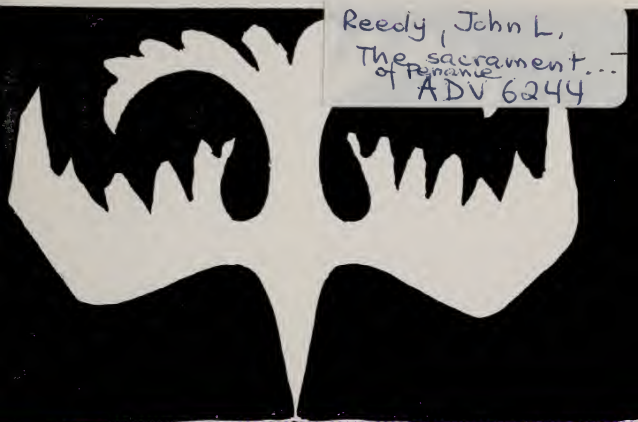


THE SACRAMENT OF
penance
A PRAYER OF LOVE

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The Sacrament of
PENANCE
A Prayer of Love

by Rev. John L. Reedy, C.S.C.



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Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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Deacidified

Far too many Catholics look on the sacrament of Penance as some kind of supernatural vending machine. You put in a list of your sins, crank it with a minimum amount of sincere sorrow, and out comes an absolution.

This comparison may sound irreverent, but ask the ordinary Catholic you meet on the street what his first thought is when he hears the word "confession." He will probably say: "a way of getting rid of mortal sin."

He should say: "a special form of prayer."

Penance is one of the seven great sources of supernatural life by which the Christian takes giant strides toward God. He walks the paths of mystery and divine life, even while on the human level he seems to live a drab and monotonous routine as a bank clerk, elevator operator or used car salesman.

The sacrament of Penance, like every other act of worship, must be seen in relation to the supernatural life. We must realize that there is a whole world of supernatural reality hovering over the world which we see and feel and touch. And God has called us to be a part of this world.

The term "supernatural life" is not ecclesiastical jargon, hollow as the platitudes in most second-rate political speeches. It is a life which is real, vibrant and inescap-

able. We would commit the ultimate blasphemy if we believed that Christ hung on Calvary for the sake of a platitude.

He spoke of life; He meant life. His teachings gave an eternal importance to every action we perform, every word we speak. He called us to live the life of God through knowledge and love.

Christ Instituted Penance

It is within this framework that we should see the sacrament of Penance. This was one of the chief fountains of life that Christ gave us before He ascended to the Father. During the 40 days after He rose from the dead, Our Lord taught His Apostles many things. One of the instructions He gave them was: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

With these words Christ gave his Apostles and their successors a frightening power. With the same words, He asked us to do what He Himself had done when He took the sin of Adam and turned it into an occasion for worshiping the Father. Because of Adam's sin, the Son of God became man and offered to the Father the most glorious prayer that could rise from human nature.

And when Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance, He asked us to take our petty, trivial faults of weakness and malice

and turn them into occasions of worship. If we follow His example, we can say of our own failings what the Easter Vigil liturgy says of Adam's sin: "*O felix culpa,*" "O happy fault!"

Keep in mind that Penance, like all the other sacraments, is a source of that special, supernatural life which has been given to us. When we receive the sacrament worthily, God floods our souls with an increase or a restoration of sanctifying grace (which is our supernatural life).

It happens this way. In looking at our sins, we must also look at God. The more we understand our sins, the more we recognize our fallen nature, so much more do we realize the majesty of God. Moreover, this self-examination nourishes our love. We simply cannot look on His continuing forgiveness and on our own repeated ingratitude without being stimulated to love Him more deeply.

Embarrassment in the Confessional

Knowledge and love are the blood stream of the divine life. This is the activity of the Trinity — each of the Divine Persons knowing and loving the Others perfectly.

Christ takes this knowledge and love of God which comes from our honest recognition of our sins; He blesses it and raises it to the supernatural level by the action

of His grace; He makes it possible for us to know and love God as He knows and loves Himself. This is the divine life, the life of mystery and wonder to which the bank clerk and the elevator operator are called.

The sacrament of Penance is directed toward our weakness — we can consider it a kind of spiritual life preserver. But it is also directed toward God as an act of worship, a special form of prayer.

Such a view of the sacrament has little in common with our vague feeling of embarrassment and futility as we stand in line outside the confessional on Saturday evening.

We find it hard to believe that what happens in this dark, stuffy enclosure is directly connected with Adam and the prophets, with Calvary and Bethlehem. Only by faith can we realize that the angels and saints anxiously await our words of sorrow. No authority other than that of Christ could convince us that our routine reception of the sacrament stirs the waters of eternity and sends out ripples of prayer that will endure forever.

Why Dredge up Old Faults?

And when there is no serious sin, another fact bothers us. We examine our conscience and find that our confession sounds very much like all the others we have

made during the past year. What good do we accomplish by dredging up these faults again? Can we honestly say that we feel a sincere sorrow for them? Are we being truthful when we say that we are firmly determined to avoid them in the future?

All of us have a hard core of common sense. We look for reasons and meanings — especially for those duties we don't like to fulfill. We tend to rebel, at least inwardly, when we can't find these meanings.

You've probably had this reaction when you saw a baseball player give that nervous right-hand twitch that's supposed to be a sign of the cross just before he steps into the batter's box — or when you saw a prizefighter use the same gesture just before he started to pound his opponent into a staggering, bloody stupor. You wondered what this ritual had to do with the worship of God. It smells of superstition and voodoo. The fighter or baseball player may mean it as a sincere prayer, but it strikes us as a meaningless habit. Our common sense rebels against giving the ritual any importance.

I believe that many Catholics have somewhat the same feelings about their regular routine confessions. The fact that they continue to go to confession frequently says something about their spirit of faith and obedience in carrying out the instructions of their priests; it doesn't

necessarily say anything about their real understanding of the importance of the sacrament.

If confession is merely a spiritual scrub-down to get rid of mortal sin, then the fact is that most Catholics do not have to make frequent use of it.

Many priests feel that it's not easy to commit a mortal sin — especially for the person who is making the ordinary, sincere effort to live a good life.

Was It REALLY a Mortal Sin?

Some actions which, at first sight, seem to be serious faults lose much of their guilt when checked out against the three requirements for mortal sin: (1) the action itself must be a *serious violation* of God's law; (2) we must *fully understand* what we are doing and see it as a serious offense against Almighty God; (3) we must really *decide* to perform the action and not merely be swept into it by emotion or by circumstances.

A potential convert recently presented me with a cold, logical objection which many life-long Catholics feel, but which few of them put into words.

"You say I *have* to go to confession only when I have a mortal sin to confess; you also say that I *should* go to confession often — even once a week. I don't think that I'm seriously offending God — cut-

ting myself off from His friendship — every week. In fact, I don't know that I've ever done this. So where's the consistency of your position?"

The consistency of my position was lost in the fact that I had done a poor job of explaining the real meaning of the sacrament of Penance to this person. It frequently happens that we priests, who tend to see this sacrament from the other side of the grating, are so concerned with forming true consciences on what constitutes mortal and venial sin that we play down the sacrament's real importance as an act of worship.

Christ told us to pray always. No one has any trouble in seeing why we should not limit our prayers to those times when we are on the brink of disaster and need His help to get us out of trouble. All of us understand that this kind of prayer is like making a visit to a Church — to get out of the rain. We owe our Creator more than this.

Prayer Is a Normal Human Reflex

It's a perfectly normal thing for me to thank God for a particular joy or success that has come up in my life; it's a normal response for me to tell Him "I'm sorry" after I've lost my temper or cut someone with a sharp word; it's almost a reflex

action for me to ask Him to protect and direct those I love.

Well, the sacrament of Penance is another form of prayer — which has a special character and special effect. Christ raised this particular form of worship to the dignity of a sacrament and gave it these special effects because He wanted us to use it regularly in honoring the Father. That is how we should look on it.

To understand the real meaning of the sacrament of Penance we should clear up a confusion in terminology. Theology and the formal documents of the Church generally use this expression: “sacrament of Penance.” Maybe the confusion is caused by an accident of the English language. The one word “penance” has two meanings. It refers both to the sacrament itself and to the works of satisfaction imposed by the priest after he has heard our sins.

At any rate, most of us refer to the sacrament as “confession.”

Confessing — telling our sins — is certainly part of this act of worship, but it’s not the central part.

You can see this when you recognize that there are times when we can receive the sacrament without mentioning our sins in detail.

For example, a short time ago I visited a friend who was recovering from a serious illness in a hospital ward. He wanted to

go to confession, but the beds on either side were so close that he couldn't speak without being overheard by the other patients.

In these circumstances, I told him to simply state his sorrow for all the sins of his past life, especially for those he had committed since his last confession. I was able to give him absolution and confer the sacrament without unnecessary embarrassment.

During a war or at the time of a serious accident, a priest can give "general absolution" to a group of people without hearing their confessions individually. Of course, at their next regular confession they must mention any mortal sins that have not been previously confessed in detail. But the general absolution is valid; the sins are forgiven; the sacrament is conferred, and the person is restored to the state of grace even though he hasn't given the details of the particular sins.

What Is Absolutely Necessary?

What, then, is absolutely necessary? What must be present whenever I receive the sacrament of Penance validly?

Contrition. Contrition which involves two things — sorrow for our sins based on supernatural motives and the determination to avoid serious sin in the future.

Confession forces us to look at our faults

and failings with honesty. When we examine our conscience in preparation for this sacrament, we must recognize what we are and what we have done.

This can be a painful procedure which shatters the dreams of self-glorification which make us feel so warm and righteous. It's like looking at a sharp, close-up portrait of ourselves before the photographer has touched it up to eliminate our skin blemishes, wrinkles and double chin.

Once we look at ourselves as we are and at God as He is, we are disposed to say: "My God, I'm sorry! I'm sorry that I have abused the gifts of intelligence, will and body which You have given me. I'm sorry that I have failed to respond to the graces You have offered. I'm sorry that I have not given You the honor and adoration which is Your due. Instead, I have lived my days as though the world revolved around my interests and pleasures, as though You existed only at those times when I stumbled into serious trouble and had to call upon You for help.

"I'm sorry that I have repeatedly refused to recognize that my only reason for being on earth is to know and love and honor Your perfections. I'm sorry that I have dishonored You by warping the way of life You set down for me in your commandments and in the teachings of Your

Son. My God, I'm sorry . . . sorry . . . sorry!"

These are the dispositions which are at the very essence of the sacrament of Penance; this is the way in which "confession" is a prayer, an act of worship; this is the truth which Christ meant for us to recognize when He instituted this sacrament.

There's one trap that's hard to avoid when the sincere Catholic looks at his confession — the danger of confusing his feelings with his intentions. Feelings or emotions frequently follow our convictions, but sometimes they don't.

Is the Will Dependent upon Emotions?

If you *feel* sorrow in the sacrament of Penance, fine. If you don't, it doesn't make much difference — as long as your will, your intention, is firmly rooted in contrition.

And you can be fairly sure, from the very fact that you are going to confession, that your basic intention is good.

The most important thought you can keep in mind about the sacrament of Penance is this awareness that sorrow, contrition, is the most important element. Remember this as we go on to look at the element that gives us the most trouble, the confessing of our sins.

When we have serious doubts about whether a sin was mortal or venial, we are

not obliged to confess it. It's easy to deceive ourselves in this matter by talking our consciences into doubts which didn't exist at the time of the action. (That's why many priests say it's a good practice to mention these actions when we go to confession.)

Still, the Church's teaching is quite clear. When there is a serious doubt about the gravity of the sin, we don't have to confess it. If we should happen to be wrong, God gives us the benefit of the doubt, and this action is forgiven along with all the unmentioned venial sins which come under our general act of contrition.

A Practical Guide

With regard to venial sins, the rule is simple: tell those that you want to mention; you aren't obliged to confess any particular venial sin. We may choose to mention particular ones when asking for forgiveness, but this is entirely a matter of our own choice.

Why isn't it necessary to list all of them? Because venial sin alone will never destroy our bond of friendship with God. As long as we protect that friendship and have a general contrition for any offenses we may have committed against Almighty God, there's no need to catalogue every fault and failing. The unmentioned venial sins are forgiven along with the rest when we

receive absolution — as long as we are sorry for them.

A special word should be said about occasions of sin. Putting yourself in an occasion of sin is like fooling around with a live wire while standing on a wet basement floor — and then pretending to be surprised when you are bounced into next winter's supply of preserved peaches.

Dubious — and Dangerous — Situations

Put a young teen-age couple in a flashy convertible, parked on a bluff overlooking a moonlit lake, with soft dance music coming from the car radio—and they *might* be talking about the trigonometry test they have to take the next day. But regardless of what they are talking about, the situation had a red danger sign flashing on and off.

That's an easy one to see — especially if you're the girl's father.

But do you recognize that this particular bridge club is an occasion of sin for you if the small talk almost always comes around to the clever, clinical, and vicious surgery on the characters of any women who aren't present?

Do you see that the third double-scotch on the rocks can be an occasion of sin for you if you're the type of fellow who gets "playfully amorous" after the second one?

Do you understand that the new living room set can be an occasion of sin if it leads you to badger your husband into an unwise use of the family savings—or, more likely, the family credit?

There's nothing mysterious about occasions of sin for the person who is able to take an honest look at himself. He can see, on the basis of past performance, that he is likely to commit this sin if he puts himself in these circumstances.

Of course, there's always the chance that this time he might not slip; but, in effect, he's saying: I know that I might seriously offend Almighty God if I go to this place, see this person, read this book. But I'm willing to take that chance for the sake of the personal satisfaction I get from the action.

Some Moral Risks Are Necessary

If it's necessary for us to take some moral risks for a serious reason, we can do so. As long as we use all the precautions available. An ambulance driver might have to exceed the speed limit to save a patient's life; but even in taking these chances, he's obliged to keep the siren wailing, the red light flashing, and his driving as safe as possible for the fulfillment of his duty.

Placing yourself in circumstances in which there is a good possibility that you

will commit serious sin without a sufficiently important reason is a mortal sin in itself.

The third element of the sacrament of Penance — the purpose of amendment — is a cause of worry for many sincere Catholics who are trying to lead good lives. They torment themselves with doubts because when they promise to avoid the sin in the future they are reasonably sure that they will be confessing it next time they kneel before a priest and ask for absolution.

If you're genuinely sorry for the sins you have committed, don't worry about the purpose of amendment. You can't have sincere sorrow without intending to avoid the sin in the future.

“. . . But the Flesh Is Weak”

We all know that there's a big difference between our good intentions and our knowledge of our own weaknesses. The husband who is an alcoholic can look at the bruises on his wife's face and say with the deepest, most heartfelt emotion: "I'm sorry! I feel like cutting off my hand when I see what I have done to the person I love."

At the same time, he may know himself well enough to suspect that when the pressures mount up again, he may take the first drink. This doesn't make his sorrow

less sincere. Anyone who believes that it does simply doesn't know the hell of remorse endured by the alcoholic or drug addict who is trying to recover.

No matter what we may think about the likelihood of our committing this sin again, our sorrow must be such that at this moment of confession, we are firmly determined to do everything in our power — aided by the grace of God — to avoid offending God in the future.

Without this determination, our protest of regret is nothing but shallow hypocrisy.

When we studied the sacrament of Penance in the catechism, we found that one of the questions asked was: What are the effects of this sacrament? The answer, at least as I learned it, centered around the results of the sacrament in our own souls. It overlooked the fact that this prayer, like every other one, has the primary effect of giving worship to God.

In other words, even if Christ had given no other special effects to our act of penance, the good man — simply as a creature of God — would be obliged to offer up the homage of his sorrow for the offenses he had committed.

Marvelous Effects of Penance

But Christ did attach other, marvelous, effects to this sacrament.

Like all the other sacraments, Penance

is a great source of sanctifying grace. This term "sanctifying grace" is a mysterious label which all Catholics use when they talk about their religion. Whether they clearly understand the real meaning and significance of the term is open to question.

Sanctifying grace is not just the condition of being free from mortal sin, though many Catholics think of it this way. Instead, it's a supernatural reality, freely given to the individual Christian by Almighty God. Its purpose is to make the Christian soul pleasing to God and capable of receiving the supernatural destiny which God has offered to man.

You can't really *imagine* what sanctifying grace is — and that's part of our problem. We understand the things we can see and feel and touch; and grace isn't something tangible.

But we do know other realities (real things) which we can't grasp with our senses. Can you taste or smell a thought? Yet, you recognize that you have thoughts. They are spiritual (nonmaterial) realities we accept and use in our everyday life.

During a war a soldier might come upon two men lying next to each other — one dead, the other sleeping. They might look practically the same, but he knows that the one body is simply a material object

which should be buried reverently out of respect for what it once was. The other is completely different. It is a man possessing dignity, rights, human relationships, a future. It is *alive*.

The difference is not simply that one body is breathing and the other is not. Breath is a sign of life, not life itself. We recognize and deal with life as a reality, even though we can't see it or feel it or touch it.

Sanctifying Grace Desperately Needed

The same is true of sanctifying grace. We know that it exists and that it can be possessed by man because Christ, Who is God, told us so. We know that it is a thing that can be increased or diminished, gained or lost. Christ also told us that its possession or absence makes all the difference in the world in the life of man. The degree of sanctifying grace we possess at the moment of death, when our period of trial has run out, will determine the degree of our happiness in heaven.

In a sense, the soul which possesses sanctifying grace already exists in heaven because it exists in the knowledge and love of God. This is the essence of heaven — knowing and loving God as He actually is. This is the meaning of the expression, "the Beatific Vision."

What separates us from heaven itself is

the fact that our knowledge and love is incomplete—blurred by our mortality. Because it is incomplete, we can lose it through our sins. Nevertheless, in a real way, the Christian begins his heaven, his life as a saint, at the moment he is baptized.

Therefore, simply because Christ gave us this sacrament of Penance as one of the great sources of sanctifying grace, we should make frequent use of it—aside from the other effects it has on our souls.

But each of the sacraments, in addition to increasing the sanctifying grace in our souls, has a specific supernatural effect—an effect which sets it off from all the others. This is what we mean by the *sacramental* grace.

This particular help which comes through the sacrament of penance points to the future. Whenever we mention a specific sin in confession—one committed since our last good confession or one that has already been forgiven in a previous confession—God offers us an extraordinary support in our struggle to avoid this sin in the future.

Everyone Has His "Special Sins"

If you know yourself at all, you will admit that there are particular sins which are your specialty. They gather on you the way lint collects on a black suit.

Don't be afraid to acknowledge these weaknesses. Everyone has them. The weaknesses themselves aren't shameful. They are part of our fallen humanity. But where there is a particular weakness, we need a particular help.

Christ offered us this support in the sacramental grace of Penance. Whenever I mention in confession that I have been guilty of entertaining sensual thoughts, I receive a very special supernatural help which will strengthen me in my efforts to overcome this temptation in the future. It's no gold-seal guarantee that I won't fall into the sin again, but it channels the grace into my particular needs.

Of course, the sacrament of Penance does remove the guilt of sin — mortal sin and venial. Now guilt and punishment are not the same thing. Punishment is the effect of guilt. In other words, when we make a good confession, God says to us, through the words of His priest: "I accept your sorrow; I forgive your offense; I welcome you back into My friendship and love. So that order and justice might be maintained there are still punishments to be satisfied."

Penance Removes Some Punishment

Some of the punishment is taken away by our confession itself. The eternal punishment — hell — no longer hangs over our

head. And even some of the temporal punishment (which we usually think of in terms of the sufferings of purgatory) will ordinarily be canceled out. The amount of temporal punishment forgiven depends on the dispositions (the attitudes of mind and will) that we bring to the sacrament — the sincerity of our sorrow, the depth of our contrition, the firmness of our intention to avoid the sin in the future, the intensity of our love of God which motivates all these other dispositions.

Such are the chief effects of the sacrament.

All that has gone before is an attempt to help you see Penance not simply as a governor's pardon for a condemned prisoner, but as a regular and natural part of our prayer life, an ordinary instrument of progress in the tremendously exciting supernatural life which God has given to each of us.

If we hold on to this view of the sacrament, it will influence the way we make our confession.

First, we should make our examination of conscience a meaningful part of our prayer. A great many Catholics, when they are kneeling in a quiet church before confession, run through a mental process of this kind: It's been about a month since the last time I was here. I haven't com-

mitted any sins that I'm sure are mortal during this time, but there were some thoughts and actions that I might have given some consent to, so I'll mention them — just to make sure. After all, they're part of the routine.

Then, on venial sins, I haven't any idea of how many times I've lost my temper or been guilty of uncharitableness or crowded the truth so far that I might have been lying. So I'll take a guess at an average number and use that. It's about the same number I always mention for this particular sin because I can't see that I'm noticeably better or worse than I have been in the past.

Or the person might take one of the lists of common sins printed in many prayer books and run through it, saying: Yes, this action might have offended against the obligation to avoid servile work on Sunday. I'll add this to my tally sheet; this language might have given bad example to my children — I'll mention it. . . .

The dominant theme of both these approaches is routineness. It resembles the plodding route of those old horses that used to pull milk wagons over the same ground day after day. We cover the same territory; we stop at all the familiar places, but there's no spirit, life, or understanding.

A Much Better Way

Try another approach. When you kneel down to make your examination of conscience, start as you start any other prayer. Make yourself aware that you are in the presence of God. Think of God as your Creator and Saviour. Recognize that you owe Him your life, your talents, any success or happiness you have achieved. He freely gave you the gift of faith and the opportunity for an eternity of happiness with Him.

If you have seriously offended Him in any way since your last confession, the mortal sin will stand out like a blotch of ink on a clean sheet of paper. You won't miss it, and you won't wonder about the number of times you have been guilty.

After this, think of the life you should be leading. What kind of a husband or wife should you be if you are taking Christ's teaching seriously? What kind of a father or mother? How should you treat the neighbors, the person who works next to you in the office, your parents, your employer? It's not so much what you owe them as what you owe God. Make yourself realize that God is really present in each of these people you meet in your daily life — even though His presence is sometimes obscured by ugly or irritating character traits.

Don't give too much of your time to those offenses which occur without any thought or deliberation — the momentary burst of anger or the thoughtless use of God's name which is no more than a habit of speech. Concentrate on the deliberate ways in which you pull back from Christ's invitation to love and worship the Father completely . . . with your whole heart, with your whole mind, with your whole soul.

Look at those things you should have done. The kind word, the sympathetic gesture that would have recognized Christ in your neighbor; the extra bit of generosity that could have been given to your husband or wife when, in fact, you insisted on "your rights"; the added effort you could have given to your job, even when you knew your employer wasn't watching; the opportunities for prayer that you've missed; the good example you haven't given; the injustices you've witnessed without protest.

When Does Imperfection Become Sinful?

Certainly not all these omissions are sins. But it's precisely this mentality that we want to avoid: "How far can I go without committing sin?"

Remember that the essential of the sacrament of Penance is sincere sorrow at having offended God. An awareness of the

opportunities we have lost can take the dullness and routine out of our examination of conscience.

Two additional points should be made here.

Remember that you don't have to come up with something original in each of your confessions. You can make a perfectly good confession by saying sincerely: "Father, I don't think I've committed any serious sins since my last confession. I can't recall any deliberate venial sins during this time. But I am deeply sorry for all the sins of my past life — especially those committed against (charity or purity or obedience or any other virtue)."

Secondly, to get the full benefit from confession, there's another practice you should keep in mind. There's a difference between cataloging sins committed and trying to reveal the state of your soul to your confessor. (The sacrament of Penance is a prayer which has medicinal effects.)

Searching Our Spiritual Depth

For example, after mentioning your sins, you might add something like this: "Father, the life seems to have gone out of my religious practices. I still go to the sacraments and try to recite my prayers, but I seem to be just going through the

paces. It doesn't seem to mean anything to me."

Or: "Father, I find that I'm becoming more critical about everyone around me — my wife, my children, my secretary. It's not that I'm doing it on purpose, but I seem to be making life hard for all of them."

The point is that there is a difference between mentioning an individual sin and mentioning a habit or pattern of life that affects your spiritual growth. The sacramental grace can apply to these patterns as well as to the particular sins. And the confessor's advice might be of greater value to you on these broader aspects of your life than on the special sins you confess.

This is, of course, one of the reasons why it is good to have a regular confessor. Though he will probably never know your name or be able to recognize your face, he can come to know your soul — its strengths and weaknesses — as your doctor knows your body.

It's perfectly all right to "shop" for the right confessor; in fact, it's a good idea to do so. Although every priest speaks with the voice of Christ when he says, "*Ego te absolvo . . .*" still, it's true that Christ uses human beings — each with his own mannerisms, insights, personality — in His priesthood. You will be able to talk to one confessor better than to another;

one will "understand" you better than another. But once you've finished with the shopping and discover a good confessor for yourself, go to him regularly and frequently.

Keep Confession Simple and Brief

Make your confession simple; make it brief. Don't bother with all the details of place, time, and how it happened — unless one of these circumstances changes the character of the sin. (If the man you punched in the nose happens to be your pastor, it makes a difference — sacrilege is involved.) Aside from that, just give the details that your confessor requests. He may want to know more about the circumstances to advise you on ways of avoiding the sin in the future. If so, he will ask the questions.

But always keep in mind the essential point. The sacrament of Penance is directed toward God, not toward yourself. It is an act of worship, not a self-help tool for character-building.

As an act of worship, it takes its meaning from the supreme prayer offered by Christ on the Cross. And this thought returns us to the point at which we started. Penance is one of the great life-giving sources in the supernatural world which surrounds and absorbs us.

After Adam sinned, leading all men into

the state of sin, all creation cried out for a restoration of God's honor. A tree, a waterfall, a rock cannot rebel against its creator. It honors God's majesty simply by being what it is — a tree, a waterfall, a rock. Only man, of the whole material universe, could rebel.

Refusal to Accept Our Human Role

This is how we offend God — by refusing to be what we are destined to be. It's as though a tree could say: I refuse to be a tree. I shall not bear fruit or give shade from the burning sun, or grow in a lovely symmetry of branches. Instead, I shall develop as a great, shapeless, barren, ugly mass of green. Such a tree would be a monstrosity in God's creation; it would rebel against the order and design which exists in all things; it would cut itself off from its Creator's purpose and stand as a tragic, wasted, lonely orphan in the world of God's making.

Such is man after his sin.

Christ came to restore meaning and purpose to the lives of men, to absorb mankind into his own life of knowledge and love. He took upon Himself the guilt of man's madness and mounted the Cross, as God-Man, to offer sorrow, repentance, purpose of amendment, worship to the Father.

Now we come close to the mystery of the

sacramental life. In this darkened, stuffy confessional, with the muffled sound of traffic breaking in upon our whispered words, our sorrow, contrition and love are swept up into the explosion of love and worship which the Son of God offered to His heavenly Father.

Our cheap, ugly acts of selfishness, sensuality and absurd pride become the occasion for an act of adoration which is made up of the voices of all men and spoken by the lips of Christ. Our sorrow, which seemed such a routine formula, is joined to that of Peter and Paul, the Magdalen and Augustine. We no longer live our lives alone, or express remorse merely for our own sins. We live the life of Christ's penitent Mystical Body and speak the contrition of sinful mankind.

The Saviour offered love and satisfaction, not for His own guilt, but because God's Majesty called for sorrow and repentance. In the same way, my use of the sacrament of Penance should not be motivated so much by the fact that I have sinned and I shall be held responsible, as by the fact that sin has been committed and expiation is due.

This is why Christ raised man's sorrow to the dignity of a sacrament. This is the meaning of the sacrament of Penance.

A True Examination of Conscience

For those who are so used to reviewing a list of sins in preparation for confession that they would feel uncomfortable without it, I would offer another kind of list. Here are a few considerations to reflect upon during your examination of conscience.

1. God wants to love us; He wants to be loved in return — that's all that matters.
2. Anything that gets in the way of this love gets in the way of our religion. This is the meaning of sin.
3. God doesn't want us to be tortured over details and insecurity. These concerns distract us from love and worship.
4. Sorrow for sin is a particular form of love of God.
5. God wants to bless this prayer of love. He does so in the sacrament of Penance.
6. Sharing the Christ-Life is the Supernatural life; and the Christ-Life is one of reparation. Christ offered the supreme satisfaction on Calvary. Our part is to unite ourselves to His sacrifice through our sorrow.

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