



Horrid Nails by Joe Sixpack

In the days of the Dutch masters of art, there was a noted painter who had wasted his youth in wickedness and depravity. Coming to his senses later in life, he bitterly regretted his sins and resolved to make up for them.

One of the painter's best known works depicted the 13th station of the cross: The Taking Down of Our Lord From the Cross. Prominent in the painting was the man who pulled the nails from our Saviors sacred flesh. The person painted into that role was the painter himself. When asked why he used himself as the model for that man, with considerable feeling he replied: "God knows I've driven innumerable cruel nails into my Lord, crucifying him over and over with my sins. Don't you think it's about time for me to tenderly and lovingly pull out a few of those horrid nails?"

This is a man who understood the value of confession...and penance, both of which are the topic of this article. We have already looked at the first three elements necessary to make a good confession: examination of conscience, contrition, and firm purpose of amendment. Now let's continue with the fourth element, confession of our sins to a priest.

Confession is the actual telling of our sins to a priest. This is the only way he can absolve our sins, as he has no way of knowing what to absolve without first hearing them. "The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible."¹

When I'm teaching non-Catholics interested in joining the Church, this is ordinarily where I begin to teach them the proper form and sequence for the actual act of confessing in the confessional, but we lack the room here, and I don't want to insult you who have gone to confession since childhood... even if irregularly. Believe me, there are plenty of sources around for you to learn this, and your confessor would be most happy to help you learn the proper way to go to confession.

We must confess every mortal sin when we go to confession. "Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit."² The Church requires us to go to confession at least once a year, during the Easter time. She suggests that we go at least once a month, but tells us the best thing for the benefit of our soul is to go every week... even if the matter for our confessions consists only of venial sins.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1455

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1458

We receive a penance to make at least some satisfaction for our sins, thus decreasing the punishment we deserve for those sins. The sacrament of Penance always removes all the eternal punishment in hell that is deserved by mortal sin, but it doesn't necessarily remove all the temporal punishment. The debt of temporal punishment can only be satisfied in purgatory or on earth. Since there is no merit in purgatory, and since purgatory isn't a pleasant place, we are far and away better off to satisfy the debt we owe God in this life.

The means of satisfying this debt, which also contributes to our own sanctification, are voluntary acts of penance, devout participation in the Mass, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, earning indulgences, performing the spiritual and temporal works of mercy, and patiently accepting the trials and sufferings God chooses to permit in our lives.

Since we mentioned indulgences in the last paragraph, let's talk about them for a moment... especially since so few people even know what they are anymore. An indulgence is the remission of the whole or part of the temporal punishment due to forgiven sin, granted by the pope and the bishops out of the Church's spiritual treasury, which is made up of the infinite redemptive merits of Jesus Christ, and the superabundant merits of the saints. It's more than a mere remission of canonical words of penance, because it really remits the whole or part of the punishment due the sinner by God. Remember, Jesus told Peter (Mt 16:18) and the apostles (Mt 18:18) they have the power of binding and loosing.

The divine power of the Church to grant indulgences can be better understood if we compare it with the state's power to pardon all or part of a convicted felon's punishment inflicted by the courts. The president (in federal cases) and the governor (in state cases) has the right to grant a commutation of any part or the whole of a felon's sentence. Moreover, those same two offices, by the administration of enacted law, give prisoners time off their sentences for good behavior.

The state may grant a convicted felon a pardon or commutation, even if he isn't sorry for his crime. The Church, however, never remits temporal punishment unless the sinner has shown his sorrow.

Indulgences are granted in two forms: plenary and partial. A plenary indulgence remits all the punishment due to forgiven sins. A partial indulgence remits some portion of the punishment due to forgiven sin. And although we should be interested in gaining indulgences for ourselves (because purgatory ain't no fun), we may also gain them for the poor souls in purgatory (*who know purgatory ain't no fun*). We gain indulgences by being in a state of grace, have the desire to gain the indulgence, and perform the good acts required by the Church. For a plenary indulgence, these Church required acts include making a good confession and Communion within eight days prior to or after the indulgenced act.

Now that we've covered sufficiently, but in no means deeply, the sacrament of Penance, I hope you will more frequently avail yourself to its benefits. Regarding indulgences, I also hope you will begin to seek them out for yourself and your loved ones who have gone ahead of you to the next life. Next week we will look at the Anointing of the Sick, because this is What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

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