

Confession

I am in my fifty-fifth year as a Catholic priest and I still hear confessions during these years of my priestly life. I have experienced fatherhood in a special way whenever I've heard confessions and granted absolution from sin to repentant souls. For the priest to forgive mortal sin in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and bring us all back to supernatural life is a greater act than if God permitted him to restore physical life to a man who laid there as a dead corpse.

Pope Pius XII [1939-1958] said, "Mankind is losing its sense of sin." Pope John Paul II [1978-2005] said, "Mankind has lost its sense of sin." Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the need for confession. The corruption of sin is evident everywhere in the world. This is evident even among some who consider themselves practicing Catholics, but go to Holy Communion without first making a good confession after sins such as fornication, masturbation, adultery, deliberate drunkenness, serious dishonesties in business dealings, neglect of the family, and financing by poor planning. How many today realize that it is seriously sinful to deliberately entertain dirty thoughts with no effort to control the mind and imagination? Jesus said that if a man even looks at a woman with lust he has already committed that sin. All mortal sins, of which penitents after diligent self-examination are conscious, must be recounted by them in confession even if they are most secret. [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1456]

According to the Church's command, "After having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year." Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution. [CCC 1457] Children must go to the sacrament of penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time. [CCC 1457] Going to Holy Communion with mortal sin on the soul is another mortal sin called a sacrilege. What about going to confession when only venial or every day, small faults have been committed? Without being strictly necessary the Church nevertheless encourages confession for spiritual growth.

To make a good confession one must confess all mortal sins and circumstances which may change their nature. It would be a bad or sacrilegious confession to deliberately conceal or not to confess a known mortal sin. One could fool a priest, but not God who is really the one who forgives sin through the instrumentality of the priest, who by ordination in Holy Orders has the indelible mark of Christ's priesthood sealed on his soul forever. In addition to confessing our sins we must have contrition for them. Contrition is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the sincere resolution not to commit the sin again. Sorrow (contrition) for sin may be perfect or imperfect. Perfect sorrow is the ideal sorrow and is based on love of God whom one has offended. Imperfect sorrow is a gift from God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit, and comes from the fear of eternal damnation.

The act of contrition is a free decision that includes a detestation of and grief for sins committed and also a determination not to sin again. This detestation is an act of the will that causes the sinner to regret having committed the sin.

Before going to confession one ought to examine his or her conscience based on the light of the Word of God, the Bible, and the teaching of the Church. One must be willing to do the penance the priest gives him. The penance is to help make satisfaction to God and neighbor whom one has offended. For example, the return of stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, and pay compensation for injuries. Such

is required by the justice of God. Sin weakens oneself and often harms one's neighbor. All sin is social in the sense that it offends the church of God of which we are members. This is why confession is also called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It reconciles the sinner with God and the Church.

Absolution

With the priest's absolution, "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," sin is washed from the soul of the penitent, yet the disorder or weakness we inherited with original sin remains and this weakness must be fought against for our entire lifetime. Jesus and His Church call us to do penance and make satisfaction for sin, to strengthen our minds and wills to resist temptations in the future. Temptation in itself is not sin. Giving in to the temptation is what makes for sin. Those who make a good confession leave the confessional with peace of soul, for the burdens caused by their sins has been lifted. This relief of burden is a common experience especially for those who have not been to confession for many years. One should never fear to confess mortal sins. Every priest who hears confessions is bound under very serious penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the Sacramental Seal because what is confessed remains "sealed" by the sacrament.

Pastoral vision

Priests should make available to their people, as far as possible, sufficient opportunities for confession. When a priest's parish is made up of many hundreds of families, it can become tedious making confessions available each week. The confessional is not essentially a counseling session or time to air one's problems—this should be done outside the confessional by appointment with your priests. The priest must advise penitents in the manner of overcoming habits of sin, or ask a question or two to remind them of the need to have a firm purpose of amendment, especially their promise to God not to miss Holy Mass on Sundays, or holy days through their own fault in the future. Or to a sinner guilty of fornication (sex by people who are not married) for they have become an occasion of sin to the other person. We must all avoid the near occasions of sin. If one does not intend to avoid persons, places, or things that lead to the committing of sin, how can they have the firm purpose of amendment of sin that is required for a good confession? The priest must be careful that the penitent does not consider confession to be like a washing machine with no responsibility required on their part.

For centuries, priests of the Catholic Church have forgiven sins in Jesus' name. The two chief powers given the priest at the time of ordination are the powers of consecrating bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to forgive sin. It is in the Bible. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them. If you hold them bound, they are held bound." (John 20: 22-23) Frequent confession is encouraged. Every Pope has exhorted priests to instruct the faithful on the need for confession and to make the sacrament available. To grow in holiness, both confession and the Holy Eucharist ---together with daily prayer, such as the Rosary, are essential. One in serious sin should go to confession as soon as possible. For an outline of how to go to confession see *Prayer Book for Young Catholics*. This book may be obtained from **Fatima Family Apostolate** call 1-800-213-5541 or on the web at johnpreiss@fatimafamily.org.

This pamphlet was written just days before Fr. Fox died of bone cancer. Unable to go to his computer, he wrote it by hand while sitting in his recliner, the very chair that he died in. *God bless this good priest.*

Pope John Paul II :

The Sacrament of Penance

The fruits of this sacrament for those in mortal sin include the regaining of sanctifying grace, forgiveness of the eternal punishment due to sin, forgiveness of at least a part of the temporal punishment, as well as the regaining of all merits. Those who have only venial sins to confess receive the remission of at least some of the temporal punishment due to sin, an increase of sanctifying grace, and more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All who receive this sacrament worthily receive special grace to avoid sin and the gift of peace of soul.

If we are to obtain these benefits, the sacrament must be properly and devoutly received. That is why we pray for light to know our sins, for the grace to be truly sorry for them, and for the gift of true repentance.

Mercy presumes conversion on the part of all of us, and the notion of conversion forces us to reflect on the truth which we must live. It often happens that when the Church speaks of the requirements of truth in relation to conversion and mercy, the world reacts negatively. But the Church cannot proclaim the reality of God's infinite mercy without pointing out how the acceptance of mercy requires an openness to God's law. It requires the personal observance of God's law as a response to His covenant of mercy. In demonstrating His fidelity to His fatherly love, God cannot contradict His own truth. Hence true conversion, which consists in discovering God's mercy, includes repentance from whatever negates the truth of God expressed in human nature.

At the same time, conversion brings with it reconciliation. Reconciliation is the result of conversion. It is the gift of the heavenly Father given through Christ and in the Holy Spirit to those who are converted. In the words of Saint Paul: "God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Conversion remains the key to all ministry of reconciliation. All individual and collective reconciliation springs from the conversion of hearts. The social fabric of the Church and the world will be reformed and renewed only when conversion is interior and personal.