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WHEN WE GO TO CONFESSION

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When We Go to Confession

This Is for All

CONFESSIO**N** was meant by the dear Lord for everyone.

Hence every Catholic goes to confession.

The Holy Father, like any other man, kneels before his confessor and tells his sins. One of the first things the little child learns is to make a good confession. The Church advises her members to go to confession before most of the important actions of life. And in the end, with death hovering near in anticipation of the soul's swift flight to eternity, the most important thing that can happen to the dying person is a good confession.

Sinners after a lifetime of vice can find their way back to God only through sorrow and confession.

But saints like to go to confession; for after telling their sins and feeling the wonderful mercy and love of God, they sense their closeness to God.

There is something very beautiful about an entire family's going to confession together in preparation for their receiving together the Good Shepherd in Holy Communion.

And when a young engaged couple go off happily to confession together, they are finding another dear bond of union for their love.

Confession is for all. God meant it to be the source of happiness and peace and courage and strength.

This little booklet is intended to help anyone who goes to confession. In a way it is a sequel to the pamphlets "Confession Is a Joy?" and "Are You Scrupulous?" But it can be followed even if the other two booklets have not been read, for it is complete in itself.

Two Types of Mistakes

1. TOO MUCH WORRY

We may as well start with the mistakes about confession. Once they are out of the way, we can go to the question of confession rightly made.

The first type of mistake about confession is made by the person who agonizes over confession. He creates a positive horror of confession. He dreads it more than he dreads a trip to the dentist. He probes into his conscience until it aches. He enters the confessional with the feeling of a man marching to the electric chair. And when his confession is over, he is in a sweat and a stew, and he spends intolerable minutes trying to persuade himself that the confession was good or not good.

All wrong of course.

For the Christ who instituted confession was Christ the Father of the prodigal son; Christ the Good Shepherd; Christ the merciful who forgave Mary Magdalen her sins and Peter his denial, Christ who told us of the tremendous joy in heaven over one sinner's doing penance.

Confession should be approached with joy. It should be made with infinite trust in the mercy of God. It should be looked back on with a sense of intense relief.

2. NOT ENOUGH WORRY

The second type of mistake about confession is made by the person who does not worry enough. Confession has become for him a casual thing into which he bolts without a worry in the world or for that matter with scarcely a thought.

Protestants find this kind of Catholic very puzzling — as do educated and instructed Catholics.

While confession was never meant to be a rack for the torturing of a soul, it was not meant to be something into which to dance carelessly, out of which to come gaily and thoughtlessly, for which to make almost no preparation, and from which to get no real results for the improving and strengthening of life.

Confession is tremendously important.

It is as important in God's eyes as sin is

in the eyes of the devil. Through sin the devil grips the soul and holds it fast. Through confession the soul goes back to God. But the soul cannot deliver itself to the devil without deliberate intention and clear choice. And the soul cannot return to God unless it thinks about what it does and wants once more to become God's friend, God's child.

The Right View

Confession is meant to be a source of real joy.

Through it sin is forgiven. We listen while a man vested with power from God says, clearly, "Your sins are forgiven. I absolve you. Go in peace."

Those words spoken by that man are powerful: The soul who had lost God's friendship once more becomes God's friend; the soul whose title deed to heaven had been torn up has that title deed restored, and heaven is reguaranteed.

Before his confession the person may have been in imminent danger of hell. After making a good confession, the person is set once more on the safe, sure road to eternal happiness.

But for this there must be real cooperation on the part of the sinner. God cannot forgive the sins of a person who is not sorry for his sins. The priest's absolution is worse than wasted on the sinner who has no intention of giving up his sinning. If it is with-

out thought or sorrow or honesty that the individual goes into the confessional, when he leaves it he is worse off than he was when he entered it.

For Christ, standing back of His priest, follows the course of the confession and sees deep down into the human conscience. He knows whether or not the sinner is sorry. He knows why he came to confession. And to the absolution He adds the words with which He dismissed the woman taken in adultery: "Go, *AND* now sin no more."

The People Who Go to Confession

Among the various types of people who go to confession we find the following:

1. THE LONG ABSENT SINNER

When after years of sin, of a life spent in "a far country . . . living riotously," a man or a woman comes back to confession, God is glad, and the priest is deeply happy.

Naturally the sinner is not going to find it easy to tell what a scoundrel he has been. The recital of his crimes is not going to make him proud of himself. He may even prepare himself for the reprimand which his sins certainly rate.

All this is however entirely secondary to the joy of the priest when a long-tarrying sinner comes back to confession. The priest counts it a good night in the confessional if he has helped some man or woman who has

long been an enemy of God to find happiness and forgiveness and peace.

The joy of the priest however is slight compared with the joy of Christ Himself. This is the moment for which He has waited. He, the Father of the prodigal son, now holds the wanderer in His arms. He is carrying the strayed sheep safe against His heart. His death on the cross has not been in vain. He has found His long-lost brother or sister.

Christ put all this so clearly when He talked of the joy in heaven over one sinner's doing penance. He spoke of the joy of the woman who found the small coin that had been mislaid. And whenever in His own life on earth sinners came seeking forgiveness, He welcomed them with open arms and an outpouring of His mercy and love.

2. THE HABITUAL SINNER

This is the man or woman who sins over and over again. Probably it is precisely the same sin that is committed each time. Some habit of vice has gripped the sinner, and he or she feels powerless to shake it off.

Something like despair freezes the souls of these people. "We have meant in the past to improve. We were firmly determined never again to commit that sin. We failed. What hope is there for us this time?"

No matter how often the sin is committed or how deep-rooted the habit, they must

keep coming to Christ in confession. As long as they have the determination to keep trying to amend their lives, they must return to confession. The day is going to arrive when their hopes will be realized and the habit of sin will be broken.

For God wants to help them. He is far more eager to see the fault corrected than they possibly could be. He wants to pour His strength into their soul. Perhaps they trusted their own powers too much and called too carelessly on God.

Besides this, confession is not only a means to obtain absolution and forgiveness; it is a source of strength. It possesses great curative powers. *The grace of the sacrament* is the strongest possible help against the recurrence of sins.

So even if there are habits of sin in his soul, the sinner wisely goes to confession because:

God gives him fresh strength.

Confession itself is a source of power.

The priest may give him the advice which will solve his problem.

His own repeated efforts to renounce his sin will in the end triumph.

3. THE ORDINARY PERSON

The life of most men and women is a blend of goodness and evil, of virtues and sins. They do much that is good, yet they

feel they do it in slovenly and unsatisfactory fashion. They do much that is sinful and imperfect, and they do it so easily.

For them confession is most precious.

Their sins are forgiven and in God's mercy wiped away.

They are given fresh strength to do with courage and constancy the things they want to do.

They feel their unceasing need of God's mercy. They know that even more they need His strength to lead a good life, surrounded as they are by the ever-present pressure of temptation.

4. THE GOOD

Their sins are few. They have the feeling sometimes that they have almost nothing to tell in confession. Isn't confession a waste of time for themselves? Aren't they merely taking up the priest's time when there are really sinful souls to be absolved and weak people to be strengthened?

But no one can know the extent and nature of his own sins. Hence when they go to confession, even the good benefit: They win pardon for those human defects and faults of which they may be scarcely conscious.

The purgatory toward which all of us are by sin directed is by the power of confession—with its sorrow and appointed penance—cut down in intensity and duration.

Again *the grace of the sacrament* is poured into the lives of the good. They are strengthened against that terrible temptation which will perhaps suddenly rise up and almost overwhelm them. Because of the strength they received in confession, they do more easily the difficult things required of any one trying to lead a saintly life.

Christ Instituted Confession

As this booklet is meant for Catholics, it is not necessary to go to great lengths to prove that Christ instituted confession.

We should almost expect that He would do this, since He knew the universality of sin and man's constant need for forgiveness.

The steps by which He instituted the sacrament of penance however are remarkably clear.

When the man sick of the palsy was lowered through the roof into His presence, Christ said to him simply, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee."

Those standing around were typical protestants. They protested: "What man has power on earth to forgive sins?" Christ the God-man. To prove that He had this power to forgive sins, He gave them a test: If He raised this sick man to full health, would they believe He had the power to forgive sins? For certainly to give back health to the body was almost as astonishing a power as to give back health to the soul.

Quietly He answered their doubt with proof:

“But that you may know that the Son of man hath power *on earth* to forgive sins, I say to thee [the sick man]: Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house.”

Whereupon the man did rise and walk forth a well man. Christ had proved His power to forgive sins.

This power of forgiving sins Christ then passed on to His disciples as one of their most important rights:

“Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain they are retained.”

So the power of forgiving sin and—for proper reasons—not forgiving sin was given directly by Christ to His disciples, who in turn passed that power on to their successors.

Now this is one of the powers which the Church never for a moment doubted she possessed and never for a moment ceased to use. Throughout history the Church has constantly forgiven sins and, where the person clearly showed he did not deserve forgiveness, has declined to forgive sins.

If the Church today claims to possess that power and use it, she is doing no more than Christ did, what Christ ordered His disciples to do, and what the Church has always done.

Very Reasonable

In giving this power to men, Christ acted very wisely.

We human beings go to a doctor for the cure of our bodies. And Christ gave us doctors for our souls.

Sinners have a very clear sense of the horror of their sins. They know what it means to sin. They feel sharp remorse after they have sinned. They dread the terrible consequences of those sins now and hereafter. They want a convincing assurance that they are forgiven.

That assurance comes to them clearly from the mouths of their priests. Appointed by God and given Godlike powers, the priests say to the sinners, "I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Go in peace."

Into the human ear and thence into the human heart comes the positive assurance of forgiveness. This is not God's silent voice; it is the audible voice of His human representative.

The sinner rises happy and sure. God's own ambassador has told him he is forgiven. He is at peace when he leaves the confessional; he is certain that he is again the friend of God, an heir of heaven.

Christ could have worked out no finer way to give men who are troubled by the consciousness of sin the peace and comfort

of knowing that those sins have been washed away.

Freud Agrees

When Freud first began to study modern human nervousness and the disturbances and chaos of modern minds, he insisted on the importance of the heart's being released from the burden of past sins and crimes, even if a doctor is the confidant. The worried person would find relief if he told his troubles and presented frankly and honestly to another the vices that had distorted his past.

Then Freud and his followers found that one class of people were least in need of this release. They were the Catholics. They already had that release. It had been provided for them by the Savior, Jesus Christ, when He instituted the sacrament of penance.

Quite obviously this release is of secondary importance; the forgiveness of his sin and the restoration of sanctifying grace to his soul is of primary importance. When the victim of a nervous breakdown tells his worries and sins to a doctor, all the doctor can do is give him advice and aim at a long-term correction and cure. When a Catholic goes to confession, he knows that he will be healed of his sins. He will be restored to life.

Beyond this however there is the happy release that comes through confession. Forgiveness is the main objective. The removal

of sins is the great purpose of the sacrament. Yet when a Catholic goes to confession, he tells to a representative of God the things that have bothered him and have twisted his mind in remorse and regret; he goes through the very human release of telling his troubles to someone else. Even psychologically this is a great blessing. Christ, we see, had anticipated Freud by long centuries. Confession was to be a means to heal the wounds of sin. But it was to be also the sweet opportunity to place before a human representative of God our problems and the twists in our character that are brought about through sin.

How Often?

How often should people go to confession?

Of course everyone should go as soon as possible after he has sinned seriously.

Strictly speaking, no one is ever obliged under pain of sin to go to confession if there is no serious sin in his life. But beyond obligation there is *the grace of the sacrament*; and even if one has not committed mortal sin, that grace is most precious and important.

Now that frequent communion is the rule of most good lives, one should go to confession on an average of about once every two weeks, even where there is no serious sin to be confessed.

People who have habits of sin are advised to go to confession more frequently for the

strength to be received from the sacrament. If one is passing through a time of intense problems or heavy temptations—say in the days of youth—the practice of frequent confession is extremely wise.

A Regular Confessor

Some people go to that confessor “who has the fewest people waiting outside his box.”

The wise person who really wants to use confession to the best advantage picks one confessor. To that confessor he goes time after time.

He makes himself known to the confessor. This he does not do by name. Rather he identifies himself. “I am going to come regularly to you to confession, father,” he says. And if he has some problem he wishes to discuss, he adds, “I want to get my vocation in life settled,” or “I’ve been having problems about faith,” or “I hope you’ll help me overcome such and such a temptation.”

If the person has made clear his desire for help, advice, and guidance, the confessor is only too happy to do all he can.

Especially wise to choose a regular confessor is the person who has contracted a habit of sin, who is trying to decide what to do in life, who has doubts about faith, who is confronted with problems at home or at work, or who really wants to become a more perfectly developed person.

The confessor soon knows how to deal with this person, as a doctor does with a sick person who constantly consults him. The Catholic with a regular confessor to whom he explains himself and from whom he asks and accepts help is well along the road to happiness, success, and heaven.

What to Get From Confession

From confession you have a right to expect:

1. Forgiveness of sin. This is the essential object of confession, but only one of the objectives.

2. Help to overcome problems, whatever they may be. The confessor is a wise guide and director. He hopes to be permitted to bring his professional experience and wisdom to your assistance.

3. Help to plan and carry forward a full and useful life. The priest is not only interested in forgiving sinners; he wants to help good people to become better and to help better people to become saints. He is glad to help young people to find the right work in life, and he is happy when he can assist older people to do more perfectly the work God gave them to do. He is a counselor, an experienced adviser. He likes to be called on for help.

General Confession

A general confession is that which covers a number of former confessions; the repeat-

ing of matter already presented in those earlier confessions. Sometimes a general confession is a retelling of all the serious sins of one's life. Sometimes it is a repetition of the sins of a year or some longer period. Often people who make a yearly retreat make a general confession to cover the sins of the year that has just elapsed.

Scrupulous people should never make a general confession unless they are told to do so by their confessors.

A general confession must be made if an earlier confession was bad and has never been corrected.

The value of a general confession even when all past confessions were good and sincere is enormous. By such a confession one grows more humble. One contrasts God's tremendous goodness with the number of one's own sins. Sorrow grows. Future sins are forestalled. One plans for the coming year and determines to avoid the sins that have soiled or spoiled the year that has gone.

A yearly confession may thus serve to indicate our spiritual progress, to show us our advance or deterioration since our last general confession, and to prepare us for a holier year to come.

Many retreat masters encourage a general confession during a retreat. A mission may serve the same opportunity. General confession is often advised for people who are entering upon a new state of life and hence

is fairly common among people who are about to be married or to enter upon the priestly or religious life.

The Steps to Confession

1. AN ACT OF GRATITUDE TO GOD

This is a lovely prelude to confession.

Before we think of our own sins at all, we call to mind God's wonderful goodness to us. In contrast to His goodness our ingratitude and sins seem the blacker, and it becomes much easier for us to experience sorrow.

Such a prayer might go thus:

Dear and generous Father in heaven, before I begin to think of my sins, may I first think of your generosity to me? You gave me the gift of life. You created me when you might have created another saint to love and serve you devotedly. You gave me my faith, baptism with the right to heaven, the divine life which is grace in my soul. You gave me your Son as my Savior and leader and my food in Holy Communion. You gave me the indwelling God, who is the Holy Spirit, in confirmation. When I sinned, you did not cast me off but forgave me and gave me another chance. You have given me so much—health, education, friends, opportunities in life—that I cannot begin to thank you. Nor can I properly thank you for those favors which make me in a special way your favored child. (Pause here and

think of the special gifts God gave to you alone.)

This I know, that you have been wonderfully good and generous to me. In return I have given you sin and evil and the most reluctant and selfish service. But I am really grateful. Your generosity makes my sin seem even worse. At least before I begin my confession, I can tell you how grateful I am for all you have done for me. And in the light of your goodness let me see my own selfishness and complete lack of generosity to you, my good and generous Father.

My God, I thank you. Forgive me if my chief return to you has been selfishness and sin.

2. A PRAYER FOR LIGHT

Before we can properly confess our sins, we must know them. In a complete confession we tell all the serious sins of which we have been guilty and the number of times we have committed them.

But men and women can fool themselves. They can pretend that things are not wrong when really they are wrong, or that things are not so bad as God knows them to be. So it is most important that we see our sins as God sees them.

This viewpoint calls for an honest appraisal of our conduct. And for that we need the help of God.

It is the greatest possible mistake on our part to exaggerate our sins. One can be

dishonest by pretending that things are sins when they are not sins or by puffing up venial sins to look like mortal sins. People sometimes take this astonishingly dishonest course.

On the other hand one can be dishonest by pretending that things which are sinful are not wrong at all.

The priest in the confessional has in his dealings with the penitent one rule of conduct which everyone should know and remember: The confessor is instructed to believe the penitent when he tells things which are to his own discredit. Believe the penitent! That is the priest's only course of action. So the whole matter of honesty is put squarely up to the one who is making the confession.

Honesty does not mean scrupulosity. It does not mean our prying into our memory and torturing our mind in an effort to discover things which may long since have slipped away. It does not mean our trying to find nonexistent sins or feeling that the confessor will be disappointed if we have not sizeable sins to relate. It merely means our sincere and not-too-prolonged effort to get at the sins on our conscience and to find the words to express them simply and candidly.

God is most eager to help the sincere person make a good confession.

So we ask God to let us know our sins as He knows them. And to this prayer we

add a request that we will feel real sorrow for our sins.

We may use the following type of prayer:

My God, who will one day be my judge, I am asking you to help me prepare honestly and correctly for confession. I sincerely want to know my sins as you see them. Help my memory so that nothing in which I have seriously offended you may escape my attention. I shall try to recall exactly how often I have committed these sins; then I can tell this correctly to the priest.

So, God of light and truth, help me to know my sins and to tell them as they are. Give me the honesty to present them in such a way that the priest will understand them exactly. I do not wish to be unnecessarily scrupulous or to waste time and energy on things which are not sinful. But I do wish to make a complete and honest confession.

Even more importantly, dear God, give me sorrow for my sins. For this I need your help. Let me see the evil of sin. Let me realize how much of pain and sorrow I deserve for my sins. Let me think briefly of the sufferings of hell and the joys of heaven. But beyond that I want to see what sin did to Jesus my Savior on Calvary. And I want to come to hate sin because you are so good and beautiful and sin is so evil and hideous and ungenerous and rotten.

Help me, Holy Trinity, to make a good confession. My Father, make me sorry. My

Savior, make me remember Calvary. Dear Holy Spirit of truth and love, enlighten my mind, assist my memory, but most of all move my heart to real contrition for my sins.

3. THE EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

In confession a person is obliged to tell *only* the serious sins, that is, the mortal sins of which he is certain. He is not obliged to tell venial sins. He may tell his venial sins, and it is a good thing for him if he does so. But if he forgets any venial sins or deliberately does not tell them, the completeness of his confession is not affected.

Mortal sins however must always be told. They must be mentioned by name, that is, exactly the kind of sins they are. And the number of times they were committed must be mentioned.

If through some failure of memory a person forgets to mention a mortal sin of which he is guilty, or he innocently understates the number of times he has committed this sin, he is not to worry. He need not return to confession to correct this undeliberate omission or error. The sin has been forgiven along with the others he confessed.

The next time he goes to confession however he should tell this sin and mention that through a lapse of memory or a mistake he did not mention it in his last confession.

If any serious, mortal, sin is deliberately

not told, the entire confession is valueless and bad. If one deliberately understates the number of times one has committed the sin, the confession is bad. So a person is not allowed to withhold the telling of it in confession. Or if he has, let's say, entertained impure thoughts ten times, he makes a bad confession if he says that he had impure thoughts five times when he knows that the number of times was ten.

It is not too easy to commit a mortal sin.

For this, as we all know, three things are necessary.

A. The matter of the sin must be serious.

It must do real harm to God, to ourselves, to others. Otherwise it is a venial sin.

B. We must know what we are doing at the time we are doing it.

This is often called sufficient reflection. Suppose that a person does something that he thinks is perfectly right and later on he finds out that it is wrong; he is of course guiltless of sin. If he eats meat on Friday and thinks that the day is Saturday, he is not guilty of even a slight sin. If a person does something wrong without thinking of what he is doing, he is guiltless.

On the other hand if a person suspects that something is wrong and deliberately does not find out whether or not it is wrong, he is guilty of sin whether the action itself

is wrong or right. For in a case of this sort the person acts on a doubtful conscience and with the attitude that he would act thus regardless of whether the act were right or wrong. That puts him in the wrong, and he is deliberately responsible for his false conscience. A young man steals a motorcycle, for example. He does not know exactly how valuable a thing must be in order to have the act of his stealing that article become a mortal sin. But he argues: "So long as I don't know, I haven't committed a mortal sin." So he does not find out. He is blameably ignorant. Hence the theft cannot be excused on the ground of ignorance.

In the same way people often try to remain ignorant about what constitutes a serious sin against purity.

Ignorance that a person develops or wants to retain does not excuse mortal sin.

C. We must give full consent.

This means that for a sin to be mortal the person has to be fully awake, has to choose deliberately to do the evil, and has to do it with full determination.

Hence one cannot commit a mortal sin if he is asleep or partially asleep. An insane person cannot be guilty of sin. If by accident one were to kill another person, there having been no intention to kill, no guilt would attach to the killer.

It is possible for a person to be so drunk for example that he does not know what he

is doing. The drunkenness is his own fault and sinful.

Let us suppose that while he is drunk he becomes involved in a fight and injures someone. If he did not foresee the fight and was too drunk to know what he was doing, he is not responsible before God for the consequences of his drunkenness. But if he foresaw that when he would be drunk he would probably get into a fight, as he had done before, and would hurt someone, he is definitely responsible for the consequences of that fight.

But people will sometimes use this false argument: "If I become drunk, I will be likely to commit sins of impurity, as I have done in the past; but since I will be drunk and not in full possession of my senses, I will not be to blame." Such reasoning is entirely incorrect. Foreseeing the evil they may commit or the likelihood of that evil, they are guilty even if they commit that evil while they are drunk.

So if a person foresees that when he is in a drunken state he will do things which are morally wrong and yet he becomes drunk anyway, he is guilty of the evil he commits while he is drunk. For he has deliberately accepted not only his drunkenness but the consequences of his drunkenness.

This is also true for persons who take stimulants like drugs in order to destroy completely their will power and make serious sin easy and apparently outside of voluntary control.

Such conduct is however fairly rare.

It is important to remember that one cannot commit a sin unless one intends to do so; that accidents are never sins; that unless one wants to do a thing which is wrong he is not guilty of sin.

Procedure

1. REGARDING SINS

A. The frequent penitent, for whom confession is part of normal living, need not take nearly so much time for or give so much attention to the examination of his conscience as need one who goes to confession seldom.

Hence the following points may be noted about the person who goes to confession often.

Serious sins are likely to stand out clearly and be easily recalled to mind. The penitent will remember whether or not he did something notably evil. The moment he begins to prepare for confession, that sin or those sins will hit him compellingly. He will need no intense self-scrutiny to find them out.

If he has not committed any serious sins, he should pick out for confession certain types of venial sins. He is wise to mention in confession those of his sins which cause pain, annoyance, or trouble to others; this type of sin should certainly be

stressed in his confession, in his sorrow, and in his firm purpose of amendment.

The same would apply to sins which are threatening to become habits. These he will want to eliminate, since they harm his character and frequently prepare the way for more serious sins. This is also true of sins that may give scandal or lead others to sin.

No one else finds an examination of conscience before confession easier than does the person who each evening makes a brief examination part of his night prayers. For him confession is simple because he has every day checked up his faults and sins and made an act of contrition and resolutions for the next day. His confession has been prepared for by his daily custom.

Even the person who confesses frequently may profitably spend a little time examining his conscience in more detail than he does.

B. The person who has been long away from confession or who seldom goes to confession will find it important to make a far more careful examination of his past life. Otherwise he is likely to forget things that occurred and thus give his confessor an incomplete presentation of his case.

Hence he should make a careful review of his life since his last confession. For this he follows the examination offered below.

If he is puzzled by his own life and after an examination of his conscience is still not satisfied that he has prepared a correct statement of his sins, he is extremely wise to ask the priest in the confessional for help. He does this quite simply: "Father, it is a long time since I've been to confession." (He mentions the approximate time.) "I examined my conscience, but I'm not satisfied that I have remembered everything. Will you please help me to make a complete confession?" The priest will gladly assist him, and a few expert questions will bring everything to light.

C. The scrupulous should in the examination of conscience do exactly what their regular confessors tell them to do. If they have been told to make no examination at all, they should obey. If they have been told not to repeat in confession sins of their past life or sins they have mentioned before, they should do as they are told, even if they want to repeat and feel dissatisfied with the advice. "Obey your confessor!" That is the first and last rule for the scrupulous. As for doubtful sins, the scrupulous person should never worry about them. (This question has been treated at length in Father O'Boyle's booklet "Are You Scrupulous?")

2. GUIDES

This does not pretend to be a complete table of sins. We are offering merely guides which will normally lead a person to a quick and easy knowledge of his own sins.

If there is some experience that lies outside the line of this guidance, or if there is some problem that the person does not understand, his easiest course is to put this experience or problem at once before his confessor: "There is something about this that is not clear to me."

Otherwise this series of simple questions and suggestions should normally bring to the penitent's mind anything which may be matter for confession.

1. What has been my major sin since my last confession? Has this become a habit with me? Is it something that recurs frequently in my life? Such a sin will usually prove to be rooted in real weakness of character. It is the sin that stands most dangerously between oneself and one's salvation.

2. What has been my attitude toward God? Do I believe in Him and try to love Him and trust Him? Have I been faithful at Mass? Have I honored God through prayer and service? Have I an honest respect for His commandments? Am I loyal to the Catholic Church and her laws? Have I fasted and abstained at the proper times?

3. What has been my personal conduct? Have I been pure and modest? Has my speech been clean and decent? Have I guarded against sins of thought and desire? Have I accepted as true the things God has revealed and the Church has taught? Have I been proud in my attitude toward others

and conceited about my personal gifts? Have I been temperate in the use of food and drink?

4. What has been my conduct toward others? Have I been honest in my dealings with them and shown a decent respect for their rights and property? Have I been careful of their good name and reputation? Have I by my sin led others to commit sin? Have I by word or act made others my partners in sin? Have I fought with others, used them cruelly, or harmed them physically?

5. Have I done my duty? Each of us has within his state of life or profession duties toward others—duties as parents, children, as professional men, as men in business, as employers, employees. This means that we owe to others who depend upon us for happiness or service honest work, kindness, just dealings, charitable conduct. How have I acted along these lines?

3. THE ACT OF CONTRITION

No matter how complete the confession, how accurate the account given of one's sins, the confession is worse than wasted if the person is not sorry for his sins.

Hence the necessity of expressing to God our sorrow, of telling Him our deep regret for the sins of the past, and of determining not to commit them again.

During the course of the confession the confessor is likely to say, "Make a good act

of contrition." If the sorrow for the sins is expressed at this point, that is sufficient. The person who wants to be sure of a good confession however makes his act of sorrow before he enters the confessional. He tells God in all sincerity that he is sorry. He expresses to the good and generous God his shame and regret for his past.

This sorrow must be supernatural. By that is meant that a person cannot be sorry merely because of some sad effects suffered here in this world because of his sin. It is not enough to be sorry for sins because they might lead to sickness or bring about one's failure in business, one's disgrace before friends, misery to one's family, or similar unhappy consequences. His sorrow must have some direct reference to what sin tries to do to God, to what it did to Jesus Christ in His Passion and death, or to the eternal effects it will have on the soul through the pains of hell or the loss of heaven. The thought of the sufferings in purgatory is sufficient sorrow for venial sins committed.

Sorrow or contrition may be expressed in one's own words, in some formula, or in the classic act of contrition that most Catholics learn when they are children. Sorrow need not necessarily be put into words at all, provided it comes from the heart and is really sincere.

Sorrow need not necessarily be felt in the sense that it cause one to weep, to feel perfectly miserable, to grow indignant with

oneself. Sorrow is chiefly in the mind and the will: The mind sees clearly the horrible nature of sin and the consequences of sin; the will determines to throw sin out and, if humanly possible, with God's aid not to sin again. Feelings may accompany sorrow; they are not necessary for sorrow.

Sorrow or contrition may be:

A. Imperfect. Such sorrow is brought about by a fear of hell or a realization that we have lost heaven.

Such sorrow is sufficient for a good confession.

So the penitent may say, simply, and mean it:

"O my God, I don't want to go to hell. I know that because of my sins I deserve to go there. Please forgive me. Help me to get rid of my sins. I don't want to lose my soul in eternal pain and the absence of all happiness."

Or:

"My God, I realize that I have lost the right to heaven. You wanted me to be happy with you forever in joy. Because of my sins I have no right to that happiness. Forgive me. Please give me back my right to heaven. Please take away my sins."

B. Perfect. Naturally and obviously such sorrow is much higher than sorrow that arises out of fear of hell or the realization of our loss of heaven. One realizes how good

God is and how horrible sin is. And because of God's beauty and loveliness and goodness we hate sin and want to get rid of it.

"If any man love me, my Father will love him, and we will come and take up our abode with him," said Our Lord.

Hence if it is not possible for us to go to confession, this act of sorrow is enough to have God forgive us our sins. But if later on confession becomes possible, we are obliged to confess our sins to the priest, to whom, since they are the Apostles' successors, Christ gave the power: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain they are retained."

The simplest way to reach perfect contrition is to follow these steps:

a. We remember how good God has been to us, how much He has given us, what wonderful things He has done for us, how often He has forgiven us our sins in the past, how completely good and generous a Father He has been. Then considering our sins, we realize how rottenly selfish we are, how little we have done for Him; and with a sense of shame and sorrow we move toward real love for Him.

b. We think of Calvary. We look at Jesus on the cross, and we think: "This is what my sins did to Him. They scourged Him; they drove those thorns into His head; they piled the weight of that cross, which is heavy with my vices, on His shoulders; they

nailed Him to the cross and drove the lance into His side." These thoughts make us realize how good God has been: Rather than let us suffer the consequences of our sins, He died on the cross for us. We realize how horrible sin is when it can kill the Son of God—the dearest man that ever loved and worked for His fellows—in the most horrible fashion.

c. We think of what God in His goodness has tried to do for mankind. He wants all human beings to be His sons or daughters; He wants to make them eternally happy; He longs to bring them to paradise. But by sin man says, "We won't be your children; we don't want to let you make us happy; we'd rather have the dirty thing called sin than paradise itself."

d. All these thoughts lead inevitably to a consideration of how good God is in Himself, how dear, beautiful, infinitely lovable. Then we see by contrast our sins as they are: crimes against the good Father; insults to the most beautiful being in the world; an attack upon the Holy Trinity, which contains within itself all the perfections we love in the world—and far, far more.

So to express all these realizations, we may use a formula like the following:

"O my God, I am sorry for my sins. You have been so wonderfully good to me, and in return I have given you nothing but evil and ingratitude, selfishness and sin. I know that my sins nailed Jesus Christ to the

cross and made His body one terrible, agonizing wound; it was I who killed you, my God, by my sins. All the time you, dear God, have tried to make the world happy, to bring all men to heaven; but sins, my sins, have spoiled your plans, ruined your work, made impossible your desires for our happiness. Oh my God, blessed Trinity, gracious Father, the Son who died for me, Holy Spirit who wants to live in my soul, you are so good. In you is all the beauty of all the world, all the goodness we admire in the greatest men and women, all mercy and utter perfection raised to Godlike heights. And sin makes war on you, strikes at your goodness, spoils your plans, prevents you from making mankind happy. I am sorry. I love you for all you are and for all you have done. Don't ever let me by my sins work against you again."

4. THE FIRM PURPOSE OF AMENDMENT

This too is essential for a good confession.

If a person means to go right on sinning, he certainly is not sorry for his sins. If he really hates his sins and is afraid of their consequences, he is determined not to let himself commit them all over again. An apology to a friend means, "I'm sorry; and you can count on it that I'll not do the same thing again." Precisely the same should be true of our apology to God.

A firm purpose of amendment then means:

a. I am so sorry for my sins that . . .

b. with the help of God's grace and as far as I can . . .

c. I shall not commit them or any other sins again.

We must note that this purpose can be firm even though we know from past experience that we shall be tempted again. We may even have a habit of sin that has so often conquered us in the past that we dread to think of the future. Yet we are sorry. We put our trust in God. We are determined to do all we can not to sin again. We ask for help. And we know that God is willing to help us.

Chiefly however the practical side of this resolution is our determination not to run into temptation. Certain people have a way of making us sin; we will avoid them; perhaps—when it is necessary—we will give them up. If we look at certain pictures, read certain books, go to certain places, we will sin; then those pictures, books, places are out. If a certain type of work always makes us sin, it is not for us. If we find a certain type of recreation seriously sinful, we won't pursue it. If a certain conduct always leads us into sin, we will not risk the conduct.

All this is grouped under what we call the *occasions of sin*. These will be different for different people. Our own experience with what causes us to sin is the ultimate test. Some people can't take a single glass of beer without becoming roaringly drunk. Another

man can't take the slightest liberties with a woman without rushing into sin. Another man knows his weakness for money, knows that he can't handle it without stealing it. Some man finds drink no temptation, is uninterested in women, is absolutely trustworthy about money.

So the occasions of sin are different for each. What causes me to sin, what has caused me to sin in the past—these I must give up. If I do not mean to or do not try very hard to give them up, I am not really sorry for my sins. Perhaps I am ashamed of them or afraid because of them, but I have no real determination to give them up.

Restitution may sometimes be necessary in the case of serious sins. If a person has stolen money, he must be determined to give it back.

a. Usually the stolen money must be given to the person from whom it was taken.

b. If the person does not know who the wronged person is or can no longer reach him, the money may be given to the poor, to some charitable cause, to the Church.

c. If the person cannot return the money without betraying himself, he may send it back anonymously. If the person from whom the money was stolen is rich or closely associated with the guilty person and the return of the money would be bound to betray the thief, the penitent may give it to the poor or to charity.

d. If the thief no longer has the money, he may give it when he can. Sometimes the money may be returned in the form of extra work done for the injured person.

Restitution of another kind must be made if one has stolen the good name or ruined or hurt the character of another. He must tell the truth, or he must try to repair the damage if what he told was really true.

A damaging lie which can be corrected must also be repaired.

5. CONFESSION

We are wise if, before we go to confession, we think out briefly but clearly and vividly just what we are going to say and do in confession.

a. Confession is God's lovely way of showing compassion.

b. The priest is merely Christ's representative, who dares not tell anything we tell him, who has probably heard stories like ours before, who is usually kind and patient, who wants to help us, who is happy when he has a chance to bring big sinners back to God.

c. We can see behind the priest the figure of Jesus Christ smiling at us in encouragement. He loves us. He wants us to be His friend. He is delighted that we are going to go to confession.

Formula: When the priest is ready for confession, without waiting for him to speak

—though usually we can hear him giving us the opening blessing—we say:

a. “Bless me, father, for I have sinned.

b. “It is —— (number of days, weeks, or months) since my last worthy confession.”

This data is important, since it gives the priest a clue to whether or not the sins we confess are habits. Thus three impure thoughts harbored in the course of a day or a week would be a habit; three in a year would not be a habit.

If our last confession or one of our former confessions was NOT good (because of no contrition, the deliberate concealing of a serious sin, no intention to correct the past, or some other serious reason), the form used is different. We say: “For my last two (give the correct number) confessions” or “For the past year” (give number of years) or “Since my first communion my confessions have not been good because (mention what was wrong) I concealed a sin in confession . . . was not sorry . . . did not mean to give up the sin.

In such a case the priest will probably immediately interrupt you in order to give you help.

c. “Since then I accuse myself of the following sins:

The penitent mentions the kind or kinds of serious sins he has committed and the number of each one. Both kind and number are necessary only for serious sins.

d. After telling all his serious sins and any venial sins he cares to mention, he uses this or a similar formula:

“For these and all the other sins which I may have committed and which I cannot now recall I humbly ask pardon of God and absolution from you, my father, especially for these sins of my past life.”

He then mentions some past sins:

1. To increase his sorrow.
2. To bring those sins again to the mercy of God, in case some punishment in purgatory is still due him because of them.
3. To guard against their recurrence in the future.

He now listens carefully while the priest gives him necessary advice, asks any questions that he may think important to make the confession complete, and assigns the penance.

The instructed Catholic knows that the priest is not prying or curious when he asks questions. This is just his way of trying to help make the penitent's confession as perfect as possible and to aid him in his future fights against sin.

e. While the priest is giving absolution, the penitent again tells God that he is sorry, using the accepted formula or merely talking to God from his heart.

6. AFTER CONFESSION

The penance is an essential part of confession. Hence the wise person says it almost at once. Deliberately to omit the saying or doing of a penance given for serious sin is in itself a serious sin. The forgetting of a penance does not make the confession bad. But because the prayers of penance are connected with the whole sacrament of confession, they have a special value in the removing of the punishment in purgatory because of those sins.

In these modern days penances are relatively light. In the past they were often extremely heavy, lasting in some cases for years.

When the absolution has been given, the penitent briefly thanks God for the grace of confession, promises Him anew to lead a better life, and goes about his regular occupations.

Conclusion

What better, kinder, more effective way to help the sinner could God have devised than the sacrament of confession?

So the well-instructed Catholic regards it as a privilege to go often to confession. He looks upon it as a dear and safe way of coming back to God after sin; as a means of relieving a troubled conscience and getting the expert advice and guidance of the trained confessor; as a preparation for his final confession, which he will make as part of the last sacraments before his death.

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