



General Grant's Catholic Encounter by Joe Sixpack

After serving his term as president, U.S. Grant went with his wife on a world tour. One of the stops on their trip was the Vatican. When Grant was presented to the Pope the Holy Father said, "I want to thank you for the religious privileges you granted to Catholic soldiers in your armies."

Thinking back, the general couldn't recall any special privileges he'd granted to Catholics. Perceiving this, the Pope explained, "I'm referring to the fact that before every battle you told your officers to allow the Catholic soldiers an opportunity to go to confession."

Grant replied rather directly, as was his manner, "I did that as a military measure, because *my soldiers fought better when they felt that their conscience was clear*. But I had no idea Your Holiness was aware of this custom."

"Ah, my friend," replied the Pope, "there is nothing which effects my children anywhere in the world that is not known to me, and every such benefit is cordially remembered."

Despite that he wasn't a Catholic, Grant understood the obvious benefit of confession, and so should we all. If well received, the sacrament of Penance restores or increases sanctifying grace, forgives our sins, obliterates eternal punishment due for mortal sins, helps us with additional strength to avoid future sins, and restores all the merits that have been lost by the commission of mortal sins.

There are five elements necessary for us to be able to make a good confession:

1. We must make a good examination of conscience;
2. We must be truly sorry for our sins;
3. We must resolve not to sin again (called a firm purpose of amendment);
4. We must confess our sins to a priest;
5. We must accept the penance the priest assigns us.

Now let's begin to look at these five elements individually, beginning with a good examination of conscience.

In order to make a good examination of conscience we must make a deliberate recalling of all the sins we have committed since our last good confession. This is done by going over in our minds all that is required of us by God's commandments and the Church's laws. The Church recommends that we do a brief examination of conscience each night before bedtime, which makes it much easier to do before confession.

There are a number of prayer books and leaflets available that have a *printed* examination to help guide us. They merely list God's commandments and the Church's laws in order. Under each commandment and law are questions we should ask ourselves. The two best printed forms of an examination of conscience I've seen are found in the *Queen of Apostles Prayerbook*¹, and the *Handbook of Prayers*.²

Sorrow for our sins is called contrition. There are two types of contrition: perfect and imperfect. Perfect contrition is sorrow for our sins with the purest of motives; it is hatred for our sins solely for the love we have for God and the offense our sins cause Him. "Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins *if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.*"³

Imperfect contrition, on the other hand, is sorrow for our sins for less pure motives; e.g., fear of hell. Like perfect contrition, imperfect contrition is still a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. We experience imperfect contrition when we are sorry for our sins because we fear hell, or because of the inherent evil of sin. Although perfect contrition is obviously the better of the two, it is rare. However, we may receive the sacrament well if we have at least imperfect contrition.

The rite of the sacrament of Penance allows for recital of the prayer called an *act of contrition*, of which there are many, and we should be sincere in the recitation of this prayer. By *act* of contrition we mean an act of the will, causing our will to be sorry for the sins we commit. We should never confuse subjective emotion with an objective act. In other words, you may not *feel* sorrow for your sins, but you can *decide* to be sorry. We should be sorry for all our sins, including venial sins, because all sins offend God. Still, you must only be contrite for your mortal sins. If all you're confessing is venial sins and don't have sorrow for them, recall a past mortal sin and be contrite about it.

Next is the firm purpose of amendment. This is the firm resolution that you will not sin again. In order to receive God's forgiveness, you must have this firm purpose of amendment. Being resolved not to sin again is not the same as living up to it. Yes, you should absolutely have your mind made up not to sin again and to avoid all the occasions of sin, but let's not forget that only one human person, the Blessed Virgin Mary, went a lifetime free of all actual sin. Even though all the saints were perfect by the time they died, all of them had sinned. Even St. John Paul II went to confession *every day*, and no one will deny he was a holy man. (By the way, as holy as he was, I've often wondered what it would be like to be a fly on the wall during one of his confessions. What could he possibly have had to confess?)

Next week we will conclude our examination of the sacrament of Penance with a look at the final two elements of the those five necessary to make a good confession. Don't wait until reading next week's article if you need to go to confession, though! Your priest will happily help you through a good confession, because this is What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

Got a question? Go to JoeSixpackAnswers.com.

¹ Daughters of St. Paul, <http://store.pauline.org/english/books/categoryid/690/catpagesize/50/level/a/productid/4438.aspx>

² Fathers Belmont and Socias, Scepter Publishers, <http://www.scepterpublishers.org/subcategory/?keywords=handbook+of+prayers&x=0&y=0>

³ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1677