3.5

SACRAMENTS

THE HEALING POWER OF CONFESSION



Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer

1. Read John John 8:3–11.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

In fourth-century Milan, there lived a talented professor of rhetoric.

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While one of his parents continually tried to get him to convert to Christianity, he had decided to follow some of the pagan philosophies of his day. Thankfully, through a series of friendships, the professor began to reconsider Christianity, and over time, he became convinced that it was true.

There was just one problem: His attachment to sexual sin overwhelmed him and kept him from conversion.

The professor tried to forget about his struggle until, one day, a simple Christian man named Ponticianus came to his house for business. Upon seeing the professor's copy of St. Paul's epistles, Ponticianus told the story of how he had converted to the Catholic Faith. While they were speaking, the professor was reminded of his own struggles and became ashamed that he, who was much smarter, more successful, and more famous, was unable to do what his simple friend had nobly done: give up his sins and start living as a Christian.

After saying goodbye to Ponticianus, the professor went into his garden to weep. There he considered the choice that lay before him: He could remain on the fence with his faith, believing in his head but not following God in his heart in how he lived each day — or he could turn his life around and commit to following Christ.

His mind began to race. On the one hand, his lust taunted him: He realized that, if he chose Christ, he would have to give up sexual sin forever. On the other hand, the life of chastity also began to appeal to him: He recalled the many Christian men and women who were able to rise above their slavery to lust because God gave them the strength to do what they could not do on their own.

During this interior battle, the professor heard voices of children playing and repeating the phrase, "take and read, take and read."

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God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.

— Pope Francis



The children's words inspired him to pick up his book of St. Paul's epistles and read the first passage he found. He read: "[L]et us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:13–14).

A light of certainty flooded the professor's heart, and all his doubt faded away. He repented of his sins, was baptized, and eventually became a priest and then a bishop. He became one of the greatest saints and theologians that the Church has ever known: St. Augustine of Hippo. His autobiography — *Confessions*, where he tells his story — is one of the most read books in history.

DISCUSS

What is your initial reaction to the story of St. Augustine? Do you notice people having similar struggles today?

REPENTANCE

Repentance is a key disposition in the Christian life. In Scripture, the word "repent" (*metanoia*) means to "turn around" or "turn back." It involves a fundamental turning around in our life, turning away from sin and turning toward Christ. The Catholic Church explains it

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this way: "Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end to sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed" (CCC 1431).

Repentance is necessary to remain in right relationship with God, our loving Father and creator. The sin in our hearts should cause us great sorrow because sin separates us from God. Our sin motivates us to repent so that we can return to union with him.

But repentance is not a one-time act. It's an ongoing habit for a disciple of Jesus who wants to grow. The Bible challenges us, "rend your hearts" (Jl 2:13), which means to tear open our hearts, to look inside and see what's really there. Then we must have the courage to remove anything that does not belong in the heart of a Christian. Whether it's big sins like the sexual impurity Augustine struggled with or the hundreds of petty sins that plague many Christians — little grudges we hold, a tendency to complain, envy, self-centeredness, lack of kindness, lack of trust, pride, discouragement, wasting time — we all have plenty of sins in our hearts of which we can repent!

But there are several things that can hold us back from true repentance. Let's look at three.

- ***Rationalization: I Don't Need to Repent***

  First, we might not think we have much to repent of. Our relativistic culture often avoids talking about what is right or wrong. Because of this, it is easy to look at our own lives and think, "I'm a good person. I haven't committed any horrible crimes. Everyone else does this. I know other people who are much worse than I am." But God doesn't grade on a curve. True disciples of Jesus don't try to rationalize their sin. When a part of us senses we might have done something wrong or we're doing something that goes against what Jesus and his Church teaches, the next step is to repent: to admit our fault, trust in God's mercy, and try to change our behavior instead of trying to justify our sins, convincing ourselves what we're doing is okay.

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Fear of Repenting: I Don't Want to Change!

Second, we might be afraid to let go of certain sins. Augustine knew what he was doing was wrong, but he didn't want to give up his bad habits. Before his conversion, he once even prayed, "Lord, give me chastity... only not yet!"[1] We, too, might be afraid to give up a sin, perhaps because we fear what others will think of us or we wonder whether life will lose its fun. But we need to see what Augustine came to see: that God's plan is for our happiness, and when we follow God's plan, we always find a greater joy than we would otherwise, no matter the cost. The joy of the Gospel is so much better than our sins.

Despair: I Can't Be Forgiven

Third, we might doubt we are capable of repentance. Like Augustine, we might believe we are so enslaved to sin that turning our lives around is impossible. We might delay and convince ourselves that, maybe later when we have our lives put together, we can repent and believe in God. Jesus, however, doesn't work like this. We don't need to "put our lives in order" so that we can begin living in friendship with Jesus; we need to entrust our lives to Jesus so that he can put our lives in order! We cannot do it on our own. But with his help, we can be forgiven, changed, and made new.

Sometimes we are so ashamed of our sins — sexual sins, addictions, bad habits, or other serious offenses — that we think it's impossible for God to forgive us. However, this is a lie. In fact, compared to the ocean of God's mercy, our sins are like a single drop of water. God's mercy totally envelops our sins, no matter how serious. He always forgives when we come seeking his mercy.

DISCUSS

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If you were to rend your heart open and look inside, what weakness would you find there that separates you most often from God? Which of these three obstacles — rationalization, fear of letting go of certain sins or thinking you can't change — might hold you back from true repentance?

CONFESSION

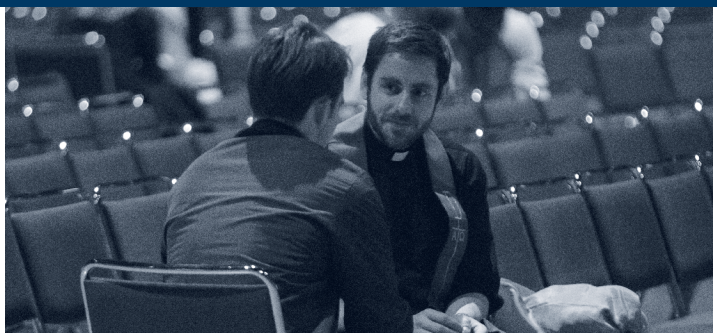
A crucial step toward full repentance is going to confession. For many Catholics, confession is one of the most freeing, liberating, life-giving experiences of their lives. Instead of holding on to the burden of their sin and guilt, they are able to give it to God, who not only forgives them, but also embraces them as a loving Father and rejoices at their returning home, just like in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32).

For some people, however, confession is scary and misunderstood. We might be hesitant to confess our sins, afraid of what the priest might think. Or we may not understand this sacrament, thinking, "Why confess to a priest? Isn't God the one who forgives me?" Or maybe we are just nervous and unsure of how to make a good confession. Let's address some of these concerns.

First, the sacrament of reconciliation (confession) is instituted by Christ as the place he wants us to go to deal with our sins. Jesus said to his apostles, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22–23). Just as the Father sent Jesus to forgive the sins of the world, so too are his apostles (and their successors) called to forgive sins.

But why did Jesus set it up this way, instead of simply having us pray to God? Why involve a priest?

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God has always used human beings as instruments in his plan of salvation. Whether it was Moses leading the people out of Egypt or the prophet Elijah raising a girl from the dead, God has worked through his human leaders, even if they are fallen and sinful. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised when we see God still involving his leaders, the priests and bishops, in his work today. Think of the priest in confession as God's instrument of mercy — or, in the words of St. Paul, "God's fellow worker" (1 Cor 3:9) — and having a "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). It's not the priest who is forgiving our sins, but Jesus working through the priest.

A second reason confession is so important is that Scripture tells us to "confess [our] sins to one another" (Jas 5:16). When we have to verbalize our sins to another person, we are forced to face the truth about ourselves at a much deeper level. We speak our sins. We name them. And we do so in the presence of God's representative here on earth, the priest. We also have the privilege of hearing the priest say, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace." It's so important to hear those words, to have confidence that God has indeed forgiven us. Some of the most profound moments in friendship or marriage come when we say, "I am sorry," and we hear our friend or our beloved say, "I forgive you." How much more profound it is when we speak the words "I am sorry" not just in the silence of our hearts, but out loud to God's representative, the priest — and how much more beautiful it is when we hear Christ say to us through the priest, "I absolve you of all your sins"!

A third reason to go to confession regularly is that the sacrament gives us grace to heal and overcome our weaknesses. God doesn't just pardon our sins in confession: He gets to the root of our sins and heals our deeper wounds. This is another reason we should desire to go to confession regularly, at least once a month.

Finally, sometimes people are just nervous about going to confession or don't know what to do once they get there. There are plenty of guides to confession available; see the "Additional Resources" section for some options. As you prepare, don't be afraid to ask for help! Friends, leaders in your church or even the priest himself during your confession can help you make a great confession.

Jesus doesn't want you to remain stuck in your sin. He has a great plan for you. Don't let your sins hold you back. Come to him in confession and receive Christ's forgiveness, healing, and grace to overcome your weaknesses.

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Be ashamed when you sin. Do not be ashamed when you repent.

— St. John Chrysostom

DISCUSS

How long has it been since you have been to confession? Do you have any hesitations about confession? Take some time to discuss how to make a good confession and any struggles you might have with receiving this sacrament.

TAKE ACTION

If you haven't been to confession in a while, consider how you could partake of this sacrament soon. When is confession offered at a parish close to you? How might you need to prepare? Feel free to reach out to a priest if you would feel more comfortable talking with someone before you go. You can also ask a friend to help you prepare and possibly go with you.

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If you don't yet go to confession regularly, try to make a plan to go at least once a month. Look up confession times nearby and plan for when and where you will go to confession.

Finally, look up a good examination of conscience to help you prepare. See the "Additional Resources" section of this article for some suggestions.

KEY CONCEPTS

Repent*:* The word "repent" (*metanoia*) means to turn our whole lives around, to turn away from sin and toward Christ.

Apostolic Authority: Jesus gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins, and that was passed on to their successors throughout the centuries to the bishops and priests today: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22–23).

Frequent Confession: Not only are we forgiven of our sins, but we also receive grace to help us overcome our weaknesses and heal the wounds of sin in our lives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CCC 1422–1498: "The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation"

Lord Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession by Dr. Scott Hahn

From the FOCUS Blog on focusequip.org: "Confession Week (And Every Resource You'll Need)"

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[1] Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*, Book VIII, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey, *Sacredtexts.com*, accessed April 2, 2020, https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/augconf/aug08.htm.