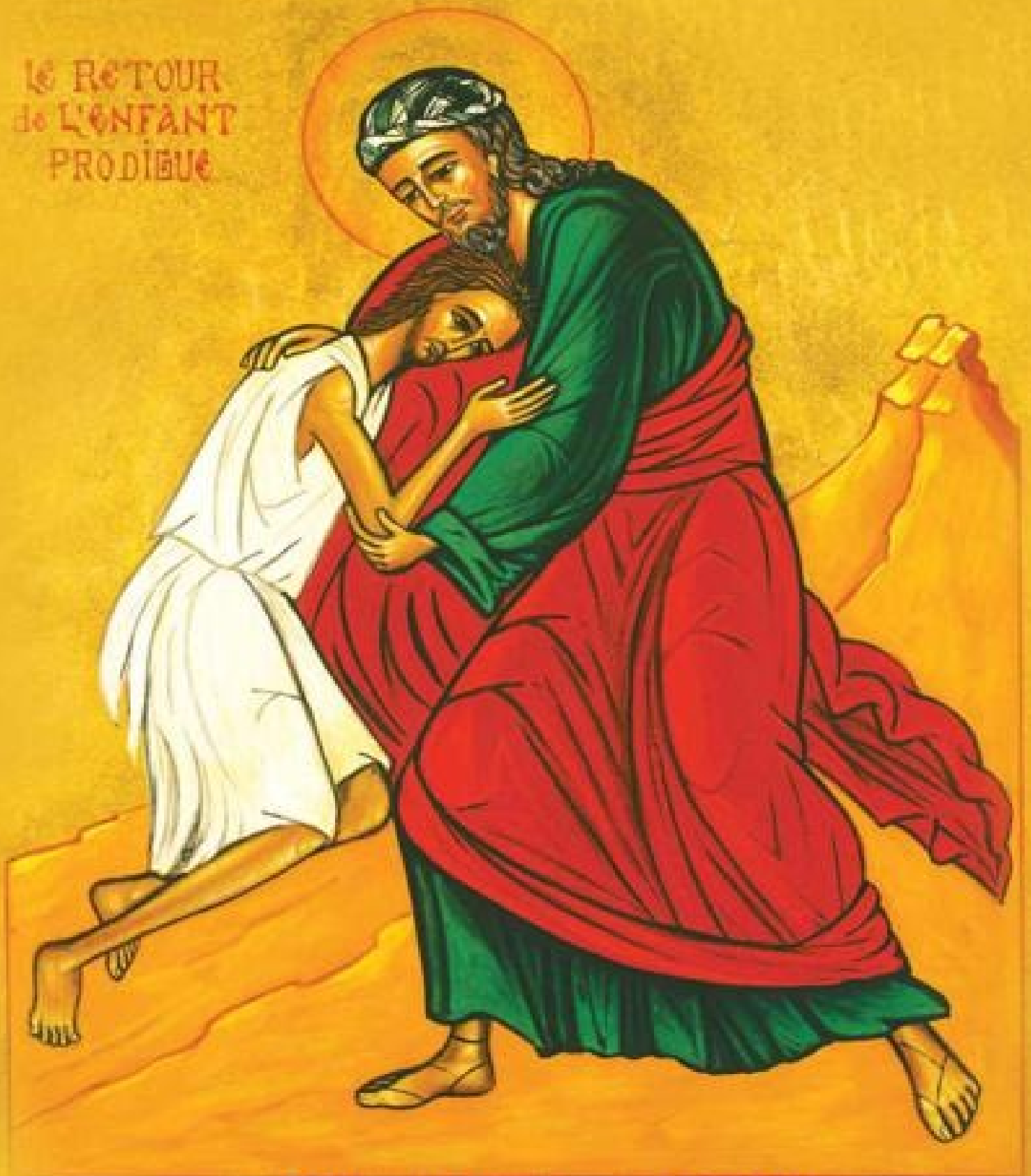


# GOING TO CONFESSION?

LE RETOUR  
DE L'ENFANT  
PRODIGE



LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA

# **GOING TO CONFESSION?**

**Jorge Medina Estévez**

*Introduction by Gianfranco Girotti, OFM Conv*

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## INTRODUCTION

The sense of sin and the Sacrament of Penance stand or fall together. If either of them weakens, the other goes into crisis. As life becomes more and more secularized, dominated by a growing weight of difficulties, it gets harder to understand that looking to God for his light, his support, helps us to resolve better and more effectively even the toughest problems of daily life. The Sacrament of Penance presupposes—and at the same time increases—the awareness that talking with God is a source of warmth and serenity.

I am pleased to recommend this easy-to-read pamphlet, written with the heart of a pastor and the expertise of a theologian, in support of those who love to immerse themselves in the pool of Penance and live more transparently in God's company. Not everyone knows the riches of this sacrament, its power of reconciliation with self and others, the spiritual peace and goodwill that it brings. With that in mind, this brief pamphlet is a skillful introduction to the beauty of this sacrament, explaining how to make use of it and above all helping to dispel the sense of shame that is often felt in talking about one's weaknesses with a man like us. But do we hide our illnesses from the doctor? And when the waves are dragging us out to sea, don't we call out for someone to rescue us, without blushing? Everything finite is finite, that's true. But the finite is not always merely finite. With the Incarnation, God has made his dwelling among us. And doesn't the priest, who is made mediator between God and human beings, extend the visibility of God in time? So isn't that human weakness a source of support at the moment of confession, since the one who hears our confession is a sinner like us?

Although the increase in the sense of blame, frequent recourse to psychotherapy, and the rebirth of different forms of magic and superstition respond to needs of various kinds, they also expose a situation of general malaise that must be addressed by recovering the power and profundity of the Sacrament of Penance. His Eminence Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez is well aware of these problems, and while he distinguishes the many different levels of our spiritual life, he maintains with justified conviction that the spiritual life, if it is fortified by the Sacrament of Penance, is able to provide stability and strength in the many difficulties of daily life. And neglect of it is often at the origin of serious psychological disorders, with considerable consequences for individual and community life.

For this reason, we are very happy to welcome the translation of this pamphlet (already in its twelfth edition in Spanish) of great value for those faithful who are still hesitant or not well informed about a sacrament of such significance for Christian life.

Formerly the prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, as well as a member of many dicasteries of the Roman curia, Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez here confirms that refined theological sense of pastoral life, which he had demonstrated as a young bishop in the two dioceses in Chile entrusted to his care—Rancagua and then Valparaíso—and before that as canon penitentiary for twenty years at the Cathedral of Santiago.

Although they are simple, these pages are truly enlightening and incisive. I eagerly invite the reader to assimilate them and to share them with those who, out of uncertainty or disappointment, look at this sacrament with distrust, because they have not been guided lovingly or taught sufficiently on the path that leads to intimacy with God. The noble and fruitful effort to discover more and more about the merciful face of God is made easier by this pamphlet, full of ancient theological wisdom lavished by someone with firsthand experience of the revitalizing beauty of Christian doctrine.

The Sacrament of Penance is a pearl, but most often it is left buried in the ground. Those who contribute to displaying its beauty and wiping away the dust that has fallen on it over time are highly pleasing to God.

Gianfranco Girotti, OFM Conv  
Head of the Apostolic Penitentiary

# PART ONE

## 1. Going to confession?

Great! This means that God is knocking on the door of your heart.

It means that you are Catholic, and you recognize that you are a sinner. It is a good point of departure.

Is it hard for you? That's very understandable. This pamphlet was written to help you. I hope that it will be useful for you and that you will trust in the help of God. For him, nothing is impossible.

To start with, I recommend that you read this passage taken from the Gospel of St. John:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [Jesus] said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (Jn 20:19-23)

So then, a man limited like you, the priest, is going to enter into your conscience, and you will open it to him, fulfilling the command of Jesus Christ. This is possible because that man is a priest who in his priestly ordination has received the power to forgive sins, a power that Christ himself gave to his Apostles.

The priest bears great responsibility before God. He doesn't listen to your sins to afflict your conscience; he does it to serve you and reconcile you with the Church. His task is not an easy one. Pray for him, that the heavenly Father may give him love and zeal for the salvation of his brothers and sisters and that the Holy Spirit may enlighten him.

When you confess, you perform an act of faith in Jesus and in his Gospel. You honor God by submitting to the way that he established to forgive our sins. You also perform an act of humility contrary to the act of pride that you committed in sinning, preferring your will over that of God.

## 2. Clarifying Our Purpose

When we confess, we need to be well aware of what we are doing. So first, let's remember *what we are not about to do*:

- We are not going to list our good actions so that the priest will congratulate us.
- We are not going to excuse ourselves by finding “justifications” for our sins.
- We are not going to confess the sins of other persons.
- We are not going to “take care of a formality” in order to receive Communion, without any concrete resolutions for the future.
- Confession is not a mere conversation, nor is it a description of all the little details of what happened.

Jesus Christ did not institute the Sacrament of Penance for this.

There are other benefits that, although they are not the primary ones, are frequently obtained through confession:

- *Consolation*, not merely human, but stemming from God's forgiveness
- *Advice* for resolving a certain spiritual problem or for providing better direction to our Christian life
- *Comfort* of the conscience, but not the kind that might be obtained from a psychologist or a psychiatrist, since the confessor is not usually a specialist in these sciences

Keep in mind that the priest is not always a wise man or a prophet. Not all priests have the same qualities, the same talent, the same education, the same virtues. They are not infallible in advising you, and they can make mistakes, especially when the penitent does not give them enough objective criteria for judgment.

Having said this, it is important to look at the main aspects of confession, at what God wants to give you by means of the confessor.

## 3. The Main Purpose

When we confess we are seeking above all, with the help of God's grace, to change our lives in conformity with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to obtain

God's forgiveness through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Although our sins are a rejection of the covenant to which God has called us through Baptism, he continues to offer us his love and his forgiveness. He wants to restore us internally and externally to the community of salvation, to his holy People who are the Church.

All of this can be expressed with the word "conversion." Conversion is a rejection of sin and a return to the love of God, or if you prefer, a departure from sin out of love for God. If we had always loved God more than any other thing, we would never have sinned. To the extent to which we accept sin in our lives, we cannot say in all truthfulness that we are "Christian," meaning disciples of Jesus Christ and members of his Church. In reality, the Church is a community of converts, or at least a community of people who are seriously seeking to convert. For this reason, the Sacrament of Penance (which can also be called the sacrament of conversion) is a celebration, a joyous event: it is the triumph of God's love and the reestablishment of his covenant with a Christian sinner.

Now you can understand better why—even if you are not given wise advice, even if you do not "feel" any great consolation, and even if you have the impression that the confessor did not understand your situation very well—after the priest has heard your confession and granted you forgiveness and absolution, *you are reconciled with God and with the Church.*

This is the essential thing. Does it not seem like much?

#### **4. A Personal Matter Only Between God and Me?**

Some people think this way, but it's a big mistake, because you have not only offended God, but also the Church, the Christian community. Maybe you've never thought about this, but it's true.

Let's see how.

With our sins, we have often given a bad example to others. We have not given witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Before our brothers and sisters, we have obscured the face of God our Father that should always be reflected in our words and actions, and we have discouraged our neighbor from living the Christian life.

Maybe we have led others into evil, making them part of our sins and undermining the Kingdom of God.

Even the most hidden and personal sins, the ones known only to God and to our conscience, have hampered our Christian dynamism; they have made us less



active in charity, less pure in the motives that guide our actions, and less generous in apostolate. All of this jeopardizes the Church.

Because of this, neither your sin nor your conversion is a “private” matter between you and God. The Church is involved, too: you have wounded it, you have deprived it of strength, you have stained it. The Church has prayed for your conversion, and if you convert with your whole heart you reinvigorate it and make it more beautiful in the eyes of God and of human beings.

Remember that Christianity is not a collection of individual relationships with God, but rather life according to the Gospel in the community of the baptized.

## **5. What are you feeling?**

Maybe you feel afraid. Maybe you think that the confessor, if he knows you, will reprimand you or will lose the respect that he has for you. Maybe you think that he will be shocked by what you say or be scandalized by your failings.

Reflect a little bit.

If the fear of God does not stop you from sinning, much less should human fear stop you from confessing your sins. Besides, you have not offended the priest who is listening to you. More than anger, he (like you) will feel pain and suffering because you have offended God, your Father, and have “chilled” the fervor of charity of the Christian community, the Church, which is your mother.

Remember that the confessor is bound to observe absolute secrecy: he cannot reveal your sins to anyone, not even if threatened with death.

Nor can he talk to you about your sins outside of confession unless you yourself permit him to do so. Much less can he, even indirectly, talk with anyone else about the sins you have confessed.

The priest, through painful experience acquired over the course of his personal life and through the exercise of his ministry, is very familiar with human weakness and wickedness. It is difficult for you to tell him something he has not already heard. This same experience, greater or lesser as the case may be, will help him to support you in your search for God.

You may feel confused and not know where to begin, especially if it has been a long time since you have approached this sacrament. In this case, you can ask the confessor to help you; in any case, it is very important for you to tell him about what is weighing on you and troubling your conscience the most. In this way you will steer him toward the questions that may be necessary.

Do you feel ashamed? That is normal. You should have been more ashamed when you committed the sin.

Now the only thing needed is sincerity.

Talk to the confessor as you would talk to Jesus Christ. He will try to receive your words as Jesus would have listened to you.

Try to guide all of these feelings toward what is fundamental: *toward sadness and repentance for offending God and toward the conversion of your heart, in order to live afterward according to the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

In other words, according to a wonderful thought from St. Paul, so that it is Christ who is living in you (cf. Gal 2:20). Or, as Jesus himself says in the Gospel of St. John, so that you may live united with him as the branches of a tree are united to the trunk (cf. Jn 15:1-11), so that you may be a living member of the Church and generously give your witness of faith in Jesus Christ, encouraging your brothers and sisters in fidelity to the Lord.

## **6. Where will I go to confession?**

Wherever you are most comfortable.

Ordinarily you will be in church, in the confessional or outside of it. You can also go to the priest's office. You can keep your identity secret or let it be known.

When you choose the place where you will go to confession, do not think of purely human or egoistic reasons; think instead of what will contribute to making your confession more sincere. Think also of the priest's convenience, and remember that his time is not unlimited. He cannot dedicate himself exclusively to you; you must consider that he must serve and take care of other Christians as well.

If it has been a long time since you made your last confession, or if the one you are about to make is particularly complicated, it may be convenient for you to make it outside of the confessional, for example in the priest's office, so that the atmosphere will be more tranquil and there won't be a line of people losing their patience behind you. Nonetheless, if the confessional seems more convenient to you, make your confession there without fear or haste. And if you have to wait longer than you expected, be patient with your brothers and sisters and remember the great patience that God has had with you.

We priests have heard confessions on trains, in the streets, on airplanes, and

even when someone has come for a visit.

## **7. To whom will I confess?**

There are people who usually confess to the same priest. This is good and can be useful on the condition that the penitent always feels free to choose the confessor that he or she wants. Becoming too attached to just one priest could be a sign of a lack of faith.

If you have a particular problem, or one that is especially serious, you are right to seek out a priest who is particularly competent in that matter. Other priests or other faithful can help you to find one.

Nevertheless, you must not be too demanding. We priests are few, and there are not many choices, especially in small cities and rural areas. There are also shortages of priests in some areas of the big cities. But remember that any priest can give you what is essential: *the forgiveness of God and reconciliation with the Church*.

Moreover, once you have confessed, you are completely free to go to another priest to tell him about the problem that is bothering you. But don't be scrupulous; that would demonstrate a lack of faith in the infinite mercy of the Father.

## **8. Some Questions**

### **Do priests go to confession, too?**

Of course, like every Christian. Even bishops and the Holy Father confess.

### **Why is confession ordinarily done in the confessional?**

Because the Church wants to respect the will of the many faithful who do not want to be recognized by the confessor.

### **How often should one go to confession?**

It depends on the case. If a serious sin has been committed, it should be confessed as soon as possible. If only venial sins have been committed, it is a good idea to go to confession several times a year, although this is not obligatory.

**In order to receive Communion, after committing mortal sins, is it enough to make an Act of Contrition and confess later?**

No. This can be done only in exceptional cases, and only if it is truly urgent to receive Communion without having the chance to confess first.

**What happens if someone forgets to confess a mortal sin?**

That sin is also forgiven, but if it is remembered afterward, it must be confessed at the next opportunity.

**What happens if someone knowingly conceals a mortal sin?**

In this case, the confession is not valid. No sin is forgiven, and a new one is added: lack of respect for one of Christ's sacraments.

**Is it obligatory to receive Communion after going to confession?**

No. However, it would be normal and advisable, because with Communion one receives the Body and Blood of the Lord, which transmit the fullness of charity to us.

## **9. Is general absolution valid?**

This question requires some clarification. To begin, we should say that it is authorized by the pope under particular exceptional circumstances, and it must be carried out in conformity with the guidelines of the Holy See and of the local bishop.

It is by no means a way to avoid the personal confession of sins to the priest. The Church cannot dispense with that general requirement, which is founded on the word of Jesus Christ. So this is not a matter of convenience; Christianity is certainly not "convenient."

The main reason the Church can give general absolution without the personal confession of sins is a lack of priests, which the Church cannot ignore. A penitential liturgy, done well, is a good opportunity to reflect on conversion and the Christian life. It also helps to reinforce the communitarian sense of Christianity and of the celebration of the sacraments, which unfortunately are seen by many Christians as purely individual acts. A communal penitential celebration does not necessarily presuppose the granting of general absolution. These celebrations have great educational value and help Christians to understand better the meaning of sin and the permanent need for conversion.

It is clear that participation in a communal penance celebration with general absolution presupposes sincere repentance and desire for conversion.

Under these conditions, all sins will be forgiven. *In spite of this, the*

*obligation remains to confess mortal sins forgiven through general absolution when the next opportunity for personal confession presents itself (and it must be sought out).* According to recent guidelines from the Holy Father, this must be done before participating again in a penitential liturgy with general absolution unless there are serious reasons to delay. In any case, it must be done within a year if it is not truly impossible.

## **10. A Story**

On one occasion, Jesus described the conversion of a sinner in the parable of the prodigal son, which could also be called the parable of the merciful father. I recommend that you read it again attentively. The interpretation is simple: the father is God, the son is the sinner. This is the story:

A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, “Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.” So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, “How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.’” So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.” But his father ordered his servants, “Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.” Then the celebration began. (Lk 15:11-24)

That son is you.

You have imitated him in his ingratitude. Imitate him also in his conversion, in his humility, in his return to the house of the Father.

Your Father, God, is waiting for you, full of mercy. If you do not listen to his voice, it is as if you continued to wound his heart and abuse his patience.

Do not delay your return: you will be the only one disadvantaged. Always keep in mind that time does not belong to you, and that you have no guarantee of what will happen tomorrow.

## **11. Summing Up**

Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance” (Lk 15:7).

Would you dare to say that you are one of those ninety-nine righteous people?

If you think that, it is more likely that you are not so righteous, but that the eye of your spirit is in darkness so that you cannot see your real situation. This would be very dangerous.

## **PART TWO**

### **1. How do I confess?**

If you have decided to confess, it is because the salvific power of God has moved you to conversion. Have confidence! You are under the influence of God, and this should fill you with joy and hope.

You are approaching the Sacrament of Penance, and you must do so well, so that salvation may come to you like a seed that falls on fertile and well-prepared ground. It would be foolish to sow on rocky ground.

So prepare yourself well!

### **2. Prayer**

Enter into your heart. Recollect yourself in the silence of your room, a church, or any other place. Turn to God: “Father, I have sinned against you and against my brothers and sisters; I am not worthy to be called your child. Have mercy on me. I have been weak, ungrateful, and a traitor.” You can say the same thing in other words, which the Holy Spirit will bring from the depths of your heart.

Ask him for what you need.

In the first place, that he help you to clarify in what way you have departed from the Gospel of Christ in your thoughts, desires, words, actions, or in the things that you should have done and instead have neglected. You need a powerful light to help you dig to the roots of sin. Don’t forget that sometimes we deceive ourselves, our consciences sleep, and we give the Devil free rein to make us confuse evil with good. It is not unusual for the Devil to succeed in misleading us and making us believe, through his incredible cunning, that evil is not really so evil, that we can even consider it good. Deception is the preferred weapon of Satan; as Jesus says, he is “the father of lies” (cf. Jn 8:44 ff.).

Ask also for the strength to begin again a life of love for God and for your brothers and sisters; to give humble and vigorous witness to the Gospel of Christ; to withdraw forcefully from the situations that put you in danger of sinning. Ask the Lord to allow you to taste the joy of living in his friendship and of being an active member of the Church. So that your presence and activity in the world may be like a reflection of Jesus Christ, so that those who do not know him may also receive the light of faith and may begin to bless the Father of

heaven.

Pray with Christian hope. Listen to what Jesus says to you:

For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him? (Lk 11:10-13)

### **3. What have you done, what have you failed to do?**

It is time to examine your conscience and see the contradictions of the Gospel in your life. In essence, every sin is a rejection, a forgetting of God's love. You have preferred something else rather than him; you have put him in second or third place. Now we will see concretely what things have manifested your lack of love for God and for your brothers and sisters, and how to begin again a life in communion with them: both things are inseparable.

If you read the holy Gospels frequently, you will find many points of departure for examining yourself. For example, you can look at chapters 5 and 7 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

Make the examination of conscience as you prefer. One method is to refer to the Ten Commandments; another is to consider the Christian virtues (faith, hope, charity or love, justice, fortitude, prudence, moderation); another is to think about your duties toward God, toward your neighbor, and toward yourself. These perspectives usually complement each other.

If it has been a long time since your last confession, it would be helpful to write the most important points on a piece of paper so that at the moment of your confession, you do not forget to tell the priest about your sins.

Below I am providing you with a few questions you can use to examine yourself. They are not intended to produce a complete list of your sins, but simply to help you make a good confession and orient your conversion.

#### ***Some Attitudes That Refer More Directly to God***

- Have you had little faith? Have you doubted truths of the faith? Have you lost trust in God, allowing yourself to be guided by desperation? Do you make an effort to know the Gospel of Christ in order to apply it to your life



and what happens in it? Have you been ashamed of your faith in the presence of other people?

- Do you remember God frequently? Do you pray? Have you remembered him only when you have been in need? Have you praised and thanked him for his blessings? Have you rebelled against God?
- Are you superstitious?
- Have you sworn, invoking God as your witness in things of no importance, or even worse, in false things? If you have made some promise or vow, have you kept it?
- Have you sanctified Sundays and the feasts of the Church by taking part in Holy Mass? Have you done so with participation and devotion? Have you tried to avoid being distracted and distracting others during the celebration of Holy Mass? Have you missed Mass without a valid reason, only out of negligence, laziness, or because you “didn’t feel like it”? Christian life does not consist in doing what we please...

### ***Think About Your Relationships with Your Family***

- If you are a child: Are you kind, helpful, respectful, obedient, charitable, and patient with your parents? Are you too demanding, asking for too much money and clothing? Are you dissatisfied with the food that they serve to you at home? Do you take your parents’ advice into consideration? If there are elderly, sick, or needy, do you help them as you are able? If you do not live with your parents, do you visit them or write to them? If you have offended them, have you asked them to forgive you? If they have been or are sick, have you brought them a priest to satisfy their spiritual needs? If they are deceased, have you prayed that God will forgive their sins and grant them eternal life?
- If you are a father or mother: Are you attentive to the raising of your children? Do you try to raise them to know Jesus and to live according to his Gospel? Do you give them good examples in all aspects of life? Have you exaggerated with excessively severe words and actions? Or, on the contrary, do you let yourself be led by excessive leniency? Do you try to gain their trust? Have you spoken to them clearly and in Christian terms in the important moments of their lives, or have you preferred a comfortable and irresponsible silence? If your children are married, have you interfered in the privacy of their families? Have you listened to complaints and

criticisms against your parents and in-laws without verifying anything first? Have you fostered division in the families of your children with criticisms, murmuring, and comments?

- If you are a husband or wife: Are you kind to your wife/husband? Have you avoided useless discussions and unpleasant moments over little things? Do you let yourself be guided by your impulses? Do you do everything possible to make your home pleasant and welcoming? Have you treated your inlaws with respect and consideration? Have you been faithful to your spouse in your thoughts, desires, or actions? Do you let yourself be guided by unjustified jealousy, embittering the life of your wife/husband? Do you try to make God present in your home? Do you pray often with your wife/husband? Do you pray for her/him? If you have made a mistake, have you had the courage to acknowledge it? If your spouse has made a mistake, have you forgiven her/him, or have you nagged her/him about it?

### ***Now Your Relationships with Other Persons***

- If you are an authority: Have you been just in giving each his own, or have you betrayed justice for recommendations, connections, or corruption? Have you abused your authority or exploited it for your benefit? Have you delayed, out of laziness or with pointless or bureaucratic practices, what you should have resolved? Have you discriminated against persons of merit out of sectarianism or for revenge?
- If you are a professional, employee, laborer: Have you been responsible, doing your work conscientiously and efficiently? Are you punctual? Have you taken what is just for your work? Have you been generous, helping those in need? Have you caused losses for the institution for which you work through negligence of materials or machinery?
- If you have a business: Have you also considered the interests of others and those of the country, and not only those of your corporation or group? Do you contribute personally to making society more just, fraternal, and human?
- If you are a student: Do you make an effort to learn? Do you study only for your future, or do you also think of serving others? Have you been lazy, obtaining results that do not correspond to your work? This would be a rejection of the gifts that God has given to you and an injustice against society's efforts on your behalf.

## ***General Attitudes***

- Are you helpful and generous? When you perform a service, do you perform it honestly and with disinterest, or do you always think of how you will be repaid? Do you give up the things you like in order to make your neighbor happy, or do you always put first your own will, your convenience, and what you like? Are you like Jesus Christ, “meek and humble of heart” (cf. Mt 11:29), or are you arrogant, vain, and proud? Do you control your character? Do you forgive the offenses you have received? If you do not forgive others, neither will God forgive you. Do you work with your parish or other community groups?
- When you discuss or talk about politics, do you try to be objective in your statements? Do you lean toward this or that side because of your own interests rather than those of the country? Do you resort to the unjust influence of people who have the power to support your preferences? Are you able to recognize positive aspects in persons who do not think like you do?
- Do you respect other people and their ideas?

*Life does not belong to you, neither your own, nor that of others:*

- Have you damaged your health through excessive eating or drinking? Have you taken drugs or urged others to do so? Have you exposed your life or those of others to unnecessary danger? If you drive an automobile, do you do so prudently, respecting the rules of the road?
- Have you had the intention of taking your own life? Have you struck others unjustly? Have you been cruel to animals?
- Have you had any part in encouraging an abortion? This is a homicide like any other and can even be said to be more serious than the others because of the innocence and defenselessness of the child.
- Everyone must also think of the spiritual good of his or her neighbor. Have you given a bad example? Have you laughed at others when they behaved correctly? Have you given advice contrary to the Gospel of Christ? Have you helped others to do evil? Have you preferred silence when something unjust was being justified in your presence?

*You must respect everything related to sex, because this too is a work of God and because he has willed that the human body should be the temple of the*

Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:15-20):

- Have you permitted impure thoughts, desires, and intentions? Have you acted alone or with other persons in a way contrary to modesty? Have you generated passions by your way of acting, talking, or dressing? Have you read indecent books or magazines? Have you watched indecent and provocative performances at the movie theater or elsewhere? Have you sought out obscene programs on television or on the internet? If you are in a relationship, have you maintained the proper behavior of purity and respect?
- If you are married, have you lived conjugal chastity with gentleness? Have you used artificial means to prevent conception?

***You Must Also Respect the Goods of Others***

- Have you taken something that does not belong to you without permission? Have you been correct in your affairs? Have you felt sadness, anger, or envy because of the success of others?
- If you have taken something improperly, have you given it back?
- If you have employees or workers, do you pay them justly, even generously, or do you have two standards: one for you and your aspirations, and another for others and their needs? Do you remember the words of Jesus, who commands us to act with others as we would like others to act with us (cf. Mt 7:12, Lk 6:31, Tob 4:16)? Have you respected the laws of society relative to rest, vacations, the payment of contributions, and compensation? Surely you become angry when others do not do so with you...
- Have you paid your taxes conscientiously?
- Have you been greedy or miserly?

***You Also Have Obligations of Sincerity***

- Do you lie? Do you do so out of vanity to appear like more than what you are, out of cowardice to cover up your mistakes and escape your responsibilities? Have you falsified documents, grades, signatures, or accounts?
- Have you calumniated your neighbor, harming him or her through falsehood? Have you shirked your responsibilities by laying blame on

others?

- Have you made known the personal failings of your neighbor? You must consider that even when these are true, that does not authorize you to make them public without serious reason. Have you commented on the defects of others? Have you judged their way of acting casually and without sufficient evidence?

### ***Another Thing***

- Do you do penance in reparation for your sins? Have you observed fasting and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday? During the Fridays of Lent, have you made any special acts of penance, prayer, or charity?

As a member of the Catholic Church, in addition to your spiritual responsibilities toward it, you also have material duties:

- Do you contribute to the expenditures of the Church, supporting it financially in order to meet its enormous expenses? This is not voluntary almsgiving, but the concrete sign that you want to contribute to its economic support, according to your ability.

## **4. Sadness and Repentance**

Maybe you thought you had nothing of which to accuse yourself. If this examination of conscience has surprised you, thank God, who has wanted to show you your failings as a Christian. Thank God for wanting to free you from sin.

Now you must repent. A sterile awareness of your failings is worth little if you do not feel repentance.

It is difficult to express the sadness that is felt after having sinned.

It is not only a feeling, a psychological anxiety, or a vague impression of fear.

It is like a sadness for having defrauded God and wounded our neighbor, who is a visible image of Jesus Christ. It is a sincere desire not to sin again. It is repentance for not having acted as a child of God, as a disciple of Jesus, and as a temple of the Holy Spirit. So it means detesting what we have thought, said, done, and omitted contrary to the law of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Only those who are humble can feel sadness for their sins.

Put yourself in the presence of God, like the publican spoken of in the Gospel, who did not dare to lift his eyes from the ground and repeated humbly, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Lk 18:13).

Reflect calmly in order to tell God, your Father, in the best manner possible, how it burdens you to have offended him and that you trust in his mercy and forgiveness. Ask him to give you the strength to be more faithful in the future. In a word, ask for the grace of this sacrament: that in place of a heart of stone, he give you one of flesh to serve him with love (cf. Ez 11:19).

Offer the Lord a sincere and effective resolution, and adopt concrete measures to avoid the occasions of sin.

If God offers you the grace of weeping for your sins, thank him humbly.

If you do not feel anything, don’t worry, what matters most of all is your sincere intention.

## **5. With the Confessor**

Talk with him trustingly and clearly so that he won’t need to ask you any questions.

Start by saying when you made your last confession, and then recount your sins. Do not add any unnecessary details, but do not leave out any circumstances that significantly increase the seriousness of a sin committed.

When it comes to mortal sins, mention, if possible, the number of times you have committed them, at least approximately: this is a necessary element of judgment so that the confessor can give you advice on your actual situation.

If the confessor asks you something about your confession, answer him with sincerity and without being evasive.

After making your confession, listen to the priest attentively and ask simple questions if you need clarification.

The confessor will tell you what penance you will need to perform.

At the end, you will receive forgiveness of your sins in the name of God the Father through the merits of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

You are reconciled with God and with the Church!

## **6. Penance**

What does this mean?

It is a good work that you must do in reparation for your sins.

Let's be clear: the great reparation for our sins is that which Jesus Christ has offered to the Father of Heaven with his life, his Passion, and his redemptive Death on the Cross. Compared to this, our good works are like grains of sand, but God looks at them as an expression of our repentance and desire for expiation.

The priest can assign various kinds of penance for you. Sometimes it will be a prayer or help for someone in need, or it can even be a renunciation or privation. It could also consist in doing your usual duties—for example, participation in Sunday Mass—in a spirit of penance.

The penance is usually proportional to the seriousness of the sins committed, but often it is relatively lenient, so it would be a good idea to add your own works of penance to those assigned by the priest.

It may sometimes be difficult for you to perform the penance assigned by the confessor—if so, tell him so he can change it. But don't be too quick to make excuses. You'll get more out of your penance if it involves some effort.

You are not required to perform the penance before receiving Holy Communion, but try to do it as soon as possible.

If you happen to forget the penance given to you by the priest, decide on another for yourself.

## **7. One More Thing**

There's more?

Yes. The Holy Spirit has reawakened a desire for conversion in your heart. He has given you the grace to overcome your fear, shame, and laziness, and to go to confession. Jesus Christ has given his priests the power to forgive you: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:23). God the Father has waited for you with mercy. The Virgin Mary has prayed for your conversion. Your guardian angel has also contributed. Other Christians have given you a good example and perhaps good advice that has helped you draw near to God. Do you see? It has taken a lot of help for you to settle your debt. It is fitting that you pause for a moment to thank God and the Virgin Mary. It is also fitting that you pray for those who, known to you or unknown, have helped you.

And now, remember the words of Jesus: "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you" (Jn 5:14). Begin again,

with a sincere and generous spirit, to love God in everything and before all else,  
and love your brothers and sisters as Christ loves them.



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