

# A Primer for Confession

By Father Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save all people from the power of Satan, sin, and sin's consequence, death. The purpose of his ministry was our reconciliation with the Father. In a special way, his death on the cross brought the possibility of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation to all.

On the evening of his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to his Apostles and gave them the power to forgive all human sins. *Breathing upon them, He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."* (Jn. 20:22-23)

Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, bishops and priests of the Church receive the ability from Christ himself to forgive sins. It is exercised in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also known as the Sacrament of Penance or simply as "confession." Through this Sacrament, Christ forgives the sins that the members of his Church commit after baptism.

In order to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation worthily, the penitent (the sinner) must be sorry for his or her sins. Sorrow for sins is called contrition. Imperfect contrition is sorrow for sins motivated by fear of the fires of hell or the ugliness of sin itself. Perfect contrition is sorrow for sin motivated by the love of God.

Contrition, perfect or imperfect, must include a firm purpose of amendment, that is, a solid resolution to avoid the sin committed as well as the persons, places and things that prompted you to commit the sin in the first place. Without this repentance, contrition is insincere and our confession is pointless.

Whenever you sin, you should beg God for the gift of perfect contrition. Often God gives this gift when a Christian thinks about Jesus' agony on the cross and realizes that his sins are the caused of that suffering. Throw yourself into

the arms of the crucified Savior's mercy and resolve to confess your sins to a priest as soon as possible .

When you come to Church to confess your sins, you should first examine your conscience. Review your life to see how you offended the good God since your last confession.

The Church teaches that all mortal sins committed after Baptism must be confessed to a priest in order to be forgiven. This "precept" or law is of Divine Institution. Simply stated, this means the confession of grave sins to a priest is part of God's plan and therefore is supported and carried out in the life of the Church. **The Catechism of the Catholic Church** (#1455) underscores the therapeutic value of confession for all believers.

Mortal sin is a direct, conscious and free violation of one or another of the Ten Commandments in a serious matter. Mortal sin, also known as grave or deadly sin, destroys the life of grace in your soul. God's grace begins to draw the sinner back to him through sorrow for sin. He is brought back to life when he confesses his sins to a priest and receives absolution (forgiveness). The Church recommends that Catholics confess their venial sins which are violations of God's law that do not sever the relationship with him or destroy the life of grace in the soul.

Following is an Examination of Conscience to help you prepare for confession. If you are not sure whether your sins are "mortal" or "venial," the confessor (the priest to whom you confess yours sins) will help you to understand the difference. Don't be shy: seek his assistance. Ask him questions!

Most parishes schedule confessions every week, often on Saturday. You are also free to call your parish and make an appointment for confession.

When you enter the place set aside for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the priest may greet you and together you will make the sign of the cross. He may then choose a brief reading from the Bible to help you feel the merciful presence of Christ. Next, you tell your sins simply and honestly to the priest.

The simpler and the more honest the better! Don't make excuses! Don't try to disguise or minimize what you have done! Most importantly, think of Christ crucified dying out of love for you. Step on your pride and admit your guilt!

Remember, God wills that you confess all mortal sins by name and number. For instance, "I committed adultery three times and helped a friend procure an abortion." "I missed Mass on Sunday." "I gambled away a whole week's pay check."

This sacrament is not only for the forgiveness of mortal sins. You may also confess your venial sins. The Church encourages devotional confession, that is, the frequent confession of venial sins as a means of growing perfect in the love of God and neighbor.

After you confess your sins, listen to the advice the priest offers you. You may also seek his help and guidance. He will then give you a penance. He will ask you to either pray, fast or perform an act of charity. Through the penance, you begin to make reparation for the harm your sins have caused you, others and the Church. The penance of the priest reminds us that we need to be one with Christ in his sufferings so as to share in his resurrection.

Finally, the priest will ask you to express your sorrow for the sins confessed in an act of contrition, and then, exercising the power of Christ, he will give you absolution. As he prays over you, know with the certainty of faith that God is forgiving all your sins, healing you and preparing you for the Banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven!

The priest will dismiss you saying: "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good." You respond: "His mercy endures forever." Or he may say, "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace," to which you answer, "Thanks be to God." Try to spend some time in prayer, thanking God for his forgiveness. Perform the penance the priest has given you as soon as possible after receiving absolution.

If you make good use and frequent use of this sacrament, you will have peace of heart, purity of conscience and a deep union with Christ in his love for his Father and for all men and women. The grace of the sacrament will cause you to become like Jesus, our Lord, in all you say and do! It will make you a stronger and more committed member of His Church!

#### Act of Contrition

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, Who are all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen

Father Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D.

teaches theology at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, Wynnewood Pennsylvania.

See Examination of Conscience on the next page

## **Guide for Examination of Conscience for Confession of Sins**

### **6 STEPS FOR A GOOD CONFESSION**

1. Examine your conscience - what sins have you committed since your last good confession.
2. Be sincerely sorry for your sins.
3. Confess your sins to the priest.
4. Make certain that you confess all your mortal sins and the number of them.
5. After your confession, do the penance the priest gives to you.
6. Pray daily for the strength to avoid the occasion of sin, especially for those sins you were just absolved from.

#### **FIRST COMMANDMENT**

**"I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before Me." (Ex 20:2,3)**

- Did I doubt or deny that God exists?
- Did I refuse to believe what God has revealed to us?
- Did I believe in fortune telling, horoscopes, dreams, the occult, good-luck charms, tarot cards, palmistry, Ouija boards, séances, reincarnation?
- Did I deny that I was Catholic?
- Did I leave the Catholic Faith?
- Did I give time to God each day in prayer?
- Did I love God with my whole heart?
- Did I despair of or presume on God's mercy?
- Did I have false gods in my life that I gave greater attention to than God, like money, profession, drugs, TV, fame, pleasure, property, etc.?

#### **SECOND COMMANDMENT**

**"You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain." (Ex 20:7)**

- Did I blaspheme or insult God?
- Did I take God's name carelessly or uselessly?
- Did I curse, or break an oath or vow?
- Did I get angry with God?

#### **THIRD COMMANDMENT**

**"Remember that you keep holy the Sabbath Day." (Ex 20:8)**

- Did I miss Mass Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation through my own fault?
- Did I come to Mass on time? Leave early?
- Did I do work on Sunday that was not necessary?
- Did I set aside Sunday as a day of rest and a family day?
- Did I show reverence in the presence of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament?

#### **FOURTH COMMANDMENT**

**"Honor your father and your mother." (Ex 20:12)**

- Did I disobey or disrespect my parents or legitimate superiors?
- Did I neglect my duties to my husband, wife, children or parents?
- Did I neglect to give good religious example to my family?
- Did I fail to actively take an interest in the religious education and formation of my children?
- Did I fail to educate myself on the true teachings of the Church?
- Did I give scandal by what I said or did, especially to the young?
- Did I cause anyone to leave the faith?
- Did I cause tension and fights in my family?
- Did I care for my aged and infirm relatives?
- Did I give a full day's work for a full day's pay?
- Did I give a fair wage to my employees?

## **FIFTH COMMANDMENT**

### **"You shall not kill." (Ex 20:13)**

- Did I kill or physically injure anyone?
- Did I have an abortion, or advise someone else to have an abortion? (One who procures and abortion is automatically excommunicated, as is anyone who is involved in an abortion, Canon 1398. The excommunication will be lifted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)
- Did I use or cause my spouse to use birth control pills (whether or not realizing that birth control pills do abort the fetus if and when conceived)?
- Did I attempt suicide?
- Did I take part in or approve of "mercy killing" (euthanasia)?
- Did I get angry, impatient, envious, unkind, proud, revengeful, jealous, hateful toward another, lazy?
- Did I give bad example by drug abuse, drinking alcohol to excess, fighting, quarreling?
- Did I abuse my children?

## **SIXTH COMMANDMENT**

### **"You shall not commit adultery." (Ex 20:14) "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." (Ex 20:17)**

Note: In the area of deliberate sexual sins listed below, all are mortal sins if there is sufficient reflection and full consent of the will. "No fornicators, idolaters, or adulterers, no sodomites,... will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor 6:9-10) "Anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts." (Mt 5:28)

- Did I willfully entertain impure thoughts or desires?
- Did I use impure or suggestive words? Tell impure stories? Listen to them?
- Did I deliberately look at impure TV, videos, plays, pictures or movies? Or deliberately read impure materials?
- Did I commit impure acts by myself (masturbation)?
- Did I commit impure acts with another - fornication (premarital sex), adultery (sex with a married person)?
- Did I practice artificial birth control (by pills, device, withdrawal)?
- Did I marry or advise anyone to marry outside the Church?
- Did I avoid the occasions of impurity?
- Did I try to control my thoughts?
- Did I engage in homosexual activity?
- Did I respect all members of the opposite sex, or have I thought of other people as objects?
- Did I or my spouse have sterilization done?
- Did I abuse my marriage rights?

## **SEVENTH & TENTH COMMANDMENTS**

### **"You shall not steal." (Ex 20:15) "You shall not covet your neighbor's goods." (Ex 20:17)**

- Did I steal, cheat, help or encourage others to steal or keep stolen goods? Have I made restitution for stolen goods?
- Did I fulfill my contracts; give or accept bribes; pay my bills; rashly gamble or speculate; deprive my family of the necessities of life?
- Did I waste time at work, school or at home?
- Did I envy other people's families or possessions?
- Did I make material possessions the purpose of my life?

## **EIGHTH COMMANDMENT**

**"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Ex 20:16)**

- Did I lie?
- Did I deliberately deceive others, or injure others by lies?
- Did I commit perjury?
- Did I gossip or reveal others' faults or sins?
- Did I fail to keep secret what should be confidential?

## **OTHER SINS**

- Did I fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday?
- Did I eat meat on the Fridays of Lent or Ash Wednesday?
- Did I fail to receive Holy Communion during Eastertime?
- Did I go to Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin? Without fasting (water and medicine permitted) for one hour from food and drink?
- Did I make a bad confession?
- Did I fail to contribute to the support of the Church?

## **ACT OF CONTRITION**

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell, but most of all because they offend You, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.