

Temptation

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ~ 1 Corinthians 10:13

TEMPTATION has a long history. It goes all the way back to our first parents, Adam and Eve. They were the first human beings to be tempted (see Gn 3:1-6). Had they resisted the serpent's temptation, they would have remained innocent. However, they chose to follow the words of the serpent rather than the Word of God. By giving in to the temptation, they fell into sin.

Temptation is Not Sin

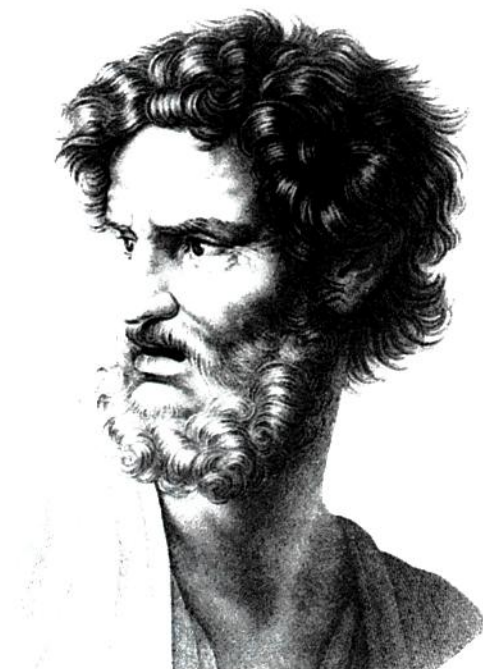
This highlights a very important distinction between temptation and sin. All human beings are faced with temptations to do evil. However, as long as we refuse to give in to the temptation, there is no sin. It is only when we say "yes" to the temptation and commit the evil, that we sin.

Temptation is basically an enticement to do evil of some kind. Holy Scripture says, "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (Jas 1:14). Temptations, however, are never from God: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (Jas 1:15).

Why Does God Allow Temptation?

Why does God allow us to be tempted? He allows us to be tempted to give us the opportunity to show our faithfulness and love for him and to test us. This testing is for our own benefit. It shows us the truth about ourselves, and it helps us to grow in virtue.

"As long as we refuse to give in to the temptation, there is no sin."



Simon the Cyrenian, by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

It can be easy to consider ourselves full of patience and love whenever things are going well. But as soon as we are confronted with situations that require patience and love, we may discover the reality: I'm not as patient and loving as I thought. We will only discover how patient, loving, honest, just, chaste, faithful, compassionate, etc., we really are by being confronted with the choice of doing the opposite. As gold is tested in fire, so must our moral character be tested (see Sir 2:1-6; 1 Pt 1:6-7). As we say "no" to the various temptations that come our way, we will grow in love and virtue.

God is always with us and if we ask, he will

give us the grace that we need to resist temptations. If we do surrender to temptation, let us be quick to repent, turn away from the sin, and trust in God's mercy. Fully human as well as fully God, Jesus allowed himself to be tempted, though he never sinned. He thus undid Adam's failure to resist temptation. Since he has experienced temptation, he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16).

The Spiritual Battle

The reality of temptation highlights an extremely important aspect to life on planet earth — *we are in*

the midst of a spiritual battle. The Christian life takes this fact very seriously and calls us to do whatever is necessary to remain faithful to God's commands. But where do temptations come from? There are basically three sources of temptation. They come from what Scripture calls "the flesh," the world, and the devil. They lure and entice us to give in to evil and disobey God — if we allow it.

The Flesh

The "flesh" is a term used in Holy Scripture to refer to our fallen human nature. In other words, that lower part of us that tends toward selfishness and is attracted to sin. (The technical term for this tendency toward sin is "concupiscence.") Growing in the Christian life involves mastering the flesh and learning to let the Holy Spirit lead us in our lives. St. Paul says, "[W]alk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh" (Gal 5:16-17).

The practice of self-denial is important for dealing with temptations. It has two primary purposes. First, it helps us to master our flesh. By saying no to its demands and desires, we learn to exercise self-control. There are many forms of self-denial. We don't have to do anything complicated. Simple acts of self-denial done consistently can be quite effective. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are traditional forms of self-denial.

The particular form of self-denial is not the point. The point is that we do simple acts of self-denial out of love for God and the desire to grow in Christian holiness. As Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24).

Second, self-denial helps us to practice true Christian love. Why? Because Christian love is loving to the point of self-sacrifice. Christian love is the love of Jesus, who lays down his life for the good of others (Jn 10:7-18; Jn 15:13). In order to love as Jesus loves, we must master ourselves. This will enable us to give more of our love to God and our neighbor. True love is a great defense against temptation, be-

cause love helps us to obey God's commands.

The Devil

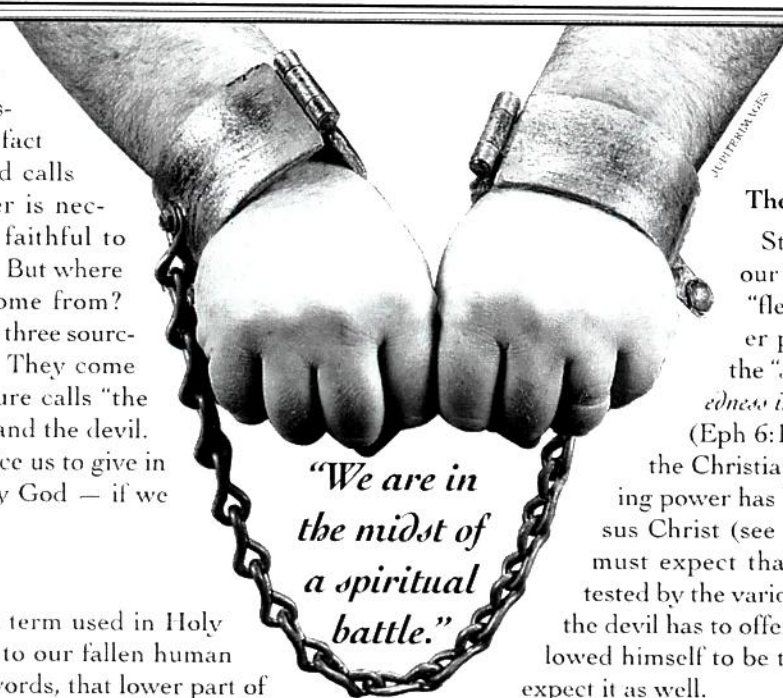
St. Paul tells us that our battle is not against "flesh and blood" (other people) but against the "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Of course, for the Christian the devil's enslaving power has been broken by Jesus Christ (see 1 Jn 5:8). But we must expect that our faith will be tested by the various temptations that the devil has to offer. If even Christ allowed himself to be tempted, we should expect it as well.

So who, exactly, is the devil? He is a fallen angel and is the leader of all the other fallen angels. Because he is an angel, he is very intelligent. But because he rejected God, he became completely evil. He is given many titles in Holy Scripture. Each one reveals something about who and what he is. Jesus said that the devil is a "liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44). He is also called "the tempter" (Mt 4:3) and the "adversary" who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

A brief look at human history reveals that he is very effective at temptation. Deception is always part of his temptations. The most effective deceptions are the ones mixed with half-truths. The devil always tries to make his suggestions attractive so that people will fall for them. This is why Holy Scripture says that he "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14) or, in other words, as something good. He "dangles" things in front of us that appear good, but in reality will lead to our death.

The World

The third source of temptation we will consider is "the world." It is important to understand what this term means, because the same word has three different meanings in Holy Scripture. The context of the passage tells us which meaning is being used. The first meaning of "the world" simply refers to creation in general — the universe, the earth and all its inhabitants, etc. All of God's creation is good (see Gn 1:31). The second meaning of the world refers to humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his



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The Temptation of Christ, by Ary Scheffer, 1795-1858

only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 5:16). The third meaning of "the world" refers to everything about human life and society that is in any way opposed to God.

It is in this meaning that the world can be a source of temptation. "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 Jn 2:15-16; see also Jas 4:4). The voice of the world calls us to turn our backs on God, and to set our hearts on things like impurity, wealth, power, fame, etc. We must resist these voices and seek first the Kingdom of God (see Mt 6:33), praying "O Lord, Father and Ruler of my life, do not abandon me to their counsel, and let me not fall because of them!" (Sir 25:1).

From Temptation to Sin

The steps of how one goes from being tempted to actually committing sin can be listed as follows:

1) Sin is suggested to the soul by the flesh, the devil, or the world.

"The devil always tries to make his suggestions attractive so that people will fall for them."

- 2) One listens to the suggestion and "toys" with it instead of immediately rejecting it.
- 3) One delights in the suggestion or yields to sin's attraction.
- 4) One falls into sin and commits the sin in thought, word, or deed.

Resisting Temptation

We can learn a lot about resisting temptation from Jesus. Throughout his ministry, he was constantly praying. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus admonished his disciples: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mk 14:38). Before he confronted the devil in the wilderness, he fasted. And during the devil's assaults, Jesus quoted Holy Scripture to him! Satan hates the Word of God. The Word of God is our greatest weapon against the temptations and schemes of the devil (see 1 Jn 2:14). We must fill our minds with God's Word. If we do this, the Holy Spirit will remind us of passages when we need them.

We must also avoid the near occasion of sin. This refers to any situation that is likely to lead us into sin. That is, we don't want to make the devil's work easier. As well, it is important to seek out Christian fellowship for support and encouragement. Finally, if one has been fully initiated into the Church, one must frequent the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.

The Christian life is a spiritual battle. As long as we are on this earth, we must be vigilant in resisting the influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil. God has given us every help we need to be victorious. Let us look to the example of Jesus. To resist temptation, we must pray, fill our minds with God's Word, and deny ourselves. And if we fall, let us run quickly to our merciful God, for "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

(CCC 391-395, 538-539, 1426, 1808, 2340, 2846-2849, 2851-2854)

The Seven Deadly Sins

*The beginning of man's pride is to depart from the Lord; his heart has forsaken his Maker.
For the beginning of pride is sin, and the man who clings to it pours out abominations.*

~ Sirach 10:12-15



WE KNOW from our own experience and that of all other human beings that we are preoccupied with our bodies. We try to make and keep our bodies healthy, for so much of our well-being, and our happiness, is dependent upon our good health. We do innumerable things, some of them not always pleasant, to gain physical well-being. We diet, exercise, go to dentists, get stuck with needles, give blood for tests, surrender our privacy to a physician, and take medications, all in pursuit of physical health.



*Jesus drives seven demons from Mary Magdalene,
by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962*

But, as strange as it may seem, this preoccupation with physical health has no counterpart in our spiritual nature. The soul, which is our immortal life-giving principle, is all too often a sadly-neglected part of our being. We are not preoccupied with our spiritual health and well-being. We too often neglect the most important and eternal element of our nature.

Sickness in its many forms is the sign of bodily unhealthiness. In the same way, sin is the sign of an immortal soul in trouble. Sin is spiritual illness, one that plagues us because the tendency to it is embed-

“Sin is spiritual illness.”

ded in our nature as fallen human beings (see handouts on

What is Sin? and Original Sin). Sin is the essential malady of our immortal soul; it can be deadly. If we are to be totally healthy, we must be aware of sin, know its causes and symptoms, and avoid it at all costs.

The roots of sin in our fallen nature are a group of tendencies, or inclinations, known as **capital** (those at the head of the line) or **deadly sins**. They are so called because they engender other sins or vices (habits of sin) in us. The seven deadly sins are: pride or arrogance, avarice or greed, envy or jealousy, anger or wrath, lust, gluttony, and acedia or sloth. These sins are perverse inclinations that cloud our consciences and distract our judgment of what is good and what is evil. Sin grows in us and, like a deadly cancer, eats away at the health of the soul.

Pride, or arrogance, is an inordinate sense of one's importance. The human race owes its troubles to the pride that prompted our first parents to want to be like God (see Gn 3:5); and “[w]hen pride comes, then comes disgrace” (Prv 11:2). They were seduced by Satan, whose own sin was pride. In our daily lives, we contend with pride whenever we deem ourselves more important than others, especially God. Catering to our self-importance leads us into the sin of pride.

Avarice, or greed, is an undue desire for, or attachment to, material possessions. The distinction between *needs* and *desires* is important. The fulfillment of needs is not an undue desire for things. But the satisfaction of desires can lead to accumulation and hoarding of things out of all proportion to need: “A greedy man's eye is not satisfied with a portion, and mean injustice withers the soul” (Sir 14:9). Avarice is a form of idolatry; material things become gods. Poverty exists partly because avarice promotes the inequitable distribution of God's abundance.

Envy, also called jealousy, is characterized by the begrudging of good that another possesses, and an immoderate desire to obtain them for oneself, even if this must be done unjustly: “But you should not have

“The seven deadly sins are perverse inclinations that cloud our consciences and distract our judgment of what is good and what is evil.”



The Pharisees accusing Jesus, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

gloated over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune.... You should not have entered the gate of my people in the day of his calamity; you should not have gloated over his disaster in the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods in the day of his calamity” (Ob vv 12-13). This sin resents the accomplishments or good things of others, and leads to dislike or hatred of other persons and their attainments. Envy comes from pride but is the clear mark of a small and self-centered heart; it cannot rejoice in a success that is not its own. The envious person also rejoices over another’s misfortune; it was the envy of Satan that led him to tempt Adam and Eve.

Anger, or wrath, is the root of violence. It can manifest itself as silence or passive resistance to an action or person, or as overt violence. Sinful anger is not the same as righteous anger, such as when Jesus cleared his Father’s house of wrongdoers (see Jn 2:13-17), or that which prompts good people to act so that evil will not prevail. Nor is it the primitive emotion of anger, which is morally neutral until it becomes damaging thoughts, words, or deeds. The deadly sin of anger is disproportionate to its cause, and can overpower freedom. It has been said that Satan is pure hatred whereas, as Sacred Scripture teaches us, God is pure love (see 1 Jn 4:8) and he has commanded us to love (see Jn 13:34). Anger corrodes a person’s soul: *“Unrighteous anger cannot be justified, for a man’s anger tips the scale to his ruin”* (Sir 1:22). It is also the spur to much sinfulness on the part of others: *“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and a man given to anger causes much transgression”* (Prv 29:22).

Lust includes all forms of sexual impurity, unchastity, and undue desire for sexual gratification, whether with others or with oneself. Lust treats others as objects for personal gratification, rather than as persons worthy of self-sacrificing love. Selfish satisfaction is all that matters. Because lust seeks some of the greatest physical pleasures the body can know,

it attracts the mind and body more than most other evils. Lust is not just a matter of deeds; it is also desires that are not acted upon, as Jesus says: *“[E]very one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Mt 5:28). Lust includes fornication, adultery, sodomy, incest, rape, prostitution and the use of prostitutes, masturbation, and the use of pornography.

Gluttony, like lust, is associated with a lack of self-control. It is an inordinate desire for bodily satisfaction in the use of food, drink, or sleep, for its own sake. The gluttonous person is one who fails to exercise restraint in the satisfaction of physical desires. Gluttony is self-indulgence that is so out of proportion to actual need as to be contrary to reason: *“Healthy sleep depends on moderate eating; he rises early, and feels fit. The distress of sleeplessness and of nausea and colic are with the glutton”* (Sir 31:20). (Gluttony should not be confused with addiction to a substance such as alcohol, nicotine, or cocaine, which has an element of physiological dependency. Addictions, however, must eventually be controlled by the willful avoidance of the addicting substance.)

Acedia, also called sloth, is a sickness of the soul. The slothful person knows the good, but does not desire it. The spiritual laziness whereby we refuse to seek what is needful for our soul’s salvation is a deadly sin. Sloth induces a torpor of the soul towards things divine; it rejects the efforts we must make to combat difficulties in the pursuit of holiness. Slothful people neither seek God nor find him; they are just not interested in God, and therefore refuse to make any effort toward him or to do the things that are necessary for salvation. They fail utterly to seek answers to the questions of life: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? They lead a life that has no real meaning and, ultimately, expose themselves to discouragement.



Mother of Sorrows, by Elizabeth Stefanick

ment and despair. For the person in despair, God is dead, and all that could have meaning is absent. The slothful, spiritual derelict is bored — bored so that he is dead, truly dead while he still breathes. In the book of Revelation, Jesus describes his reaction to the slothful: “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Rv 3:16). (The discouragement and despair of acedia is to be distinguished from clinical depression.)

For every deadly sin, one or more virtues oppose it. For the health of our soul, it is these virtues that must be sought after, prayed for, and practiced daily. Each of these virtues is a healthy prescription provided by a wise, loving, divine Physician to help us keep evil from our souls and to ready us for our immortal life in his Kingdom.

Humility is the antidote to pride. In simplest terms, humility is truth; it is seeing ourselves in proper perspective. It says that God is pre-eminent; his will, not ours, be done (see Lk 22:42). A humble soul knows that God is the creator and author of all and that it is but a creature; everything it is or has is from him. The attitude and behavior of humility is the basic ingredient of littleness that

our soul needs to enter into God’s Kingdom, and is one of the great virtues we must learn from Jesus: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). His entire life was a hymn of praise to humility, for “though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

The virtues that oppose avarice are **detachment** and **charity**. While avarice inclines us to cling to what we have accumulated, and to desire even more despite the needs of others, the virtue of detachment spurs us to a right understanding of the importance of material creation as something to be used and enjoyed, but not hoarded. Charity concentrates upon the needs of others and prompts us to help others obtain the satisfaction of their needs, even if it means giving to others what we possess. The supporting virtue of **generosity** induces us to give to others out of our abundance. Avarice is counteracted by our efforts to be just and charitable stewards of the goods of this world for the well-being of those less fortunate than us.

Charity is also a virtue that opposes envy and jealousy. The law of love (see Mt 22:35-40) encourages us to be glad at the good fortune of a neighbor. To delight in the spiritual well-being of another is, especially, the duty of charity. True love means seeing things and persons for what they are, not for what they can do for us. Charity embraces God and all for whom God loves and cares. In addition, the virtue of **gratitude** teaches us to be thankful for the good things that God has given us, rather than feeling

that we are somehow “owed more.” This attitude of thankfulness does not question God’s generosity or measure it by what

he has given to others, for as Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard asks: “[D]o you begrudge my generosity?” (Mt 20:15).

Anger is controlled by the virtue of **meekness**, the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1). Meekness is not by any means a matter of weakness; the essence of Jesus’ meekness was not to cause harm. The same Jesus who humbly submitted to his Father’s will was dynamic. He spoke and acted with authority, and did not hesitate to confront and condemn evil. If our God, with his infinite power, can be meek, then we, too, instead of giving way to an-

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ger, can imitate him in gentleness and yet be fruitfully firm in all our dealings with our fellow mortals. Supporting virtues that help us control our anger are **gentleness** and **patience**.

Purity or chastity is the virtue that overcomes lust in our lives. We are to love and respect others as we love and respect ourselves (see Mt 22:39). Chastity centers our attention and use of our bodies upon God as the source and object of our love and, in this light, we treat our bodies as holy and inviolate, temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 6:19). Chastity is a virtue that must be practiced by everyone, including those who are married, for marriage is not a license for lust but an image of God's own inner life. Only the pure in heart shall see God (see Mt 5:8), the goal of all our efforts here on earth. Resisting the lures of lust allows us to offer to God a holy and undefiled heart, fit for eternity. Essential in achieving chastity is the virtue of **self-mastery** by which we control the passion of sexual desire.

Temperance counteracts the tendency to gluttony by tempering our attraction to physical pleasures other than sex. It establishes priorities and balance in the use of material goods. It inclines us to restrain our appetites so as "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world" (1 Tim 2:12), and enables us to exercise a healthy discretion in what we seek. By temperance, the human will gains control over sense appetites and instincts, and directs our efforts toward more worthy and spiritual purposes. The supporting virtue of **self-control** is similar to self-mastery, but it addresses the appetites rather than the passions.

Zeal for the good and **perseverance** are the virtues that we must cultivate to counteract our tendency to sloth. We must "*hunger and thirst for righteousness*" (Mt 5:6), which resides only in God, toward whom we ought always to strive. We must build resolve upon



A Sorrowful Man, by Ferréol Bonnemaison, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

the knowledge that seeking perfection and eternal life is ultimately the only good to come from our earthly existence. Armed with this knowledge and strength of purpose, we must daily take up our cross (see Lk 9:23) and continue to make efforts to avoid evil and pursue good. We must persevere, always mindful that our Lord has told us that "*[i]n the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world*" (Jn 16:33).

The seven deadly sins are obstacles that impede our progress toward a wholesome, healthy spiritual life. Our divine Physician has provided virtues that we

can cultivate to achieve the holiness to which, as children of God, we must aspire. Virtue is health of soul, and it is this health that we must want to possess — it is the source of joy. Each of us has an immortal soul, and each of us is important to God. We want to be among those who say to God, "*[T]hy will be done*" (Mt 26:42) rather than in the company of those to whom God must say, "*Your will be done*" as they willfully separate themselves from God for all eternity.

Part of developing virtue is "spiritual dieting and exercise" in the form of prayer, fasting and other forms of self-denial,

and almsgiving. Just as vice is rarely the matter of a single instance of wrongdoing, with each sin contributing to the formation of a habit of vice that makes doing evil ever easier, doing good on a daily basis develops the habit of virtue, and virtue makes doing good ever easier (see handout on Virtuous Living). Eventually the entire moral character of a person is formed in the character of holiness. This is not possible by our own efforts, but is a result of our cooperation with God's abundant grace, for "*[w]ith men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God*" (Mk 10:27).

(CCC 1866, 2094, 2259, 2551-2357, 2534-2536, 2538-2541, 2735)

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Reconciliation

Jesus said to [the apostles] again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ~ John 20:21-25

THE sacrament of Reconciliation continues the work of conversion and forgiveness in the life of the Christian — a work that is necessary, because the inclination to sin is not removed in Baptism and our life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin. As long as we live on earth, we must struggle against this inclination, and thus we demonstrate our choice to love God above all else, to be saints.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1:8), "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), even after Baptism. For this reason, Jesus gave to the Twelve the power to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, especially for those who have committed mortal (deadly) sin (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-25). In this way, we receive spiritual healing and salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The Names of the Sacrament

The preferred name for this sacrament is "Reconciliation," because this name identifies the very

"Through the priest, God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner."



The Prodigal Son, by Gustave Doré, 1855-1885

purpose of the sacrament. The sacrament reconciles one with God and restores their intimate friendship. Nevertheless, each of the names given to this sacrament highlights important aspects. The name "sacrament of Conversion" emphasizes Jesus' command, "Repent, and believe in the gospel," which is given to every person (Mk 1:15; see also Lk 15:18). The name "sacrament of Confession" points to the essential element of "confession" in which the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) both confesses his or her sins and a belief in God's mercy. The name "sacrament of Penance" is perhaps the oldest name for this sacrament and underscores the importance of doing penance as both a sign of thanksgiving to God for his mercy and an expression of the desire to repair the damage caused by sin. The last two names, "sacrament of Forgiveness" and "sacrament of Reconciliation," are closely united. Through the priest, who acts *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner who converts, confesses, and repents. In this

way, "God ... through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). This ministry is both a gift and a duty for the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) — as he or she is forgiven and reconciled, likewise he or she must forgive and reconcile as Christ's ambassador (see 2 Cor 5:20).

The Rite of Reconciliation

Although this sacrament may be received as often as desired, there are occasions when the sacrament is obligatory (required). The Church obliges all the faithful to confess their sins once a year. Also, the Christian is obliged to go to Confession before receiving Communion if even one mortal (deadly) sin has been committed (see 1 Cor 11:27).

Jesus gave only the apostles the authority to forgive sins, and so bishops, as the successors of the apostles, and priests are the only ones with the authority to forgive sins (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-25). As part of this great authority, they are required to keep the "sacramental seal," that is, they must keep everyone's confession absolutely secret. Neither a bishop nor a priest may ever make known to anyone, for any reason, in any way, the confession of another person. Even if someone were to confess sins as serious as murder, drug dealing, or rape, they may never reveal even the smallest detail of the confession.

The essential elements of the Rite of Reconciliation are the sinner's repentance, confession, and intention to do their penance, and the priest's absolution. The first essential element, the sinner's repentance, be-

gins before the actual rite. Repentance or contrition is a gift from God in which one experiences sorrow (great pain and detestation) for sin: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Jb 42:6). Genuine repentance includes the choice of the sinner to make

a firm resolution to sin no more. Many times, the weight of our sin, especially habitual sins, make it more difficult to make that firm resolution in the face of countless resolutions made and broken in the past, but Jesus gently invites us to come to him with our sorrows and burdens (see Mt 11:28). The sacrament is for the weak, so we need not worry about how many resolutions have been broken. When questioned on the limit to forgiveness, the Lord says, "[Not] seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). With the Lord there is no limit to his forgiveness. Those who approach the sacrament in humble contrition will receive forgiveness from him: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17). Those, however, who approach it in a spirit of complacency, accepting the fact that they will do wrong again, are not truly sorry and are not really seeking forgiveness. God honors the freedom he has be-

stowed on the human person. If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God: "Restore us to thyself, O Lord! Renew our days as of old!" (Lam 5:21).

Before seeking Reconciliation, the penitent must prepare to receive the sacrament by asking God's help in examining his or her conscience: "Behold, we

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✠ ἡ ἀνάστασις
 λέγω ὅτι δεῖ τὸ μύσθημα τοῦ ἀποστόλου
 παραδοθῆναι εἰς χεῖρας ἀγίων
 ἀμαρτωλῶν· καὶ ἔρωθῆναι



καὶ τὴν τρίτην μέραν ἀναστῆναι· καὶ
 ἐμφανισθῆναι τοῖς ἁγίοις ματθαιῶν·
 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἔρυσαν ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημῆος

Jesus' descent to the dead, 12th century book of the Gospels

are before thee in our guilt, for none can stand before thee because of this" (Ez 9:15), and to grant the gift of contrition. Various Scripture passages may be used in examining one's conscience, for example, the Ten Commandments (see Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (see Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and on love (see 1 Cor 12-13), the conduct of Christians (see Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and the Spirit (see Gal 5:19-23).

Following the examination of conscience, true repentance, and a resolution not to commit those sins again, the penitent is prepared to receive the sacrament, choosing to sit face-to-face with the priest or kneeling behind a curtain.

The actual Rite of Reconciliation begins with the priest's greeting and blessing of the penitent, which may be followed by a reading from Scripture. After this, the penitent begins his or her confession by making the Sign of the Cross and saying words similar to these, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned; my last confession was a month ago." Next, the penitent confesses to the priest every mortal (deadly) sin committed since the last confession, and the approximate number of times each one was committed. Intentionally withholding mortal sin from confession is the serious sin of sacrilege, because of his dishonesty and failure to trust in God's mercy. It is beneficial to the penitent to confess venial sins, a practice that helps in realizing the seriousness of these sins and how they, too, offend God and harm one's relationship with him. The confession is concluded with the penitent's own words or a traditional formula such as, "I am sorry for these and all my sins."

At the completion of the penitent's confession, the priest may ask questions to give suitable counsel.

Then, the priest gives some penance for the sinner to do in order that the person may begin to repair the damage done by his or her sin, to make satisfaction, and to make necessary changes to avoid sin in the future. Next, the priest asks the person to make an Act of Contrition aloud, such as the following: "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In

choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy" (*Rite of Penance* 45).

The priest then grants the sinner absolution by extending his hand over the penitent: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Penance* 46).

The priest may then offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." The penitent responds, "His mercy endures forever." The rite concludes with a dismissal and a blessing, for example, "The Lord has freed you from your sins, go in peace."

After the priest's absolution, the penitent then does the penance given to him or her by the priest, in order to make reparation for the sin he or she committed.

The Effects of Reconciliation

The sacrament of Reconciliation reunites the sinner with God. Through mortal sin, we destroy our intimate friendship with God. Sin separates us from

"The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation."



The piercing of the side of Jesus, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

God by weakening his life within in us and causing us to neglect the abundant gifts he first gave to us in Baptism. Sinners become like the prodigal son, who separated himself from his father and squandered his inheritance (see Lk 15:11-32). So too we sinners must humble ourselves and beg our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, as the prophet cries: *"Hear, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned before thee"* (Bar 3:2). The Father, who longs for our return, can then run to us, embrace us, and kiss us (see Lk 15:20). Again and again, when we fall, our Father offers his mercy to the truly repentant: *"Thou art merciful to all, ... and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.... Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living"* (Wis 11:23, 26).

in Christ, but also to every other baptized person. We become both children of God and brothers and sisters to one another in the Trinity-family, the communion of saints (see Gal 4:5-7, 1 Cor 12:12-31). For this reason, Reconciliation is also necessary to reconcile us with our brothers and sisters in the Church.

The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation. Every sin, however, has temporal consequences connected to it. These temporal punishments are only partially remitted in Reconciliation. In order to be free of those consequences, the forgiven sinner must do penance to repair the harm done by his or her sin, that is, "to make satisfaction."

Proper reception of the sacrament provides sac-



Reconciliation is a sacrament of mercy and healing

Reconciliation is the way for the baptized who have committed mortal sin to return home, to re-establish their intimate friendship with God. And our Heavenly Father is full of mercy, ever willing to reconcile the penitent sinner to himself: *"Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"* (Mi 7:18-19).

Furthermore, mortal sin separates the faithful from the family of God, the Church. This is so because in Baptism, each one is united not only to God

ramental grace in abundance. These graces assist the penitent in making satisfaction, in growing in virtue and in fighting temptation. They are invaluable and they are a major reason for the recommendation for frequent reception of this sacrament. Not only are we strengthened in virtue but we learn, ever more, the dreadful reality of our sins so that we might strive ever more to avoid them: *"Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass, and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin, that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord"* (Wis 12:2).

(CCC 976, 979-983, 1420-1484)

Forgiveness

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses. ~ Mark 11:25

IN ONE OF THE PETITIONS IN THE OUR FATHER, we ask God for forgiveness of our sins in the same measure that we forgive others who have sinned against us. This is the only one of the seven petitions that Jesus repeated after he had taught this most perfect of prayers to us: *"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses,*

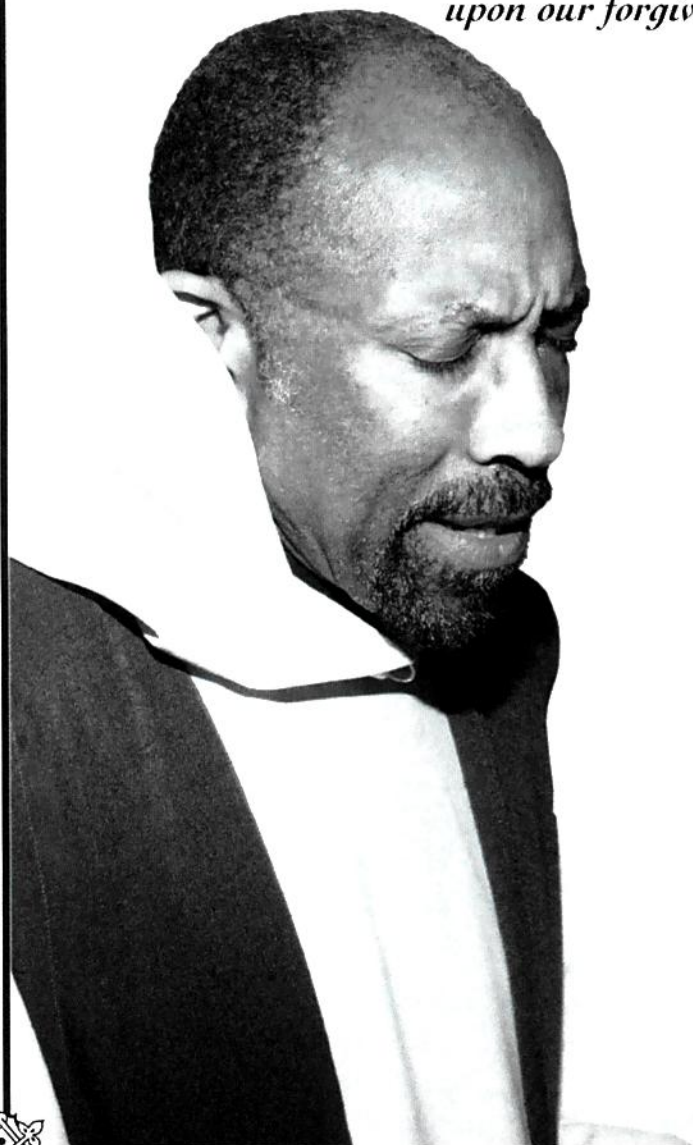
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:14-15). Our forgiveness by God is contingent upon our forgiveness of others. Our forgiveness is conditioned on what we do for others. Doing unto others as we would have God do to us is an application and elevation of the Golden Rule (see Mt 7:12). Jesus' emphatic repetition is just as surely needed in our world as it was in his.

"Our forgiveness by God is contingent upon our forgiveness of others."

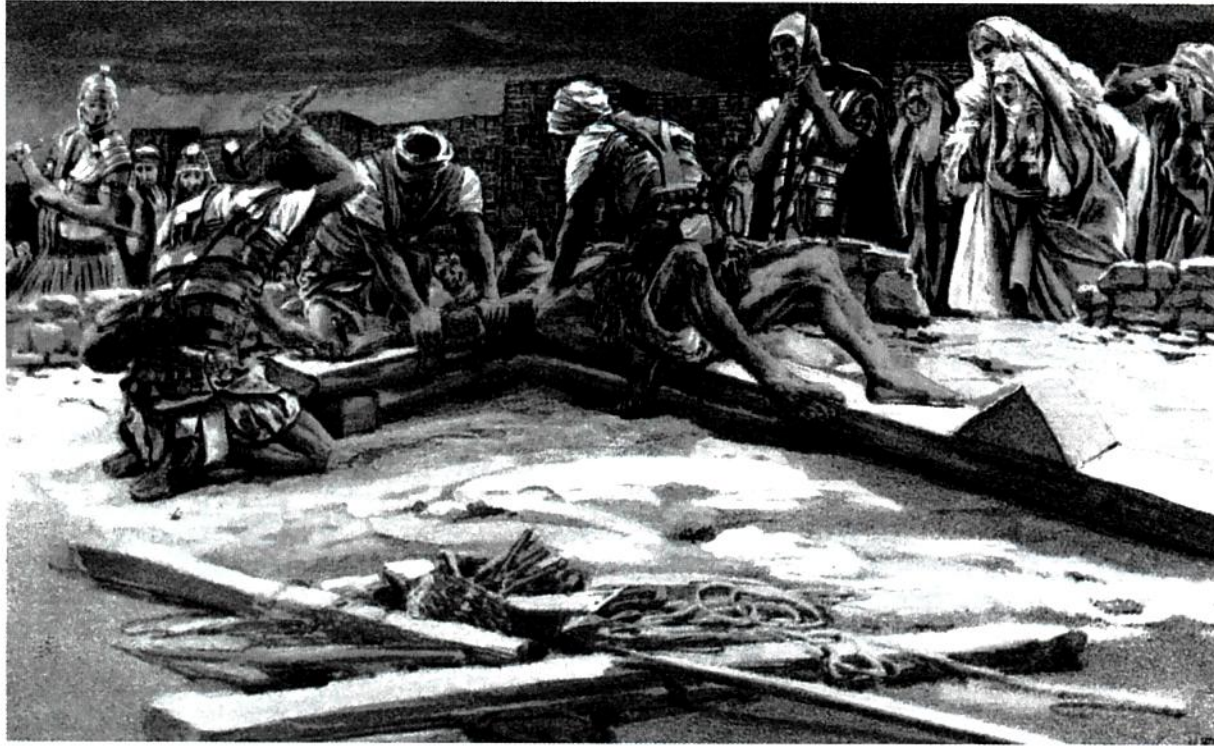
In an extended parable, Jesus taught us this same lesson:

"[T]he Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt 18:25-35).

The *as* in the Our Father is important. Jesus made it important in many other instances: *"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt 5:48); *"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful"* (Lk 6:36); *"love one another; even as I have loved you"* (Jn 13:34). In each case, the inner life of love of the Blessed Trinity is the standard not only for



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The First Nail, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

our relationship with God but also with one another. Jesus wants us to really strive. He frowned on the half-hearted and the lukewarm, even threatening to vomit such out of his mouth (see Rv 3:16). Jesus tells us: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you"* (Lk 6:27-28), as Jesus himself did from his cross when he said, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"* (Lk 23:34). If he could forgive, for love of us, those who put him to such a terrifying death, he can ask us to forgive not just little things, but things that our enemies and persecutors, and even killers, do to us. Jesus is also our model for *when* we forgive: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"* (Rom 5:8). We must forgive **even before** those who injure us ask forgiveness. This is breathtaking.

Even further, forgiveness is not a one-time event. There are people who may hurt us, or sin against us, over and over. The Apostle Peter asked Jesus just how generous we are expected to be: *"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many*

as seven times?" (Mt 18:21). He received this astonishing reply: *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven"* (Mt 18:22).

Jesus sets for us these seemingly impossible standards, but he teaches us that *"with God all things are possible"* (Mt 19:26). He gives us the pledge that, whatever we encounter, his grace will be sufficient for us (see 2 Cor 12:9). Forgiveness is something we must work at. It is not the result of words, but the result of action that stems directly from the heart. We get our continuing example of love and forgiveness from Jesus in the Eucharist: we sin again and again, but when we humbly ask, he forgives us over and over, and invites us to come to his Table to eat the Flesh and drink the Blood that won this grace for us. No greater love is there than God's for us. He asks us to have the same kind of love for all our brethren whom he loves as well: *"If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen"* (1 Jn 4:20).

(CCC 2838-2845)

***"We must forgive even before those who injure us ask forgiveness.
This is breathtaking."***

Confession to a Human Being

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. ~ Proverbs 28:15



AT ONE TIME or another, we have probably heard questions, or asked them ourselves, concerning the Catholic practice of confessing their sins to a priest. "Why," some will ask, "do Catholics *have* to go to confession?" while others say, "Who needs confession when I can go straight to God?" Some may even ask, with the scribes listening to Jesus, "*Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" (Mk 2:7). These questions pose essentially the same objection: confessing sins to another human being may be therapeutic, as some psychologists tell us, but it cannot bring about the forgiveness that God alone can grant.

The answer to this objection lies in the proper understanding of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the role of the priest. The sacrament is a *real encounter with Jesus*, who healed and forgave the sins of many to the astonishment of the religious leaders surrounding him (see Mt 9:2-7; Lk 7:48-49). Before ascending into Heaven, he breathed the Holy Spirit on his apostles and said, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (Jn 20:23). This power of Christ given to the apostles expressed his will to institute the sacrament of Reconciliation and to extend the ministry

"When a Catholic walks into a confessional, Christ is there in the priest."

of forgiveness throughout the world and down through the centuries.

When a Catholic walks into a confessional to confess his or her sins, Christ is there

in the priest because the priest acts not in his own name but *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"). Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, Christ has configured the priest to himself in this way specifically so he (the priest) can carry out this sacrament and the other functions given to him by Christ. When the priest absolves the penitent, it is Christ himself who speaks although the voice is that of the priest. Unless this power to forgive sins is real, confession to a priest would be a sham and, worse, an offense against God. No one can forgive sins except God; but likewise no one can decide whether to mediate this power through an earthly priesthood except God. Christ revealed the Father's will in this matter, instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation, and thereby set out God's plan to extend his mercy and forgiveness to the whole world through the ministry of his priests.

(CCC 1455-1456, 1464-1467)



A child receives absolution from a priest, making the sign of the cross with him

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Continual Conversion and Penance

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church. ~ Colossians 1:24

JESUS CALLS EVERY PERSON to turn away from sin and to turn towards him — that is, to convert. This conversion requires not only change in one's actions but also a conversion of heart, a radical change of being. In the conversion of heart, one changes from being "dead to sin" to "alive ... in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11), from a child of wrath (see Eph 2:3) to a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7).

We cannot change (convert) our own hearts, and so conversion is first a work of God, the one who "will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt 30:6). God "circumcises our hearts" in Baptism, when we are cleansed from sin and made children of God, "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17), and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). God gives to each person the grace for conversion, to choose either to accept or reject. By a response of faith, the person accepts this gift of conversion, and by doing penance, cooperates with this grace.

Penance is any act which assists the Christian to turn away from sin and toward Jesus. Whenever we sincerely do penance, we cooperate with the grace of conversion. We will rejoice in our sufferings for the sake of Christ and experience a willingness to complete in our own bodies "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24; see also Phil 3:8). Our penance thus expresses an interior conversion.

Forms and Examples of Penance

Scripture suggests three forms of penance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (see Tb 12:8, Mt 6:1-18). Fasting cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's individual life, prayer cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with God, and almsgiving cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with others. Tradi-

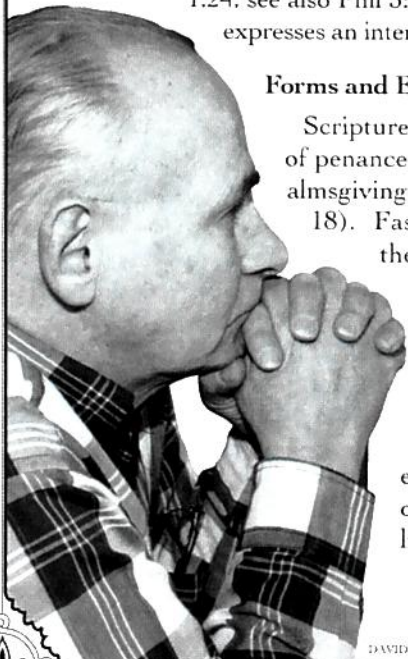
tional fasting means abstaining from food for a given period of time to draw closer to God. Some people fast on bread and water alone as a way of teaching that Christ alone is the soul's only real nourishment. Almsgiving means giving money (or food, clothing, etc.) to the poor. The Church teaches that we must recognize Christ in the poorest of the poor. These are his brothers and sisters; as members of his Body, we must care for them. Furthermore, the practice of penance in one form affects the other two. For example, if we pray with true repentance, we will desire to change our way of life and will change the way we treat others.

Because of ever-present human weakness and sin, continual conversion is necessary. Someone who truly desires to cooperate with God's grace need only utter a prayer like "How can I love you more, Lord Jesus?" and many ideas will surely come to mind. Scripture teaches that crying tears of repentance (see Lk 7:37-48), "love for one another" (1 Pt 4:8), and "bring[ing] back a sinner from the error of his way" (Jas 5:20) each "cover[s] a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8; see also Jas 5:20). Other ways to accomplish conversion are receiving the Eucharist, reading Scripture, praying the Rosary or any other devotion, worshiping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, examining one's conscience, caring for the poor, giving money and time to those in need, seeking and following spiritual direction, visiting the lonely, practicing self-denial, and patient acceptance of suffering and persecution.

Requirements to do Penance

The penance assigned by the priest in the sacrament of Reconciliation is how the penitent is asked to make satisfaction for the sins they have just confessed and of which they have been forgiven. The baptized are also obliged to observe the days of abstinence and fasting during Lent. Additional penances should be done during those liturgical seasons and days designated for penitential practices — the forty days of Lent, Holy Week, Advent, and every Friday — since these are times when the Church intensely works together as the family of God in continuing conversion. (CCC 1427-1439)

"Penance expresses an interior conversion."



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DAILY EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter. ~ Matthew 12:36

CONTINUING CONVERSION IS A DAILY NEED in the universal call to holiness. An examination of conscience each day helps us to love God more fully and to live as his child. Recalling personal sins daily helps us to see our weaknesses, areas of temptation, and repetitive sins, and in turn be able to ask God for help: "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds" (Mt 7:8). This daily examination also serves to make us more sensitive to sin and so contrition (the sorrow for sins and firm intention to sin no more) grows in the heart. This increase in contrition prepares us for Reconciliation and for worthy reception of Holy Communion. Having spent this time examining his or her conscience, praying, and receiving the sacraments, the baptized person grows spiritually and is more able to battle against human weakness and the inclination to sin. Every daily examination of conscience should begin by asking God for his help in our weaknesses, areas of temptation, and repetitive sins, as if helping us "render an account" before the judgment seat (Mt 12:36). To avoid being scrupulous, we should also ask God to help us keep in mind his "abundant mercy" (Ps 51:1) and "his steadfast love" (Ps 136).

"Daily examination serves to make us more sensitive to sin and so contrition grows in the heart."

Reading Scripture passages helps in a proper attitude toward sin. The same text can be read every day, or others can be chosen for each new day. Some appropriate passages are the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and love (1 Cor 12-13), the conduct of Christians (Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5). A few minutes spent considering our love of God, charity in relation to others and our responsibilities for this day will help keep us focused on what is most important each day. It will also serve to move us more frequently to God's mercy: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness" (Lam 3:22). Finally, this daily examination of conscience would best be concluded by a heartfelt Act of Contrition.

Act of Contrition

O my God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. In the name of Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Lord. Amen.
(CCC 1451-1454)

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HELPS IN USING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in Heaven. ~ Lamentations 5:40-41

Elements of Making a Good Confession:



THOROUGH examination of conscience since your last confession is necessary.

Inform the priest of the approximate length of time since your last Confession.

Say to the priest: "Father, forgive me for I have sinned. It has been ___ years (or months) since my last Confession."

Confess your serious sins, or mortal sins, as completely as possible, naming them as specifically as possible and with some indication of their frequency. Less serious sins should also be mentioned specifically, but can be mentioned more generally.

In order to receive the effects of forgiveness from your sins, there needs to be a sincere desire to reject the sinful behavior confessed and a willingness to respond to God's grace by attempting to avoid all future sin as well as times when sinning might be too easy to fall into.

"Father, forgive me for I have sinned."

Quotes from Scripture that may be helpful in thinking about your sins:

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

"And if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" (Mt 18:12).

"God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17).

Act of Contrition:

The Act of Contrition is said after you have confessed your sins to the priest and after he has given you a penance to do.

An Example:

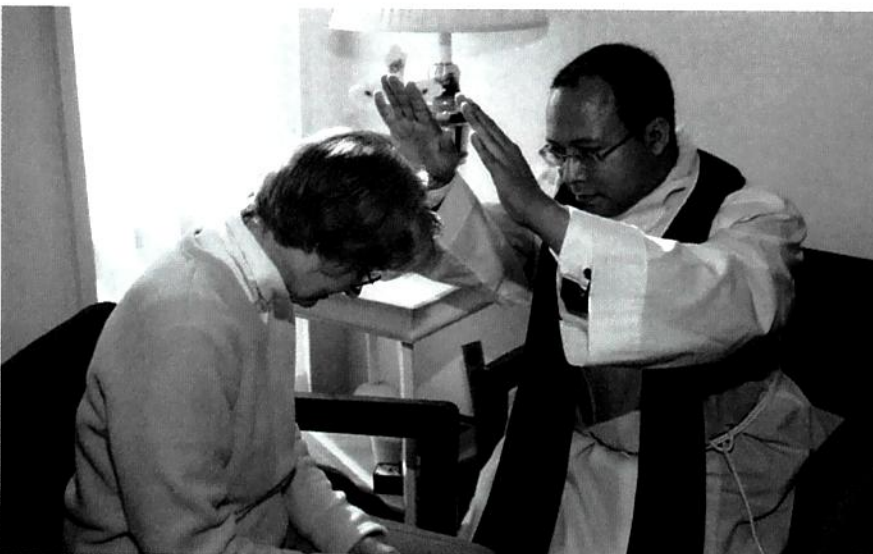
Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you.

I detest all of my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are good and deserving of all my love.

I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

Remember: It's completely fine to ask the priest to help you if you don't know what to say.

(CCC 1450-1460)



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