

Notes on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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From fear and shame to relief and joy

None of us enjoy confessing our sins. But, confession is only one part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We all know that feeling of dread that comes over us as we approach the confessional, and the relief that we feel as we leave the confessional. To tell all of our sins to another human being is always going to be humbling at best, and humiliating at worst. So, for us to partake of this sacrament voluntarily, we must be drawn by something powerful enough to overcome our fear and shame.

What are you looking for when you go to confession?

- Forgiveness of sins. (Granted by God, not the priest)
- Freedom from guilt. (Granted by the priest, in the name of the Church)
 - *The Church teaches that God WILL forgive the sins of anyone who is truly repentant. The Church grants the priest authority to judge the sincerity of a person's repentance and to "absolve" them of any guilt attached to their sins.*
 - *Analogy: You have committed a crime and pled guilty. When you go to court to receive your sentence, the judge informs you that the State has dropped all the charges, your record has been expunged, and you can go free. God's forgiveness is like the charges being dropped, and the priest's absolution is like the judge telling you that you can go free with a clean record.*
- Wise counsel, with compassion and understanding. (Counseling and penance that are genuinely helpful)

The Sacrament is a divine and human encounter, in which the penitent hopes to see Christ in the confessor. However, even if the priest does not appear very Christ-like, we can have confidence that the encounter with Christ was genuine, and the sacrament was valid.

What the priest listens for when a penitent confesses:

- The three essential elements of repentance:
 - A clear and honest articulation of the sins that the person has committed.
 - True sorrow for having committed those sins.
 - A desire to avoid repeating those same sins in the future.

(Note: The purpose of the Act of Contrition is to express that sorrow and desire for change as explicitly as the confession described the sins.)
- Awareness of the impact of their sins – on themselves, on their relationships with other people, and on their relationship with God.
- Efforts that they have already made to repair the damage caused by their sins.
- True desire to grow in virtue.
- Understanding of why they committed those sins.

(If a person does not know why he/she is sinning, the sinful behavior will certainly continue, and will probably grow worse.)

The motives matter. Compulsive behaviors vs. free choices.

Most of our sins are compulsive to some extent, meaning that we are responding to impulses that are not fully under our control. That's why all of us tend to repeat the same sins over and over again, even though we want to stop. When I encounter compulsive behavior in a penitent, I always ask them to analyze their motives.

- Why did you make that choice? What is driving that habitual behavior?
- When do you feel most vulnerable to that temptation, and what triggers you to give in to it?
- What psychological factors are at play, as opposed to spiritual ones?

When psychological issues are misinterpreted as spiritual failings (*I'm a bad person, or I lack faith*), the result typically is deepening shame and an *increase* in compulsive behavior.

How do we determine the seriousness of our sins?

To assess the seriousness of our sins, we must base our judgments on the *circumstances* and the *consequences* of the sins. Too often, people are taught to ignore those factors and base their judgments on theoretical (often arbitrary) notions about what offends God the most. That often leads to overestimating or underestimating the seriousness of our sins.

- The traditional classification of sins as either "mortal" or "venial" is misleading and counterproductive, and sometimes very damaging.
 - That way of speaking about sin encourages people to see all venial sins as so minor that they can be ignored, and mortal sins as so terrible that they separate us from God's love. Both of those judgments inhibit their ability to repent and receive mercy. Either they feel no need to repent or they feel unworthy to ask God for mercy.
 - Venial sins cover a very wide range of behaviors. To put all of them in the same category suggests, wrongly, that they are equally serious.
- One of the worst things that parents, catechists and pastoral leaders can do is to tell people that they are in a state of mortal sin when they are not. According to the Catechism, a mortal sin "destroys the grace of God in the heart of the sinner," and it must be committed "with full knowledge and deliberate consent" of the will. (*Note: No sin that is at least partly compulsive in nature can meet those criteria.*) Example: Many people incorrectly teach children to label any sexual thoughts or actions as mortal sins. The intent is to scare them away from serious sin, but the effect often is to convince them that even minor sexual sins will destroy their relationship with God. Some people will also claim that same-sex attraction is a mortal sin, even though official Church teaching clearly says that sexual orientation, as opposed to sexual behavior, cannot be sinful at all.
- Sometimes children underestimate the seriousness of their sins because they lack the maturity to understand the consequences of their actions. Example: They may not know the difference between harmless teasing and very harmful bullying, or they may not grasp how lying makes it impossible for others to trust them.
- Sometimes adults fail to recognize the seriousness of their sins because they lack empathy for their victims. Example: sexual harassment in the workplace.

Repairing the damage.

God's forgiveness and the absolution of our guilt may be only the beginning of the healing process. Making amends and asking others for their forgiveness may also be necessary, and can be much more difficult, especially in cases of serious sin. Forgiving ourselves can be even more difficult.

Grace resulting from sin.

When we repent of our sins, we should also reflect on them and ask what grace can result from our failures. What can we learn from our mistakes? How can this new self-knowledge help us to grow? Every sincerely repented sin has the potential to become an occasion of grace and spiritual growth. In particular, acceptance of our human weakness and gratitude for God's mercy can lead us to deeper compassion and humility.

How often to confess, and why.

I suggest regular, but not too frequent, confession (perhaps once a month). Frequent confession helps us to maintain awareness of minor sins and how we experience temptations. If too much time passes between confessions, that awareness tends to fade. On the other hand, people who confess every week or every two weeks tend to be overly scrupulous and focused obsessively on individual instances of sin, not on patterns of sin. I find that once a month is right for me, because I can maintain a healthy awareness of my sin, but I also have an opportunity to reflect on my sinful habits and tendencies and to notice any growth that has taken place. The goal is to avoid the extremes of complacency and scrupulosity, and to leave room for personal reflection and growth.