

# Get It Off Your Chest

## HOW TO LET YOUR SOUL BREATHE AGAIN

Ever get so stressed you feel you're not able to take another breath? Like your chest is so tight, your stomach a volcano with nowhere to go so that you might just pop a gasket? That's your heart (not your physical one, but your soulful one) screaming for help. You see, we humans were not built to live that way. Red Alert! Stress is God's alarm system, warning us to do something about the problem. Now!

You'd probably agree that some things in life can really tie your stomach up in knots. I sure get that way if I look at the nightly news. All the terrible things going on in this world... but, bad as that is, what gets me most is my personal failures. Like too many of us, I've become very good at blaming the world's problems on the other guy. But, when it comes to accepting responsibility for my problems? Well, that's another story!

In my advancing years, and realizing that I have done so many stupid things in my life, I am no longer sure just why God has forgiven me... over and over again. I do understand, as you probably do, that He does forgive me, even blesses me. The evidence is everywhere. But the real question is, why? Can any being, divine or otherwise, be expected to love that much?

From my experience, the obvious answer, of course, is "yes." God is Love Itself. He is incomprehensible love on such a grand scale it is hard to imagine. Given the number of really rotten people about, how is this kind of relentless mercy possible? God forgives them? And we are to do the same? It seems superhuman – beyond our abilities.

Inner peace, however, is tied to at least trying to forgive as we have been forgiven. It's the only way to get rid of the anxiety with which sin infects us. This answer is right there in the Our Father, *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. No question, but how do we do that?

Fortunately for us, Jesus has left us a sacramental key to this puzzle in one of the more famous scenes in the New Testament. It was shortly after Christ rose from the dead, when the Apostles huddled in secret out of fear for their lives. You may remember it. It was late that Sunday evening, shortly after Christ died and rose from the dead, and the disciples were already "marked men." They gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. "*Peace be with you,*" He said. After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were overwhelmed at seeing the Lord. John's Gospel account reports the moment:

*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."*

*Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins,*

*they are forgiven them; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

*- John 20:19-23*

“Confession,” “Penance,” or as it has come to be more properly called, “The Sacrament of Reconciliation,” was born that night for us. Over the years it has become a sacramental gift to us all. It is a direct connection to God’s love and forgiveness, a way to happiness by getting closer to Love Itself.

Unfortunately, in recent years, “Confession” has gotten a bad rap. All too many misguided souls consider this Sacrament as a sort of formalized holy guilt trip, complete with sets of rules that would choke a lawyer. But that couldn’t be further from the reality of what Christ intended.

We must understand that we are all sinners; it’s the human condition. But, no matter our personal sins, God forgives us because of what Jesus did for us. Never forget, Christ took on our sins, atoned for them and saved all of us.

When that reality sinks in, we are ready to learn how to forgive others. That inner peace that our soul so ardently seeks – and which Christ promised to those Apostles in that upper room so long ago – depends on this critical admission. We all, without exception, make mistakes that prevent us from loving God as we should, and our brothers and sisters as we might.

There is no shame in being a sinner. The only real shame is in allowing ourselves to be unrepentant for our sins. There’s no reason to be afraid to enter a confessional and lay one’s failings before a forgiving God in the person of His priest.

Jesus is our Friend, our Loving Brother. He is not some frightening guilt-provoking god up in the sky. He is here with us every minute of every day. He ordained that priest you’re talking to in that Confessional as His sacred confidant, His holy and humble minister of Reconciliation’s Sacramental grace.

OK, so you and I don't like to admit we're imperfect. I don't like the shame of being a knucklehead sometimes any more than the next guy. Get over it. Jesus knows you better than you know yourself, so there’s no point in stressing about opening up your soul to His healing graces in Reconciliation. Who's going to know but you and Jesus? And, once you have a couple of frank talks within that Confessional, you will start to feel His grace at work.

You’re not going to want to frequent the places or hang with those who lead you away from Christ. The material things of this world are not going to mean so much to you. You’ll find you want to go to Reconciliation to share with Christ how well you did, ask forgiveness for what you messed up, get strong to do better. It can be a wonderful experience. Every time. Honest. Christ’s love does things like that.

It is a pity that, for one reason or another, so many Catholics simply don’t give this reality any serious and informed thought. Consequently, they don’t go to Confession and thus fail to take advantage of the enormous grace the Sacrament of Reconciliation conveys.

Yes, we're talking serious grace. It's that "we-have-no-real-right-to-it-but-we-get-it-anyway" unmerited kindness and gift from God. Nothing we've done of our own accord warrants it but, nevertheless – and because of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf – our loving God gives it freely to us to propel our spiritual rebirth and bring us to salvation.

We get grace in lots of ways but the Sacrament of Reconciliation bestows incredible strength on us to be better people, to sin no more, to avoid those occasions and circumstances that lead us into sin. This is one of the principal ways that we become the fully blessed child of God we were intended to be. The Holy Eucharist, the greatest of all Sacraments, is the other.

We all need to take a fresh look at Confession. The key to understanding this sacramental gift is, as always, appreciating the nature of God's merciful and caring love for us.

Remember, our God is Love. His acts are the acts of a loving, all knowing Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When it comes to the Trinity's eternal love for us, I have come to look at it this way:

- God the Father is the Source of Divine Love.
- Jesus is the physical Incarnation of that genuine, boundless, unexplainable and redemptive Love.
- The Holy Spirit is both the Giver, Channel and Living Catalyst of that Love in our lives.

You need to think about this concept. Stop here – if you need – and re-read the last few sentences and consider their meaning in your life. Please. This is the heart of what makes us Catholics.

Next, you need to train your soul to pick up the traces of the Trinity's workings in your day. When have you felt the Father's love? Was it a loving Mom or Dad? A faithful friend? A great kid? How has Jesus' kindness touched your life and the life of another? Was it a selfless act on your behalf? How often have you perceived the subtle flow of love the Holy Spirit works in your life? Were you mysteriously motivated to do something good for someone?

Confession exists so we can clean house of all distractions, imperfections, and impediments that prevent us from noticing and responding to these evidences of God's love for us.

In spite of all this ready forgiveness and unconditional love, those of us who lived in a loving home, as children, know that you don't mess with Mom and Dad. From time to time, I'll admit that I was a bit afraid of my parents. I was afraid I would disappoint them and not be the good kid they had worked so hard to nurture.

Along the way to learning those lessons, there were admonitions and corrections. My parents really loved me, but if I crossed the line, look out! When it comes to transgressions, God The Father has always appeared to me as somewhat like that too.

Of course, Mom and Dad are – or at least in my case, were – human. Not so with Jesus,

God-made-man. It's remarkable that He, as one of the three Persons in the Blessed Trinity, assumed a human body. By this act of love and obedience He made incarnate the Trinity's presence of unbounded love and forgiveness, "live and in color" to us all. Don't forget, Jesus walked among us in the flesh! When you think of it, back then that was the perfect way for God to show us His love in a real and tangible way in our lives.

When Jesus ascended into heaven His followers were distraught and confused. But the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ's disciples and changed their lives. All the devout who have followed Jesus since are also enlightened by the same Spirit. That's you and me. And a good thing, too. With that Spirit, among other things, we each have the grace to figure out the place that Confession has in our religious life.

The Holy Spirit is our way of getting and staying in sync with Christ. From the Spirit's many graces, we learn as a Church, and as a person in and of the Church. Of course, the Holy Spirit not only brings us a growing understanding of the Trinity's love, but some other precious gifts as well. We receive wisdom, understanding, knowledge, fortitude, reverence and wonder at the Lord's majesty. Devotion to the Holy Spirit will help get us through lots of Life's tough spots. It will most certainly help us understand where the Sacrament of Reconciliation fits into God's Plan for our salvation.

Reconciliation is all about integrating our enlightened appreciation of that Divine Love. It's about recognizing when we fall short of loving Jesus back. It's about being reassured that, in spite of our sins, we are still unconditionally loved to the point of absolute forgiveness. This is conveyed by God's priestly minister in those wonderfully comforting words, "I absolve you in the name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit."

I hope you can see that there's no room for mindless guilt in our relationship with God. None! Wipe that nonsense out of your head already! If you are "feeling guilty" or like a hypocrite, it is probably because you have ignored the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Perhaps you just haven't "gone to Confession" frequently enough. If you're "scared" of going to Confession, no doubt you haven't been for a long time. It's a silly but "natural" (and a stupid-uncalled-for-not-what-Christ-had-in-mind) reaction! Make it your business as an intelligent adult Catholic to get this one under control!

As soon as you muster the courage to go to Confession, things will turn around. But the trick is that, once you are back on track with a good confession, don't let it be too long between confessions. The longer you wait between receiving the Sacrament, the more difficult it will be to go again. The longer you wait, the more your unforgiven transgressions will begin to subtly grieve you, and the unconscious guilt will mount. This is not good and it is just what Satan wants. Yes, my friend, the Devil. He hasn't taken a vacation from humankind or your soul. I'm willing to bet he's just tickled a crimson pink when you allow yourself to get into such a state.

The best antidote in that situation is the truth. Get to Confession and put it all out there for Jesus' love to fix. The Devil loves darkness. Put your life – the good, bad and ugly – in the light.

You are not alone! We all have the same problems with being Christ-like. In what we have done or failed to do, we're not going to be pulling the wool over His eyes and slipping one past Him. So don't act that way. There is no need to.

The Trinity is omniscient. That means the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are so infused in our world and our lives as to have a timeless, intimate, personal and complete understanding of absolutely all of our reality... and way beyond. I know that's a mouthful, but it's the reality. Said another way: Jesus knows, loves and forgives us personally. He's that close to us. So, there is nothing we need to hide or be ashamed of.

If we fail, we ought to feel contrite because we have fallen short in returning God's love. We need to immediately admit it and not deny or try to hide it. And we need to confess it, get it off our chest, and return to a state of grace in which we hope to be stronger for the effort.

A word of encouragement here. Please don't think your sins are so special. On the "Sin-O-Meter" you're probably a wimp. Consider two Church rock star Saints: St. Peter and St. Augustine. Peter, who knew, loved and lived with Jesus everyday, actually denied Christ and abandoned Him in his most desperate hour! Then there's the great St. Augustine whose "Confessions" (of a less than perfect life) run on for hundreds of pages. The list goes on and on. No, there's not much chance you are a Sin-Olympian.

Better that you should stop worrying about (and inflating the importance of) all those annoying little sins. Better you should get them out of your head in the confessional. Then concentrate on learning from those transgressions. Take action to remove the occasions in your life that may cause you to fail again. Remember, Einstein figured that one out. He said that nothing is dumber than doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result! And he was right!

If you lie every time you play poker, stop playing poker! If you get crazy thoughts about the opposite sex when you go to a bar, stop going to the bar! Work to remove the temptations in your life. It will make sinning a lot less likely.

I know, I know, sometimes you just can't avoid those occasions that have led to trouble in the past. You're in a crowd of friends and, oops, all of a sudden you find yourself in what, in the past, has proven to be the wrong place at the wrong time for making sinful mistakes. What do you do? Depends.

If you can, make your excuses, and run like the dickens and get away from it. If you just can't, get your brain turned around fast and do a quick analysis of what went wrong last time. Then see to it you take steps to fashion a different scenario "on the spot" this time. Could be tricky. If all else fails, think of Jesus or the Blessed Mother or your Guardian Angel. Set your mind to contemplate pretty much anything beyond this limited world of self-gratification to some place a lot more God-friendly. Then look for the first chance to exit stage left!

And, sorry to say, be prepared for something of a fall if you mess it up. Try to make the

fall smaller, and less grave, this time, and get out of the situation quickly. Reinforce your good intentions in the midst of any failures by getting to Reconciliation as soon as you can. Be frank. Tell your confessor what went wrong and your sin, and get the grace to do better next time. Hate to say it, but since we're all sinners, it may seem like we're to spend most of our lives managing the "next time" better. Don't worry. Jesus will help.

On the other side of that coin, seek to recognize and avoid the "sins of omission." These are all those times when you could have stepped up to the plate but were too lazy, too selfish, too embarrassed. They are opportunities to do good, to help the less fortunate, to make life a little easier for your fellow man.

Sure, after a good confession, say or do the penance as prescribed, but take it from there to do something more... on your own. Pick a moment when it hurts to be nice, when it is inconvenient to be civil, when it is a drag to reach out. Then do it anyway. It is what Christ did and what He wants you to learn from Confession especially. It will help your soul and brighten your life. It will also make the next time you go to Confession a miraculously happy and personally satisfying occasion.

God understands we are human and that, in spite of our humanness, we are trying to be better people in His name. That's why He loves us so. It might be hard for us to imagine, but this omnipotent Trinity longs for our love.

We should go to Confession to get a clearer focus on ourselves. Use it to make those course corrections that will enable us to love better, to live happier, to die peacefully. Make sure your soul is in the state of grace. Please. It is the way you will enter into His eternal bliss. There, at last, we will share that beautiful reality so far beyond what we now see or can imagine.

Theologian, song-writer, and liturgist Father Lucien Deiss – a great priest I once met many years ago when I was a Franciscan Friar – understood and enjoyed the grace that comes from Confession. He often spoke of his death as something he looked forward to as "the most joyful day of my life," which he characterized as returning home to be with his Lord. You don't feel that way unless things are "right" between you and Jesus.

If you want to know why we need to be genuinely contrite, but not live in guilt, all you have to do is to think of how Jesus handled the sinner when He walked the Earth. The instances are a revelation. One of my favorites is the woman who was caught in adultery and about to be stoned by a gathering self-righteous crowd. You can read the entire passage in St. John's gospel (John 7:53 - 8:11) but the heart of the matter is simple.

The Scribes and Pharisees were, once again, out to trick Jesus. They brought to Him a woman who was allegedly caught in the act of adultery. According to the Law of Moses (which all devout Jews of the time were to observe), she should have been executed by stoning. Lest you think this was a long-lost barbaric practice, consider that it is still in practice in certain cruel subcultures today.

Rather than take the Pharisees' bait, Jesus stooped down and began to write in the dirt before these lofty frauds. It is not clear from the passage just what he wrote, but soon the accusers began to back away and disappear. My guess is that Jesus, the omniscient God-made-man, was writing their sins, one by one. This was a literal instance where – as my wise old Episcopalian Aunt Katie used to say – “people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.” Like I said, no need to try to hide who we are and what we are doing from God. It's a silly exercise in human self-deception, arrogance and folly. Christ knows everything about us.

After a bit, all of the woman's accusers – presumably having been confronted with their sins – had left. Only Jesus and the woman were left. Perhaps it was one of those awkward moments in life. Then, as Jesus stands up from His writing, comes one of the greatest moments in Christ's teachings on love and reconciliation. He says to the woman, “*Woman, where are they? Did no man condemn you?*”

Guilty of the accusations or not, I imagine she was totally stunned. By this time in Christ's life, many had come to believe rightly that He was the Messiah. Pretty much everybody knew He was at least a very special person – possibly a great prophet. And so when Jesus asked if no man was left to condemn her, the woman simply blurted out, “*No man, Lord.*” The gospel puts a telling end to this extraordinary encounter: *And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you: go and from now on sin no more.”*

We need to remember those words. Neither does Christ condemn us. But we must accept that amazing unqualified love and go forth and sin no more... no matter how hard that may appear to our frail nature. Contrition, forgiveness, repentance, sincere resolution to do better with our lives... such that we use all we have to sin no more. Say you want to get some things off your chest and find some peace? This would be the way.