

Confession: the Healing Sacrament

by Jim Forest

A young monk said to the great ascetic Abba Sisoës: "Abba, what should I do? I fell." The elder answered: "Get up!" The monk said: "I got up and I fell again!" The elder replied: "Get up again!" But the young monk asked: "For how long should I get up when I fall?" "Until your death," answered Abba Sisoës. —*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

"When I went to my first confession," a friend told me, "tears took the place of the sins I meant to utter. The priest simply told me that it wasn't necessary to enumerate everything and that it was just vanity to suppose that our personal sins are worse than everyone else's. Which, by the way, was something of a relief, since it wasn't possible for me to remember all the sins of my first thirty-odd years of life. It made me think of the way the father received his prodigal son—he didn't even let his son finish his carefully rehearsed speech. It's truly amazing."

Another friend told me that he was so worried about all he had to confess that he decided to write it down. "So I made a list of my sins and brought it with me. The priest saw the paper in my hand, took it, looked through the list, tore it up, and gave it back to me. Then he said 'Kneel down,' and he absolved me. That was my confession, even though I never said a word! But I felt truly my sins had been torn up and that I was free of them."

The very word *confession* makes us nervous, touching as it does all that is hidden in ourselves: lies told, injuries caused, things stolen, friends deceived, people betrayed, promises broken, faith denied—these plus all the smaller actions that reveal the beginnings of sins.

Confession is painful, yet a Christian life without confession is impossible.

Confession is a major theme of the Gospels. Even before Christ began His public ministry, we read in Matthew's Gospel that John required confession of those who came to him for baptism in the River Jordan for a symbolic act of washing away their sins: "And [they] were baptized by [John] in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:6).

Then there are those amazing words of Christ to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). The keys of binding and loosing sins were given not only to one apostle but to all Christ's disciples, and—in a sacramental sense—to any priest who has his bishop's blessing to hear confessions.

The Gospel author John warns us not to deceive ourselves: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins" (1 John 1:8, 9).

The sacrament of baptism, the rite of entrance into the Church, has always been linked with repentance. "Repent, and . . . be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."

Saint Peter preached in Jerusalem, "and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). In the same book we read that "many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds" (Acts 19:18).

The Prodigal Son

One Gospel story in which we encounter confession is the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Here Christ describes a young man so impatient to come into his inheritance and be independent that, in effect, he says to his father, "As far as I'm concerned, you have already died. Give me now what would have come to me after your funeral. I want nothing more to do with you or with this house."

With Godlike generosity, the father gives what his son asks, though he knows his son well enough to realize that all the boy receives might as well be burned in a stove. The boy takes his inheritance and leaves, at last free of parents, free of morals and good behavior, free to do as he pleases.

After wasting his money, he finds himself reduced to feeding the pigs as a farmhand. People he had thought of as friends now sneer. He knows he has renounced the claim to be anyone's son, yet in his desperation he dares hope his father might at least allow him to return home as a servant. Full of dismay for what he said to his father and what he did with his inheritance, he walks home in his rags, ready to confess his sins, to beg for work and a corner to sleep in. The son cannot imagine the love his father has for him or the fact that, despite all the trouble he caused, he has been desperately missed. Far from being glad to be rid of the boy, the father has gazed day after day in prayer toward the horizon in hope of his son's return.

"But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (v. 20). Had he not been watching, he would not have noticed his child in the distance and realized who it was. Instead of simply standing and waiting for his son to reach the door, he ran to meet him, embracing him, pouring out words of joy and welcome rather than reproof or condemnation.

"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son'" (v. 21). Here we have the son's confession compacted into a single sentence. It is the essence of any confession: our return to our Father, who made us and constantly awaits our homecoming.

What Is Sin?

There are countless essays and books that deal with human failings under various labels without once using the three-letter word *sin*. Actions traditionally regarded as sinful have instead been seen as natural stages in the process of growing up, a result of bad parenting, a consequence of mental illness, an inevitable response to unjust social conditions, or pathological behavior brought on by addiction.

But what if I am more than a robot programmed by my past or my society or my economic status and actually can take a certain amount of credit—or blame—for my actions and inactions? Have I not done things I am deeply ashamed of, would not do again if I could go back in time, and would prefer no one to know about? What makes me so reluctant to call those actions “sins”? Is the word really out of date? Or is the problem that it has too sharp an edge?

The Hebrew verb *chata'*, “to sin,” like the Greek word *hamartia*, simply means straying off the path, getting lost, missing the mark. Sin—going off course—can be intentional or unintentional.

The author of the Book of Proverbs lists seven things God hates: “A proud look, / A lying tongue, / Hands that shed innocent blood, / A heart that devises wicked plans, / Feet that are swift in running to evil, / A false witness *who* speaks lies, / And one who sows discord among brethren” (6:17–19).

Pride is given first place. “Pride *goes* before destruction, / And a haughty spirit before a fall” is another insight in the Book of Proverbs (16:18). In the Garden of Eden, Satan seeks to animate pride in his dialogue with Eve. Eat the forbidden fruit, he tells her, and “you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

The craving to be ahead of others, to be more valued than others, to be more highly rewarded than others, to be able to keep others in a state of fear, the inability to admit mistakes or apologize—these are among the symptoms of pride. Pride opens the way for countless other sins: deceit, lies, theft, violence, and all those other actions that destroy community with God and with those around us.

Yet we spend a great deal of our lives trying to convince ourselves and others that what we did really wasn't that bad or could even be seen as almost good, given the circumstances. Even in confession, many people *explain* what they did rather than simply admit they did things that require forgiveness. “When I recently happened to confess about fifty people in a typical Orthodox parish in Pennsylvania,” Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “not one admitted to having committed any sin whatsoever!”

“We're capable of doing some *rotten* things,” the Minnesota storyteller Garrison Keillor notes, “and not all of these things are the result of poor communication. Some are the result of rottenness. People do bad, horrible things. They lie and they cheat and they corrupt the government. They poison the world around us. And when they're caught they don't feel remorse—they just go into treatment. They had a nutritional problem or something. They *explain* what they did—they don't feel bad about it. There's no guilt. There's just psychology.”

For the person who has committed a serious sin, there are two vivid signs—the hope that what one did may never become known, and a gnawing sense of guilt. At least this is the case before the conscience becomes completely numb—which is what happens when patterns of sin become the structure of one's life to the extent that hell, far from being a possible next-life experience, is where one finds oneself in this life.

It is a striking fact about basic human architecture that we want certain actions to remain secret, not because of modesty, but because there is an unarguable sense of having violated a law more basic than that in any law book—the “law written in [our] hearts” to which St. Paul refers (Romans 2:15). It isn’t simply that we fear punishment. It is that we don’t want to be thought of by others as a person who commits such deeds. One of the main obstacles to going to confession is dismay that someone else will know what I want no one to know.

One of the oddest things about the age we live in is that we are made to feel guilty about feeling guilty. There is a cartoon tacked up in our house in which one prisoner says to another, “Just remember—it’s okay to *be* guilty, but not okay to *feel* guilty.”

A sense of guilt—the painful awareness of having committed sins—can be life-renewing. Guilt provides a foothold for contrition, which in turn can motivate confession and repentance. Without guilt, there is no remorse; without remorse, there is no possibility of becoming free of habitual sins.

Yet there are forms of guilt that are dead-end streets. If I feel guilty that I have not managed to become the ideal person I occasionally want to be, or that I imagine others want me to be, that is guilt without a divine reference point. It is simply an irritated me contemplating an irritating me. Christianity is not centered on performance, laws, principles, or the achievement of flawless behavior, but on Christ Himself and on participation in God’s transforming love.

When Christ says, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), He’s not speaking of getting a perfect score on a test, but of being whole, being in a state of communion, participating fully in God’s love.

This condition of being is suggested by St. Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity: those three angelic figures silently inclined toward each other around a chalice on a small altar. They symbolize the Holy Trinity: the communion that exists within God—not a closed communion restricted to themselves alone, but an open communion of love, in which we are not only invited but intended to participate.

A blessed guilt is the pain we feel when we realize we have cut ourselves off from that divine communion that irradiates all creation. It is impossible to live in a Godless universe, but easy to be unaware of God’s presence or even to resent it.

It’s a common delusion that one’s sins are private or affect only a few other people. To think our sins, however hidden, don’t affect others is like imagining that a stone thrown into the water won’t generate ripples. As Bishop Kallistos Ware has observed: “There are no entirely private sins. All sins are sins against my neighbor, as well as against God and against myself. Even my most secret thoughts are, in fact, making it more difficult for those around me to follow Christ.”

Far from being hidden, each sin is another crack in the world.

One of the most widely used Orthodox prayers, the Jesus Prayer, is only one sentence long: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Short as it is, many people drawn

to it are put off by the last two words. Those who teach the prayer are often asked, "But must I call myself a sinner?" In fact, the ending isn't essential—the only essential word is "Jesus"—but my difficulty in identifying myself as a sinner reveals a lot. What makes me so reluctant to speak of myself in such plain words? Don't I do a pretty good job of hiding rather than revealing Christ in my life? Am I not a sinner? To admit that I am provides a starting point.

There are only two possible responses to sin: to justify it, or to repent. Between these two, there is no middle ground.

Justification may be verbal, but mainly it takes the form of repetition: I do again and again the same thing as a way of demonstrating to myself and others that it's not really a sin, but rather something normal or human or necessary or even good. "Commit a sin twice and it will not seem a crime," notes a Jewish proverb.

Repentance, on the other hand, is the recognition that I cannot live any more as I have been living, because in living that way I wall myself apart from others and from God. Repentance is a change in direction. Repentance is the door of communion. It is also a *sine qua non* of forgiveness. Absolution is impossible where there is no repentance.

As St. John Chrysostom said sixteen centuries ago in Antioch:

Repentance opens the heavens, takes us to Paradise, overcomes the devil. Have you sinned? Do not despair! If you sin every day, then offer repentance every day! When there are rotten parts in old houses, we replace the parts with new ones, and we do not stop caring for the houses. In the same way, you should reason for yourself: If today you have defiled yourself with sin, immediately cleanse yourself with repentance.

Confession as a Social Action

It is impossible to imagine a healthy marriage or deep friendship without confession and forgiveness. If we have done something that damages a relationship, confession is essential to its restoration. For the sake of that bond, we confess what we've done, we apologize, and we promise not to do it again; then we do everything in our power to keep that promise.

In the context of religious life, confession is what we do to safeguard and renew our relationship with God whenever it is damaged. Confession restores our communion with God and with each other.

It is never easy to admit to doing something we regret and are ashamed of, an act we attempted to keep secret or denied doing or tried to blame on someone else, perhaps arguing—to ourselves as much as to others—that it wasn't actually a sin at all, or wasn't nearly as bad as some people might claim. In the hard labor of growing up, one of the most agonizing tasks is becoming capable of saying, "I'm sorry."

Yet we are designed for confession. Secrets in general are hard to keep, but unconfessed sins not only never go away, but have a way of becoming heavier as time passes—the greater the sin, the heavier the burden. Confession is the only solution.

To understand confession in its sacramental sense, one first has to grapple with a few basic questions: Why is the Church involved in forgiving sins? Is priest-witnessed confession really needed? Why confess at all to any human being? In fact, why bother confessing to God, even without a human witness? If God is really all-knowing, then He knows everything about me already. My sins are known before it even crosses my mind to confess them. Why bother telling God what God already knows?

Yes, truly God knows. My confession can never be as complete or revealing as God's knowledge of me and of all that needs repairing in my life.

A related question we need to consider has to do with our basic design as social beings. Why am I so willing to connect with others in every other area of life, yet not in this? Why is it that I look so hard for excuses, even for theological rationales, not to confess? Why do I try so hard to explain away my sins, until I've decided either that they're not so bad, or even that they might be seen as acts of virtue? Why is it that I find it so easy to *commit* sins, yet am so reluctant, in the presence of another, to admit to having done so?

We are social beings. The individual as autonomous unit is a delusion. The Marlboro Man—the person without community, parents, spouse, or children—exists only on billboards. The *individual* is someone who has lost a sense of connection to others or attempts to exist in opposition to others—while the *person* exists in communion with other persons. At a conference of Orthodox Christians in France a few years ago, in a discussion of the problem of individualism, a theologian confessed, “When I am in my car, I am an individual, but when I get out, I am a person again.”

We are social beings. The language we speak connects us to those around us. The food I eat was grown by others. The skills passed on to me have slowly been developed in the course of hundreds of generations. The air I breathe and the water I drink is not for my exclusive use, but has been in many bodies before mine. The place I live, the tools I use, and the paper I write on were made by many hands. I am not my own doctor or dentist or banker. To the extent that I disconnect myself from others, I am in danger. Alone, I die, and soon. To be in communion with others is life.

Because we are social beings, confession in church does not take the place of confession to those we have sinned against. An essential element of confession is doing all I can to set right what I did wrong. If I stole something, it must be returned or paid for. If I lied to anyone, I must tell that person the truth. If I was angry without good reason, I must apologize. I must seek forgiveness not only from God, but from those whom I have wronged or harmed.

We are also verbal beings. Words provide a way of communicating, not only with others, but even with ourselves. The fact that confession is witnessed forces me to put into words all those

ways, minor and major, in which I live as if there were no God and no commandment to love. A thought that is concealed has great power over us.

Confessing sins, or even temptations, makes us better able to resist. The underlying principle is described in one of the collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers:

If impure thoughts trouble you, do not hide them, but tell them at once to your spiritual father and condemn them. The more a person conceals his thoughts, the more they multiply and gain strength. But an evil thought, when revealed, is immediately destroyed. If you hide things, they have great power over you, but if you could only speak of them before God, in the presence of another, then they will often wither away, and lose their power.

Confessing to anyone, even a stranger, renews rather than contracts my humanity, even if all I get in return for my confession is the well-worn remark, "Oh, that's not so bad. After all, you're only human." But if I can confess to anyone anywhere, why confess in church in the presence of a priest? It's not a small question in societies in which the phrase "institutionalized religion" is so often used, the implicit message being that religious institutions necessarily undermine spiritual life.

Confession is a Christian ritual with a communal character. Confession in the church differs from confession in your living room in the same way that getting married in church differs from simply living together. The communal aspect of the event tends to safeguard it, solidify it, and call everyone to account—those doing the ritual, and those witnessing it.

In the social structure of the Church, a huge network of local communities is held together in unity, each community helping the others and all sharing a common task, while each provides a specific place to recognize and bless the main events in life, from birth to burial. Confession is an essential part of that continuum. My confession is an act of reconnection with God and with all the people and creatures who depend on me and have been harmed by my failings, and from whom I have distanced myself through acts of non-communication. The community is represented by the person hearing my confession, an ordained priest delegated to serve as Christ's witness, who provides guidance and wisdom that helps each penitent overcome attitudes and habits that take us off course, who declares forgiveness and restores us to communion. In this way our repentance is brought into the community that has been damaged by our sins—a private event in a public context.

"It's a fact," writes Fr. Thomas Hopko, rector of St. Vladimir's Seminary, "that we cannot see the true ugliness and hideousness of our sins until we see them in the mind and heart of the other to whom we have confessed."

A Communion-Centered Life

Attending the liturgy and receiving Communion on Sundays and principal feast days has always been at the heart of Christian life, the event that gives life a eucharistic dimension and center point. But Communion—receiving Christ into ourselves—can never be routine, never something we deserve, no matter what the condition of our life may be. For example, Christ solemnly warns

us against approaching the altar if we are in a state of enmity with anyone. He tells us, "Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24). In one of the parables, He describes a person who is ejected from the wedding feast because he isn't wearing a wedding garment. Tattered clothing is a metaphor for living a life that reduces conscience to rags (Matthew 22:1–14).

Receiving Christ in Communion during the liturgy is the keystone of *living* in communion—with God, with people, and with creation. Christ teaches us that love of God and love of neighbor sum up the Law. One way of describing a serious sin is to say it is any act which breaks our communion with God and with our neighbor.

It is for this reason that examination of conscience—if necessary, going to confession—is part of preparation for Communion. This is an ongoing process of trying to see my life and actions with clarity and honesty—to look at myself, my choices, and my direction as known by God. The examination of conscience is an occasion to recall not only any serious sins committed since my last confession, but even the beginnings of sins.

The word *conscience* derives from a Greek verb meaning "to have common knowledge" or "to know with" someone, a concept that led to the idea of bearing witness concerning someone, especially oneself. Conscience is an inner faculty that guides us in making choices that align us with God's will, and that accuses us when we break communion with God and with our neighbor. Conscience is a reflection of the divine image at the core of each person. In *The Sacred Gift of Life*, Fr. John Breck points out that "the education of conscience is acquired in large measure through immersing ourselves in the ascetic tradition of the Church: its life of prayer, sacramental and liturgical celebration, and scripture study. The education of our conscience also depends upon our acquiring wisdom from those who are more advanced than we are in faith, love, and knowledge of God."

Conscience is God's whispering voice within us calling us to a way of life that reveals God's presence and urges us to refuse actions that destroy community and communion.

Key Elements in Confession

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann provided this summary of the three key areas of confession:

Relationship to God: Questions on faith itself, possible doubts or deviations, inattention to prayer, neglect of liturgical life, fasting, etc.

Relationship to one's neighbor: Basic attitudes of selfishness and self-centeredness, indifference to others, lack of attention, interest, love. All acts of actual offense—envy, gossip, cruelty, etc.—must be mentioned and, if needed, their sinfulness shown to the penitent.

Relationship to one's self: Sins of the flesh with, as their counterpart, the Christian vision of purity and wholesomeness, respect for the body as an icon of Christ, etc. Abuse of one's life and resources; absence of any real effort to deepen life; abuse of alcohol or other drugs; cheap idea of "fun," a life centered on amusement, irresponsibility, neglect of family relations, etc.

Tools of Self-Examination

In the struggle to examine conscience, we have tools that can assist us, resources that help both in the formation and the examination of conscience. Among these are the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and various prayers, as well as lists of questions written by experienced confessors. In this small booklet, we will look at only one of these, the Beatitudes, which provide a brief summary of the Gospel. Each Beatitude reveals an aspect of being in union with God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Poverty of spirit is my awareness that I need God's help and mercy more than anything else. It is knowing that I cannot save myself, that neither money nor power will spare me from suffering and death, and that no matter what I achieve and acquire in this life, it will be far less than I want if I let my acquisitive capacity get the upper hand. This is the blessing of knowing that even what I have is not mine. It is living free of the domination of fear. While the exterior forms of poverty vary from person to person and even from year to year in a particular life, depending on one's vocation and special circumstances, all who live this Beatitude are seeking with heart and soul to live God's will rather than their own. Christ's mother is the paradigm of poverty of spirit in her unconditional assent to the will of God: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Similarly, at the marriage feast at Cana, she says to those waiting on the tables: "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). Whoever lives by these words is poor in spirit.

Questions to consider: We are bombarded by advertisements, constantly reminded of the possibility of having things and of indulging all sorts of curiosities and temptations. The simple goal of poverty of spirit seems more remote than the moons of Neptune. Am I regularly praying that God will give me poverty of spirit? When tempted to buy things I don't need, do I pray for strength to resist? Do I keep the Church fasts that would help strengthen my capacity to live this Beatitude? Do I really seek to know and embrace God's will in my life? Am I willing to be seen as odd or stupid by those whose lives are dominated by values that oppose the Beatitudes?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Mourning is cut from the same cloth as poverty of spirit. Without poverty of spirit, I am forever on guard to keep what I have for myself, and to keep me for myself, or for that small circle of people whom I regard as mine. A consequence of poverty of spirit is becoming vulnerable to the pain and losses of others, not only those whom I happen to know and care for, but also those who are strangers to me. "When we die," said Saint John Climacus, the seventh-century abbot of Saint Catherine's Monastery near Mount Sinai, "we will not be criticized for having failed to work miracles. We will not be accused of having failed to be theologians or contemplatives. But we will certainly have to explain to God why we did not mourn unceasingly."

Questions to consider: Do I weep with those who weep? Have I mourned those in my own family who have died? Do I open my thoughts and feelings to the suffering and losses of others? Do I try to make space in my mind and heart for the calamities in the lives of others who may be far away and neither speak my language nor share my faith?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Meekness is often confused with weakness, yet a meek person is neither spineless nor cowardly. Understood biblically, meekness

is making choices and exercising power with a divine rather than social reference point. Meekness is the essential quality of the human being in relationship to God. Without meekness, we cannot align ourselves with God's will. In place of humility, we prefer pride—pride in who we are, pride in doing as we please, pride in what we've achieved, pride in the national or ethnic group to which we happen to belong. Meekness has nothing to do with blind obedience or social conformity. Meek Christians do not allow themselves to be dragged along by the tides of political power. Such rudderless persons have cut themselves off from their own conscience, God's voice in their hearts, and thrown away their God-given freedom. Meekness is an attribute of following Christ, no matter what risks are involved.

Questions to consider: When I read the Bible or writings of the saints, do I consider the implications for my own life? When I find what I read at odds with the way I live, do I allow the text to challenge me? Do I pray for God's guidance? Do I seek help with urgent questions in confession? Do I tend to make choices and adopt ideas that will help me fit into the group I want to be part of? Do I fear the criticism or ridicule of others for my efforts to live a Gospel-centered life? Do I listen to others? Do I tell the truth even in difficult circumstances?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. In his teaching about the Last Judgment, Christ speaks of hunger and thirst: "I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink" (Matthew 25:35). Our salvation hinges on our caring for the least person as we would for Christ Himself. To hunger and thirst for something is not a mild desire, but a desperate craving. To hunger and thirst for righteousness means urgently to desire that which is honorable, right, and true. A righteous person is a right-living person, living a moral, blameless life, right with both God and neighbor. A righteous social order would be one in which no one is abandoned or thrown away, in which people live in peace with God, with each other, and with the world God has given us.

Questions to consider: Does it disturb me that I live in a world that in many ways is the opposite of the Kingdom of heaven? When I pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," am I praying that my own life might better reflect God's priorities? Who is "the least" in my day-to-day world? Do I try to see Christ's face in him or her?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. One of the perils of pursuing righteousness is that one can become self-righteous. Thus, the next rung of the ladder of the Beatitudes is the commandment of mercy. This is the quality of self-giving love, of gracious deeds done for those in need. Twice in the Gospels Christ makes His own the words of the Prophet Hosea: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7). We witness mercy in event after event in the New Testament account of Christ's life—forgiving, healing, freeing, correcting, even repairing the wound of a man injured by Peter in his effort to protect Christ, and promising Paradise to the criminal being crucified next to Him.

Again and again Christ declares that those who seek God's mercy must pardon others. The principle is included in the only prayer Christ taught His disciples: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). He calls on His followers to love their enemies and to pray for them. The moral of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that a neighbor is a person who comes to the aid of a stranger in need (Luke 10:29–37). While He denounces hypocrisy and

warns the merciless that they are condemning themselves to hell, in no passage in the Gospel do we hear Christ advocating anyone's death. At the Last Judgment, Christ receives into the Kingdom of heaven those who were merciful. He is Mercy itself.

Questions to consider: When I see a stranger in need, how do I respond? Is Christ's mercy evident in my life? Am I willing to extend forgiveness to those who seek it? Am I generous in sharing my time and material possessions with those in need? Do I pray for my enemies? Do I try to assist them if they are in need? Have I been an enemy to anyone?

Mercy is more and more absent even in societies with Christian roots. In the United States, the death penalty has been reinstated in the majority of states and has the fervent support of many Christians. Even in the many countries that have abolished executions, the death penalty is often imposed on unborn children—abortion is hardly regarded as a moral issue. Concerning the sick, aged, and severely handicapped, “mercy killing” and “assisted suicide” are now phrases much in use. To what extent have I been influenced by slogans and ideologies that promote death as a solution and disguise killing as mercy? What am I doing to make my society more welcoming, more caring, more life-protecting?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. The brain has come up in the world, while the heart has been demoted. The heart used to be widely recognized as the locus of God's activity within us, the hub of human identity and conscience, linked with our capacity to love, the core not only of physical but also of spiritual life—the ground zero of the human soul. In our brain-centered society, we ought to be surprised that Christ didn't say, “Blessed are the brilliant in mind.” Instead, He blessed purity of heart.

The Greek word for purity, *katharos*, means spotless, stainless; intact, unbroken, perfect; free from adulteration or anything that defiles or corrupts. What, then, is a pure heart? A heart free of possessiveness, a heart capable of mourning, a heart that thirsts for what is right, a merciful heart, a loving heart, a heart not ruled by passions, an undivided heart, a heart aware of the image of God in others, a heart drawn to beauty, a heart conscious of God's presence in creation. A pure heart is a heart without contempt for others. “A person is truly pure of heart when he considers all human beings as good and no created thing appears impure or defiled to him,” wrote Saint Isaac of Syria.

Opposing purity of heart is lust of any kind—for wealth, for recognition, for power, for vengeance, for sexual exploits—whether indulged through action or imagination. Spiritual virtues that defend the heart are memory, awareness, watchfulness, wakefulness, attention, hope, faith, and love. A rule of prayer in daily life helps heal, guard, and unify the heart. “Always keep your mind collected in your heart,” instructed the great teacher of prayer, Saint Theophan the Recluse. The Jesus Prayer—the prayer of the heart—is part of a tradition of spiritual life that helps move the center of consciousness from the mind to the heart. Purification of the heart is the striving to place under the rule of the heart the mind, which represents the analytic and organizational aspect of consciousness. It is the moment-to-moment prayerful discipline of seeking to be so aware of God's presence that no space is left in the heart for hatred, greed, lust, or vengeance. Purification of the heart is the lifelong struggle of seeking a more God-centered life, a heart illuminated with the presence of the Holy Trinity.

Questions to consider: Do I take care not to read or look at things that stir up lust? Do I avoid using words that soil my mouth? Am I attentive to beauty in people, nature, and the arts? Am I sarcastic about others? Is a rhythm of prayer part of my daily life? Do I prepare carefully for Communion, never taking it for granted? Do I observe fasting days and seasons? Am I aware of and grateful for God's gifts?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Christ is often called the Prince of Peace. His peace is not a passive condition—He blesses the *makers* of peace. The peacemaker is a person who helps heal damaged relationships. Throughout the Gospel, we see Christ bestowing peace. In His final discourse before His arrest, He says to the Apostles: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). After the Resurrection, He greets His followers with the words, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). He instructs His followers that, on entering a house, their first action should be the blessing, "Peace to this house" (Luke 10:5).

Christ is at His most paradoxical when He says, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34; note that a similar passage, Luke 12:51, uses the word "division" rather than "sword"). Those who try to live Christ's peace may find themselves in trouble, as all those who have died a martyr's death bear witness. Sadly, for most of us the peace we long for is not the Kingdom of God, but a slightly improved version of the world we already have. We would like to get rid of conflict without eliminating the spiritual and material factors that draw us into conflict. The peacemaker is a person aware that ends never stand apart from means: figs do not grow from thistles; neither is community brought into being by hatred and violence. A peacemaker is aware that all persons, even those who seem to be ruled by evil spirits, are made in the image of God and are capable of change and conversion.

Questions to consider: In my family, in my parish, and among my coworkers, am I guilty of sins which cause or deepen division and conflict? Do I ask forgiveness when I realize I am in the wrong? Or am I always justifying what I do, no matter what pain or harm it causes others? Do I regard it as a waste of time to communicate with opponents? Do I listen with care and respect to those who irritate me? Do I pray for the well-being and salvation of adversaries and enemies? Do I allow what others say or what the press reports to define my attitude toward those whom I have never met? Do I take positive steps to overcome division? Are there people I regard as not bearing God's image and therefore innately evil?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. The last rung is where the Beatitudes reach and pass beyond the Cross. "We must carry Christ's Cross as a crown of glory," wrote Saint John Chrysostom in the fourth century, "for it is by it that everything that is achieved among us is gained. . . . Whenever you make the sign of the cross on your body, think of what the Cross means and put aside anger and every other passion. Take courage and be free in the soul."

In the ancient world, Christians were persecuted chiefly because they were regarded as undermining the social order, even though in most respects they were models of civil obedience and good conduct. But Christians abstained from the cult of the deified emperor, would not sacrifice to gods their neighbors venerated, and were notable for their objection to war or bloodshed in any form. It is easy to imagine that a community that lived by such values, however well-behaved, would be regarded as a threat by the government. "Both the Emperor's commands and those of others in authority must be obeyed if they are not contrary to the God of heaven," said Saint Euphemia in the year 303, during the reign of Diocletian. "If they are, they must not only be disobeyed; they must be resisted." Following torture, Saint Euphemia was killed by a bear—the kind of death endured by thousands of Christians well into the fourth century, though the greatest number of Christian martyrs belongs to the twentieth century. In many countries religious persecution continues.

Questions to consider: Does fear play a bigger role in my life than love? Do I hide my faith or live it in a timid, half-hearted way? When I am ordered to do something that conflicts with Christ's teaching, whom do I obey? Am I aware of those who are suffering for righteousness' sake in my own country and elsewhere in the world? Am I praying for them? Am I doing anything to help them?

Finding a Confessor

Just as not every doctor is a good physician, not every priest is a good confessor. Sometimes it happens that a priest, however good his qualities in other respects, is a person not well suited for witnessing confessions. While abusive priests are the exception, their existence must be noted. God has given us freedom and provided each person with a conscience. It is not the role of a priest to take the place of conscience or to become anyone's drill sergeant. A good confessor will help us become better at hearing the voice of conscience and become more free in an increasingly God-centered life.

Fortunately, good confessors are not hard to find. Usually your confessor is the priest who is closest, sees you most often, knows you and the circumstances of your life best: a priest of your parish. Do not be put off by your awareness of what you perceive as his relative youth, his personal shortcomings, or the probability that he possesses no rare spiritual gifts. Keep in mind that each priest goes to confession himself and may have more to confess than you do. You confess, not to him, but to Christ in his presence. He is the *witness* of your confession. You do not require and will never find a sinless person to be that witness. (The Orthodox Church tries to make this clear by having the penitent face, not the priest, but an icon of Christ.)

What your confessor says by way of advice can be remarkably insightful, or brusque, or seem to you a cliché and not very relevant, yet almost always there will be something helpful if only you are willing to hear it. Sometimes there is a suggestion or insight that becomes a turning point in your life. If he imposes a penance—normally increased prayer, fasting, and acts of mercy—it should be accepted meekly, unless there is something in the penance which seems to you a violation of your conscience or of the teaching of the Church as you understand it.

Don't imagine that a priest will respect you less for what you reveal to Christ in his presence, or imagine that he is carefully remembering all your sins. "Even a recently ordained priest will quickly find that he cannot remember 99 percent of what people tell him in confession," one priest told me. He said it is embarrassing to him that people expect him to remember what they told him in an earlier confession. "When they remind me, then sometimes I remember, but without a reminder, usually my mind is a blank. I let the words I listen to pass through me. Also, so much that I hear in one confession is similar to what I hear in other confessions—the confessions blur together. The only sins I easily remember are my own."

One priest told me of his difficulties meeting the expectations that sometimes become evident in confession. "I am not a psychologist. I have no special gifts. I am just a fellow sinner trying to stay on the path."

A Russian priest who is spiritual father to many people once told me about the joy he often feels hearing confessions. "It is not that I am glad anyone has sins to confess, but when you come to confession it means these sins are in your past, not your future. Confession marks a turning point, and I am the lucky one who gets to watch people making that turn!"

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