

It's been a loooong time since my last Confession ...

By: Mike Aquilina

Lots of people want to go back to Confession. They remember the relief they felt, many years ago, when they unburdened themselves before God.

They want to go. But they can't imagine how they'd even begin the conversation once they walked into the box:

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been forty years since my last confession. I lied 32,438 times."

Maybe you feel that way. Maybe you can't even remember when you last experienced the sacrament. I have a dear friend who just returned after a long time away from the faith. He had to admit to the priest: "I can't remember when I last went to Confession, but I remember that Ronald Reagan was president."

The good news for him was that that was OK for the occasion. And maybe that will be good news for you, too.

The Bible tells us that even "the just fall seven times" (Proverbs 24:16). Over the course of decades, that adds up to a lot of falls, impossible to tally, really.

So, if you've been a long time away, you probably won't remember every instance of every fall -- every lie, every boast, every time you lost your temper, or every time you made a lingering examination of the model in a swimsuit advertisement.

God knows those sins better than you do. He doesn't require Confession because it helps Him in any way. He's not looking for you to refresh His memory. He wants you to refresh your own. He made the sacrament for your sake, because it helps you. It does you a world of good to take responsibility for your actions -- to speak your sins aloud before Jesus Christ, in the person of his priest -- and then to experience forgiveness.

Accuracy is not as important as honesty. If we can be accurate, we should be. If we know the numbers, we should say them. But the point is to be clear — very clear — about what we've done.

We need to speak our sins aloud without euphemisms, without evasions, without excuses, without citation of extenuating circumstances. And we need to be clear about whether the sin is habitual, occasional, rare, or happened only once. But estimates and guesstimates, ranges and "ballpark figures," are perfectly OK and perfectly understandable if you've been away a long time.

Confession is a sacrament of healing. A priest is, by God's grace, empowered to heal your soul and apply divine mercy. But no doctor can treat us effectively if we're hiding our symptoms.

Some sins are embarrassing. They carry social stigma. They're hard to admit to anyone. But we need not fear revealing anything to our confessor. A priest is bound to secrecy. He may not reveal the content of an individual's confession to any human being, not even his bishop, not even the pope.

No earthly authority can compel a priest to violate the “seal of the confessional.” A priest who violated this sacred trust would face not only expulsion from the priesthood, but automatic excommunication from the Catholic Church. History abounds with examples of priests who have gone to prison rather than testify about a parishioner’s sins.

Most priests say they rarely remember anything they’ve heard in the confessional. One priest told me that, within a year of his ordination, he probably heard “every known sin except successful suicide.” Priests are soon exposed to the secrets of the heart; and you’re unlikely to shock or even mildly surprise them.

Here’s a secret to make Confession much easier: always start off with the sin that’s most difficult to say, the one that’s most embarrassing or shameful. You’ll feel immediate relief, and the rest of the confession will be all the more rewarding.

If it makes Confession easier for you take advantage of “The Light is On for You!” on Tues., Dec. 11 and go to a parish on the other side of town. Or in another town. Or drive out to a monastery where nobody knows you.

But don’t put off the mercy, the grace, the happiness God has in mind for you.

Confession has many benefits in the natural order. It makes you feel better psychologically and sometimes even physically. It empowers you to move on.

But the big benefits are supernatural. It gives you divine life. You get God’s power to overcome your shortcomings.

If you’ve been away a long time, your confession will be a great relief. But it’s only a beginning. If it’s been years or decades since your last Confession, you’ll probably still need to work some things out.

So make it a regular part of your life. Go once a month. It’s guaranteed to be the best habit you pick up this year. Your family, friends, and co-workers will probably notice a change for the better, though they won’t know why.

Confessing the sins of many years should be difficult; but God makes it easy for us. And confessing the sins of a month is a lot easier still.

Writing from the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Mike Aquilina has authored numerous books on the faith. He is the co-author of “What Catholics Believe” that is being serialized in the Pittsburgh Catholic during the Year of Faith.

People, Get Ready

Confession goes better if you spend a little time in prayerful preparation. There are many good guides for examining your conscience. You’ll find one online here: www.sborromeo.org/confess.htm. You’ll find another in the *Handbook of Prayers* edited by Father James Socias (MTF, 2012).