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Nothing to Tell in Confession?

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by

RICHARD GINDER



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THE good Catholic goes to confession once a week. So says St. Francis de Sales. Perhaps we should not have said the good Catholic. We might rather have said the devout Catholic.

“But I find I have nothing to tell when I go once a week!”

Congratulations!—but also a word of caution. The weekly penitent has “nothing to tell” precisely because he is so close to the Sacrament of Penance and, we presume, to Holy Communion. For confession does more than release us from guilt; it assures

us of grace against future temptations. It is at the same time a purge and a tonic.

Let the penitent start missing a week here and there, let his confession lapse to two, three, or four weeks, and he will have something to tell—to his sorrow. Sins of weakness will overtake him. Missing his weekly checkup, he will begin omitting his prayers and devotions. His spiritual life will lose tone and one day he will be surprised by the devil and stampeded into mortal sin.

The realization that one has "nothing to tell" can be a turning point in one's life with God. It can mark the beginning of real growth in holiness, or it can indicate a stalemate, the development of lukewarmness, and the onset of dry rot.

Of course, the usual Catholic, on looking over a printed examination of conscience, is excused from the grosser faults. He has not blasphemed God, nor has he cursed, or perjured himself; he has kept

Sunday holy and has been considerate of his parents; tantrums are the exception, and he has not usually been in a rage; nor has he committed adultery or fornication; he has not stolen, cheated, lied or been envious, nor has he entertained bad thoughts. For which thank God!

WE WANT GROWTH IN HOLINESS

But there is need now of a closer scrutiny. We are not concerned with the mere avoidance of sin. We want growth in holiness. So we must scan our soul for venial sins, for faults, for breaches of virtue and neglect of divine inspirations.

We must always devote special attention to charity. Have I been unkind, suspicious, or malicious in my thought, words, or actions? Have I not resented some particular person just a little? Have I not given him a "dig" now and then in my conversation?—or have I, perhaps, condemned him by my silence or by my scant praise?

What about religion: Have I been faithful to my prayers, morning and evening? Have I prayed as much as I ought to have, from time to time during the day? Have my prayers been devout and recollected, or have they been the mechanical recitation of routine formulas? How about the Blessed Sacrament?—how is my attitude? Do I drop in for little visits? Do I make my genuflexions reverently? And my signs of the cross; are they made carefully? Do I do any spiritual reading at all? In short, am I living as a child of God in constant union with my Father, or am I a child of the world, who belongs to the Catholic Church as men belong to the Elks or the Kiwanis?

JUSTICE AND PIETY

Justice: Have I paid my bills promptly? Am I living above my means? Do I have the property of others in my possession? Have I kept things too long "on loan?" Am I scrupulously fair in my judgments

and statements about other people? Am I not prone to snap decisions about those with whom I come in contact?

Piety: Am I good to my parents? Do I call on them often in their old age? Do I try to help them with their little chores? Do I ever offer to mow the lawn for them, to clean the cellar, or flush off the porch? Do I take them driving? Do I listen patiently to their worries and troubles, and try seriously to advise them? Do I ever bring them little presents or offer money should that be needed? Am I not, rather, bored with them? Do I not try to bull-doze them and belittle their opinions?

Under piety comes all the family relationships — my husband or wife. Am I patient and understanding? Am I a "complainer?" Am I stingy with my wife or do I not try to economize on my husband, buying him shabby clothes and cheap meats? Do I feed him out of tin cans instead of taking the trouble to prepare fresh vege-

tables and fruits? Do I keep my home neat and my children washed and attractive? Or, from the man's side, does that drink taken last thing before coming home tend to put me "on edge" and make me quarrelsome?

VIRTUE RATHER THAN VICE

It's a case, generally, of looking at what we ought to do instead of what we ought not to do.

Of course, no one should enter the confessional and hold up the line by going through such a detailed routine as the one you just read. If one had a personal chaplain, perhaps—but under the usual setup, it would be an imposition on everyone.

No, what we do is this: "Father, I have been negligent about my prayers. I have had wilful distractions entirely too often. I have neglected the Blessed Sacrament; sometimes I have left the Church without making a proper thanksgiving after Com-

munion. I have been cross with my husband (or wife), I have been neglectful of my duties of state, haven't taken a right interest in my home," etc.

A checkup on the virtues shows which ones we are slighting. Then we say, "I have neglected religion." But that could cover anything from missing Mass to twiddling one's thumbs during the sermon, so we go on to give the priest enough so he can judge whether it was mortal, venial, or only a fault. We add, say, "I haven't prayed properly since last Saturday."

FROM OUR PAST LIFE

It is not impossible that we should go through one week or another without committing one venial sin. We may have confessed only faults. So, since absolution can be given only for the forgiveness of sin, it is a fine practice always to mention something from the past. If we don't the priest will have to ask us, and we may set to

fumbling. It is enough to say something like, "I am also sorry for all my past sins against charity" . . . or justice, or purity, or whatever our weak point may be. Then the absolution cuts down on the temporal punishment attaching to those sins, even though they have already been forgiven.

The telling of the sins should be impersonal. There should be no play for the confessor's sympathy, no accusations made against other people—above all, no long tales of the "And then I did this and then he did that" variety. One simply states the fact, bare and unvarnished.

Some penitents there are who confess a sin only to excuse themselves immediately, so that the priest ends up wondering why the person bothered coming, since he refuses to admit any guilt at all.

The confession must be complete, regarding "What?" and "How often?" We make our confession candidly, stating the facts as being certain or doubtful as the

case may be. "I had bad thoughts twice; on one of those occasions there was some doubt about my consent—however, I accuse myself of whatever guilt I may have incurred before God."

DON'T WORRY

We are bound to confess only mortal sins. There is no room, then, for anguish, or anxiety about the completeness of our confession, as long as we mean to do the right thing. If we are sensitive enough to have anxiety, then we must be the type who can be sure that we're not omitting any of those. For the rest, we don't have to worry.

If we forget something in the confessional and can't remember it after an instant or two—all right, it wasn't our fault; it can wait until our next absolution. If it comes back to mind during the absolution or while one is on the way out, hold it for the next time.

But we mustn't leave the confessional

until the priest has finished the words of absolution. Some people do, strange to say! In most confessionals there is enough light on the priest for the penitent to see his face and the movement of his hand as it makes the sign of the cross; often one can hear his voice, or he'll say "God bless you" or some such prayer; or he'll close the slide. Anyway, we must stay until he's finished.

If we forget our penance? The sins don't come back. They're gone forever. But we speak of this in our next confession and the priest takes it into account in assigning a new penance.

ONCE AGAIN: DON'T WORRY

As a general rule, we oughtn't worry over past confessions. There are exceptions, to be sure. In case of such worries there is a very simple rule of thumb to follow. Was I at peace on leaving the box at the time? If so, 99 times out of 100, we're in the clear on it—because our judgment then was bet-

ter than it is now. We were right on top of it then; but by now we've probably forgotten some circumstance that excused us.

Suppose that all my life I've been in the habit of doing something and then one day, say, July 1, 1946, I find out that this is a mortal sin. Up until that, I had had no idea of it. Well, then, up until July 1, 1946, we're in the clear. No sin. Nothing at all to worry about. We didn't know any better. But from now on we are accountable and we begin our bookkeeping on that score as of July 1.

A lie, or silence, in the confessional, when it involves sins which must be confessed, is a sacrilege that fouls the soul. One would have done better not to go if he meant to suppress the facts or lie about them.

The most important thing about confession is our sorrow for our sins. If we take fifteen minutes to prepare for confession, we should allow five minutes for our exam-

ination of conscience and ten for exciting our sorrow.

QUALITIES OF OUR SORROW

Remember the Catechism on contrition? It is a true grief of the soul for having offended God, with a firm purpose of sinning no more. It should be (1) interior, (2) supernatural, (3) universal, and (4) sovereign.

(1) It must come from the heart and not merely from the lips.

(2) It must be prompted by the grace of God and not merely by natural motives (such as loss of health, friends, money, reputation, etc.)

(3) We must be sorry for all our mortal sins without exception. (We can be sorry in general for everything we have done to offend God.)

(4) We must grieve more for having offended God than for any other evil.

We mustn't forget that our sorrow looks

to the future as well as to the past. If we fall immediately after confession, it would seem that our sorrow wasn't very sincere. No confessor is well impressed by the penitent who says "I'll try." What the priest wants is the ringing promise "I will."

And while our venial sins are forgiven without their being confessed, they certainly aren't forgiven if we are not sorry for them.

It isn't hard to make a good confession. The very fact that we want and that we try to make a good confession is our best insurance. For if we have the right spirit and if we pray for light and sorrow, we can't go wrong.

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