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The Decision to Confess: Approaching Our Via Dolorosa

Habits can keep our lives on target, and they can also run (or ruin) our lives for us.

Even in the sphere of our Catholic faith, this can be true. Over and over again, the “what” that is next can sprint us forward like a runaway dog off their leash. On this day, at this time, and in this church, we go to this Mass. On a certain day each month, it is time for this devotion for that saint, and so forth. The very thought of a “why,” let alone several of them for each “what,” may be the furthest thing from our spiritual day planners’ minds.

No one doubts that life can be insanely busy for most of us, and the urgent-important priorities can infinitely multiply with children, jobs, strained financial budgets, marriage issues, and many other responsibilities. But these decisions for our Catholic Faith are more than just more means to more ends. These are intentional decisions (the “what’s”) that we freely choose to bring us much closer to Heaven and our eternal salvation—the one and only “why” that really and truly matters.

Or at least that is the original game plan.

I faced such a “what” just recently, indeed it happened at the very church where my wife and I were married over twenty years ago. On a shallow level, I knew “why” I was there: I was not in a state of grace and the sacrament of Confession was essential for my soul.

Here we go again with the rat race!

It was not enough to mail the bills on the way—we’ve been identity theft victims, so that meant a trip inside the post office. (I see you nodding your head in agreement!) We’re in north suburban Columbus and off to Mass downtown, without a direct route from the post office so that I can get in the Confession line on time before Mass. Of course, there’s construction near the church and this is downtown Columbus we’re talking about—just what was I thinking! And yes, this was the very first Mass of the morning, meaning the Mrs. needed a 4:30 A.M. wake-up call so that everything was turned off by the time the gate closed (or the front door was locked) for our 5:30 A.M. motor vehicular take-off.

Fortunately, everything delivered according to plan that morning, so there I was in the usual place, along the left-side aisle eight feet back from the confessional, with my wife (as always) reserving our place out in the pews as she had already confessed earlier that weekend (as always). Another periodic Sunday for me in line for another periodic sacramental visit with the priest. Another bout of the usual pre-Confession foreboding and dread soon settled into my conscience.

And then I looked up and over.

After all these years in this line, and even with this church's magnificent renovations through the tremendous vision of its Dominican former pastor (and our Wedding Mass celebrant), I had never noticed this Station of the Cross directly across from me on the right-side aisle so clearly and so vividly before.

There was the Tenth Station of the Cross, Jesus is Stripped of His Garments.

The church's lighting almost seemed providential, as it beamed directly upon Christ's face as He surely was saying to Himself, "My hour indeed has now come." The Ninth and even Eleventh Stations were barely noticeable from where I stood.

The Son of Man would soon be all but naked. There was no one there to save my Lord, and yet His hands were open in complete submission as the centurions performed what they thought were just three more crucifixions out of thousands under Roman law: Jesus, St. Dismas (The Good Sinner), and the unrepentant thief Gestas.

As I gazed upon this scene in a much different light, and as I would soon approach the Son of Man *In Persona Christi* in an efficacious, sacramental way, this reflection occurred to me:

Is this not for me the laying bare of *my* guilt, shame, and regret? If I am especially bringing Mortal Sin before my God, isn't this truly a stripping of my desires, my intents, and my purposes, and mine alone, when only days before the knowledge and consent to instead follow Frank Sinatra's theology and deliberately do it "my way" brought me to this place and time where it was no longer my decision to undress but for my soul to be undressed against my human will so that I may say these words: I Have Sinned, These Are My Sins, I Am Truly Sorry, I Offer my Firm Purpose of Amendment, and I Beg Forgiveness?

Is this Tenth Station of the Cross my station as well?

And could it really be that all of His stations are all of my stations, too? When I enter that confessional, is a repentant, naked sinner like me about to enter a horribly naked death and a ruined eternity? At least that is what "the other guy" is trying to tell me.

Much to my wife's relief, the answer to that last question was an absolute No! least another sleepless night in the garage without supper awaited her husband. Yet questions like these are important, and they brought me the inspiration to write this book for most anyone going to this sacrament.

This is the "why" of Confession. The "what" is already on the task list, and because we are all spiritual adults here, the "how" is a matter of previous catechesis and formation, although cursory reviews of these topics will follow throughout this text.

For young children and all other neophyte Catholics just entering the sacramental life, obviously sound catechetics must come first. These boys and girls (and converts and reverts) will come to the deeper "why" later.

But for the rest of us, approaching the sacrament of Reconciliation through the Stations of the Cross, and most especially the Tenth Station, can be tremendously beneficial from several vantage points such as these, though not limited by them:

- The regular penitent can find renewed meaning in following along The Way of the Cross, versus just a rudimentary sacramental checking of the box (no logistical pun intended)

- When the penitent faces a particularly hard or soul-searching confession, e.g., either a “I really blew it” examination of conscience or one marked by several Mortal Sins along with many complimentary Venial Sin patterns, knowing that the Tenth Station is really our last station can be a tremendous comfort and encounter with God’s saving love, perhaps for the very first time in their life; and,
- If the penitent is returning to the sacrament after an extended period away from Confession (five or more years), the ideas presented here are meant to demonstrate Confession as a welcome home—and *not* where the heck have you been—for all where repentance and not sin-laden circumstances are our guiding concern. While Satan (and perhaps you as well) may believe all is lost, our Lord is always overjoyed that you are there in the confessional with him!

As we trace this path to our forgiveness—one chapter per station—I will show that in many ways, we all follow Jesus through the First through Tenth Stations, but the story changes radically in the Eleventh Station, from there in the Twelfth through Fourteenth Stations, and certainly beyond the tomb on that third day.

For each station as we traditionally know them, I will also present these fourteen stops along The Way of the Cross in bold print as The Evil One may view them—not as the Stations of the Cross, but respectively as Satan’s Accusations for your sins (e.g. for this initial chapter, You’re ruined forever, and your “savior” hardly matters) and Christ’s Responses To Us for each of these satanic accusations (I am simply overjoyed that you are here with me).

With the Resurrection, we will then see how much our repentance through the sacrament of Confession on our personal Via Dolorosa, or way of suffering, bears eternal fruit through Jesus’ conquering of sin and death once and for all on His Via Dolorosa.

This path, however, begins with the condemnation of the Son of God.

It is a path that will lead to the event that Saint John Paul II the Great called the worst thing that ever happened in human history, an event he implored us to keep in perspective as we wail and wallow through our own personal “worst things that ever happened to me.”

After all, what could possibly be worse than the day that God was killed?

Please join me on that early Friday morning enveloped in darkness thousands of years ago, as you remember the last time after you decided to repent and then waited in that reconciliation line, and from there use your vivid imagination alongside your true sorrow for each of your sins.

Before your deliverer comes, your accuser awaits.



Our Fear of Confession:

The First Station

and His Condemnation

Does the dread or the sense of trepidation ever go away before we actually enter into this sacrament, no matter how many times we go to Confession? Do we subconsciously allow a “guilty as charged” and self-destructive mindset to permeate our approach with each visit to the confessional?

Even with the right catechesis and family support, you cannot blame our children, and especially our littlest First Confession candidates, for feeling this way. Kids are like that with other kids; that’s especially true when Kid A and Kid B are known adversaries in the neighborhood, on the school playground, or at the family dinner table. What do they always say when Andy A screws up and Bobby B sees it and knows it?

Yes sir, and yes ma’am, it is that kid classic line from the one and only, Mr. Bobby B—YOU'RE in TROU-BLE! When the guilt is invariably spread around the block, across the homeroom, or with all the siblings, it can take on a Charlie Brown persona, as in WE'RE DOOMED!

Most of us get over such tactics through our personal and spiritual maturity process. Sins are committed, confessed, and reconciled through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Yet we know that for many of us, the constant need to “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (a phrase sometimes used instead of “Remember that you are dust, and undo dust you shall return” with the imposition of ashes on the first day of each Lent) escapes our spiritual practices.

This can be a slow progression over time for many different reasons not just perfunctorily explained away by the banal excuse that “life gets in the way.” From a month away, then a year, then several years and far too many decades removed from the Sacrament of Confession, perhaps these phrases apply to many more people than we realize:

The longer I wait before I go back, the less I believe that God’s mercy is even remotely possible for me personally. The more that the years pile up before I get back in that line, the more I fear the sacrament and another accusation of Satan becomes increasingly plausible: You crossed the line and all hope is gone.

And while it may be easy to see how such an accusation from The Evil One can creep into a penitent’s heart as it takes longer and longer to finally return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, those of us who actively and even more fervently practice our Catholic Faith are not immune from criticism here. When a spiritual practice borders on becoming a habitually rote habit—even when Mortal Sin is far too routinely involved—all of us lose sight of an essential Catholic reality.

That reality is this: Without this sacrament when we are in a state of Mortal Sin, you and me and every other believer are spiritually dead.

Death now translates into death in eternity if we do not face that reality before our time comes. We do not often hear this, and some parishioners have never heard this, not even once in their entire cradle Catholic lifetimes. But the dread of being in Hell forever should compel all of us to raise the Sacrament of Confession to a level far beyond that of the local drive-thru window, where all we do is occasionally get in line and get it done.

While this book is not principally catechetical in nature, a review of sacramental basics is in order at this point, in order to reinforce the importance of our being saved from condemnation before our natural deaths, as our Savior takes on our condemnation in our place through His own suffering and death. In brief, these are the Confession basics, keeping in mind that the priest *In Persona Christi* (or “in the person of Christ”) is there to guide and direct you through the sacrament as needed:

- Before we enter the Confessional, an Examination of Conscience and fervently praying for a good Confession is necessary to determine the type and number of our sins—especially our Mortal Sins—as referenced against the Ten Commandments and other comprehensive frames of reference in the Catholic Faith, as prescribed by your pastor and/or per specified Catholic reference materials from reputable sources.
- A good Confession in most cases should only take about five minutes for all of the steps below, keeping in mind that a more in-depth and extended practice of the sacrament should be scheduled by appointment at another time, especially for special cases such as twelve-step recovering addicts. I developed this expression many years ago, and I think it applies more and more with the evolving culture: It’s a Confession, not a therapy session! And for that matter, this saying also applies: It’s your Confession, not theirs! (whomever they may be).
- The Sacrament of Confession should first start with our request for the priest’s blessing; Confession is hard enough feeling we are already condemned, and we cannot do this alone without God’s help. God’s Son is present *In Persona Christi* in the confessional, so we already have all the help we need right then and there. From this point forward,
- The amount of time since our last Confession sets a frame of reference for our Priest-Confessor. After this,
- We need to specifically confess the number and type of Mortal sins, and then,
- The type of Venial sins committed (the number of Venial sins is not necessary), and in particular, consistent and persistent patterns of Venial Sin. Finally,

- Conclude your confession with the words, “With firm purpose of amendment, I confess these and all my other sins,” being aware that honestly *forgetting* a committed sin is *not* a sacramental issue, but purposely *withholding* a committed Mortal sin *is* a Mortal Sin in and of itself. At this point,
- The priest may briefly counsel you to further guide your spiritual progress, but otherwise he will prescribe a penance (specific prayers and/or spiritual reflections) and then direct you to make an Act of Contrition that is generally posted in the confessional to be read aloud.
- Confession concludes with the priest vocally proclaiming the Church-prescribed Words of Absolution from your sins; and once you have left the confessional,
- You should then immediately complete your Penance as applicable either in the pews, or by personal preference or parish tradition at the altar (e.g., kneeling before the Blessed Mother, the Blessed sacrament as exposed during a Holy Hour, or a similar devotional practice).

All of these steps become easier with spiritually disciplined practice, but they are never meant to become routine and rehearsed. We should always understand that without this sacrament and Mortal Sin present on my soul with full knowledge and consent, I choose my own condemnation, but even now with this sacrament, Satan still perceives that you are invariably dead on arrival.

Here is where the context of Jesus on Good Friday in the presence of the turbulent crowd and Pontius Pilate becomes important to this condemnation discussion. The Devil may have already cast his judgment upon you, but Christ has quite a different retort for our sinful failures. These are sins and especially *serious sins* that we’re talking about here that separate us from God and from each other, and *not* merely the “mistakes” often placed in the lyrics of contemporary Christian music that God could frankly care less about with His children.

In our Confession preparation, and in the context of the First Station of the Cross, Jesus’ response to us and to Satan’s condemnation accusation is quite simple and quite direct: This is my destiny, not yours.

What did Christ's destiny response look like on that day thousands of years ago but still directly meaningful to today's souls?

Prior to that judgment of condemnation, it had been an all-night ordeal. Our Lord and Savior surely knew what was coming, and his sweat like drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36) foreshadowed the hours to follow. From one set of judges and accusers to another, across the Roman and Judaic authorities, Christ's fate was being sealed. Pilate saw no sense in any of these actions, but ultimately the mob persuaded him to release an insurrectionist murderer called Barabbas and instead demand the Son of God's execution.

How did Christ respond to all of these Satanic accusations? Perhaps the Sacred Scriptures never directly quote Jesus with the exact words of, "This is my destiny, not yours," as specifically addressed to you and me. But at the turn of the nineteenth century, the American statesman and Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan came pretty close to putting those words in Jesus' mouth when he said, "Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."

Christ chose His destiny of condemnation that Friday through submission.

He let himself be arrested in that garden. He remained silent as blatant untruths were hurled at Him by both the civil and religious authorities. He, the Son of Man, did not summon "legions of angels" (Matthew 26:53-54) to save himself from being nine-tail scourged, or crowned with thorns, or beaten with a reed, or mockingly dressed as a king by the Satanically motivated centurion cohort.

And He accepted his condemned destiny as a matter of choice that had to be achieved for the sake of our souls' destinies. Yet this was His destiny, not ours, even when our sins crossed that line.

Every opportunity for the Sacrament of Confession will not resemble an extended silent retreat. We all know that our time here on Earth is a gift from God, and quite limited, for that matter.

But if we do not take the time we do have in this life on Earth to consider the condemnation that The Evil One tries to impose on us—and the condemnation Jesus assumed as His destiny for our salvation, in obedience to His Father's Will—the most important tool that the Catholic Church has for healing the entire world through the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be squandered too many times, if not ignored altogether.

Christ instituted this sacrament in John 20:23 for a profound reason. And as we consider the decision He made during the Second Station of the Cross to further His destiny, please remember this as we discipline our families' priorities to make our precious time available for this sacrament of healing:

We may have failed by first following that false accuser, but it is His Destiny, not ours.

Appendix A: Summary Outline

Approaching the Stations of the Cross

As discussed on page 2:

The Decision to Confess: Approaching Our Via Dolorosa

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Acknowledging the Why of the Sacrament

Satan's Accusation:

You're ruined forever, and your "savior" hardly matters.

+ Jesus' Response+

I am simply overjoyed that you are here with me.



The First Station of the Cross

Jesus is Condemned to Death

As discussed on page 9:

Our Fear of Confession:

The First Station and His Condemnation

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Overcoming the dread of our individual sins

Satan's Accusation:

You crossed the line and all hope is gone.

+ Jesus' Response+

This is my destiny, not yours.



The Second Station of the Cross

Jesus is made to bear his cross

As discussed on page 17:

Our Need to Confess:

The Second Station and Bearing the Cross

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

The importance of the Crucifixion to our crosses

Satan's Accusation:

You will never get past this obstacle.

+ Jesus' Response+

It is upon my shoulders, not upon your guilt.



The Third Station of the Cross

Jesus falls the first time

As discussed on page 32:

Examining Our Conscience:

The Third Station and The First Fall

including the first thirteen invocations—

Litany of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

Confession Phase: Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

The importance of knowing and admitting our sins in

personally knowing Jesus

Satan's Accusation:

You're not even in there yet

and you're already failing down on the job.

+ Jesus' Response+

I choose to stumble for your sake.



The Fourth Station of the Cross

Jesus meets his mother

As discussed on page 51:

The Beauty of Our Advocate:

The Fourth Station of Our Mother

Confession Phase: Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Leaning on Mary the God-Bearer as our Mother of Mercy

Satan's Accusation:

**You are already beyond hope,
and even your mom can't save you.**

+ Jesus' Response+

It is not their mother who is their advocate--it is My Mother.



The Fifth Station of the Cross

Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross

As discussed on page 61:

The Truth of This Burden:

The Fifth Station and Simon's Cross-Bearing

Confession Phase: Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Understanding in the Sacrament of Confession that

you are never going it alone

Satan's Accusation:

You can't even carry the whole mess by yourself.

+ Jesus' Response+

There are multitudes praying for your soul.



The Sixth Station of the Cross

Veronica wipes Jesus' face

As discussed on page 71:

The Release of Sinful Reality:

The Sixth Station and Veronica's Touch

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Conquering the Addiction of the Pointed Finger

Satan's Accusation:

You can't really think that anyone else matters to you now.

+ Jesus' Response+

It is my own comfort that will sustain you.



The Seventh Station of the Cross

Jesus falls the second time

As discussed on page 78:

The Stumbles of Sinful Suffering:

The Seventh Station, The Second Fall

including the next thirteen invocations—

Litany of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

**Moving past the frustration of
repeated Confessions for the same sins**

Satan's Accusation:

You didn't learn from the first collapse, so it happens again.

+ Jesus' Response+

I am with you with each and every fall--each and every time.



The Eighth Station of the Cross

The women of Jerusalem weep over Jesus

As discussed on page 90:

A Foundation of Sorrow:

The Eighth Station and The Women Weeping

Confession Phase:

Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Earthly success is not eternal salvation:

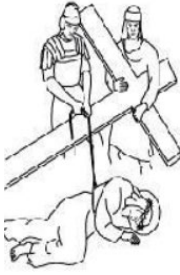
The How of genuine contrite sorrow

Satan's Accusation:

You receive no mercy from me.

+ Jesus' Response+

I am mercy borne for all sinners who bear their own sorrow.



The Ninth Station of the Cross

Jesus falls the third time

As discussed on page 102:

The Utter Frustration:

The Ninth Station and Yet Another Fall

including the last twelve invocations—

Litany of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

Confession Phase: Before Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Mustering the fortitude to

enter the confessional with account-ability

Satan's Accusation:

You are so pathetic that you don't even know when to give up.

+ Jesus' Response+

I am the greatest redemption for the greatest sinners.



The Tenth Station of the Cross
Jesus is stripped of his garments

As discussed on page 113:

An Embrace of Mercy:

The Tenth Station and The Bearing of Our Sins

including the final prayers for mercy—

Litany of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

Confession Phase:

During Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Requesting the Priest-Confessor's Blessing as we Embrace Mercy

Satan's Accusation:

You are naked, exposed, and doomed.

+ Jesus' Response+

I am ready, willing, able, and acceptable to save you.



The Eleventh Station of the Cross:

Jesus is nailed to the cross

As discussed on page 124:

A Superhuman Surrender:

The Eleventh Station--God Nailed to a Cross

Confession Phase:

During Confession

Sacramental Themes:

Confessing our sins, expressing our contrite sorrow, stating our firm purpose of amendment, and trusting in Jesus' mercy

Satan's Accusation:

You have absolutely no chance to turn back now.

+ Jesus' Response+

I now freely submit myself to bring God's Children home.



The Twelfth Station of the Cross:

Jesus dies on the cross

As discussed on page 137:

Dying to the Self:

The Twelfth Station—God the Son is Killed for Our Sake

Confession Phase:

During Confession

Sacramental Theme:

Receiving the Confessor's guidance

Satan's Accusation:

You are a complete and total fool not to have given up by now.

+ Jesus' Response+

I will soon expose the biggest fraud and fool of all time.



The Thirteenth Station of the Cross:
Jesus is taken down from the cross

As discussed on page 147:

A Contrite Contrition:

The Thirteenth Station and The Passion's End

Confession Phase:

During Confession

Sacramental Theme:

A Good Act of Contrition defying the culture

Satan's Accusation:

You have become a moot thing by trusting in a dead prophet.

+ Jesus' Response+

**I will not forsake those who
believe and trust in my Divine Mercy.**



The Fourteenth Station of the Cross:

Jesus is placed in the sepulcher

As discussed on page 158:

A Godly Absolution:

The Fourteenth Station and The Tomb--For Now

Confession Phase:

During Confession

Sacramental Theme:

The Proof of sin's removal from our souls

Satan's Accusation:

You are now rotting inside your own corpse.

+ Jesus' Response+

**My destiny to come will soon be
your destiny with me in Heaven.**

Following the Stations of the Cross:

As discussed on page 170:

The Perfect Freedom:

The Resurrection and Our Via Gloria

Confession Phase:

After Confession

Sacramental Themes:

**Our bearing and suffering of penance and
experiencing forgiveness and freedom**

Satan's Accusation:

You are living a lie of forgiveness and grace.

+ Jesus' Response+

**The only rot is in Hell now and
it is neither me nor my beloved children.**