



A True American Hero **by Joe Sixpack**

During a desperate battle on Guadalcanal in World War II, an American soldier threw himself on a Japanese grenade that landed among his mortar crew. The soldier survived the blast, but was horribly wounded and maimed.

The chaplain visited the young man in an army hospital and asked him, "Why did you take that million to one chance and risk your life that way?"

The soldier smiled and replied, "It was like this, Father: I had gone to confession that morning, so I was ready to die, but I didn't know if the other guys were ready."

This great American hero drives home a point about death and our need for confession perfectly. Death is the most rude of all visitors. He never announces himself, and he always comes when we least expect and are least prepared for his visit. Even if we won't go to confession regularly because we are sorry for having offended God, we should at least prepare ourselves for that most dreaded visitor: Death.

"But, Joe," you say, "I'm not a bad person. Why do I need to go to confession regularly?" Obviously I can't be your conscience, but I do have a good understanding of human nature. After all, I'm a human...believe it or not. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that Catholics aren't utilizing the confessional as they should. We live in a culture where what was once viewed by polite society as wrong is today the norm. We think nothing of dressing immodestly, using artificial contraception, or even fudging on our taxes. Yet virtually everyone goes to Communion at Mass, but hardly anyone shows up for confession.

All of our sins—original and actual, in the case of an adult—were washed away in Baptism, but that sacrament of initiation doesn't protect us from the sins committed afterward. Jesus understands human nature perfectly, because He both created it and lived it, so He established the sacrament of Penance so we could find reconciliation to God from the sins we commit after Baptism.

As we mentioned some weeks ago, all sacraments have both matter and form. The matter of Penance is the penitent and his sins. What sort of matter would be considered worthy of confession? Well, just randomly poking through the written examination of conscience in front of me, I'll ask you a few of those questions and you can decide if you perhaps need to go to confession: "Have you refused to believe anything the Church teaches?" "Have you omitted your daily prayers?" "Have you used God's name carelessly?" "Have you failed to attend Mass on any Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation?" "Have you disobeyed your parents (children) or other lawful authority (adults)?" "Have you allowed anger to turn into resentment?" "Have you been intoxicated?" "Have you willfully entertained impure thoughts?" "Have you kept something you borrowed beyond the agreed upon period, or for an unreasonable time?" "Have you

listened with pleasure to the exposure of the faults of others?” “Have you failed to fast or abstain when you were not excused by a sufficient reason?” These are just a few of the things to ask ourselves.

We should never allow shame or fear to prevent us from confessing our sins, especially mortal sins. Speaking from a purely human standpoint, I can understand how tempting it is to withhold a sin in confession. I've been tempted more than a few times myself. However, our logic and reason tell us such shame and fear are superfluous. The priest who hears our confession is acting *in persona christi*; the person of Christ. In other words, it is actually Christ to whom we are confessing our sins.

Furthermore, the priest is bound by the *seal of confession*. That means he can never tell a soul—including his own confessor—anyone's confession. Indeed, many priests have been jailed, tortured, and murdered rather than divulge the contents of a penitent's confession. The seal of confession even extends to the point that a priest can't use the knowledge gained from a confession for any reason. Let me illustrate that point.

Let's say that Fr. Patrick has appointed Judas Avarice to oversee the parish finances. One day, Judas goes to confession and tells Father that he has embezzled \$250,000 from parish funds. Since Judas must replace the money to satisfy God's justice, Fr. Patrick tells Judas he must replace the money. However, there are two things Father *absolutely cannot* do. He cannot tell the police and have Judas prosecuted, as that would violate the seal of confession. Furthermore, Father cannot later replace Judas in his position, as this would be acting upon knowledge gained in the confessional. The seal of confession is that strict!

Now let's get back to being tempted to withhold a mortal sin in confession. If a penitent deliberately omits the confession of a mortal sin he commits the additional mortal sin of sacrilege, risking eternal punishment. Furthermore, he leaves the confessional without having *any of his sins forgiven*. In order to be forgiven and reconciled to God, the penitent must confess the sin of sacrilege, any Communion received since the sacrilege (which is itself a sacrilege to be confessed), all the sins of his sacrilegious confession(s), and all the mortal sins committed since. Whew! It's a lot easier to avoid the sacrilegious confession in the first place. (A little tip I learned is, when you're tempted to omit a mortal sin in confession, just tell the priest you're being tempted and the temptation will flee.)

Now, sometimes people simply forget to confess a mortal sin. Don't try to play games with God, as He knows the truth, but if you genuinely forget to confess a mortal sin during confession it's still okay to go to Communion, as God forgave the sin because you made a good confession and didn't deliberately omit the mortal sin. However, know with moral certitude that you are obligated to confess the forgotten mortal sin the next time you go to confession...as soon as possible.

Finally, most Catholics think the priest *must* forgive your sins. No, not necessarily. Jesus gave His priests a decision making power in the confessional, and a priest may withhold absolution if the penitent shows no sign of sorrow for his mortal sins, or if he indicates he won't break with the sin. For example, a man confesses several acts of adultery because he has a mistress. The priest tells the man he must break off the adulterous relationship. The man refuses. The priest would be within his right and doing his duty to refuse absolution.

The sacrament of Penance is also called Reconciliation and Confession. Next week we will take a final look at this wonderfully merciful sacrament so that you can know What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

Got a question? Go to JoeSixpackAnswers.com.