role of serving as someone's confessor leaves me profoundly inspired by those who confess their sins and failings as penitents. Addressing our holiness of life is always a great challenge, and we can never tell when people will allow the movement of the Spirit to bring them to this truly reconciling sacrament. I often wear clerical attire when I travel, and it's not at all uncommon to pass through an airport and have someone approach me asking to go to confession.

The celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation has fallen off somewhat over recent years. Clearly, we need to rediscover the power of this sacrament in our lives. When we look a little more closely at the sacrament, it becomes clear how important it really is to our spiritual growth.

First, we need forgiveness. Every one of us is a sinner, and we know it. At the beginning of every Eucharist, we acknowledge our sinfulness and proclaim God's mercy with one of several forms of the Penitential Rite. During the Our Father, we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." The redeeming and forgiving presence of Jesus is always with us. Again and again, we can return—yes, and we need to return—to the wonderful gift of this sacrament, seeking forgiveness and healing with a spirit of gratitude and joy.

Second, it is important to remember that there is always a communitarian aspect to our sinfulness. Whenever we do something positive, in some small way we uplift the entire community of faith and the world

about us. But the opposite is also true. Whenever I sin, the quality of the spiritual life of the community surrounding me is somewhat diminished. The second rite for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation is the communal rite, including individual confession and absolution of our sins. As we gather in that setting to celebrate the sacrament, we see our solidarity: with one another as sinners, and in our need for forgiveness. Our churches have specific rooms for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. Those spaces are a visible sign to every member of the community.

Third, we need to recognize the full reality of our lives, sins and all. The preparation that we need to celebrate the sacrament assists us in dealing with the spiritual blindness, sinfulness, and dehumanizing patterns that confound our spiritual journey. Whenever we celebrate the sacrament with our confessor, we must take time aside beforehand to assess the condition of our soul. We must ask ourselves, in truth and integrity: For what do I need to be forgiven? This time we spend in the examination of our conscience is truly a time of honesty, grace and blessing.

Fourth, the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation keeps us humble. Everyone, from the pope to the rest of us in the pews, needs to confess sins. At a recent meeting of the bishops, we have scheduled an afternoon of prayer and reflection. Almost always during those times, there is an opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. Usually this happens during a Holy Hour. One after another, the bishops rise and go to a station, where a confessor waits to celebrate the sacrament. I find it moving to see that common acknowledgment, all of us approaching the celebration of the sacrament as a need in our own lives.

I often wonder: If we celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation more regularly, might not our Catholic family better address our anger, our shortcomings, and our struggles? There is a healing grace from the sacrament. The celebration of the sacrament is an intense form of prayer and encounter with the Lord Jesus. And it is clear to me that if we respond regularly to the sacrament, our call to holiness will be better appreciated and answered.

May we always rejoice in God's mercy and forgiveness, extended to us in the sacrament of reconciliation! That mercy and forgiveness have power without end in our lives. Thanks be to God!



What Are You Doing Here?

I hope this sharing of my experience is helpful, especially to my brother priests and those who prepare people for the sacrament of reconciliation.

I have been a priest for thirty-three years and a preacher of parish missions and retreats. During my first year of priestly ministry, I was sent to a small rural parish to preach a mission. On Saturday afternoon, I went to the church to “hear confessions” as we used to say back then. The church was empty, and I sat in the small, dark confessional wondering why no one was coming. I opened my breviary and began to pray. A long time passed without anyone coming into the confessional.

I was a little disappointed that no one seemed to want to “go to confession” when suddenly I heard a voice: “What are you doing here?”

The voice was so clear that I thought someone was outside my confessional talking to me. I pulled the curtain aside but found no one there. The church was completely empty. I sat back once again and the voice came a second time: “What are you doing here? You have no right to hear what you are about hear. Only I have a right to hear what is said in this place.”

I suddenly realized Who was speaking to me. “They are coming to Me, not you. Only I can forgive their sins. You are given a great privilege to share in the most intimate moments between Me and My people.”

A great peace came over me and a deep sense of awe. I realized in that moment that celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation was not a *job* a priest did, but an awesome responsibility and privilege.

Since that day, I have always loved to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. I find that my knowledge of God deepens through being His instrument. I am amazed at the ways God uses me during the sacrament of reconciliation, and the blessing it is to those who approach the sacrament in faith and hope.



“God waits

*He waits for our return. ‘But I haven’t been to confession for fifty years!’
The response is simply... ‘Welcome back! How good it is that you are
here!’”*

Lessons for Confession

by Fr. Pat Umberger

see page 171



Supernatural Magnet

I am currently a postulant for the Capuchin Franciscans in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Perhaps the happiest day of my life was at the Easter Vigil in 1999 when I converted to Catholicism. It was also one of the most humbling.

After I was baptized, received holy Communion, and was confirmed, I was so full of joy that I literally could not stop smiling. Having never experienced joy like this before, I was blown away. Following the Mass there was a reception for all of us catechumens and our families and friends. We had a little party and then it was time to go home.

As happy as I was, on the ride home I began to feel truly repentant. I had never felt this way before. I recalled that as I was going through RCIA the priest, Father Whalen, told me that I would not have to go to confession. Boy, was I relieved. I had never gone to confession before and it scared me.

When I finally felt the desire to go to confession for the first time, I was at the Franciscan University of Steubenville for a young adult conference. It was my second time there but my first time as a Catholic. I was scared because I had never told anyone about the dark things in my soul. It was time to be accountable, and it was difficult.

I held my breath and walked (practically without looking) under the tent that was used as a makeshift confessional. I sat down in the chair and told the priest my sins. After I was done, and as he gave me absolution, I felt an incredible peace hovering around me that was affecting me in an indescribable way. It was very powerful and very peaceful. It was as if I could literally feel God working inside me. It seemed as if He was a *supernatural magnet* vacuuming out my impurities and filling me with His holy flame. As I walked out from that confession I thought, “Wow! That was awesome!”

I assumed that God would move like that at my next confession, and when He didn't, I was disappointed. But, looking back on it, I now realize God is not a showman performing parlor tricks. He is our living God and always does what is best for our souls.

Craig N. Glantz

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Second Opinion

It was my forty-something birthday and I phoned my mom to again thank her and my dad (who is deceased) for giving me life. Somewhere in the midst of the conversation she said to me, “And to think I almost didn't have you...” Not sure if I had heard her right, I asked her to repeat what she said. She said it again, and added, “Didn't I ever tell you that?” I explained that I think I would recall such a statement, and she proceeded to tell me the way I came into being.

It was the mid 1950s and she was the mother of six boys. My mom was experiencing some “woman problems” as they said back in those days, and went to see her doctor. He told her that because she was experiencing some bleeding, and since she already had six children, he would schedule a hysterectomy for her. The operation was scheduled to take place a few weeks later in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

Saturday arrived and Mom decided to go to confession and mention this operation to her parish priest, Father John Callhan. He advised her to seek a second opinion from a Catholic doctor. Mom called my aunt and got the name of a Catholic doctor. At her appointment, this doctor explained how she was not in need of a hysterectomy at all, and a much less invasive procedure was performed to ratify her bleeding problem.

A week or so later when the hospital called to remind my mom of the operation that was scheduled, she canceled it. Then, about a month later I was conceived! I owe my life not only to my parents, but to the sacrament

of reconciliation and a good holy priest at St. Charles Catholic Church in the small coal mining town of Twin Rocks, Pennsylvania.

Mary K. Soyka

Salem, Ohio

My Thoughts...

The Beatitudes comes immediately to mind. Have I done anything not in accordance with their intent?

A nightly examination of conscience is good. It makes us aware of our need for daily conversion. Also, the two great commandments: Love God, love my neighbor. Have I done anything today not in keeping with those commandments?

I find pride is my biggest sin. It's so easy to get puffed up. A nightly examination of conscience helps me identify where I most need conversion since many of the same faults keep cropping up.

I make a list of what I want to tell the priest before confession. Then it's easy to just hand it to him, and we can discuss whatever.

This works for me. Hopefully it will help others.

Mary Lou Duncan



Just Ask Mom

While raising a family of five children, I found weekly confession of sins a helpful tool. Each Saturday afternoon, we would change into appropriate clothes and go to Our Lady of Fatima Church.

Msgr. Coleman was pastor at the time. Before we entered the church, I suggested to the children that they look over the past week and see what sins they might have committed. In fact, I suggested to them, that if they could not remember their sins, to just ask me and I could remind them.

I know that the sacrament of penance had a powerful influence on our family and our interactions with one another. It motivated the children to be good for another week!

Joanne L. McGoldrick

Spokane, Washington



Cafeteria Catholic

I was raised Catholic, but the emphasis in our home was mainly to live a good Christian life. Going to church regularly or following the catechism was optional. Since religion in my family was mostly about showing Christ's love in our actions, I believed I was a devout Catholic because my arms were stretched wide helping people like nobody's business.

I attended Mass when it was convenient, and had committed my career to teaching in the Catholic schools. It was at one of these schools that I met my dear friend Lauren.

Lauren was a strange Catholic in my eyes. She kept telling me about different saints and their stories, using them as examples to lovingly teach me about my faith. I thought she was a little *out there* and kept asking her, "How do you know that story is true?" or "Where did you get that story?" Her patience with me was amazing.

Eventually she started telling me about the holy days of obligation. Like Sunday Mass, those, too, were optional in my opinion. I was not going to be a hypocrite and attend Mass during the week. Besides, my dad told me that going to Mass so everyone can see you is not what makes you holy. It's how you live that makes you holy.

Poor Lauren. Look what she was up against. I was this holier than thou Catholic teacher who knew nothing about our faith and was convinced I didn't need to know it because I was living it. Bless her heart. Lauren did not give up on me.

Lauren gave me Scott and Kimberly Hahn's conversion stories. You'd think that would turn me around wouldn't you? No, they were neat stories, but I was already Catholic.

As we went through the school year, Lauren invited me to begin praying with her after school. That was really pushing it. Prayer is a private thing. Sharing with a friend, whoa! But I agreed because I loved her and knew I needed to do what interested her.

Wow! What a difference that prayer time made. She taught me how to pray the rosary, how to talk to Jesus rather than just God the Father, and how to call on the gifts of the Holy Spirit for help. That did me in. When she got all three persons of God and Mother Mary working with me, my eyes began to open.

Then one day Lauren used the phrase "cafeteria Catholic" in a story she was telling me. I asked, "What is a cafeteria Catholic?" Lauren explained that a cafeteria Catholic is someone who only follows the rules of the Church that he or she agrees with and lets the rest go. Well, I'm a major rule follower and did not at all like the sound of that. So I began asking questions.

We turned to the catechism, we turned to the Bible, we prayed the rosary, and I was convicted big time! I knew that I was indeed a cafeteria Catholic, and until now I had not even known it. It was time to decide. "What will it be Mary, are you Catholic or not?"

I pondered this for months and in the meantime got pregnant. This affected me deeply. Was I going to teach my children to be cafeteria Catholics? My heart began to ache, my anxiety increased, and at the prodding of Lauren, I decided to go to confession at St. Charles.

I was so scared. I wrote everything down. I listed all the individual sins that I could think of, such as my wrong attitude, and the biggest sin of all which was that my husband and I had used birth control for years, even before we were married. That one killed me. Granted, he was my

only one, but I had still sinned against God. That my husband is my one and only made it okay? Right? Not!

It was Saturday and approaching 3:00 p.m. I was so nervous that I was shaking. I picked Father Pat as the priest I would confess to. He is so warm and caring that I felt I could talk to him. So, I went in. “Face to face or behind the curtain?” I decided to face him.

He smiled and said, “Sit down, Mary.” Before I lost my nerve, I told him that I wrote down a whole list of things, and that I had not been to confession in years. I don’t think I took a breath.

Father Pat was so dear. He touched my knee and said, “Let’s start with a prayer.” We did, and that calmed me. Then he told me to begin my confession.

I read everything. I explained how I was raised Catholic and how I had changed. I told him about my husband and me. I got it all off my chest. You know what? He did not look disappointed, he did not tell me how bad I was, and he did not even call me a huge sinner and tell me to leave the Church forever. “You know what he said?”

“Mary, you have had a conversion. God has drawn you closer to Him and your life is about to change for the better.” I was shocked and so relieved that I started to giggle. Father Pat joined me. He was so happy for me.

He gave me my penance, which was to go and live the life of a good and faithful Catholic and to say the Joyful Mysteries for strength and courage. I did, and now both my husband and I are living a Catholic life and raising our children to do the same. My life changed that day, and I give thanks and praise to God for both Lauren and Father Pat.

“Mary”

Tacoma, Washington



A Different Light

I grew up as a Protestant, active in my church until I went to college. I never paid much attention to other faiths until I met my husband-to-be.

Joe was a Catholic from a very Catholic community. I began attending church with Joe and tried to learn about his faith. When we got engaged, I decided to join the Church—mainly because it was important to Joe and his family. I believe I joined the Church with my head and not my heart, which is why things began to fall apart shortly after our wedding.

Within a year after our son, Lee, was born, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. *Suffering had begun.* I was very confused. I got angry at everything and everybody: my husband, the doctors, and God. All I saw everywhere, including the church, was suffering and I couldn't handle it.

I felt that God had abandoned all of us. I quit going to church. My actions and attitudes became full of sin. I emotionally began leaving my marriage and unknowingly went into a deep depression.

In 1997, a few years after my mother's death, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I hit bottom. I had never been more terrified in my life. Worst of all, I had no faith. When I checked into the hospital for surgery, I was asked what church I attended, what my faith was. I had no answer. I felt abandoned by God, but He was there watching over me, along with my husband, who never left my side.

After surgery, I turned on the TV trying to calm down, and that's when I found the channel with the camera on the crucifix in the chapel at the hospital. I left that channel on all night. Every time I woke up there was a soft glow from the TV filling the room—and there was Jesus on the cross.

I stared at Him and began to see His suffering in a different light. For the first time I started to see within my heart the beauty and love of our crucified Savior on the cross. My life began to change.

My mother-in-law gave me a tape of the rosary that Joe and I played and prayed together whenever the fear set in.

During this time, I experienced one of the greatest healings of all, through the sacrament of reconciliation. I had only gone to confession once, when I first joined the church fifteen years previously. As a Protestant I had been taught that all I had to do was to tell God I was sorry for my sins, and He would forgive me. I had been doing that over and over since my surgery, but I couldn't stop feeling guilty for the many, many sins of my past.

Finally, I made an appointment to see our priest, Father Daniel Conlon, now bishop of Steubenville, to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation in his office. Before my confession, I wrote down everything I could think of then, even though I dreaded facing Father with my embarrassing sins. I felt this push from the Holy Spirit, and I couldn't stop. I poured out my past amidst tears and Kleenex. Father counseled me, and then he stood up, laid hands on me and prayed over me. He told me that in the name of Jesus, my sins were forgiven. I felt numb as I left his office.

In the days ahead, I became aware that a change was happening. Every time I would begin to think about the past, my thoughts immediately would turn to something else. Later, I would realize that I had not spent any time thinking about my guilt or my sins. Thoughts and feelings that I couldn't seem to control before were being cleansed completely from my mind. My past was being lifted once and for all!

Linda L. Lochtefeld

New Bremen, Ohio

A Spiritual Maintenance Agreement

By Vinny Flynn

If I were to ask you what confession is, what would you say?

My guess is that, for many people, the first thing that comes to mind is *forgiveness of sins*.

And I think that's a problem. Yes, confession leads to forgiveness of sins. *But it's more than that.*

Confession is a *sacrament*—which means it was instituted by Christ to give grace.

I learned that a long time ago, but then I forgot it, and I keep forgetting it. We shouldn't be going to confession just for forgiveness of specific sins. We should be going *to receive grace*.

Many of us are in the habit of waiting to go to confession until we have committed serious sin, and then we go to get it forgiven.

Through most of my life, I would only go to confession when I suddenly realized that I needed it because I had lapsed into specific sin. “Oops, I blew it again. I have to go to confession.”

Not a “repair job”

I think most of us tend to view confession the same way we view taking our car to the garage for a repair job. We think that confession is when we need a major overhaul. We're not running right, so we have to get “fixed.”

We should instead be thinking of confession as “maintenance.” *Confession should be an oil change.*

I remember when I got my first nice car. It was only two years old, and it only had 12,000 miles on it. One of my friends said, “Let me tell you something. No matter what else you do, change the oil every 3,000 miles, and that car will keep running.”

And I have found that to be true.

Our maintenance agreement with Christ

If you've bought any major appliances lately, you were probably offered a "maintenance agreement."

It costs you extra, but, with a maintenance agreement, when things go wrong, you can have them fixed. Sometimes the agreement covers parts only, and sometimes it's free parts and labor.

I like to think of confession as part of our maintenance agreement with Christ.

We come with a lifetime warranty. And if anything ever goes wrong, Christ will replace everything free. Parts and labor. Everything's free. Forever. That's our maintenance agreement. And it doesn't cost us a nickel more.

All we have to do is take advantage of that. We come to confession as a part of that maintenance agreement.

If you buy a new car, the maintenance agreement on it is something like 50,000 miles or five years, whichever comes first. But, this agreement only deals with factory defects or things that go wrong in the normal course of events. If you *abuse* the product, you've ruined the warranty.

God even lets us abuse the product. He still fulfills the lifetime warranty. But, in a practical sense, what is necessary is the same thing we find in an automobile agreement: *there are certain required times for regular maintenance.*

A manufacturer knows that if you don't ensure regular maintenance for the product, it's going to break—and then the company has to fix it according to the warranty. So you have to adhere to regular schedule *of preventative maintenance.*

Preventative maintenance

Just from checking the oil, you can see over a period of time that, even if the car is running fine, impurities slip in. They mix with the oil, and the oil gets heavy and thick and dark, and it just doesn't do the job as well. So eventually, the car doesn't run as well and it

wears out faster.

But, if you put *fresh* oil in every 3,000 miles and replace the oil filter, you remove the impurities before they create serious problems.

Let's compare this concept with confession. Let's say we have no "mortal" impurities. We are still "running" fine, nothing is "broken"—but the little impurities are steadily building up, and we are gradually wearing ourselves out.

Just as with an oil change, we should go to confession "every 3,000 miles"—that is, regularly!

I remember how surprised I was when I first read that Pope John Paul II goes to confession once a week!

Now I don't know about you, but I am in awe of that man's holiness. It just amazes me!

And *he* goes to confession once a week. Why? Because he puts a lot of miles on! Even literally. So he goes to confession regularly to keep the "oil" of his life pure—to get a fresh injection of the "new life" of grace.

I know that, at certain times, I need to go to confession more often than at others, or else I start to feel a little dusty, grimy, gritty. Things just aren't quite right.

If I don't take advantage of that period of time when there's nothing serious, but I'm just aware of the fact that "the oil needs changing"—that's when sin is going to come in, and then I'm going to need a repair job.

Built-up sin

What we tend to do when we go to confession is confess our *sins*—but not the *root* of the sin. So our sins are forgiven, but what caused us to sin has not been healed. We think that the *sin* is what the problem is. But it's not. The problem is *what's been building up in us* in terms of our attitudes, our habits, our sinfulness, our weakness, our human condition, that needs *regular infusions of God's*

grace.

We need to look deeper, asking the Holy Spirit, “Come in. Probe my heart. Reveal to me what the *real* problems are. What are the things that lead to sin? What are the attitudes? Where do I need mercy most? Where do I need healing? What are the things in me at a deep level that need to be healed?”

We need that kind of “regular maintenance,” so that we don’t reach the point where there is a big fall from grace.

Go frequently

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1458) says, “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults [venial sins] is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed, *the regular confession* of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ, and progress in the life of the Spirit.”

Next follows the responsibility that comes *out* of Confession. “By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as He is merciful.”

Regular frequent confession, even if we have no mortal sin, is thus strongly recommended by the Church, so that we can become merciful as our Heavenly Father is merciful—and continue to run smoothly, mile after mile, as our Maker intended.

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Won't Go to Confession

I am a priest in the Diocese of Plymouth in England, and for seven years I was the Catholic chaplain in a rather large local hospital there. One day as I was visiting patients, a man told me he did not want to see me. I said, "Okay, that is all right." Each day as I passed his bed, I would greet him and then walk on.

On one occasion he called me and said, "Listen, if I wanted to receive the sacraments again after more than sixty years, I know I would have to go to confession and I cannot do that." I assured him that going to confession would be quite easy, and that I would ask him the questions. We talked for a long time and finally he said he would go to confession. I made an appointment for him for three days later.

The following day as I passed his bed he called to me and said, "Sorry, but I cannot possibly tell you what I have been doing all these years. I won't go to confession."

I sat at the foot of his bed and asked him, "What are you afraid to tell me?"

To my amazement, he told me about all the sins he thought he could not tell in two or three days' time! When he finished talking, I asked him, "Is there anything else you have to tell me?"

He said, "No, that is everything."

I asked him if he was truly sorry for all these faults and failings because he had now confessed everything! Then I told him about God's love for him and for all of us. I gave him absolution and anointed him. He was so happy!

The next day when I went to the hospital, I was informed that the man had died during the night. All I could say was, "God is so great! His love is beyond understanding."

Daniel A. Longland

Sidmouth, Devon, England



A Special Memory

St. Peter's Church has been my home since I became Catholic almost six years ago. However, my story begins a few years before that.

In 1996, my best friend and her family moved to Beaufort, South Carolina. It was during my visits to see her that I attended Mass and became familiar with St. Peter's Parish. As I look back now, I can see that every time I attended Mass, I was being called home. I remember knowing in my heart that I would become Catholic if I ever decided to move from Illinois to South Carolina.

At the age of twenty-nine, I bravely traveled 900 miles, with my cat as my only companion, and arrived in Beaufort on August 31, 1999. Although I did not have a job or a home to call my own, I was eager to start my life anew.

In the spring of 2000, five months after I arrived, I celebrated my first Communion and confirmation at the Easter Vigil Mass. At that point in my life, I was feeling unloved and unworthy. I had been struggling hard to see myself as God sees me, and I was seeking a deeper understanding of His love. I was also trying to grasp our Blessed Mother's love for me.

One day after receiving the sacrament of reconciliation, I had an experience I'll never forget. Like all my other confessions, once I was absolved and out of the confessional, I felt lightness within me. Then I prayed my penance as I knelt in front of our beautiful crucifix. The memory of what happened afterwards has never left me and I pray that it never will.

St. Peter's has a beautiful icon of Mary, and I had always wanted to kneel in prayer in front of it, but I had never had the courage to do so because I didn't know if there was a certain code of behavior for doing this. I was afraid of making any mistakes, and I let fear of the unknown keep me from what I now know is a simple process.

As I knelt in front of my Lord after confession on that unforgettable day, I felt called to Mary. I went to her statue, lit a candle and then knelt in prayer. As I was praying, I began to feel the loving arms of Mary wrap around me. I felt her loving embrace and was made aware of how real she is in my life. It was with Mary's hug that I began to see just how much she will help me draw ever closer to her Son and my Lord, Jesus Christ.

I still have struggles and weaknesses, but I will continue to be blessed by the sacrament of reconciliation for as long as I live.

Amanda S. Abbott

Beaufort, South Carolina



Time to Return

My last reconciliation had occurred prior to Vatican II. Back then we always confessed our sins to the priest in a darkened confessional. The sound of the sliding window signaled the time for me to shed the usual minor sins of youth. Confession terrified me, not so much because of the darkness of the confessional, but because of the darkness hidden within me.

College in the tumultuous 1960s came along and I was drawn away from my faith. To me, the Church was little more than a building without any real human or spiritual connection. I became convinced that the Catholic Church had little to offer me and drifted away. I went on to pursue my education, a successful career, and the many distractions of the world.

More than three decades passed. I married outside the Catholic Church and despite our intrinsic spirituality, my husband and I rejected church, and all that seemed irrelevant to us.

We had a good life and traveled abroad frequently, appreciating the world from its multiple perspectives. Curiously, in our travels I found myself exploring cathedrals and chapels, pretending that I was just ad-

miring the flying buttresses and stained glass windows. I never dared to admit that what I was really admiring was the faith and passion that could build such things. I also never dared to admit that I was seeking faith and a passionate relationship with the Lord for myself.

It eventually became abundantly clear that it was time for me to return to God. The Catholic Church was familiar and comfortable, and that was where I was being called to return.

Much had changed in the Church during the decades I had been away. I spent weeks looking for the right parish and a priest to whom I thought I might be able to go to fill in those lapses. A kindly bishop literally half a world away directed me to a local parish.

I scoured the internet for advice on how to go about making a good confession. I spent days and sleepless nights examining my conscience and dutifully prepared a list so I wouldn't forget my sins from more than thirty years. What became painfully clear was that I had committed the greatest sin of all. I had turned my back on God.

Not knowing what to expect or even how to actually go about a formal reconciliation at the dawn of the twenty-first century, I waited anxiously in line. It brought back all of those childhood memories of Saturday confessions from so long ago.

The first word I heard from Father Jim when I entered was "Peace." Gradually I settled in and recounted my general sins from the last thirty-plus years. Then it was time for the *big one*.

I had a conversation with the good priest, telling him how I had rejected God all those years. He absolved my sins and blessed me, and ended with gentle encouragement. He told me that I had made his day by laying all the sins of my adult life before him and expressed his joy that I had returned to the Church.

I was relieved that the priest did not act as though my story was unique or horrendous, and was happy that I had recognized the genuine nature of my greatest sin. Both of these points contributed to me having made a good confession.

My penance was to say a prayer for my non-Catholic husband who would have much adjusting to do as I recommitted myself to a life in which God was now the center.

Later that day I realized it was the feast of Christ the King, and the last Sunday of the Year of the Eucharist. Since then, every year I celebrate that feast day as the anniversary of my rebirth.

Candice Francis

Escondido, California



Walking on Air

When I was a child, I attended Immaculate Conception grammar school in Rochester, New York, where we were encouraged to go to confession weekly. Father Wood was the dynamic pastor at the time, and he and the other parish priests, Father Dunn, Father Roach, and Monsignor Cameron, were loved by all the children.

We lived about a mile or so from the school, and had to walk there and back four times a day. One Saturday, my mother told me to walk to church for confession. I did as she said, but when I got there I was so scared that I turned around and walked back home. Mother told me to go back to confession, which I did. When I arrived back at the church and talked to the priest, he was so understanding, patient, and kind that I felt as if I were walking on air when I left. I realized then that I didn't need to be afraid of confession after all.

I also fondly remember the nuns walking us over to church from the school and staying with us as each child went to confession. As I think back on it now, it was a wonderful experience to see long lines of children, each waiting to see one of the priests, and then to see the smiles on their faces as they returned to their seats.

Joan M. Beebe

Rochester, New York



“Mortal sin is a serious break in a relationship of love with God, neighbor, world and self. We can think of it as a radical no to God and to others. It happens when we refuse to live in a positive, life-giving way. Just as acts of heroism and extraordinary generosity are evidence of our capacity to say a radical yes to God, so calculated acts permeated with malice are evidence of our capacity to say no to God.”

Understanding Sin Today

by Richard M. Gula, S.S.

see page 31



Thirty Day Penance

I believe the sacrament of reconciliation is the perfect way to obtain freedom from the state of sin and to become one with God. How fortunate for me that my first experiences of confession were positive and made me feel good. I knew from early on that going to confession was an uplifting sacrament, and knowing this helped me through an especially challenging time in my life.

As an adult, I experienced some very sinful emotions that changed my life and spirituality for a while. Before that point, I never would have dreamed that I could become so enraged about something that it would take over my life and emotions.

It all started when my ex-daughter-in-law was in our family and her behavior and actions infuriated me. My first response was to act with the three sins of anger: revenge, retaliation, and resentment. Morally I knew these thoughts and actions were wrong, but nevertheless, anger was a constant companion of mine. I tried very hard to turn things around and did all I could to make the situation better, but my efforts proved futile.

I knew I had to confess all that I was doing wrong. I was so torn from the griping emotions of guilt, fear, and anger that I could not think of a better way to find peace than through the sacrament of reconciliation. From my childhood experiences, I knew confession would help make me feel better and that I would be in a better state of grace afterwards.

The wonderful priest who heard my confession sensed the fear in my voice and helped calm me. Then, after I got through my list of sins, he wisely knew exactly how to help me return to a state of peace.

As I waited for my penance, I imagined that I would probably have to say several Hail Mary's, or maybe even the rosary. I said, "So, what do I have to do, say the rosary for my penance?" His answer was not what I expected. It was not even close.

The priest said I had to pray for thirty days for my ex-daughter-in-law. My response was, “I can’t do that.” He replied, “Oh, but you will.”

“But when I pray it won’t mean anything because it won’t be sincere.” I told him.

“You will pray for her every time you pray for yourself and your family. At first it will not mean anything to you, it will be just a formality. Eventually you will find that you will truly mean it and want peace for her,” he said.

I still had my doubts but I did pray my penance every day. It was the most difficult prayer I ever had to do. At first, praying for her was meaningless. Then, about two and a half weeks into this penance, I began to express meaning in my prayers.

To my complete surprise, I actually began to truly want my ex-daughter-in-law to find peace in her life. I wanted her to be rid of her anger and control. I wanted her to find the God of her understanding, to have God shine in her heart and soul. It was a unique and great experience to sincerely love her without anger.

Lucy O. Scholerman

Bay City, Oregon



Monthly Cleaning

After reading about confession on Sister Patricia’s web site, reconciliation was fresh on my mind. I had been thinking that it was about time I went to confession again when one Saturday morning the Lord taught me a little something about the sacrament right in my kitchen.

My coffee pot had been dripping very slowly because I had been procrastinating cleaning it.

I knew I needed to take some action, so I found the instructions and started reading. All of a sudden I felt the Lord speaking to me, showing me my own need for cleaning.

The instructions read: “Descaling—We recommend that you descale your coffee maker once a month because mineral deposits can form a coating in the coffee maker, causing slower brewing time and possibly an off flavor in the coffee. Use a cleaner recommended for coffee makers. Wash the carafe and filter with soapy hot water.” That was it! The instructions were simple!

I, too, need to be descaled and cleared of those gunky deposits that build up in my life and in my heart. As I clean my coffee pot monthly with water and vinegar, I will be reminded to clean my spiritual coffee pot in the great sacrament of reconciliation.

Often the Lord uses everyday things to teach me, making His will clear for me. On that Saturday morning, in my family kitchen, I learned more than just how to clean a slow dripping coffee pot.

Jane M. Adams

Fitchburg, Wisconsin



The Box

As a child I dreaded going to confession. It was always a fearful time as I examined my conscience and wondered, “Am I confessing all my sins? Will I forget some serious sin? Will God punish me if I don’t do it right?” I only felt relief when it was over, and I could breathe easier until the next time. I would liken it to a trip to the dentist.

Sadly, I carried this fear into my adult years. I matured, but the sacrament of reconciliation remained a thorn in my side. I found myself attending Mass but avoiding *the box*. Along the way I met some wonderful priests who talked to me and calmed my fears. I slowly began to see this time as a special gift of God’s grace. After Vatican II, I began confessing face to face when the opportunity arose. I perceived this as a visible help for me to overcome my bad habits and serious faults.

A few years ago when I was visiting relatives in Boston I would often stop by the Arch St. Chapel to pray or attend Mass. One day I decided to go to confession while making a visit. It had been a long time since I had received this sacrament. I expected a reprimand for being away for so long and a very long penance. Instead all I heard was, “I just want to tell you how much God loves you.”

I started crying and instantly felt sorrow, peace, and the knowledge that this is what the sacrament is meant to be. I can't remember the rest of what the priest said but I was so grateful to him for showing me the forgiveness that comes from God through this sacrament.

Suzanne Ching

Honolulu, Hawaii



What a Beautiful Gift

When I first started thinking of converting from the Southern Baptist Church to Catholicism, I visited a small parish and had a nice talk with the pastor, Father Sullivan.

I was struggling because my family was against my converting. None of them were Catholic. Finally, after three years, I attended RCIA at St. Mathews in Jacksonville, Florida, taught by Father Brian Carey. I loved RCIA and Father Carey was wonderful.

In the spring of 1990, our RCIA class was preparing for our first reconciliation. I was incredibly nervous. We went to Marywood, in Switzerland, Florida. My sponsor was Mrs. Mary Korson, founder of the St. Francis Soup Kitchen at Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville.

We were standing in line. I felt twenty-three years of sins burning through my brain. I was convinced the priest hearing confessions would hear all my many sins and be horrified. I was sure my penance would be doing the Stations of the Cross seventeen times!

When I entered the confessional, I was too chicken to use the screen. I whispered, “May we do this face-to-face?” I was then warmly greeted by none other than the friendly Father Sullivan I’d met three years before!

After Confession, I stepped out, crying from relief. I felt that the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt so *clean* and light! My sponsor was waiting for me with a big smile on her face.

I thought of how my non-Catholic family had tried to discourage me from converting. I burst out, “After this, I can’t understand why *everybody* doesn’t want to be Catholic!”

My sponsor cracked up. Years later, as I reflect on that day, and think of the wonderful lightness I experienced for the first time and still feel every time I go to confession, I have to say, “What a beautiful gift God has given us in confession!”

Susan M. Barber

Jacksonville, Florida



A Beautiful Card

It was 1981, and I was feeling a call in my heart to seek God. My husband was a fallen away Catholic and I was a non-practicing Methodist, pregnant with our first child.

That spring we went to Easter Mass at St. Catherine’s Parish in Quarryville, Pennsylvania. Before Mass began, my husband decided to go to confession. Father Thomas Gralinski heard his confession and told my husband to see him after Mass. They talked, and we soon started meeting with Father Gralinski once a week at the rectory to learn more about our faith. My husband and I have been going to Mass ever since.

When I was pregnant with my third child in 1991, I started thinking deeply about parenthood. My dad died in a trucking accident when I was nineteen years old and I couldn’t help but wonder if I would live long

enough to see my own children married, and if I would be able to share in the lives of my grandchildren. I prayed that I would.

Shortly thereafter I read a Scripture that gave the promise of a long life to those who honor their father and mother. That Scripture settled into my soul. I had always honored my father when he was alive, but felt there was a wall between my mother and myself.

I was convinced that my mother favored my three brothers. Even though there were times that I didn't feel this way, I always refused to give her loving cards on her birthday and for Mother's Day. The words in those sentimental cards were not how I felt about her in my heart. Although I always loved my mom, after reading that Scripture I knew I was not honoring her.

I went to confession and told Father Gralinski that I was unable to honor my mother as I truly should. Afterwards, it felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off my heart.

A few weeks later, I was totally surprised when I received a beautiful card from my mom letting me know how much she loved me, and how proud she was to have me as her daughter. Not long after that, the two of us shared lunch together and she told me about the relationship she'd had with her mother. It was not a loving one and I believe it had a subconscious effect on the two of us and how we got along with each other.

God healed my relationship with my mother after I went to confession that unforgettable day. We are very close today, and I can happily say that I can now choose loving cards to send her and that they truly say what I mean with my whole heart.

I never told my mom about my confession that brought healing to our relationship. She was raised to not trust Catholics and was upset when I became one. Over the last twenty-four years though, she has come to accept my family's spiritual commitment to God. Although she believes in God, she has not made a connection to a church. I continue to share our faith with her whenever possible and keep her close in my prayers.

Darlene E. Graver

Strasburg, Pennsylvania



A Heavy Burden

As I write this, I have tears streaming down my face; these are tears of joy and gratitude.

Reconciliation?

The Lord had been working overtime on me for the last several years. But my addictions of pornography, lies, and self-importance—won me back almost every time.

On the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul two years ago, He did to me what He did to Saul. God knocked me down from my high horse. My marriage was in trouble.

Driving to my office that morning, I was listening to the radio and happened to tune in to a Catholic radio station, The Station of the Cross, in Rochester, New York. EWTN's Mass broadcast had just started.

As I listened to the readings, the Lord touched my heart. He helped me to see my life and how far I was from Him. I cried like a child in my car. As I was parking, sobbing like an infant, I resolved to find my Ananias.*

Father Peter Abas, a priest at St. Anne's in Rochester, was the first and only priest I could think of. I left voice and e-mail messages asking if he could see me that night.

We played phone tag throughout the day. Father Peter thought if the Holy Spirit wants it, he will come. At six-thirty that night, I got into my car trusting the Lord would lead me to see Father Peter. At seven o'clock, I drove into St. Anne's parking area. Father Peter was waiting and hoping that I would come.

We went into one of the small private rooms in the rectory, and I knelt down and asked Father Peter to hear my confession. I started by telling how heavy the burden was on my soul. My tears were a cleansing flood, as I recounted, amidst sobs, all my sins. It seemed as if my confession

lasted almost an hour. Like the Prodigal Son, I told my Father I was not worthy to be called His son.

Father Peter took a clean sheet of paper, crumpled it in his hands, opened it, and said, “See how ugly this is?” I responded, “Yes, it is a very messy looking paper.”

Opening it up, he said, “Look at the lines here, and here, and here—don’t they look nice? This is how God sees you—so pleasing to Him that He can only love you.” And of course, I cried some more, a mixture of joy and shame in my tears. Joy because He did love me and did not throw me away from His sight, and shame for rejecting Him from my life.

When I received absolution, my soul felt light, and I started to see a new path. Unlike Saul, my eyes did not see everything immediately. But He showed me enough to help me walk home to Him.

Leodones Yballe

Rochester, New York

**[In the story of Saint Paul, Saul (as he was then called) is knocked off of his horse and blinded by a flash of light. A voice speaks to him saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul is totally blown away and he says, “Who are you, Lord?” and Jesus answers, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” As the story proceeds, Jesus advises Saul to go into the town where he will find a man named Ananias who will cure him.]*

My Thoughts...

It’s quite possible that a person who is striving to live a truly Christian life may not have any sins to confess from week to week or month to month.

In that case one might mention failings against the virtue of humility. Against that virtue every human being fails at least to some slight degree every day.

Also include some sin (already forgiven) for which one is especially sorry. That is important to assure the validity of the sacrament (No sin, no sacrament).

Fr. Daniel Raible, C.P.P.S.

Understanding Sin Today

By Richard M. Gula, S.S.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I lost my patience three times; I lied twice; I missed Mass once; I had impure thoughts twice and I gossiped about my neighbor four times.”

Sound familiar? The above confession reflects an understanding of the moral life and sin that prevailed among Roman Catholics for centuries. But in the last half of this century, many changes have been occurring in the way we think about morality and sin. These changes have resulted in part from new ways of understanding what it means to be human. They also come from rediscovering old ideas that the Bible and Jesus taught about how we ought to relate to God and to one another.

Sin as crime

There was a time when Catholics thought that living morally was mostly a matter of obeying the law—the divine law or the commandments of God, the ecclesial (Church) laws or the natural laws expressed in the moral teaching of the Church. “It’s in the Bible” or “The Church says so” were often our most important reasons for being moral.

Sin was like a crime, a transgression of the law. It was akin to breaking the speed limit on the highway. The law is what made an action sinful. Where there was no clear-cut law (no speed limit), there was no question of sin (go as fast as you want).

Catholic theology has since come to realize that the legal model for understanding the moral life and sin is deficient. For one thing, the demands of being a faithful follower of Jesus, of living according to the vision and values of the gospel, stretch us farther than what can be prescribed by law.

But no one is trying to do away with laws. We know that laws will always be necessary to help us live together well. Just as our city

streets would be chaos without traffic laws, so our living together would be a moral chaos without laws like those about telling the truth, respecting property and protecting life.

But laws cannot possibly cover all the decisions that we have to make. The legal model of the moral life too easily makes moral living a matter of repeating the same old behaviors even though we—and our world—have changed. The legal model also tends to focus too much on the actions that we do as being sinful or not. Did I miss Mass? Did I cheat on an exam or on my taxes? Did I disobey my parents?

Laws by themselves don't address the important realities of the heart, such as our attitudes (Are we kind or hostile?), intentions (Do we strive to be helpful or self-serving?) and ways of seeing things (Do we look through the eyes of faith? Are we optimistic or pessimistic?). Jesus reminds us that what comes from the heart is what makes one sinful. Sinful actions are like the tip of an iceberg being held above the surface by a wayward heart (see Is 29:13; Mk 7:21; Mt 23:25-26; Lk 6:45).

The legal model also tends to make the moral life too centered on one's self. Sin affects me and my salvation. Saving my soul through obedience is the guiding moral principle according to this model. This leaves out, however, the all-important relational dimensions of sin and conversion. As St. Paul teaches, no one lives for oneself (Rom 14:7). As the Body of Christ, we suffer together and rejoice together (1 Cor 12:26-27). Because we share a common world, we are part of a network of relationships that joins each of us in responsibility to others and to all of creation. We all know that we violate the ecological balance of nature when we put toxins into our air and water or throw hamburger foil wrappers out the car window. We violate our moral ecology when we create discord, dissension, fear, mistrust and alienation in the web of life's relationships.

Sin's new look

A new look at the moral life has been informed by the biblical

renewal in the Church and by some philosophical shifts within the Church and society.

For example, the biblical renewal has given us covenant, heart and conversion—not law—as our primary moral concepts. Responsibility has replaced obligation as the primary characteristic of the moral life. Shifts in philosophy have emphasized the dignity of persons and the value of sharing life in society. Together these shifts in theology and philosophy support a relational model of the moral life. The relational model emphasizes personal responsibility for protecting the bonds of peace and justice that sustain human relationships.

What might a contemporary confession sound like that reflects the relational model of the moral life?

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been six weeks since my last confession. I am a husband, a father of three teenage children, and I hold an executive position in a large computer firm.

“Over the past month I have allowed love to grow cold at home and in my work. At home, I have been inattentive to my wife and children as I allowed my new projects at work to consume most of my time and attention. I have spent more time at work and little time with the family. At work, I have selfishly neglected to disclose some data which my colleagues needed for a new project. I wanted to gain the glory. I have also failed to support a female colleague who was clearly being sexually harassed and I failed to confront those who were doing the harassing.

“I think a good penance for me, Father, would be to take the family on a picnic this week and to make a special effort to affirm my junior colleagues for the great work they have been doing.”

This penitent senses how he is affecting the quality of life and love in his primary relationships. He also knows what he can do to show conversion. His confession reflects contemporary theology’s emphasis on responsibility to others over the traditional overemphasis on what is allowed or forbidden by law. Rather than focusing just on committing sinful acts, it shows that sin is also an omission, a

failure to do what ought to be done.

Far from doing away with sin, contemporary theology admits that sin is very much with us and touches us more deeply than we realize. Greed, violence, corruption, poverty, hunger, sexism and oppression are too prevalent to ignore.

Sin is just as basic a term in our Christian vocabulary today as it has been in the past. Its root sense means to be disconnected from God through the failure to love. In sin, we simply don't bother about anyone outside ourselves. Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions. Because loving God and loving our neighbor are all tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that, just as the least of our acts done in charity has some benefit for all, so every sin causes some harm. The catechism quotes Scripture to make this point: “None of us lives for oneself, and none of us dies for oneself” (Rom 14:7); “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:26-27); “Charity does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor 13:5; see 10:24). In this solidarity with all people, says the catechism, “living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all. Every sin harms this communion” (#953).

One of the most obvious changes in a contemporary approach to sin is the emphasis given to how sin affects the quality of life and love in our relationships. Sin is any action or omission that hinders, violates or breaks right relationships which support human well-being. For example, if I spread gossip or fail to correct a false rumor about a co-worker, I am not only failing in my relationship to that person, but also impairing the quality of life in the workplace.

My favorite example of how this relational vision of sin and the moral life influenced another's behavior came from my five-year-old niece, Julia. She listened to a conversation I was having with

her eight-year-old sister about what she was being taught in her preparation for first penance. The lesson on sin was filled with stories of relationships and the difference between loving and unloving choices. The next day, when Julia came home from kindergarten, I asked her how her day was. She said, “I had a good day.” When I asked her what made it good, she said, “I had an opportunity to make a loving choice. Kenny forgot to bring a snack today, so I gave him one of my pretzels.”

Julia learned quite well that right moral living begins with caring for one another: paying attention to another’s needs and acting in a way that enhances another’s well-being. Sin, by contrast, turns in and sets oneself against another. Self-serving interests destroy the bonds of peace and justice that ought to sustain us.

Original sin didn’t go away

In an age when evils on a massive scale frequently make front-page news (wars, ethnic genocide, bombings, terrorism), theologians are trying to revive the doctrine of original sin. This doctrine tells us that there is more evil in the world than that which we cause ourselves. Consider the children being born in Rwanda or Bosnia today. They are affected and infected by the evil that surrounds them before they are ever able to make choices of their own.

Original sin is the face of sin which we recognize as the condition of evil into which we are all born. It is a condition of being human that makes us feel as if our freedom were bound by chains from the very beginning. We feel the effects of this evil in the pull towards selfishness which alienates us from our deeper selves, from others and from God. Because of original sin, we will always know struggle and tragedy as part of our life.

While the power of original sin pulls us in the direction of selfishness and aloofness, the power of grace moves us to be for others and to live mutually dependent on one another. The film Schindler’s List shows how Oskar Schindler witnessed to this power of grace in the way he saved thousands of Jews from the death

camps. So did the many unnamed heroines and heroes who helped the victims of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. So do those who open their homes to refugees of war and poverty.

In order to rise above the power of evil, we need to open ourselves to the presence of redeeming love. This love comes to us through others witnessing to justice, truth and peace. While the presence of original sin may make responsible moral living a truly demanding task, the presence of redeeming love makes it possible. This is the sense of St. Paul's conviction that while sin abounds, grace abounds even more (Rom 5:20).

Social sin—a life of its own

Social sin has been around as long as civilization, but it is a relatively new concept for Catholics. We have tended to focus exclusively on personal (actual) sin: lying, cheating, missing Mass. We have not paid sufficient attention to social structures and customs which hold such sinful practices in place. We are changing, however. One clear example of a rising social consciousness can be seen in Pope John Paul II's 1995 "Letter to Women." Here he publicly acknowledges sexism as a social sin and then goes on to apologize to women for the ways the Church has complied in denigrating women, misrepresenting them, reducing them to servitude and marginalizing them from society.

Social sin describes human-made structures when they offend human dignity by causing people to suffer oppression, exploitation or marginalization. These include educational systems, housing policies, tax structures, immigration policies, health-care systems, employment policies, a market economy. Once established, social structures and customs seem to take on a life of their own. The social sin of racism, for example, has continued and still continues long after slavery was abolished. For example, there remain obstacles to adequate education, to housing, to work, sometimes even to voting.

We learn to live in a world with these structures. We presume that

the social customs which they hold in place are good, traditional customs. That is what makes social sin so difficult to recognize and to change. Yet the evil of sinful social structures abounds in all forms of discrimination, racism and sexism; in the exploitation of migrant workers; in the illiteracy and homelessness of the poor; in the lack of basic health care for all; in the manipulation of consumers by the manufacturing practices, advertising, pricing policies and packaging of goods; and in many other practices which we continue to support more out of ignorance than meanness. Why does social sin prevail? Largely because we fail to name social evils and seek to correct them.

Christianity could easily adopt the motto of Missouri: “Show me.” It is not enough to talk a good game. The moral teachings of the prophets (see Is 58:6-8) and of Jesus (see the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5—7) tell us that faith and piety without active commitment to justice are not what God wants.

When we become aware of structural evils, we should not be paralyzed by the guilt of self-condemnation, but moved to conversion. Conversion from social sin involves, at one level, changing our own lifestyle in ways that will help reform society. We cannot do everything to end the structures which support sexism, for example, but we can do some things, for instance, curbing our use of exclusive and insensitive language. We can influence others’ attitudes through the ways we talk to and about one another. At another level, conversion from social sin involves examining existing regulations and practices, reforming those that offend human dignity.

Actual sin—we all know it

Another face of sin is personal sin. Our traditional way of distinguishing the degrees of gravity of personal sins is to call them mortal and venial sins.

Catholics traditionally have been taught that for sin to be mortal, three conditions have to be met: 1) serious matter; 2) sufficient reflection; 3) full consent of the will. These are still valuable crite-

ria. They are comprehensive in including conditions which pertain to the action (1) and to the person (2 & 3) before we can speak of mortal sin in its truest sense.

The relational model of the moral life helps us to understand actual sin as primarily an expression of the person in relationship, not simply as disobedience to the law.

Mortal sin. Mortal sin is a serious break in a relationship of love with God, neighbor, world and self. We can think of it as a radical *no* to God and to others. It happens when we refuse to live in a positive, life-giving way. Just as acts of heroism and extraordinary generosity are evidence of our capacity to say a radical *yes* to God, so calculated acts permeated with malice are evidence of our capacity to say *no* to God. Mortal sin involves a moral evil done by a person who is supremely selfish and committed to making evil and not goodness the characteristic mark of his or her life.

While we would not be surprised to find mortal sin in those who choose to make crime, extortion or greed a way of life, we must still be wary of judging another. No one can ever know for sure just by looking from the sidelines whether a particular act of malice is a mortal sin or not. We need to know more about the person's knowledge, freedom and fundamental disposition before God. We must refrain from judging others as being in mortal sin, even though we know their acts are permeated with evil. That is why the Church has never taught that anyone is, in fact, in hell. At the same time the Church acknowledges that we all have the capacity to cut ourselves off from the source of life that is God, which is a good description of hell.

Venial sin. These days people are not giving enough attention to immoral acts of less importance than mortal sin. If mortal sin radically reverses one's positive relationship to God, the habit of unloving acts can corrode that relationship. This is why we must take venial sins seriously. Venial sins can weigh us down with the anchor of bad habits.

Venial sin often enters our lives when we fail to show care for oth-

ers. People can easily become submerged in self-interest. Perhaps we speak sharply to another, revel in our piece of gossip or exercise a power play over another that keeps us secure and in control. While these acts of selfish arrogance do not radically turn us away from God, they are inconsistent with our basic commitment to be for life and for love. They are venial sins.

Contemporary notions of sin emphasize the gospel's call to conversion in and through the web of life's relationships. The more clearly we can recognize God's presence and love in these relationships, the more clearly we can recognize our venial sins, and the more seriously we can take them. Without recognizing our sinfulness, we cannot grow in converting to the demands of love.

God is merciful

These are only some of the significant changes in our understanding of sin. We are talking about sin differently today because the relational model of the moral life has replaced the legal model. One thing that hasn't changed, though, is our concept of God's love and mercy. We do not believe that God wants us to be weighed down with a distorted sense of guilt and responsibility. Rather, we believe that we are called to participate more fully in the creative power of God calling us to reconciliation, to reconnect with our best selves, with others, with the world and with God.

The sacrament of penance and reconciliation is an opportunity and invitation to heal the brokenness in our lives and to set relationships right. We should give more attention to celebrating this gift, especially during the seasons of Lent and Advent.

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Confession with Father Joe

About ten years ago, while we were still living in a rural town in West Texas, I experienced a profound conversion. Still, there were some sins from which I could not seem to get free.

It was these sins which I had to confess over and over again. Father Joe was the priest that God used to impart His forgiveness and absolution for me in a warm and affirming way. No matter how many times I went to confession with the same sins, I always felt the goodness of God in this sacrament.

It was not that Father Joe had extremely profound and awe-inspiring thoughts or words, but he was very intuitive, and his comments were thought provoking, helpful and practical. It was as if Jesus were present in the confessional with me.

Father Joe showed a genuine love for God's people and made me feel very secure. I knew that Father had tons of things to do, as he was the only priest for five parishes in that rural area; but he was never hurried, or made me feel as if I were taking up his time needlessly. It became a joy to go to confession.

One day I went into the confessional and told him that since I was always confessing the same sins every time, perhaps I should record my sins and bring in the tape for him to hear. He got a big laugh from that and we joked for a bit, but then he got serious and, in his quiet, intuitive way, told me what he knew I needed.

Father knew of my frustration at not being able to overcome my everyday failings and weaknesses. He understood the struggle that it was causing within my spirit. I remember once getting emotional and my eyes started to tear up. He simply waited patiently until I was ready and then continued to provide the spiritual direction that I needed.

God spoke to me that day and many other times in the confessional. Sometimes we would talk for a short period of time and sometimes for a long time, “Too long,” my husband would say, as he always reminded me that there were other people waiting to go to confession. But Father Joe’s words were exactly what I needed in my relationship and my walk with the Lord.

The graces and the strength that I continue to receive from the sacrament of penance can never be measured. For me, it is a powerful way to stay in relationship with God.

Dora C. Gallardo

Uvalde, Texas



Total Love and Forgiveness

About thirty-five years ago, when I was a young wife and mother of two small children, I went to confession at a different parish. In the course of my confession, the priest called me an extremely offensive word. I was devastated and heartbroken, and knew Jesus would never talk like that to me. After that humiliating experience, I continued going to church out of duty and went to confession once a year, but neither brought me a sense of peace or joy.

A few years later I attended a charismatic conference in New Orleans; before it ended it was announced that priests would be available throughout the building to hear confessions. My friend wanted to go to confession, so I told her I would wait in my seat for her to return. There was no way I was joining her; I didn’t need any more pain in my life.

As I sat in my seat with my heart hardening even more, I looked around at all the people talking to priests, unburdening themselves. I dug my heels in deeper, telling myself that I really was okay and that confession was fine for people who had never been hurt during one. Then my gaze stopped on one particular priest and penitent.

The priest had his arm around this person's shoulder and their heads were bent forward, almost touching. I stared at that sight and thought about how peaceful they looked. Then God, in His infinite mercy and love, allowed me to no longer see the priest standing there, but the Good Shepherd instead. I could not believe my eyes. All I felt was mercy and love, and I knew with every fiber of my being that I wanted what that person was receiving at that moment—total love and forgiveness.

I am not ashamed to say that I literally ran to the confession line and yes, the prodigal daughter was welcomed home with open arms. I experienced the deep joy and peace that only God can give, and was finally able to forgive the priest who had hurt me years before.

Frances D. Huck

Picayune, Mississippi



The Gift of Confession

When I was a child, I attended Holyrood (which means Holy Rod) secondary school in Glasgow, Scotland and went to Holy Cross Church. Every First Friday all the children would walk down the street to our big church for confession. I was never prepared, so I developed a habit of making up sins when it was my turn in the confessional. This became my normal way of confessing until I ran into serious problems later on in life and had to confess my *real* sins.

In 1968, I witnessed many young women burn to death in a former whiskey warehouse that had been converted into an upholstery factory. The iron bars on the windows prevented the victims from escaping the inferno. I was a bus conductress and was able to see the horror from my bus platform.

I took the rest of the day off, and as I sat on the bus on my way home, I thought about the victims of the fire and how death came so unexpect-

edly for them. Then I spotted the church where I had gone to confession with my classmates every month as a child.

I approached the rectory and knocked on the door. The housekeeper answered, and I told her that I needed to go to confession. She told the resident priest and he invited me into the church and heard my confession. This resulted in my returning to America and joining my ex-husband again. We had been divorced for six months. I tried hard to change my life and live according to the laws of the Church, but the marriage did not succeed any better. I soon found myself separated once more and living outside of the Church's safety net.

I married again and my next crossroad came after the birth of my third child, the first with my new husband. I decided to please my mother by having my daughter baptized. I made all the arrangements and my mother was very happy. However, our plans fell apart when the priest told me he couldn't baptize my child because he found out that I had remarried outside of the Church without having had my first marriage annulled. I was furious.

My anger inspired me to want to expose the *hypocrisy* of a Church that would punish an innocent child for my sins. As I sat next to my sleeping child thinking of which newspaper to write to about this hypocrisy, I had what I can only describe as a conversion experience. I could see myself falling downward and was aware of having to make an account of my life. This made me realize how I had hurt others, and I even felt what they felt as a result of my sins.

I knew I was going to hell, and I knew that was where I belonged. I slid to the floor, sobbing for the way I had wasted my life and for the pain I had caused others, especially my God. I stayed on my knees until morning.

This experience led me to knock on the door of a church to confess my sins. After that, I applied for and received an annulment from my first marriage.

The day before my *Catholic wedding* with my new husband in 1976, I met with Father Vanderloo at St. Joseph's Church in Oneida, Wisconsin. As I sat in his kitchen trying to go over my life since my last good confession, I cried because of how patient God had been with me.

My life finally seemed complete when another crossroad presented itself. My second husband decided that he wanted to marry someone else. I still had four children at home. How would I manage? How could I go on? One of my sons went wild, but before his death at age seventeen he returned to the sacraments. I was blessed to be next in line as he entered the confessional with great remorse and hope.

I will remain forever thankful for the gift of confession where God has met me at so many difficult crossroads in my life.

Rose Mary Danforth

Jacksonville, Florida



Dad's Return

In the summer of 1979, I was visiting my mother and father in Long Beach Island, New Jersey. During a conversation with my dad about the changes happening in the Catholic Church, he asked me if the prayers and format of the sacrament of reconciliation were still the same.

My dad had not been to reconciliation in many years. We talked about the different steps: examination of conscience, initial blessing, telling how long it has been since the last confession, confessing our sins, receiving absolution, getting our penance, and making an act of contrition. We practiced the act of contrition several times until he felt comfortable.

Later in the afternoon he announced that he was going to church for a while. I asked if he wanted me to go along with him. He said, "No."

He returned an hour later with a broad smile on his face, saying he was greatly relieved, "Do you know what that lovely priest did? When I was finished, he actually came out of the confessional, put his arms around me, and gave me the warmest hug."

The next day my dad was beaming when he received holy Communion.

Jacqueline D. Henry

Carolina Shores, North Carolina



“Conversion is always a response to being loved by God. In fact, the most important part of the conversion process is the experience of being loved and realizing that God’s love saves us—we do not save ourselves. Our part in this saving action is to be open to the gift of God’s love—to be open to grace.”

**The Sacrament of Reconciliation:
Celebrating God’s Forgiveness**

by Sandra DeGidio, O.S.M.

see page 71



Thirty-four Million Dollar Loser

In 1998, I found out that I was the biggest loser in the state of Michigan. It happened because my dear mother burned my lottery ticket worth thirty-four million dollars. I knew the ticket was mine because I had played the same numbers since I was sixteen. So, when the numbers of the missing ticket were announced over the radio, I called my mom and told her to stop burning old lottery tickets. “I was a winner!”

It was too late. The ticket had been burned two weeks earlier.

I remember taking the car later that day to pick up my sister Ann. When she got in the car, I told her very solemnly, “Mom is dead.” A puzzled look came over her face and she asked me what I was talking about. I told her that I would have to kill mom because she had burned my thirty-four million dollar lottery ticket! I was joking of course, but my sister thought I was being horrible.

I do admit I was *momentarily* mad at my mother, though not seriously. After all, how could I be upset with the person who gave me life? My mother is a strong and loving person. Not only did she give birth to ten children, but she also survived a serious bout with polio. Love never fails; there was no way I could really be mad at my mom.

Still, it was the sacrament of reconciliation that got me through the anger I had about losing an opportunity to assist with a wide variety of charitable projects. More importantly, it helped me heal in my relationship with God. I was mad at God for not letting me collect the money. I had great charities I wanted to assist, and I was not allowed to have the money. Why would God do this to me?

With this sacrament, my spiritual director reminded me that there was a reason that God did not want me to have the money. The thirty-four million was not mine because it would not bring me closer to the

kingdom of God. Though I had a hard time believing it in the beginning, I have gradually come to understand God's plan.

After the lost lottery ticket news went around the family, my Uncle Joe called to console me. He told me I should keep trying to win again, recalling that there was a man in Colorado who had won the lottery four times!

Well, I got hooked. I was playing the lottery all the time and spending a lot of money. I would also go to the casino and spend money there. I was preoccupied with getting that thirty-four million back, even though I knew I was not supposed to have it.

This is when the sacrament of reconciliation became even more important to me. One time, I confessed that I had spent five hundred dollars in one hour at the casino. For my penance, I was told to donate that much money to charity. It took me six months to fulfill the penance because I wanted to select good charities. The next time I confessed my gambling problem I was told I had to give up the casinos for Lent. I told my pastor and spiritual director, Father Bill Ashbaugh, that I could not do that because my friends wanted to take me to the casino for my birthday. He calmly but gently told me to offer it up. So I did not go to the casino for all of Lent.

Over a three-year process of confessing my sin of gambling, I finally decided on November 12, 1999, that I could no longer spend my time, energy or money on the lottery. I also vowed to give up the casino, but went one more time on Thanksgiving Day that year.

I am truly thankful that through the sacrament of reconciliation I was able to stop gambling. There are times when I still think about it. Recently, for example, the MegaMillions was up to three hundred and fifty million dollars. I began to think of the good I could do with that kind of money. I even encouraged my mom to get some tickets!

Once when the lottery was worth eighty million, I gave some friends a series of numbers to play, but at Mass that weekend, Father. Bill gave a homily on addictions. After Mass, I confessed the error of my ways. I felt a sense of relief and peace because I knew visiting the confessional would help me to keep saying "no" to my terrible habit.

The sacrament of reconciliation is one of the hidden treasures of the Catholic faith. In my own life this beautiful sacrament has helped me in many difficult times. Growing up, I was always nervous about going into the confessional and telling the priest my sins. However, as I continue to grow in my faith journey, I have experienced how this sacrament has changed my life.

I am not perfect, and I know that the sacrament of reconciliation is a time to practice humility. You have to confess your sins out loud to a priest and this is not easy, but the grace received to continue the faith journey is worth it. I am proof that this sacrament can help people make great strides in their lives. I hope to continue to use the grace from this sacrament to make it to the ultimate prize: heaven.

Lisa A. Stechschulte

Owosso, Michigan

My Thoughts...

I think the question on sin is a very good one. Of course anything that qualifies as a mortal sin must be confessed; but if you don't have a mortal sin, the trend that I have experienced in Pittsburgh and Greensburg, Pennsylvania, diocese is that you tell the priest most what is bothering you. They seem to use psychology to help you to figure out the root of the cause. Example: Difficulty in discipline of daily prayer was one of my problems. I talk to Jesus all day, but have trouble with setting time apart to just pray/be.

So, the priest asked me how late I stayed up, how early I got up, how busy my days are, how much stress was I under? Then he tried to give me suggestions on how to handle that stuff.

If I had more sleep and made more time for recreation then maybe I wouldn't be so tired and would be able to find time to pray as well as to pray and not to fall asleep. Basically, what is really bothering you and what is the underlying causes of our faults/sins.

Chris Scholze Zurawski, SFO



Joy and Relief

I was nine years old when I experienced the events that led to the first *major* moral crisis of my life. For a number of weeks, I'd been riding my bike over to a new housing construction site and collecting ceramic tile remnants from the trash piles around the various homes to complete a mosaic table top that I'd been designing. On one of those forays, a security guard for the construction company had stopped to question me and check out what I was doing there. Ordinarily, this would not have seemed very unusual, but unfortunately, as I have come to realize as an adult, this young man was also a pedophile. After engaging me in conversation for some time, he then proceeded on to other things, and ended up using the isolation of the site, as well as the convenience of the empty, fairly completed houses, to molest me on several occasions. Like many children, I did not mention what had happened to my parents, as he had made sure to threaten me with all sorts of dire consequences if I ever told anyone what *we* had done; but I was very troubled by the memories and shame of what had taken place.

The following year, I started fifth grade at a new Catholic school where the Franciscan Friars of the Santa Barbara Province ran the neighboring parish as well as administering to the spiritual needs of the students. It was shortly after Sister had taught our class the Ten Commandments that I began to have turbulent conscience problems about what had happened. I began to suspect that I had surely committed the very serious and grave sin of adultery, since that security guard had told me that he was married and had even shown me pictures of his wife and young toddler daughter.

Every two weeks, the students went to the nearby parish church for confession; so at the very first opportunity after my horrid suspicions arose, I'm afraid I shocked the poor friar priest in the confessional by asking him, point blank, for a detailed definition of the sin of adultery.

There was a moment's pause before Father asked me how old I was. When I replied "ten" he carefully asked me what had made me ask this question, and I replied that I thought that I had committed it!

Once again, Father gently probed and asked me to explain a little further. I told him that I had done some very shameful things with a man who was married, and the way the religious sister had talked about the Sixth Commandment, I was beginning to suspect that maybe that was what had happened, and if so, then I must be in the state of mortal sin.

Father became quite solicitous toward me and after drawing out a few more details about what had actually taken place he became very indignant about the adult involved. He told me that there was absolutely no way that I as a ten-year-old child would have been able to fulfill the conditions necessary for those events to have been a mortal sin, but that the perpetrator, (the one who had done this to/with me) was the one who had done so.

He asked if I had told my parents and encouraged me to do so. He then assured me that I was blameless and innocent in everything that had happened, which finally put my mind and heart at peace. He then heard the rest of my confession, gave me my penance (three Hail Marys) and absolution.

I cannot put into words the joy and relief that I experienced that day, but the compassionate, gentle wisdom, concern, and assurances of that Franciscan priest, and the grace of the sacrament had a very profound effect and impact on facilitating the beginning of healing, for which I have been extremely grateful.

Anonymous

Los Angeles, California



Remember Me?

It was January 17, 2006, and I had just left the priest at a Catholic church in a small city in Texas. He had gently and skillfully guided me through my first sacrament of reconciliation in forty-five years.

“Have you felt malice toward others, perhaps wishing them harm because of something they did to you?” he asked.

“Yes,” I confessed, “toward two people. One of them has died, but the other is still living. I’ve asked God to relieve me of my inability to forgive, but I haven’t been successful.”

After the priest absolved my sins, I left the rectory and then stopped at the grocery store on my way home. As I was crossing the parking lot, someone called out, “Hey Lynn! Remember me?” I looked at him for a moment. I had not seen him for eight years, and he was several pounds heavier, but it was him, one of the men I told the priest I couldn’t forgive.

I had worked with him for ten years, much of that time tolerating his bad behavior and the malicious gossip he spread about me and others to fellow employees. At one time I had even thought of bringing a lawsuit against him, but I lacked sufficient evidence.

He was smiling and friendly as we inquired about one another’s families and discussed the work place. When we parted company, my malice toward him had completely dissipated. How quickly God had touched me with his healing presence!

In my heart, I had not completely forgiven the man who molested my fourteen-year-old daughter years earlier. When I spoke to my now forty-four-year-old daughter about my experience, she softly told me that she had forgiven Ted. She felt sorry for him and in her heart had forgiven him. He died alone and miserable. I was also finally able to forgive him also.

God has lightened my burden through the sacrament of reconciliation. He brought me peace, joy, healing, and a brighter outlook on life. When I received holy Communion the following Sunday, I shed tears of joy.

Pauline L. Bludau

Victoria, Texas



My First Adult Confession

When I was eight years old, I made my first confession. Thirty years later, I made my second.

The second one happened like this. I had just started to participate in a lay apostolate program through Regnum Christi, called Familia (Family Life in America). Through the association, I learned of an audio tape about confession by Fr. Larry Richards. After listening to the tape, the Holy Spirit whapped me upside the head with a two-by-four!

I knew I had to go to confession.

I asked my sister-in-law, “How do you confess thirty years worth of sins?”

Her reply, “Pack a lunch.”

I went with the next available time, which happened to be the first Saturday after 9/11. When it was my turn, with my stomach churning, I went in. The priest was startled at first when he realized this was my first confession as an adult but he was incredibly kind and gentle. He carefully guided me through the confession by asking a series of questions. This made it easier to confess the embarrassing sins by answering yes or no.

As I left, he cautioned me, “Don’t wait so long to make your third confession.”

Jeanne C. McGuire

Columbus, Ohio

We're On A Mission From God

By Mary Beth Bonacci

Why Bother Going to Confession?

In that silence, may inner peace come to you, a peace which can be deepened and more fully possessed through the sacrament of reconciliation. ...I hope you will avail yourselves of the many priests who are here. In the sacrament of penance they are ambassadors to you of Christ's loving forgiveness.

—John Paul II, Denver, 1993

Have you ever prayed and felt nothing? Stupid question, I know. Everyone who persisted in any kind of prayer life has had times when an encounter with God didn't register on the emotional level. That's normal. Our relationship with God isn't just about emotion. No relationship is. Feelings come and go. They're dependent on how our day is going, how we're feeling, what we ate for breakfast, and various hormonally induced factors. God isn't some feeling factory where we "plug in" and automatically attain peace.

But what's going on when you *constantly* feel empty in God's presence? What's happening when you don't feel connected to Him, or when you feel vaguely uncomfortable around Him? Why is it that sometimes you look for that peace, but it never seems to come?

When this happens, it's time to take a good look at yourself. How important has God been in your life? Are you trying to live a relationship with Him and get all the spiritual benefits (inner peace, etc.) without "picking up the cross." Do you want to have God on your own terms—only when you're in trouble or needing a shot of peaceful easy feeling, while the rest of the time you live by your own rules instead of His?

Is there unrepented sin in your life?

When the relationship is off, the peace is off.
You're not comfortable together. That's what
Happens in God's presence when we sin.

Put it in terms of a human relationship. Say you're dating someone. At first, you feel this wonderful sense of security and bliss when you're together. You love to take long walks, just hold hands and being together. But then this person does something to hurt you—bad. It happens several times. There's never an apology, never any indication that the hurtful behavior will stop. Then suddenly this person wants to take one of those nice long walks. Will there be that same feeling of peace? No way. The relationship has been violated. You're not the same together. The peace wasn't magic—it was a function of the relationship. When the relationship is off, the peace is off. You're not comfortable together.

That's what happens in God's presence when we sin. We're not comfortable with Him any more. We don't want to look at Him too closely, and we certainly don't want Him looking too closely at us. Even if we don't consciously realize that's the problem, it's there.

We can't have peace with God if we plan to keep hurting Him, whether it's by being cruel and uncharitable to people around us or by ignoring His standard for sexuality, or whatever. The relationship doesn't work that way.

How do we make it right again? Well, how would it work in the example? The offender would have to come clean and say, "I'm sorry I hurt you, I love you, and I promise to try really hard not to do it again." Then you could talk it out and rebuild trust in each other, so once again you could have those nice, peaceful walks.

It works the same with God. IF we want the peace He gives, the peace the world can't give, we have to walk with Him. All the way. And that walk involves a cross. It's not easy to avoid sin, but it's a part of the bargain, a part of our relationship with Him.

In a human relationship, there are different ways to hurt someone, different levels of violation of friendship. You could say something mean about someone. Or you could murder that person's family.

Obviously the second would be a much bigger violation of the friendship than the first. It would probably rupture your friendship forever.

It's the same in our relationship with God. There are smaller sins and more serious ones. The smaller sins are called venial sins. Most of the sins that people commit frequently—using bad language, telling “little white lies,” etc.—are venial sins. Venial sins “chip away” at our relationship with God, but they don't, by themselves, sever it.

Some sins, on the other hand, are big sins. Stealing, murder, destroying someone's life or reputation, sex outside of marriage—those offend God a lot. (Sex? Really? You'll see why soon.) These big sins are called mortal sins. To know something is a mortal sin and freely choose to do it anyway is to cut ourselves off from God. Mortal sins sever our relationship with Him. That's a bad position to be in, especially if you happen to die. Then God is all you have left, and you *don't* want to be cut off from Him. Your eternal life is at stake.

Obviously we need to root all mortal sin from our lives. But we need to get rid of venial sins, too. After all, when you're trying to be a good friend to someone, is it enough not to murder his family? No. You need to strive constantly to be good to him, in the little ways as well as the big. Killing someone's mother will ruin your friendship. But constantly lying to him will eventually do the same thing.

If we want to have the peace Christ gives, we have to root out sin, mortal and venial, from our lives. There's no other way. Sometimes that's not easy. We have to determine if our behavior is sinful—and if it is, we have to stop. We have to respect God's law. We have to be examples of His love. And when we fail to live up to that, which we all do sometimes, we can't run away from our failure. We have to face up to it, repent, and move on.

Have you ever heard someone say, “What I've done is so bad, even God couldn't forgive me.” If you murder your friend's family, odds

are you'll never get that friendship back, no matter how sincerely you apologize. God, on the other hand, *always* forgives. No matter what we've done, no matter how awful it seems, if we say to Him, "I'm so sorry, I wish I hadn't done it, and I'm committed to trying hard not to do I again," He takes us back.

I want to say that again, because many people miss this point. *No matter what we've done, God always forgives us if we're truly sorry.* We just have to go to Him and ask.

"Going to Him" is a little harder to do than going to a person, because we can't see Him. With friends, we can look at them and hear them and work with them. They hear our apologies, and we hear them forgive. It helps the healing.

God knew we needed that, so He gave us a way. The sacrament of penance. Confession. We can actually go somewhere and hear the voice of someone assigned and called by Christ, who tells us that our sins are forgiven.

Confession restores our relationship with God. If we've committed venial sins, confession repairs the damage. And if we've committed mortal sins, confession reconnects the severed relationship.

The sacrament of penance is the system Christ gave us for the forgiveness of sins. It's the only system He gave us. He told the apostles, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain them, they are retained" (Jn 20:22–23). In other words, priests have Christ's sacramental power to forgive sins, and they do that in the confessional.

Christ knew what He was doing when He gave us the sacrament of penance. Like all the other sacraments, confession is a physical act. He gave us a place to go, where we can "leave" our sins and take grace in their place. He gave us a place where we have someone to talk to if we have questions—someone who doesn't even necessarily know who we are. God knows that, as human persons, we operate on the physical level. In something as important as forgiveness, He wants it to operate on the tangible level. He wants us to be there, to go to it, to hear it.

I know it's easy to want to avoid the confessional. You're afraid the priest may recognize your voice. It takes effort. It may be a little scary. It's a lot easier just to whisper in the dark, "God, I'm sorry."

Don't be afraid of the confessional. Go regularly. You don't have to go face to face. The priest doesn't have to know who you are. But you don't have to be *afraid* of going face to face either. You're not going to shock him. He hears this stuff all the time. He, better than anyone, knows that we're all human. And he won't tell anyone. He can't. Even under the threat of death he can't reveal what's been said in the confessional. Your secret is safe with him.

But he will tell *you* something. He'll say, "I absolve you from your sins." You'll know it, because Christ said it was true. That priest isn't just some guy. He's a guy acting for Christ. He's the "ambassador of Christ's loving forgiveness".

And the relationship will be back. The peace will be back. All will be right between you and God.

Nothing is better than that.

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