



“Why tell my sins to a priest?”

(The Healing Power of Confession)



Opening Prayer

“I confess to Almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault; therefore I ask Blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God. Amen.”

Dive In: William Portillo: A Gangster Transformed

In 1988, sixteen-year-old William Portillo was initiated (or “jumped”) into an El Salvadorian gang called *Mara Salvatrucha*. He was given the gang name *Maniaco* (Maniac). He was the kind of guy you didn’t want to meet in a dark alley. His favorite hobby was robbing people at gunpoint so he could see the fear in their eyes.

Two years after being initiated into the gang, William was sentenced to sixteen years in prison. Armed with steel shanks and connections to the Mexican Mafia, he and other gangsters were soon running the show—until a prison riot landed William in solitary confinement, where he encountered God for the first time.


While he was in solitary, a chaplain gave William a copy of the New Testament. With nothing else to do, he began to read the Gospels for the first time. The pages came alive as he read about God’s redeeming love for his people: the Prodigal Son, the woman at the well, and the story of Mary Magdalene. The

power of those stories gave him hope and made him decide to turn his life around.

When he was released, William took to the streets with a new mission: preaching to gang members. At one point, another *Mara Salvatrucha* gangster reminded William that the penalty for leaving the gang was death. William responded simply, “You do what you have to do; I’ll do what I have to do.”

William is still with us. He started a ministry called *Prevención y Rescate* (Prevention and Rescue), a non-profit ministry that reaches out to and rehabilitates gang members and assists their families. William is a new person.

William’s story has been repeated countless times throughout history. God doesn’t just forgive us when we ask him. He has the power to change us—to totally and completely remake us. We encounter that transforming power every time we meet God in Confession.



“Let us throw ourselves into the ocean of his goodness, where every failing will be canceled and anxiety turned into love.”

— St. Paul of the Cross



Segment 1: Hitting the Goal

- Which of his relatives did Father Schmitz say were “insanely good” at sports?
 - A) his brothers
 - B) his grandparents
 - C) his cousins
 - D) his nieces
- The _____ are God’s “rules” that allow us to be truly free.

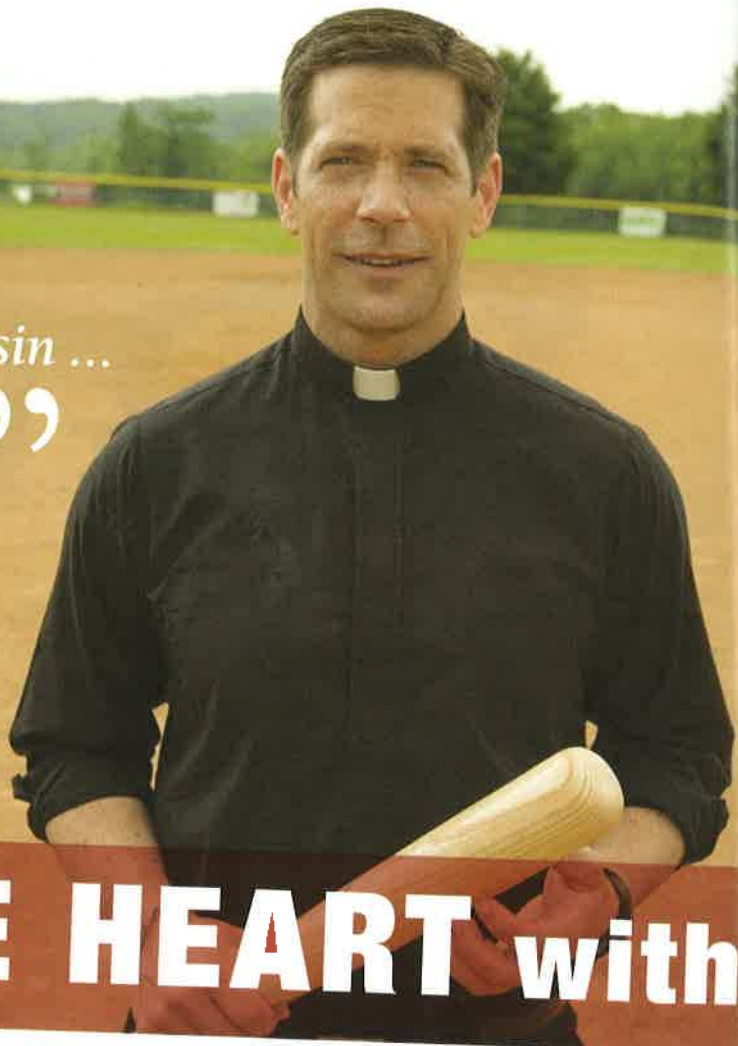
Segment 2: What Is Sin?

- Which of these is a condition of mortal sin?
 - A) grave matter
 - B) full knowledge
 - C) full consent
 - D) A, B, and C
- T or F?** The Church distinguishes between private and public sin because some sin only affects us personally.

Segment 3: The Power of Confession

- The “_____ of Confession” assures us that a priest would never reveal confessed sins.
 - A) trust
 - B) wisdom
 - C) memory
 - D) seal
- T or F?** In confessing our sins, we don’t need to regret them, but we do need to repent of them.
- Father Schmitz explains that we should confess our sins in _____ and kind.
 - A) number
 - B) humility
 - C) total
 - D) fact

“I don’t remember the sin ...
I remember the win.”



TO THE HEART with

I was once riding in an airport shuttle with a number of older folks. They noticed my collar and started asking questions. “Do you do all of the priest stuff?” “Yep,” I replied. “Even the Confession thing?” one asked. “Yeah ... all the time.” An older lady exclaimed, “Well, I think that would be so depressing; hearing all about people’s sin!”

For me, it’s just the opposite: There is almost no greater place to be than in the confessional. *It’s a place where God’s love wins.* Every time a priest celebrates this sacrament, he gets to see the costly mercy of God in action and be reminded of how good God is. And sometimes priests get to share a bit of that goodness.

I was a missionary teacher the year after I graduated from college. At that time, I was doing all of the “good kid” things on the surface, but my life was very, very far from Christ. When I finally returned

to Confession, the priest simply gave me something like “one Hail Mary” as my penance.

I stopped. “Um, Father? Did you hear everything I said?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Don’t you think I should get a bigger penance than that?” He looked at me with great love and said, “No. That small penance is all that I’m asking of you.” He hesitated and then continued, “But you should know ... I will be **FASTING** for you for the next thirty days.”

I was stunned. I didn’t know what to do. He told me that the *Catechism* teaches that the priest must do penance for all those who come to him for Confession.¹ And here he was, embracing a severe penance for all of my sins. I never forgot it.

Priests get to see firsthand how the Cross of Christ can break into people's lives and melt the hardest hearts. We offer consolation to those devastated by their sins and strength to those who want to give up on God or on life. People who have been abandoned, abused, and rejected, even by their own friends and family, encounter the Christ who reminds them that they are worth dying for ... so they can go out and start living.

As a priest, I get to see this kind of thing happen every day.

So often, people will ask if I remember people's confessions. People think that sins are so exciting or interesting. They're not. Honestly, once you realize that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about Christ's

death and Resurrection having victory in a person's life, sin loses its luster as Jesus' victory takes center stage. When the person leaves the confessional, I don't remember the sin ... I remember the *win*.

Whenever someone comes to Confession, I see a person who is deeply loved by God telling God that they love him back. That's it, and that's all.

The priest stands in judgment of no one. In the confessional, the *only thing* I have to offer is mercy. Whether you have confessed a particular sin for the first time or if this is the twelve thousandth time, every Confession is a win for Jesus. And I get to be there, standing in for Jesus. *That's what it's like ...* I get to sit and watch Jesus win his children back all day. It's actually pretty awesome, if you think about it.

Father Mike Schmitz

Find It!

What are the two Sacraments of Healing?



Hero of the Week



Born:

November 13, AD 354

Died:

August 28, 430

Memorial:

August 28

Patron Saint of:

- sore eyes
- brewers
- printers
- theologians

St. Augustine of Hippo

Do you like going to Confession?

Some people avoid Confession because they're too embarrassed or ashamed to tell their sins to a priest. And yet, when we reject this opportunity for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we also reject the opportunity for healing and continue to be drawn to "being bad," even though, in our hearts, we want to be good!

St. Augustine of Hippo understood this struggle only too well. His early life was filled with parties, drinking, and a lifestyle that led to sins of impurity as well as false ideas and pride.

Augustine was raised a Christian, but fell deeply into sinful ways. He lived with a woman and had a son out of wedlock. Once, his own mother threw him out of the house because he offended her so much. Augustine felt unworthy of being a Christian; he failed to realize that God loves us, warts and all.

Sometimes shame and regret make us feel unworthy of God's love, but this is not true! There is no sin that God will not forgive if we come before him truly repentant. God doesn't love us because we're good; God wants us to be good because it is *good for us*. Mortal sin destroys us in big ways, and even smaller sins can chip away at us slowly, causing us to lose hope, as Augustine did.

One day, fed up with his own despair, Augustine tearfully pleaded with God to free him from his desire to sin. He knew in his heart that he was hurting God, hurting himself, and hurting others. Everything he thought made him happy was actually the source of his unhappiness. He begged the Lord to heal him. In that moment he opened himself up to God's love. Suddenly, he heard children singing, "Take up and read."

Augustine thought he was hearing things, but he obeyed the voices and opened St. Paul's letter to the Romans. He read a little bit before being converted on the spot.

"Let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13:13-14, NAB).

From that point on, St. Augustine had the strength to set aside his sinful ways and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." He became one of the most influential theologians and spiritual writers in the history of the Church. His life shows us the transforming power of God's grace.

St. Augustine, pray for us. Help us seek God's healing forgiveness.

Challenge of the Week

- Talk About It!** Take a poll in school this week. First, ask students if they can name all of the Ten Commandments. Second, ask them which Commandment they think is the hardest for people to keep. Write the results of your poll below.
- Take advantage of Confession!** Do you know the Act of **CONTRITION** by heart? Write the prayer in the space below, and memorize it this week. Make arrangements to go to Confession, either alone or with your family, if you haven't done so recently.
- Choose your favorite story of REDEMPTION** from the Bible or a fiction or non-fiction book (or film), and be prepared to summarize the story briefly in class next week. Write the name of the story below.

✠ Closing Prayer

"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ... We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

—2 Corinthians 5:18, 20

Lord Jesus, you are waiting to forgive us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Help us to get to Confession regularly, to stay positive, and to never give up on ourselves, no matter how many times we fail. Thank you for refreshing and strengthening us to live out our purpose with joy and enthusiasm. Amen.

Taking It Home

Wrap-Up

“There are people who believe they are righteous, follow the catechism well enough and abide by the Christian faith, but they don’t have the experience of having been saved.

“It’s one thing to hear about a boy who was drowning in a river and the person who jumped in to save him; it’s another to have personally been at the scene and lent a hand; and even another for it to have actually been you who was drowning while someone jumps in the water to save you. Only we big sinners have this grace ... [to understand what salvation really means].”

—Pope Francis²

Have you ever done something wrong and tried to cover it up—even avoiding Confession—because of what others might think of you if they knew? Guilt can drive us crazy. When we try to cover up or “hide” that we’ve done something wrong, sin molds, festers, and rots. It makes us sick on the inside. It’s human nature to want to “unload” a guilty **CONSCIENCE**—it makes us feel better!

But wait! Can’t we just tell God we’re sorry when we mess up? Why go to a priest?

Private prayer is important—and it’s a good thing to be honest with God. But private prayer can never

For next week’s “Review Game,” be sure to read over the following ...

1. **Watch It!** questions (page 87)
2. **Wrap-Up**
3. **“What’s That Word?”**
4. **Memory Verse**

Don’t forget to do your **Challenge of the Week** (page 91)

take the place of the sacraments. Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or “Confession”) for four important reasons:

It gives us a direct encounter with God. Sacraments are our deepest encounters with God this side of eternity. When we go to Confession, we are going straight to God in a deeper way than we could by praying in private.

It gives us power to stop sinning. The Church classifies some sins as mortal (serious or “deadly”) and some as venial (less serious³). Confession is required for mortal sins; however, it’s good to confess smaller, **VENIAL SINS**, as well. Jesus understands it’s hard for us to break sinful habits, and so he gives us that sacramental help.

It reconciles us with God and the Church. Whenever we commit mortal (serious or “grave”) sins, we need to go to Confession to get right with God.* (When we offend someone, we need to reconcile on their terms, not ours.) Reconciliation with God is inseparable from reconciling with the whole Church, the Body of Christ. So it makes sense to go to God’s representative in the Church (the priest) for the reconciliation we seek.

* You can’t commit a mortal sin without knowing it (full knowledge is a requirement). If you’re not sure whether a certain sin is mortal, ask a priest.

It eliminates any confusion about whether we're forgiven. Perfect contrition (repenting not out of fear of hell but out of love for God) sets us right with God even if we've committed mortal sin—provided we have a firm resolution to go to confession as soon as possible (see CCC 1452). However, the Church teaches that we must go to Confession at least once a year, during Lent, in part because we don't always judge our own actions accurately.⁴

(“Am I really in mortal sin? Was I really sorry?”) In confession, the priest has the authority by virtue of the Sacrament of Holy Orders to forgive sins. Think about how powerful this is the next time you go to Confession and hear the words, “I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” This assurance is a great gift!

“What’s That Word?”

CULPABILITY

CULPABILITY refers to the responsibility a person has for acts, thoughts, and omissions. For an action to be sinful, the sinner must (1) be aware that what he is doing is wrong and (2) freely choose to act. If he doesn't know it is wrong, or if he is coerced into doing what he knows is wrong, his culpability is reduced. However, even if a person has reduced culpability for a particular action, the action can remain a venial sin. So while the circumstances of an act may limit one's culpability, this does not change the moral quality of the act or prevent us from experiencing its consequences (see CCC 1754). For example, being unaware that getting drunk is a sin will not prevent the body from experiencing the harmful physical effects of

alcohol or prevent the harm that could come to oneself or others from driving while intoxicated. Some actions, such as murder and adultery, are always *objectively* gravely sinful, regardless of the circumstances or one's intentions (see CCC 1756).

We have a duty to form our consciences according to the teachings of the Church. Otherwise, we can fall into *culpable ignorance*, which occurs “when a man ‘takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.’ In such cases, the person is culpable for the evil he commits” (CCC 1791).



Memory Verse:

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.”

—1 John 1:5

MORTAL SIN

To be a mortal sin, three conditions must be met: (1) the sin must be objectively mortal, i.e., consist of “serious” or “grave” matter; (2) one must have full knowledge that such an act is gravely sinful; and (3) one must fully and willfully **CONSENT** to committing the sin. If any one of these three conditions is not present, then the culpability for the sin—though it might be a “big” or seriously immoral act—would be lessened. Even if one is not *subjectively* guilty of committing a mortal sin, he or she will still be harmed by it. Just as one who unknowingly drinks poisoned water will still be harmed by the poison, one who sins—even if he or she is not aware that the act is sinful—will suffer negative consequences.

RECONCILIATION (CONFESSION)

The *Sacrament of Reconciliation* is the primary way that God has arranged for people to take care of their “sin problem” and to be reconciled with him for sins committed after Baptism. Sin harms our relationships with God and others. Because the healing of any relationship begins with a recognition that one has done something wrong, it is important to regularly consider “what I have done or failed to do”—to examine our consciences.

Sorrow for sin (or *contrition*) leads to a genuine apology. This sacrament is often called *Confession* because it provides the opportunity to confess sins and apologize for them so that they may be forgiven. God longs for us to return to him, and, therefore, he is always ready to forgive us when we are sorry. The priest who hears our confession acts *in persona Christi Capitis* “in ... the person of Christ himself” (CCC 1548)⁵ and can help us in our battle against sin. Although he isn’t perfect—every priest has a confessor to whom he confesses his own sins—the priest has been chosen by God to listen to our sins, to forgive us in God’s name, and to welcome us back to life in his family. (See also **SIN, EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE**, and **SEAL OF CONFESSION**.)

Any questions

Where is Confession found in Scripture?

We can find a scriptural basis for Confession in John 20:21-23:

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

Did You Know?

Before hearing confessions, the priest kisses a cross that is embroidered in the center of his purple stole and then places the stole around his neck, symbolically “putting on Christ.” When he takes it off again, the burden of our sins remains in Christ, not with the priest—though in his office, he does penance for others in the name of Christ.⁶