

LEADER



FROM SORROW TO JOY

A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of Confession

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FIRST MEDITATION

CONFESSION REVEALS GOD'S FATHERLY HEART

INTRODUCTION

God invented confession. This is the case with all seven sacraments: Christ himself instituted them. We have to allow that fact to sink deeply into our consciousness. Otherwise, we will miss out on much of the power and beauty of confession.

JESUS INSTITUTES THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

Jesus himself often forgave people's sins. He did it when some followers brought him a paralyzed man to be healed (Matthew 9:2). He did it when the sinful woman wiped and anointed his feet (Luke 7:48). He did it when some Pharisees brought him a woman caught in adultery in order to see how Jesus would react (John 8:11).

Jesus' habit of forgiving sins caused violent controversy among the religious leaders of his day. The Jewish leaders understood very well something that many of us in today's culture have forgotten: every sin is evil, destructive, and a rebellion against God himself, because it involves disobedience to the moral law that he in his loving wisdom has built into the very fabric of the universe. And so, only God is truly capable of forgiving sins. When Jesus claimed to forgive sins, therefore, he was claiming to be God, to do what only God can do. In the end, this claim led to his being rejected and put to death by the religious leaders of his own people.

But Jesus not only forgave sins himself, he also delegated his divine authority to forgive sins to his Apostles. This comes up various times in the Gospels, most explicitly in John 20, verses 21 through 23. This encounter with his Apostles takes place after his Passion and Resurrection, when Jesus has paid the price for all sin through his loving obedience up to death on the Cross. Here is how St. John describes the encounter:

“[Jesus] said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’”

Even today, during the celebration of the sacrament of confession, the priest echoes this Gospel passage when he says, before giving absolution, “God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins...”

The Church has always been aware of this delegated authority to forgive sins, given to the Apostles by Christ and passed on throughout the history of the Church by the sacrament of Holy Orders.

THE HEART OF A PERFECT FATHER

The sacrament of confession was God's idea; it wasn't an invention of the Church or of some corrupt priests seeking control and manipulation. That's the first thing we have to keep in mind.

What does this tell us about God? What is God revealing about himself by giving us the truly amazing gift of this sacrament? At least three things.

In the first place, God is showing us that he already knows our sinfulness, our weakness, our misery. In other words, he gave us the sacrament of confession because he knew that we would need it. Many times, we surprise ourselves with our sinfulness. We want to be perfect, to be able to keep ourselves perfect, and when we fall into sin we become discouraged and ashamed. We want to give up. The mere fact that God has given us this sacrament is an antidote to shame and discouragement. God knows that we are sinners. Our falls and our struggles do not surprise him. We may get tired of starting over again, of picking ourselves up after a fall, but God never gets tired of forgiving us. As Psalm 136 puts it:

*“Praise the LORD, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever;
Praise the God of gods; for his mercy endures forever;
Praise the Lord of lords; for his mercy endures forever...”*

That Psalm alone repeats the affirmation that God's “mercy endures forever” twenty-six times. The Lord is trying to convince us that however many times we give in



to temptation, however many times we fail in our efforts to love God and neighbor, he will always be there to forgive us if we ask him—his mercy has no limits, no end, no conditions. This is the first thing that the sacrament of confession reveals to us about God—he is the perfect Father, the Father who never condemns or gives up on his children.

GOD KNOWS HUMAN NATURE

Second, God's gift of this sacrament shows that he understands human nature. He knows that in order to experience his mercy and forgiveness, we need a real interpersonal encounter. We need to verbally express our sins and our repentance from them, and we need the words of forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation to be spoken to us audibly, inside the context of our human reality, of space and time.

God didn't want his mercy to remain abstract and distant. Just as God, through the Incarnation, made himself truly present to the world in Jesus, so he wants to make his mercy truly present to each one of us through the real, physical, fully human encounter that takes place in the sacrament of confession.

The way that this sacrament is celebrated has changed throughout the centuries, but it has always involved a true interpersonal encounter, because that's what our human nature craves (cf. CCC 1447). God knows this, and has shown his gentleness, his goodness, and his love by meeting us on our own level, bringing his divine mercy down to earth, literally, through this sacrament. This is one of the reasons why the sacrament has so many names—confession, penance, reconciliation—the interpersonal encounter through which God sends his grace is fully human, and so it has multiple levels of interaction and meaning.

SIN MATTERS

Finally, God's gift of this sacrament gives us a glimpse of how seriously God takes sin. Sin damages the human soul; it breeds strife in human communities and in the Church; and it wounds our relationship with God.

Sin is real, and it is destructive—this was one of the messages contained in Christ's passion and crucifixion, a visible icon of what sin does to the human person and the world. God knows this better than any of us, and he wanted to give us a place to go for healing. We cannot

recover from sin and its destruction all by ourselves. Only God forgives sin; only God can repair the spiritual damage done by sin. Only God can heal the soul wounded by sin. And the sacrament of confession is the privileged, God-given arena for that forgiveness, reparation, and healing to take place.

CONCLUSION: FROM DEATH TO LIFE

God doesn't want us to stay stuck in the sorrow and the spiritual death that sin brings into our lives. He wants us to live life to the full! That was how Jesus himself summarized his mission on earth: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). To make use of the sacrament of confession is to follow the God-given path from sinful death to renewed life, from sin-induced sorrow to spiritual joy.

In the next meditation, we will reflect on some extraordinary ways through which God has shown the beauty and power of confession, but for now, let's just take some time to reflect prayerfully on all that God's gift of this sacrament reveals to us about his fatherly heart. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When I think about going to confession, what feelings do I experience? Where do they come from?
2. Have I ever had a powerful experience of God's goodness and mercy in or out of the sacrament of confession? Remember and savor that experience, and thank God for it.
3. God takes sin seriously—that's one of the reasons he gave us this sacrament. How seriously do I take sin? How deeply do I believe that all sin causes damage, and that it needs to be healed by God's grace?



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SECOND MEDITATION

SIGNS OF GLORY IN THE CONFESSIONAL

INTRODUCTION

The gift of the sacrament of confession tells us a lot about God's wisdom, mercy, and fatherly heart. It really is a gift given for our benefit, not some kind of sadistic torture mechanism or burdensome punishment. And anyone who lives this sacrament sincerely and humbly will experience real benefits.

But simply knowing that intellectually isn't always enough to help us overcome the resistance that our fallen nature experiences when facing the demands of this sacrament. God knows that it's difficult for us. To help us overcome that difficulty, many times throughout history he has associated truly extraordinary, miraculous events with the sacrament of confession. Reflecting briefly on a few of these may prove to be a source of encouragement and confidence as we try to live confession more deeply and intentionally.

ST. MARY'S VISION

St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi, a nun who lived in Renaissance Italy, was given numerous extraordinary graces before her early death at age 41. She performed miraculous cures, bilocated, and experienced repeated and dramatic ecstasies and visions. One of these had to do with confession.

It occurred while she was praying in the convent chapel. At the same time, in the same chapel, another sister was going to confession. St. Mary glanced over to the confessional and was given a vision of what was happening there, spiritually.

She saw an angel letting drops of Christ's blood fall from a chalice onto the sister as she knelt confessing her sins. The blood had scarcely touched her, and suddenly she began to shine like the sun. St. Mary almost fainted, the sight was so intensely beautiful. She got up from the pew and hurried to the confessional herself, praying in a quiet voice, "Sprinkle me, too!"

This extraordinary experience lifts the veil of faith for a brief moment, so that we get a glimpse of the supernatural reality going on in the course of every sacramental confession.

ST. LEOPOLD'S PREDICTION

One of the most well known confessors of the twentieth-century was St. Leopold Mandic. He too was granted some extraordinary experiences that can help us appreciate God's perspective on the sacrament of confession.

In some senses he was an unlikely candidate for sanctity. He was small of stature, had a strange foot ailment that made him seem a bit crippled, and suffered from a serious speech impediment his whole life long.

He was born in Serbia to a noble Croatian family. A few generations previously, his family had returned to the Catholic Church from the Orthodox faith, and each year his parents and his eleven older siblings celebrated the anniversary of that return, which shows the kind of solid Catholic piety he grew up with. The few Catholic priests in his area were Italian Capuchins, so when he felt a call to the priesthood, that Order was his natural choice.

He received his seminary formation in Italy, and his first assignments were there as well. But as professor and religious superior he was considered too lenient with the young religious, so his assignment was changed. His deep and constant longing was to dedicate himself to bringing his Orthodox countrymen back into full communion with the Catholic Church, but his speech impediment and small stature, in the eyes of his superiors, disqualified him for that kind of work. So instead, he was given the ministry of hearing confessions, which he performed in a small confessional in the Capuchin house of Padua from 1909 until his death in 1942—33 years.

For twelve, thirteen, even fifteen hours every day he would dispense God's mercy through the little grill. His supernatural wisdom and miracles of mercy were so valued by the people of Padua that when the future saint was relocated to another city in the 1920s, they were up in arms and convinced their bishop to demand Friar Leopold's return. They didn't rest until they had obtained their objective.

Years before his death in 1942, during the Second World War, he predicted that war would come to Italy. He also prophesied that heavy bombings would do severe damage to the city of Padua, and to the Capuchin friary there. But he also predicted that the little, unadorned confessional



that had been the channel for so much of God's mercy to enter the world through his many years of humble ministry would survive the bombings and be preserved. And it happened just so. The buildings all around were devastated by the bombs, but the confessional was untouched. It's almost as if that little confessional was like a corner of heaven on earth, vaccinated by God's mercy against the destructive power of evil and sin.

Today you can still visit it. And in a chapel built nearby, St. Leopold is buried. His body is miraculously incorrupt, as if his years in the confessional brought him so close to divine grace that even his body has been claimed ahead of time by heaven.

ST. FAUSTINA'S INSIGHT

Another twentieth-century saint who has some encouraging things to say about this sacrament is the Polish nun St. Faustina Kowalska. Jesus graced her with a whole series of visions and mystical encounters that she recorded in her Diary. The theme that united them all was the grandeur and the power of God's Divine Mercy. And since confession is the sacrament of mercy, it often came up in their conversations. Take for example this entry in her Diary:

Today the Lord said to me, Daughter, when you go to confession, to this fountain of My mercy, the Blood and Water which came forth from My Heart always flow down upon your soul and ennoble it. Every time you go to confession, immerse yourself entirely in My mercy, with great trust, so that I may pour the bounty of My grace upon your soul. When you approach the confessional, know this, that I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest, but I myself act in your soul. Here the misery of the soul meets the God of mercy.

—Diary, 1602

A fountain of mercy where Jesus himself is only hidden by the priest—this is how our Lord explained the sacrament of confession to St. Faustina.

CONCLUSION: GOD IS TRYING TO CONVINC US

Not everyone is moved by these kinds of miraculous, extraordinary manifestations of God's glory. And indeed, we are not even required to believe in them. And yet,

through the centuries so many of our older brothers and sisters in the faith have claimed extraordinary experiences like these in relation to confession that it's hard to entirely ignore them. God seems to want to wake us up with them, to give us at least an inkling of how his glorious grace touches and redeems the fallen world through this sacrament, when we let it.

Whether or not the experiences of these saints move us emotionally, it's worthwhile taking some time now to reflect prayerfully on how fully our idea of confession coincides with God's idea, and to ask him to help us make any necessary adjustments. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/ GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why would God permit these kinds of miraculous events to happen in relation to confession? Why doesn't he allow miracles like this to be experienced by everyone?
2. Which of the following Christian virtues do I have to exercise when I go to confession: humility, faith, hope, love for God and neighbor? Which do you feel you have to exercise most? Which is hardest for me to exercise? Why?
3. If confession clearly communicates so much grace to our souls and gives God so much glory, why do so many people refuse to make frequent use of it?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

We will that the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be earnestly advocated. By it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself. Let those, therefore, among the younger clergy who make light of or lessen esteem for frequent confession realize that what they are doing is alien to the Spirit of Christ and disastrous for the Mystical Body of our Savior.

—Pope Pius XII,
Mystici Corporis, 88



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CONFERENCE

WHY WE DON'T LIKE GOING TO CONFESSION

INTRODUCTION

Confession, like all the sacraments, is a precious gift God gives for our benefit: because he knows we need it, because he understands human nature, and because sin causes real damage that only God's grace can repair. All that we reflected on in the first and second meditations.

A NEGLECTED GIFT

But if that's the case, then why don't more people make regular use of this sacrament? Anecdotal and some statistical evidence seems to indicate that a very small percentage of Catholics actually go to confession on a regular basis, even though the Church recommends that for all of us. There even seems to be only a small percentage of Catholics who faithfully follow the Church's command to go to confession at least once a year in order to confess any serious sins that we are aware of. If we haven't obeyed that command and confessed our mortal sins in the sacrament of reconciliation, we shouldn't be receiving Holy Communion—a worthy reception of Communion requires a sincere turning back to God after rebelling against him, and that's what confession is.

The relatively infrequent use of this sacrament is even more perplexing when we think about the graces that it brings us: forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and a deepening of our friendship with him, reconciliation with the Church as well, which is always damaged by our sins, and a renewal or revitalization of spiritual strength in our ongoing efforts to follow Christ more closely. The Catechism even mentions that when we go to confession, as a result of the graces received, we often experience "peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation" (CCC 1468).

Who wouldn't want all those benefits? I think everyone would want them. So why don't more people go to confession more often? And for those of us who do go on a regular basis, why is our experience of confession frequently so lackluster?

Some people have had a bad experience in confession, in which they felt that the priest didn't understand them or respect them. If we find ourselves in that position, we

need to ask around in order to find a priest who knows how to celebrate this sacrament of God's mercy in a way that will reflect the love of the Good Shepherd.

But for most of us, the obstacles are not so dramatic. We can bring the usual obstacles into focus simply by reflecting on what the Catechism calls the three "acts of the penitent," the three things we do when we go to confession.

CONTRITION

First, we prepare ourselves by spending some time in self-reflection. We look into our own souls to examine our conscience, asking God to enlighten us so that we can see the sins we have committed, and also to give us a healthy sorrow for having committed them. Many guides for an examination of conscience can help us do this fruitfully. This prayerful reflection leads naturally to a renewed desire and decision to avoid sin in the future, with the help of God's grace.

This process of coming to contrition happens even before we go into the confessional. And by reflecting on what it requires, we can already begin to identify some obstacles that keep people away from this sacrament.

First of all, our world is noisy and busy, and taking time for this kind of deep self-reflection requires shutting out the noise and distractions. This implies an effort to get beyond the superficial stimuli of our digital age—not an easy task.

But it doesn't stop there. Acknowledging our sinfulness, our weakness, and our need for God's grace takes humility and courage. We have to take ownership for our sins and failures. The more attached we are to sin, to selfishness, and to worldly treasures like wealth, success, and reputation, the harder it is to be humble and courageous enough to admit our brokenness and need for redemption. Those attachments also sometimes make it hard for us to feel sorrow for our sins. But the sorrow that goes into contrition is not just the emotion of sorrow, which can come and go, but it is the deeper spiritual recognition of the evil of sin, of how it causes damage and impedes spiritual growth. Spiritually speaking, *feeling* sorry is not necessary in order to truly *be* sorry.



THE FALSE FEAR OF REPETITION

Finally, sometimes we find ourselves falling into the same sins over and over again, no matter how hard we try not to. That makes us feel like hypocrites when we come to the point in which we are supposed to have a renewed desire and decision not to sin again. That's understandable, but it's also wrong.

In the human person, intelligence and will are two separate powers. With our intelligence, we may know that we are weak and prone to keep falling into sin. But with our will, we can still want to avoid those sins. The repentance that comes with contrition is primarily in the will. Sincere contrition doesn't mean that we never will fall again; rather, it means that we truly desire not to fall again, even if we are pretty sure we might because that desire seems small and weak and fragile.

For people who go to confession frequently and on a regular basis, recurring venial sins or imperfections are bound to come up in your examination of conscience. This is because as we grow spiritually, our willful sins diminish, and the faults linked to our unwilled personality flaws and wounds are exposed. God often uses those faults and flaws to purify our souls in ways that our own conscious efforts never could—and sometimes he doesn't heal them right away. In this case too, having to repeat the same falls over and over again is no reason to stay away from the confessional.

CONFESSION OF SINS

Our second action is the confession of our sins to the priest inside the celebration of the sacrament. This too can be an obstacle. It takes faith to believe that God knows what he is doing by requiring this, by wanting to administer his mercy through this very human encounter between priest and penitent.

But God does know what he is doing. He knows that our human nature requires a real encounter in order to experience the fullness of forgiveness. Certainly we should also confess our sins to God privately when we pray, but confessing them to God's representative in the sacrament gives us an objective experience that we need in order to really get the fresh start that God wants to give us every time we go to confession. It gives us a chance for a full-spirit workout, exercising and therefore enhancing all the Christian virtues, like humility, faith, hope, and courage.

SHAME VS. GUILT

This can also be an obstacle when we are filled with shame at our sins. Shame and guilt are two different things. Guilt is the healthy emotional response to disordered behavior. It's a sign that our spiritual nervous system is working, and warning us that we are in moral danger. If someone is habitually engaging in destructive, sinful behavior and feels no guilt at all, no remorse, we all recognize that something is terribly wrong with that person. Their conscience is broken.

Shame, on the other hand, has to do with believing a lie. Even though we are weak and sinful, God never stops loving us. Our sins don't change how God sees us. Jesus didn't condemn sinners, he died on the cross to save them, because he loves sinners and wants to rescue us and heal us from our sins. Shame is the distorted form of unhealthy guilt that forgets about that. Shame makes us think thoughts like, "I am such a terrible person that God could never love me or forgive me." This kind of shame can inhibit us from confessing our sins, because we are sure that the priest will laugh at us or deride us or otherwise expose what we mistakenly believe is our true and unlovable self. That's not how God works, though, and these feelings of shame should never impede us from seeking in confession the warm embrace of God's infinite mercy.

SATISFACTION

After we confess our sins and receive encouragement, guidance, and absolution from the priest, we perform the third act of confession: our penance. This is traditionally called "making satisfaction" or "reparation" for our sins. Often the penance is simple, like saying a few prayers. Sometimes it can be more demanding. In every case it should take into account the penitent's personal situation and seek some spiritual benefit.

Doing penance can be an obstacle that keeps some people away from confession because of a subtle form of pride. Some people recognize the gravity of their sins, and they recoil at the idea that saying three Hail Marys and an Our Father can wipe those sins away. They seem to feel that the credibility of the sacrament is made questionable by the seemingly small penances that priests typically hand out.

A basic misunderstanding underlies this point of view. Our sins are not wiped away by our penance. Our sins are wiped away by Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus Christ, true God and true man, paid the price for all sin by being obedient to his Father unto death on the



cross. The forgiveness that Jesus won for us, by suffering for us, comes to us through the sacrament, but it is not earned by our penance; it was earned by Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Our penance has a different purpose. It is a means by which we show the sincerity of our repentance, and through which God allows us to contribute in a small way to healing some of the damage that our sins caused, both to ourselves and to others.

TWO TOP TIPS FOR A GOOD CONFESSION

Those are the basic acts of the penitent, and those are some of the common obstacles hidden inside our reluctance to make use of this amazing sacrament. Whenever we feel interior resistance at the thought of going to confession, we should reflect on which one of those obstacles is at work, and allow the truth of God's mercy to root it out.

Once we have decided to make regular confession a firm anchor for our spiritual growth, we will gradually discover many other ways to live it deeply and fruitfully. Right now, I would just like to mention two.

First, cultivate a habitual attitude of penance. Sin is all around us. It contributes to the tragic miseries and injustices that make the news day after day. It contributes to our own interior conflicts and family troubles. It stirs up sorrow and steals joy. It was partly in reference to this ever-present reality that Jesus said,

 *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

—Matthew 5:4

A balanced awareness of the brokenness of this fallen world and of our ongoing need for mercy creates in us a healthy spirit of penance, a sensitivity that gives a deep, cosmic resonance to every personal experience of this sacrament.

Second, stay focused. As we grow spiritually and begin to practice regular, frequent confession, our examination of conscience and confession should gradually become simpler. We don't need to mention all of our small faults and imperfections in every confession. Rather, focus in on the one or two that have been most present since the last confession, and allow the spirit of contrition and repentance to be shaped by them. This helps us avoid dispersion in our efforts for ongoing spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION: FINDING THE TREASURE BURIED IN CONFESSION

The more we dig into what really goes on in this sacrament, the more we discover what a treasure it really is. Much more could be said about how to live this sacrament well, but for now, take some time to prayerfully reflect on the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you revitalize the three acts of the penitent in your own experience of confession.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How familiar am I with the different types of sins that we can commit? How informed is my conscience when it comes to what sinful behavior really looks like? Can I explain the full implications of the Ten Commandments to someone not familiar with them?
2. How would I explain in my own words the difference between healthy guilt and unhealthy shame?
3. When I think about going to confession, what reasons against it usually pop up first? Why?
4. How often do I find myself falling into the same sins? What steps have I taken to try and understand why that happens?
5. What am I doing to develop my ability to shut out life's noise and distractions in order to spend time in prayer with God?
6. How often do I dedicate time to prayerful self-reflection about what God is doing in my life and how I am responding? How often should I?
7. How would I explain in my own words what is meant by the phrase "an attitude of penance"? (Review that section in this conference if necessary.)
8. How do I respond when I hear about tragedies, suffering, and evil in the world and in the lives of those around me? How would Jesus respond?
9. How do I think Jesus feels when I come to receive his grace and mercy in the sacrament of confession?
10. The Church recommends that we make use of this sacrament frequently, because of its many benefits. How often will I make use of it from now on? How will I make sure I follow through on this commitment?



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *7 Secrets of Confession*
by Vinny Flynn
- *Lord, Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession*
by Scott Hahn
- *Frequent Confession: Its Place in the Spiritual Life*
by Benedict Bauer
- *An Examination of Conscience for Adults*
available online:
fatima.org/essentials/requests/examconc.asp
ncregister.com/info/confession_guide_for_adults
- *Rediscovering Catholicism*
by Matthew Kelly

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