

What Must I Do? The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Young Adults

Good Teacher, What Must I Do?

One day a wealthy young man approached Jesus (cf. Mk 10:17-22; Mt 19:16-22; Lk 18:18-23). He asked, “‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “you shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (Mk 10:17-22).

The young man had a good question. All young people ask similar questions about life’s meaning: “How can I be happy?” The probing questions of youth are always about life—life here on earth and ultimately, whether they realize it or not, life eternal. Only in Jesus, the “Good Teacher,” will young people find the authentic answer. Young men and women must learn this primary truth. Only God is worthy of our lives. If we have everything but do not know Jesus and his Father, we possess nothing of lasting value.

Jesus’ affection for the young man is striking: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mk 10:21). In truth, the Lord looks lovingly upon every young person without exception. The proof of his love is the cross, for from the cross, God’s “look of love” reached a new depth. This is Pope John Paul’s hope for youth:

May you experience a look like that! May you experience that truth that he, Christ, looks upon you with love, Jesus’ love!... My wish for each of you is that you may discover this look of Christ, and experience it in all its depth... Man needs this loving look. He needs to know that he is loved, loved eternally and chosen from eternity” (Letter to Youth, n. 7). Jesus said to the young man, “Come, follow me” (Mk 10:21).

Christ’s invitation to youth today is the same. There is no greater or more glorious call. Being a follower of Jesus, being a Christian, is the greatest of privileges, the most distinguished pursuit.

He Had Great Possessions

The sad truth is that despite Jesus’ loving invitation, the young man turned away. How many young people in the world today are on the brink of turning away from Jesus? How many already have? Our society is full of the sad, confused, and tormented faces of young people who do not

know Jesus' look of love. Why is this so? The problem is deeply embedded in fallen human nature. Because teens share this fallen nature, the budding energy and force that characterize adolescence create a powerful momentum which expresses itself in new and destructive forms. The phrase "great possessions" can have different levels of meaning. The most obvious is great material wealth. In Western culture, children learn—from their earliest days—that money is essential for happiness and the joys of this life. This passion is heightened in teenagers as all the worldly pleasures—expensive cars, beautiful homes, extravagant vacations, and glamorous clothes—are seductively set out before them. To many youth, the "good life" is the only dream that has any reality.

Youth itself is a treasure, a 'great possession.' Young people have a flair for living and relishing all the things life holds out to them. Yet youth can be wrongly treasured. Young adults can look upon their youth as a time for indulging their passions and desires. They are often urged to use their new-found freedom, potential and power in ways which are detrimental to their spiritual lives, such as in the misuse of sexuality, drugs, alcohol or entertainment. Their attitude can bet that of the unreformed prodigal son who squandered his inheritance in his youthful arrogance and passion (cf. Lk 15:11-13).

Another 'great possession' that lures youth away from Jesus is the future. Many young adults believe that time is their most abundant possession. They have a whole life ahead of them. Death is but a distant blur in a seemingly endless future. Because of this, young people tend to guard their futures, selfishly. It is not seen as an opportunity to live the Gospel, but rather to pursue careers and material success. Or they can be consumed by the demands of finding and marrying the right partner. They chase after the future and judge their options solely from a worldly perspective.

Pope John Paul reminded young people: "Christianity teaches us to understand temporal existence from the perspective of the kingdom of God... without eternal life, temporal life, however rich, however highly developed in all respects, in the end brings nothing other than... death" (Letter to Youth, n. 5).

Participating in the Sacrament

When teenagers participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, they come face to face with the mystery of God's love. This sacrament helps them experience God's forgiveness firsthand. Hopefully, they will come to experience Jesus' "look of love." How is this love of God manifested?

1. Teenagers experience the freedom that comes from bringing their sin into the light of Christ (cf. Jn 3: 20-21). Everything inside a young person can cry out: "I don't want to go to confession!" This struggle is not unique to teenagers; it is common to everyone who has endeavored to bring his sin to the light. To speak openly about our sin grates on our fallen nature. Nonetheless, the Sacrament of Reconciliation enables all of us (including teenagers) to come safely into the light of Christ's truth and experience his forgiveness. For young people it is the opportunity to experience freedom from nagging guilt and embarrassment. They are surely

blessed by the cleansing of the Holy Spirit leading to an inner sense of peace. Hopefully, they will know the reality of St. John's words: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn 1:7-9).

2. The Sacrament of Reconciliation helps young adults to grasp that they are responsible for their lives, for how they think and act. They are obliged to examine how their words and actions have hurt and offended others, and how their lives do or do not reflect God's standards. This sacrament forces them to see that they are not isolated individuals but members of the body of Christ and the human family. Their sin injures that body and violates the integrity of others. The Sacrament of Reconciliation accentuates the communal nature of our sinfulness and reconciliation.

3. Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit, empowering young people to live holy lives. John's words to young people can become a reality. He exhorted them: "I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one... I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 Jn 2:13-14).

Through the actions of Jesus, by the power of his Spirit, young men and women can conquer sin in their lives. Jesus breaks the hold Satan has gained over them through the lust of their eyes and the pride of life (cf. 1 Jn 2:16). We should not underestimate the spiritual effect that regular participation in this sacrament can have on teenagers.

4. By participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, young people implicitly, if not explicitly, recommit their lives to the Gospel. The teenager is saying, "I want to turn away from sin. I want to strive once more to live by God's commands, I want to live under his authority. I desire the power and life of Jesus' Holy Spirit to be active in my life." Obviously, young people, like all of us, may fail and sin again; nevertheless, rededication is essential for spiritual growth. Jesus is pleased when we renew our commitment to him and to his Gospel.

An Examination of Conscience for Young Adults

Responsibilities to God:

Have I gone to Mass on Sunday or have I rebelled and been stubborn about going to Mass?
Did I participate in the Mass or did I daydream?
Have I prayed every day?
Have I read the Bible?
Have I been rebellious toward God and his commands?
Have I misused the name of God by swearing and cursing?
Have I told the Father that I love him for creating me and making me his son/daughter?
Have I thanked Jesus for becoming man, dying for my sin and rising to give me eternal life?
Have I asked the Holy Spirit to help me conquer sin and temptation and to be obedient to God's commands?

Responsibilities to others and myself:

Have I been rebellious, disobedient or disrespectful to my parents, teachers and those in authority over me?
Have I lied to or deceived my parents or others?
Have I been arrogant and stubborn?
Have I talked back to my parents or those in authority?
Have I gotten angry or nurtured and held grudges and resentments? Have I refused to forgive others? Have I cultivated hatred?
Have I engaged in sexual fantasies? Have I looked at others lustfully?
Have I read pornographic literature or looked at pornographic pictures, shows or movies?
Have I masturbated?
Have I lustfully kissed or sexually touched someone? Have I had sexual intercourse?
Have I had an abortion or encouraged another to have one?
Have I gossiped about others? Have I slandered anyone? Have I told lies about others? Have I mocked or made fun of others?
Have I lied or cheated? Have I stolen anything? Have I paid it back?
Have I been selfish or spiteful toward others? Have I been jealous?
Have I gotten drunk, or taken drugs?
Have I participated in anything that is of the occult: ouija boards, fortune tellers, séances, channeling, astrology?
Have I been patient, kind gentle and self-controlled?
When my conscience told me to do something good, did I do it or did I ignore it?

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