



# TELL ME ALL YOUR SINS!

*A PRIEST'S REFLECTION ON THE SACRAMENT OF  
RECONCILIATION*

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### ***My Favorite Image of Confession:***

My favorite image of the Sacrament of Reconciliation depicts a man kneeling in a confessional to have his confession heard by the priest. Just behind the priest stands Jesus Christ, with his hand, like the priest, raised in a gesture of blessing. This simple and beautiful picture reminds us that this sacrament, like all the sacraments, are the sacraments of Christ – they are gifts from Jesus Himself, not inventions of the Church. The Lord's gesture of blessing in the image also reminds us that Jesus is not there to condemn, but to mercifully forgive. Although most Catholics are aware of the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, there is still an inherent fear that's hard to let go of. It's difficult to have to tell another person, sometimes a complete stranger, very personal details about the sinful parts of our life. Even though we have the assurance of the Seal of the

Confessional<sup>1</sup>, that sometimes does little to ease the dread of confessing before a priest. I think we need to continually work toward a better understanding of this great sacrament of mercy. I hope that more faithful will come to see the beauty of this sacrament, turning away from a fear of confession to a complete trust in God's mercy that is encountered within it. If we look to Christ who is the source of all things, in a special way the sacraments of the Church, we will see that in the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus stands, like in the image, waiting to show us compassion and draw us closer to Him.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'Seal of the Confessional' references the absolute secrecy every priest is bound to when hearing confessions. Canon Law 983 states "...It is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason". The Catechism also clarifies that a priest, "cannot break the seal to save his own life, to protect his good name, to refute a false accusation, to save the life of another, to aid the course of justice (like reporting a crime), or to avert a public calamity. He cannot be compelled by law to disclose a person's confession or be bound by any oath he takes, e.g. as a witness in a court trial. A priest cannot reveal the contents of a confession either directly, by repeating the substance of what has been said, or indirectly, by some sign, suggestion, or action."

## ***Jesus and the Adulterous Woman:***

As a foundation for this reflection on the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I turn to John's account of Jesus and the adulterous woman (Jn. 8:2-11). In this Gospel narrative, we clearly see Jesus' method for engaging sinners. It is unconventional for the time, and like all of Jesus' interactions, defied custom and tradition. This story is particularly important for us as it presents a perfect framework for what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Christ's method for engaging sinners is two-fold – *compassion* and then *conversion*. The Lord always begins an interaction with compassion and mercy, and then with that same compassion, guides that person toward conversion from their sins. Every encounter Jesus had in the Gospels shows Him using this two-part process. How is this demonstrated in His meeting with the adulterous woman? When Jesus is finally alone with the woman He begins with a question; “does anyone condemn

you?”, “no” she responds. “Neither do I condemn you” says the Lord. Here’s the compassion! Jesus starts by reassuring the woman with *compassion* that God is not out to condemn. He shows her that God is a God of mercy who wants to help His children seek better. This is exactly how the priest begins confession. He too, like Jesus, begins by offering the penitent reassurance that God does not come to condemn but to forgive. Whether it’s a warm and friendly greeting as the penitent arrives, or whether it’s words of encouragement after sins have been confessed, the priest desires to show the compassion of Christ to the person in the sacramental encounter. The next time you’re in the confessional, imagine the Lord saying to you, “neither do I condemn you”. Imagine Jesus standing behind the priest, hand raised, not in condemnation, but in a gesture of blessing. This is the Jesus of the Gospels, and the same Jesus we encounter in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

For many however, this display of compassion is enough. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters believe

that this is the only message warranted. It's easier to preach mercy and compassion and then leave it there. It's a message that makes us feel good and lifts our spirits. But it can't be the only message. If we look to the rest of Christ's encounter with the adulterous woman, we see that this is certainly the case. Jesus *does* want to show the woman His mercy and compassion. He *does* want to lift her spirits and give her hope. But He also wants to help her move away from a life of sin in order to grow closer to Him. Thus, we see the second part of Jesus' method, the encouragement for *conversion*. Directly after Jesus assures the woman that He is not there to condemn, He resolutely, but charitably, invites her to seek conversion away from her past sins. "Go, get up, and sin no more" He says. This simple statement is also a sign of God's compassion. Christ wants better for the woman and wants better for each of us. In the same way, the priest in the Sacrament of Confession desires better for each penitent. Through the simple advice offered and the penance given, the priest invites the person to seek conversion from their sins. The priest is God's

vehicle in which this movement toward conversion happens.

Pope Francis reflecting on his own experience with this sacrament says, “as a confessor, even when I have found myself before a locked door, (a hardened heart), I have always tried to find a crack, just a tiny opening so that I can pry open that door and grant forgiveness and mercy”<sup>2</sup>. What the Holy Father reminds us, especially to those who hear confessions, is that the priest’s primary task in the confessional is to show to the penitent God’s endless mercy. The mercy and compassion shown to a person is what will eventually allow for real conversion. What this Gospel story and the Sacrament of Reconciliation shows us is that while God does accept us where we are in life, sins and all, He *expects* us to grow and make change. He does not want us to remain in our sinful state, but truly desires us to be in communion with Him. In the confessional, a

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<sup>2</sup> *The Name of God is Mercy*, Pope Francis. 2016.

<http://www.lexicon-canonicum.org/english-articles/10-phrases-of-pope-francis-about-sacramental-confession/>

priest acting in the person of Christ, does in fact demonstrate the immense compassion and mercy of God. He too, like Christ, also compassionately guides the person to new life – a life of freedom from sin, and a life of rich communion with God and His Church.

## ***Reconciliation and the Virtue of Compassion:***

In his work *A Confessor's Handbook*, author Kurt Stasiak O.S.B. begins his guide for confessors by stating:

“In celebrating this sacrament, perhaps more than in any other exercise of their ministry, priests want to be Christ-like. They want to “put on the mind of Christ” as Saint Paul says and offer the compassion and understanding Christ offered. In this sacrament, above all, priests want to be effective stewards of the Lord’s grace. They want to be true ambassadors of peace”<sup>3</sup>.

What the author is saying here is that there is a fundamental desire in every priest to want to make each penitent’s experience of confession a real encounter with

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<sup>3</sup> Kurt Stasiak, O.S.B., *A Confessor's Handbook*. Paulist Press, New Jersey. 2010. Pg. 2.

Christ. Each priest who truly loves God's children, wants to *be* Christ to them, showing them the love and merciful compassion of Jesus. Compassion, as we have seen from Jesus's own encounters with sinners, is central to leading people back to Him. Even the action of exhorting someone to conversion from sin is an act of compassion if it is done out of, and with, love. The Gospels are clear – Jesus intentionally sought out sinners. Jesus went to the fringes of society and sought out the lost. He also seeks us. Confession can be the pivotal key to the lost sheep returning to the fold. But the Sacrament of Confession, although it does truly provide forgiveness of sins, will do little to bring someone back to Christ if there is not an experience of compassion within its context. Like we see in the Gospels, with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, compassion must be central.

Pope Francis in a recent audience spoke about the virtue of compassion stating that compassion is not just an attitude or sentiment, but a call to action. He continued by saying that Christianity is not a passive faith, but one that

calls us to go out and offer, “a concrete sign of Christ’s mercy and attention. Christ wants each of us to concretely share in His *compassion*”<sup>4</sup>. The Holy Father, like so many of God’s priests, wants us to experience the wonderful compassion of Christ. The Holy Father knows that our experience of compassion comes from others. What if we are being called right now to *be* and *bring* that compassion to someone around us? What if there is someone in our life that is in desperate need for an encounter of compassion? What if God is calling you to bring His compassion to that person? Don’t be afraid to respond to that call – it might just save a soul. In a particular way, as stated before, priests in the setting of the Sacrament of Confession are especially meant to be ministers of Christ’s compassion. Priest confessors are primary instruments of the compassion of Christ and can do much to help a person experience that. The manner in which a priest interacts with a penitent in the confessional has the power to either lead that person

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, Catholic News Service, August 2016.  
<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/08/17/compassion-is-not-just-an-attitude-but-a-call-to-action-says-pope/>

closer or further from the Lord. Just as we all desire medical doctors to practice a good ‘bedside manner’ when engaging patients, we desire our priests as ‘doctors of our souls’ to do the same with penitents. Kindness and a *compassionate* disposition go a long way in leading a person to true conversion.

### ***Reconciliation as a Movement Toward Conversion:***

As we saw from John's Gospel and the Lord's encounter with the adulterous woman, Jesus never wants to leave a person in a state of sin. He first begins with a display of great compassion, and then encourages the person to seek conversion toward a better life. "Go, get up, sin no more" He says to the woman. "Go, get up, sin no more" He also says to us. Although Christ will always accept us in whatever state we are in, He does expect us to grow and make change. He expects us to seek better and to turn away from all that keeps us apart from a full and fruitful relationship with Him. The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks prominently of the importance of conversion:

"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 1430).

But what does this conversion look like? We understand conversion on a basic level to signify a change – a change *from* something *to* something new or different. The Catholic dictionary defines conversion as, “any turning or changing from a state of sin to repentance, from a lax to a fervent way of life”<sup>5</sup>. But in the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I think it means more. Conversion in this setting represents a gradual discovery and acceptance of truths that weren’t before fully accepted or realized. In particular, it is the truth that God deeply loves and wishes good for His children. It is the truth that God’s greatest attribute is mercy, and that God longs to

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<sup>5</sup> Catholic Culture.

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=32806>

demonstrate this divine clemency to all who sincerely desire it. These are the truths we can come to know in our participation in the Sacrament of Confession. These are the truths that once integrated in both our mind and heart, can lead us to true conversion away from sin.

But if we really want to experience an interior actualization of these truths and thus move toward authentic conversion, we must fully engage and give of ourselves in confession. The Gospel of John does not tell us how the woman responded to Jesus' encouragement to "go, and sin no more", but we can only assume that she fully participated in the exchange with Jesus and was therefore able to live a new life in Christ. This reality can also be ours if we fully and completely participate in the 'confessional exchange'. What does this mean practically for a penitent? Firstly, this means that the person seeking confession has made a good examination of conscience prior to going to the priest. A good examination since our last confession allows us to be more open and transparent with the priest confessor. Secondly, while in dialogue with

the priest, being clear and honest about our sins also helps the priest better assist us. Intentionally holding back a particular sin, or not being completely clear about a sin will most likely lead to the creation of new sin(s) that will be need to be confessed in the future. Openness and honesty only help a penitent have a better experience of the sacrament and will certainly assist in moving toward real conversion. On the part of the priest confessor, he too plays a big role in whether or not a person comes to know the fundamental truths that can aid in conversion. Of course, his display of Christ's compassion toward the penitent must be the foundation. Also, asking the right questions can be a big benefit in a priest giving helpful counsel for the, 'conversion of the heart', the Catechism references.

In the end, it takes both the penitent and the priest, fully engaged in imparting and receiving God's grace that will make for a fruitful confession experience, and ultimately lead to a deeper conversion. The truths that we come to realize in the framework of this great sacrament do have power to lead us away from sin and back toward

Christ. We have only to hear Christ speak them to us, and then accept them in our heart. Once we have accepted them, Jesus can begin to work in us as we can begin to work toward fully loving Jesus.

## ***John Paul II and Reconciliation:***

Pope Saint John Paul II in his post-apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, calls the Sacrament of Reconciliation an invitation; an invitation to rediscover, “the good news of love, of adoption as children of God and hence of brotherhood”<sup>6</sup>. The pontiff goes on further to explain that fundamentally penance involves as the New Testament says, *metanoia*, a Greek word signifying an inmost change of the heart. Again, the Church is affirming the prominence of conversion within the context of penance.

The theme of conversion conjures up many scriptural images – Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, Zacchaeus the tax collector to name a few. For John Paul

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<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. 1984.  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html). Para. 1.

II, the image of the Prodigal Son was of particular significance. This parable is central to his teaching of reconciliation in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. Each of the characters in the account have importance in teaching the mercy of God. The brother who was lost, the brother who stayed at home, and the hopeful father all take part in this unique narrative of God's mercy. Let's look at each character individually. *The father*. John Paul notes that while the lost son was indeed apart from the father, the father had not forgotten him. The father never ceased love for his son and the hopeful prospect of his return. We can imagine the father anxiously waiting by the window of his house, hoping that one day he would see his son come back to him. When we are 'lost' because of our sin, our Heavenly Father does not forget us. He waits at the 'window' of the confessional, hoping to see us return to Him through our recourse to the sacrament. The father himself, upon seeing his lost son in the distance, rejoices with his whole being at the sight of his coming. How our Heavenly Father rejoices in us when we return to seek out His mercy. The Gospel of Luke certainly affirms for us this

‘rejoicing’ upon one’s repentance (Lk. 15:7). *The lost son*. The lost son speaks to the frailty of humanity. The lost son reflects to us our own sinfulness and need for conversion. But most of all, the lost son shows that in each of us, there is found a desire for communion with the Father. A desire and a chance for real reconciliation. What we see in the lost son is the opportunity for the Father’s mercy. *The brother who stayed at home*. The older brother also shows us our sinfulness. He shows us that we too can refuse to sit at the banquet of the Father. Although we may work hard and do our best to remain faithful to God, we can still forget God’s ultimate goodness and end up developing qualities of bitterness or resentment.

What all three players in this parable demonstrate is the profound need for a transformation of the heart. They show us too that God the Father is always waiting – waiting for us whenever we are ready to come back to Him. He is at the door of our hearts and at the window of the confessional patiently waiting to show us His infinite mercy and compassion. Pope John Paul II concludes his

reflection on this powerful Gospel story by stating, “the parable contains and grasps her mission of working, in imitation of the Lord, for the conversion of hearts and for the reconciliation of people with God”<sup>7</sup>. The Church understands that a big part her mission is that of the hopeful father from the parable – a mission to wait and welcome with open arms all who a who seek the love and goodness of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. 1984.  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html).

## *Why Go to Confession?*

I remember when I was in high school and had received my driver's license. Although I was certainly excited for the prospect of being able to drive, I was even more excited for the independence that came from having a license. I soon learned a hard lesson as a young driver when I got in an accident with the family car. As I told my parents what had happened, they were glad I was safe but disappointed that I had been careless. Looking at the car, my dad said that it was fixable, but that I had to help pay for the repair costs. While I thought back then that this was a harsh punishment, I have come to understand as an adult that he wasn't really punishing me. What I realized was that he was giving me an opportunity to deeper reflect on the wrong I had done and gave me a way to participate in the reparation process. How often do we view going to confession as a punishment? How often do we think that having to confess to a priest is simply 'harsh'? Just like

what I learned after I misused the family car, going to confession with a priest gives us an opportunity to deeper reflect on the wrong we have done, and gives each of us a way to participate in the reparation process.

We should remember that when we commit serious or grave sin, we rupture our relationship with God. But God is merciful and compassionate! God wants to forgive us and restore this relationship, giving us a beautiful way through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Maybe we haven't gone in a while – maybe we feel ashamed and embarrassed about our sins. All of this is okay. The priest won't judge us, and God is the fair and just judge! We must remember that the priest is a representative of Christ, who like Christ, only desires to reconcile us with God and His Church. If there is an uneasiness about the sacrament, here are some reasons going to confession is important and beneficial for every Catholic. Firstly, going to confession before God's priests is what Christ Himself instructed us to do. In John's Gospel we see Jesus giving authority to His disciples, or His 'first priests', to forgive the sins of others

(Jn. 20:23). By going to confession with a Catholic priest, you are doing what Jesus Himself says we should do. Secondly, going to confession helps us grow in humility. The action of having to go to a church and confess before a priest is humbling *not* humiliating. This physical action, again, helps us to deeper reflect on our sins and *humbly* reminds us that we are totally dependent on God. Lastly, in going to confession with a priest, we receive complete assurance that the sins we confessed have been forgiven. When we hear the priest pray the prayer of absolution over us, we can be fully assured, (because Christ gave His priests the authority, cf. Jn. 20:23), that all our sins, those we confessed in the moment and those we honestly forgot, are indeed forgiven by God. We shouldn't be afraid or embarrassed to go as frequently as we need, as God through the priest will show us great compassion. How amazing it is that we have this great sacrament of mercy! As Saint Isidore of Seville once said, "confession heals, confession grants pardon of sin, and in confession there is a chance for mercy".

## ***Making Great Confessions:***

So how can you ensure a fruitful experience the next time you go to confession? Here are three tips from a priest's perspective that will help the priest better guide you and will help you fully encounter the mercy of Christ.

1. **Confession is about you.** Remember that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about you and your relationship with God, not about the priest, and certainly not about other people or things. God through the priest wants to hear what you have done wrong in your life so that He can forgive you. The focus of confession should always be about *your* sins and how *you* have failed God. Spending confessional time talking about what other people have done, or about things not directly related to your sins, can actually make it harder for the priest to assist you. The priest's job in confession is to absolve sins and impart God's

mercy. You can help the priest do this by staying ‘on topic’ in your sharing during confession.

- 2. Before the sins, begin with some ‘life’ context.** We all know the traditional way a penitent begins confession – “forgive me father for I have sinned. It has been \_\_\_\_\_ since my last confession, and here are my sins”. Before you immediately jump into your sins, it’s very helpful to start by giving the confessor some context about your life. Are you married? Do you have kids? Are you single? Are you a priest, religious brother or sister? Starting off by saying, “father I’m a married man, I have been married for twenty years and have three children”, is a big help to the priest-confessor. Beginning in this way means the priest doesn’t have to guess or make assumptions about your life, and he can give you proper counsel based on your particular circumstance. The advice a priest would give to a married person is much different than the advice he would give to another priest or religious sister, and he won’t know what vocation your living

unless to you tell him. This extra ‘life context’, while it might seem like giving superfluous information, is actually very helpful for the priest-confessor.

3. **Be honest and direct.** If you haven’t realized it by now, the Sacrament of Confession is about how you have recently failed God. Remember, it’s about *you* and *your* sins. In the confessional, God is eager to forgive, and the priest is at-the-ready to absolve. The best way to get to the best part of confession, (the absolution and forgiveness), is to be as honest and direct with the priest as you can. You don’t have to be graphic or overly detailed in the telling of your sins, but you can’t be vague or unclear either. Simply saying that you have committed a sin ‘against the sixth commandment’ isn’t enough for the priest because that could mean any number of particular sins. The priest needs to hear concrete sins in order to absolve – he shouldn’t have to guess what your sins are. Again, you don’t have to share every little detail,

but make sure the priest clearly knows and understands the offenses your confessing. Making a thorough examination beforehand is very important and preparing a list to bring with you can also be useful.

### ***Final Thoughts:***

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is indeed a beautiful chance for a person to encounter the compassion and mercy of Christ. It is a sacrament instituted by Christ Himself, and it is Jesus who forgives us through the instrument of His priests. What Sacred Scripture tells us is that at the foundation of Jesus' own personal ministry, was always compassion, and a compassionate call to conversion. Jesus continually expressed His love for sinners by making a special point to seek them out. He accepts sinners as they are, but never ceases to encourage them to move away from sin toward communion with Him. The Lord desires us to seek conversion from our past, our vices and our weaknesses, placing everything deep within the ocean of His mercy. Jesus wants to forgive us. Jesus wants us to be with Him for all eternity. The Sacrament of Confession is one of many beautiful ways within the Church to lead us closer to this infinite reality. Trust in the

Lord and believe that He can do so much for you through this great Sacrament. In the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, “in the life of the body a man is sometimes sick, and unless he takes medicine, he will die. Even so in the spiritual life a man is sick on account of sin. For that reason, he needs medicine so that he may be restored to health; and this grace is bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance”.