

Confession 201: How to Confess Like an Adult July 17, 2020 Jeannette Williams

For most of us, instruction in going to confession took place in the second grade, right before First Holy Communion. We were taught how to confess like children and most of us have never received any further instruction. So we still think in terms of "I disobeyed Mommy, I pulled the dog's tail, and I fought with Jimmy in the schoolyard."

The problem with our second-grade education is that we don't know how to make a good confession when we're not really being naughty. So when we don't have anything obvious to say, we don't know what to say, and we wonder if we should even go to confession.

Maybe some of you can relate to my frustration at confessing the same-old-same-old stuff for a number of years and feeling like I'm just not progressing. I figured I must be doing something wrong, so I decided to do some research to learn how to make a grown-up confession.

What I've gathered is that, basically, making a good confession when you're not obviously breaking the Ten Commandments is hard. It takes work. But putting in that work is what propels the soul to the next level of spiritual growth.

Step 1: Change Focus

The first step is to have the right intention. Everything should stem from our relationship with Christ and our desire to grow closer to him. As Fr. Mike Schmitz says in his video "Making a Good Confession":

"Is God the center of your life? If not, you should confess that first."

My goal should be to unite more fully with the Blessed Trinity—to grow in grace, which, as we learned in second grade, is "the life of God in our souls." It is grace, God's life in us, that makes us holy.

So, do I really want to be holier or do I just want to be nicer? There is a critical difference in motives between the two. The former focuses on God and what God thinks of me, while the latter focuses on me and what people think of me. Holiness focuses on the one eternal relationship; niceness focuses on temporary, earthly relationships.

When my life's focus is on growing deeply in love with God, then I will see myself and the path I need to take more clearly.

Step 2: Understand the True Meaning of Sin

Having homeschooled six children using the Baltimore Catechism and having drilled them over and over, I have it pretty much memorized. Our second-grade lessons taught us that sin is "any willful thought, word, action, or omission contrary to the will of God." But Fr. Mike, in his down-to-earth way, defines sin this way:

"God, I know what you want, but I want what I want."

So if we understand sin as rejecting God, and we are truly seeking to grow in relationship with him (step 1), then we will want what he wants, even in the smallest aspects of our lives.

Step 3: Examine Your Conscience Like a Grown-Up

The good old Baltimore Catechism taught us that the steps to confession are: Find out my sins; be sorry for my sins; make up my mind not to sin again; tell my sins to the priest; do the penance the priest gives me.

That's still the right order, even for adults. But "find out my sins" means to examine one's conscience. The key here, I've found, is to habitually examine one's conscience, not just right before confession. Ideally, we should do an examination of conscience every night before bed. Ask for the Holy Spirit to help you as you go back over your day, first reviewing all the ways you said yes to God and thanking him, then reviewing all the ways you said no to God and asking forgiveness. Mother Teresa said it simply:

"Ask at night before you go to bed, 'What did I do to Jesus today? What did I do for Jesus today? What did I do with Jesus today?'"

Using a cheat sheet on a regular basis can deepen and improve your nightly review as well as your examination immediately before confession. There are so many to choose from! Find what works best for you in your state in life and the issues you're struggling with.

Common suggestions are the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Precepts of the Church, but you can also use a prayer like the Litany of Humility or the beautiful prayer Fr. Mark-Mary offers in his video, *Bringing the Same Sins to Confession? Try This*.

Also check out the fantastic website, goodconfession.com, that offers descriptions and attributes of various theological lists to meditate on: the Seven Deadly Sins, Seven Capital Virtues, Three Theological Virtues, Four Cardinal Virtues, and even the Four Temperaments (personalities) and the strengths and weaknesses associated with them. I will be using this website often.

Step 4: Be More than Just Sorry

The next step after examining one's conscience is to be sorry for our sins, or as one source said, "be heartbroken because of your sins." Heartbroken. Yes, if I truly loved Jesus, I would be heartbroken that I had hurt him! If we are truly heartbroken, we should be able to "make a firm resolve not to repeat our sin." This is true repentance. As Fr. Mike said in another video, *Confessing the Same Sins Over and Over Again*, we need to actually, formally renounce the sin. As Christians, we are not confessing just to get some Catholic guilt off our chests. We're confessing so that we will have a true conversion, a real change of thinking and change of lifestyle.

Step 5: Confess Like an Adult

If our motive is to grow in love with the Lord, if we understand what sin is so that we can habitually examine our consciences and see ourselves more clearly, if we are heartbroken and truly repentant, then we are ready to go to confession as grown-ups—and actually start to see some results!

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