

Sanctity Series on Navigating the Spiritual Life: Overcoming Sin with Confession

I. Introduction.

Jesus says in Matthew's gospel, "Come to Me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ... If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. And in John's gospel, "He who believes in Me, as the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." (Mt 11:28; Jn 7:38)

In her Diary of Divine Mercy, entry 1487, Jesus encouraged Faustina by saying to her: **"Tell me about everything, be sincere in dealing with Me, reveal all the wounds of your heart. I will heal them ..."**

In her Diary entry 1588, Jesus taught Faustina about His compassion for sinners:

"Today I am sending you with My mercy to the people of the whole world. I do not want to punish aching mankind, but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My Merciful Heart..."

II. Why was this Sacrament established?

2 basic reasons:

1.) We're still weak after Baptism and thus there's a danger of losing our baptismal grace by sin.

The very first paragraph in the Catechism on the Sacrament of Penance CCC 1420 says: "We are still in our "earthly tent," subject to suffering, illness, and death. This new life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin."

2.) True conversion demands a fight on our part. We have to fight, but we need strength to keep up the fight.

We need to understand what has been given to us in Baptism in order to truly understand and appreciate the Sacrament of Penance.

CCC 1263 - By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.

CCC 1264 Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls concupiscence, or metaphorically, "the tinder for sin" (*fomes peccati*); since concupiscence "is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ." Indeed, "an athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules."

CCC 1426 - [Yes, it is indeed true that...] Conversion to Christ, the new birth of Baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ received as food have made us "holy and without blemish," just as the Church herself, the Bride of Christ, is "holy and without blemish." **Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us**

III. What are the effects of this Sacrament?

CCC 1468 - The spiritual effects of the sacrament of Penance are:

- the forgiveness of sins which includes the remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins.
- remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin.
- reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace, but also an increase of spiritual strength, or sanctifying grace, for the Christian battle - which is the help we need to avoid sin in future.
- peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation.
- the restoration of the merits of our good works if they have been lost by mortal sin.
- reconciliation with the Church.

IV. How do we go to confession?

Well, first, the question is how do we get ourselves to the confessional in the first place? Where does the courage come from?

First, it takes grace to either get back into grace or to be disposed to the movement(s) of sanctifying grace. So, in the case of someone having lost the state of sanctifying grace by sinning mortally, God must give us an actual grace to move us to be restored to grace in the Sacrament of Penance.

Secondly, and very importantly, we also get there by being confident in the judgment of a merciful God.

Penitent brings 3 things:

- 1.) repentance - this is expressed by either imperfect or perfect contrition; the difference is between fearing God's punishment or loving Him.
- 2.) confession - accusing of oneself of whatever sins, which necessarily includes all mortal sins.
- 3.) intention to make reparation - amendment of life - and do works of reparation.

V. Common difficulties and questions.

- 1.) How does the priest have the power to forgive sins?

"The priest has the power to forgive sins from Jesus Christ, who said to His apostles and to their successors in the priesthood: "Receive the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

"Receive the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20:22-23)

- 2.) With what words does the priest forgive sins?

The priest forgives sins with the words: "I absolve thee from thy sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

3.) What is the symbol of the Sacrament of Penance?

A single key or a pair of keys, usually crisscrossed in the shape of an "X," occasionally one on top of the other, is the most common symbol for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

CCC 1444 - In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."⁴⁵ "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head."

The priest's stole.

The stole is the primary symbol of the ordained priesthood, and it is the priest in personal Christi, as a representative of Christ, who grants sacramental absolution. A stole is a long, narrow strip of cloth worn over the shoulders which hangs in front in equal lengths on the right and left sides. The stole signifies the priest's authority to preside over the sacraments in general, and his authority to absolve sins in particular. When a priest hears confessions, he wears a purple stole which symbolizes repentance and sorrow.

4.) Why do we have to do penance? Because something remains after absolution.

By analogy, we know that concupiscence, the proclivity to sin, remains after Baptism...The guilt of sin and its eternal punishment is indeed removed by the power of the keys with sacramental absolution, yet there remains the reality of temporal punishment.

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

1472 To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain. [A life of charity - committing ourselves to spiritual and corporal works of Mercy with the intention of seeking union with God is essential to growing in holiness from confession to confession.]

1473 The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the "old man" and to put on the "new man."

There are many examples in Scripture that can be used to show that temporal punishment is due to sin, even after the sin itself has been pardoned by God. God indeed brought man out of his first disobedience and gave him power to govern all things (Wisdom 10:2), but still condemned him "to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow" until he returned unto dust. God also forgave the incredulity of Moses and Aaron, but in punishment kept them from the "land of promise" (Numbers 20:12)....

In the New Testament as well as in the Old, almsgiving and fasting, and in general penitential acts are the real fruits of repentance (Matthew 3:8; Luke 17:3; 3:3). The whole penitential system of the Church testifies that the voluntary assumption of penitential works has always been part of true repentance and the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV, can. xi) reminds the faithful that God does not always remit the whole punishment due to sin together with the guilt. God requires satisfaction, and will punish sin, and this doctrine involves as its necessary consequence a belief that the sinner failing to do penance in this life may be punished in another world, and so not be cast off eternally from God."

After the Sacrament of Penance we're still at war with the consequences of our sin(s). Think of temporal punishment as like the temporal consequences of our sins which amounts to an unhealthy attachment to creatures.

It's called punishment because 1) it is and leads to suffering, and 2) when we sin, we experience it.

This also touches on the doctrine of Purgatory. We need to be purged, even once the guilt is removed either by Baptism or Confession, we have to be "untwisted" from our attachments and turned back to God. Every sin is a movement away from God and toward creatures, and contains its own punishment - it delivers us to more of the pain of sin. The greatest pain must be defined as that which is most opposed to our greatest joy and happiness - God Himself. And every sin turns us away from God to one degree or another and leaves us in a state of being attached to sin.

Therefore, although it is true that we do enter the ring again again with renewed strength after Sacramental (the strongest dose second only to the Eucharist, in fact), we need to deal with our sin by dealing with its consequences which necessarily entails penitential acts.

5.) The trap(s) of repetitive sin.

Are you really contrite each time you go to confession? What motivates your confession?

Do you have a strategy to carry out your amendment of life? KNOW THY SELF. Pray to know what your triggers are for the sinful behavior you're bringing to confession.

Find someone or a group you can trust who can help you be accountable for the sin/vice you are struggling to overcome.

What does the act of contrition really say? "Avoid the *near occasion*." Don't be too alarmed or discouraged when we fall: sin may very well still happen with an unforeseen occasion or if our defensive strategy is not firm. We're creatures of habit and sin delivers us to...*more sin* (which is the temporal punishment due to sin).

Remember: we are in a fight in which wounds are almost inevitable. Come back to "your corner" of the ring when you get *stunned*, i.e. the confessional, and get the aid you need to get back in the fight. That way, when you get up as soon as you fall, every fall becomes a fall forward into trusting more in God's strength than in your own.

VI. Why go?

Individual confessions of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church.

The Covenant of God's Mercy in the New Testament was established by the shedding of Christ's Blood for the sake of redeeming us from sin. So why not be faithful to that covenant by having your sins remitted on a regular basis?

Being forgiven, staying familiar with the taste of God's Mercy, we come to believe in the power of God's Mercy.

Now, there are different kinds of confessions we can make when we go to the Sacrament of Penance.

Confession of mortal sins is always necessary, and while the confession of venial sins is not necessary in itself, it is strongly recommended by the Church (CCC 1493).

Devotional Confession - renew our sorrow for past sins. This can include a general confession of all the sins of our past life.

VII. How to make it more effective for us.

When I am administering the Sacrament of Penance, I like to take the attitude that Bl. Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity want priests to have when celebrating Mass for them in their convents, "celebrate each Mass as if it is your first, your last, and your only Mass".

As a priest, I find it helpful to realize that this could be the last time I hear this person's confession. I'm putting them back into a state of grace, they can go to heaven now, or at least purgatory. Jesus has really restored them to life and saved them from Hell. *So how much more seriously should the penitent take his or her approach to the Sacrament?*

The way to live between confessions is the way of Jesus' dying to Himself. We have to mortify ourselves for the sake of the joy and the glory we taste even now through the sacramental life of the Church. The way to save one's life is to lose it. We have to be striving to lay down our lives so that we can be more effectively raised with each and every confession.

*****What should carry us and preserve our graces between confessions?*****

Catechism on Interior Penance

CCC 1430 Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.

CCC 1431 Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

CCC 1432 The human heart is heavy and hardened. God must give man a new heart. Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him: "Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored!" God gives us the strength to begin anew. It is in discovering the greatness of God's love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from him. The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced:

"Let us fix our eyes on Christ's blood and understand how precious it is to his Father, for, poured out for our salvation, it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance." (St. Clement of Rome)

CCC 1433 Since Easter, the Holy Spirit has proved “the world wrong about sin,” i.e., proved that the world has not believed in him whom the Father has sent. But this same Spirit who brings sin to light is also the Consoler who gives the human heart grace for repentance and conversion.

The Many Forms of Penance in Christian Life

CCC 1434 The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others. Alongside the radical purification brought about by Baptism or martyrdom they cite as means of obtaining forgiveness of sins: efforts at reconciliation with one’s neighbor, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one’s neighbor, the intercession of the saints, and the practice of charity “which covers a multitude of sins.”

CCC 1435 Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one’s brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one’s cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance.

CCC 1436 Eucharist and Penance. Daily conversion and penance find their source and nourishment in the Eucharist, for in it is made present the sacrifice of Christ which has reconciled us with God. Through the Eucharist those who live from the life of Christ are fed and strengthened. “It is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins.”

CCC 1437 Reading Sacred Scripture, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Our Father—every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins.

CCC 1438 The seasons and days of penance in the course of the liturgical year (Lent, and each Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church’s penitential practice. These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works).

CCC 1439 The process of conversion and repentance was described by Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son, the center of which is the merciful father: the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father’s house; the extreme misery in which the son finds himself after squandering his fortune; his deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed swine, and still worse, at wanting to feed on the husks the pigs ate; his reflection on all he has lost; his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father; the journey back; the father’s generous welcome; the father’s joy—all these are characteristic of the process of conversion. The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet are symbols of that new life—pure, worthy, and joyful—of anyone who returns to God and to the bosom of his family, which is the Church. Only the heart of Christ who knows the depths of his Father’s love could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way.

Compiled by Fr. Nicholas DuPre’, CJC

September 2014