

## **The Preparation of the Priest and the Penitent**

Around Christmas of my freshman year of high school, our assistant swim coach finally talked me into joining the swim team. Although at that point, I was a die-hard soccer fan (and player), I knew I needed to do something in the winter to keep my strength and endurance up, and it certainly wasn't going to be running! Once I finally learned the basics, such as how to dive in off the blocks (which usually resulted in me losing my goggles), how to do flip turns (which usually resulted in a noseful of water), and how to breathe properly (which usually resulted in lungfuls of water), I was hooked! It took acquiring these basic skills for me to have any appreciation of swimming at all.

My first draft of the previous sentence included the word "mastering these basic skills," which is how I would like to think it happened, but that is both incorrect and contrary to the point of the story. The more I got hooked on swimming (and ultimately it replaced soccer as 'my sport'), the more I would strive to get better at these basic things. I sought faster flip turns, longer dives, and fewer breaths per lap. The whole time, the coaches were offering me advice such as "Tuck as you flip, not after!" and the ever-helpful "Just breathe less!"

Although my instinct was to say I've mastered it, in reality I never got anywhere near a perfect start, flip turn, or lap. I was always striving for more, for faster, for better. I am sure it is a common experience. Every day, people spend millions of their hard-earned money on ways to improve themselves: golf academies, hockey camps, computer lessons, language schools. And this, in proper balance, is not a bad thing in itself. There is something fundamental to human nature about seeking to improve oneself; we've seen it throughout the history of humanity. The one caveat is that we should apply it especially to our spiritual lives, not just our attempts to get ahead in athletics or career.

The oft-neglected manner for doing this is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As discussed in the previous handout, confession is not (as it is commonly perceived) a moment of divine punishment so that maybe, if we're lucky, we won't go to hell; rather, it is a moment of healing. It is an acknowledgment that though I strive for perfection, I have not yet reached it, and I need help to get there. It is not that the priests are perfect and mete out advice to the unholy; rather, it is Christ himself who receives our pains and burdens, and he offers us his mercy and grace in return. Because of this exchange, it makes our preparation all the more important. Luckily, with the witness of Christ and his Church, we have a perfect strategy for doing so: the examination of conscience.

The examination of conscience can start one of two ways: either using the seven cardinal sins (perhaps better known as the seven deadly sins), or more commonly the ten commandments. At first glance, this can seem to be easy and imply we never need to go to confession. How often,

after all, do we build idols and worship them, or murder someone, or even steal what does not rightfully belong to us? But as we read Matthew's Gospel, and specifically the Sermon on the Mount, things suddenly begin to change.

After listing the Beatitudes, Jesus instructs the disciples on how they are to act in the word, and he uses the law to do it. He mentions "You shall not kill." He then clarifies what this means: "Whoever is angry with his brother...whoever says 'Raqa' ["You imbecile!"]... whoever calls someone a fool...you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:21-26). In a similar way, he offers a clarification about adultery: "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). We can see, then, that it's not just a 'letter of the law' understanding, but a 'spirit of the law' understanding.

Many published examinations of conscience exist to help us with this preparation. There are ones for priests, for seminarians, for married couples, for single people, for older people, for young children, and many more. Eventually, you may not need assistance from one at all. The more we allow the light of God's love to shine in our hearts, the more we will naturally be able to see anything that distracts us from that love naturally.

As I mentioned earlier, it is a fundamental part of human nature to want to better ourselves. Confession provides us the opportunity to do just that when it comes to the spiritual life. The examination of conscience provides us the opportunity to look at what areas we struggle with so we can bring them to Christ through the priest, and receive counsel on how to grow in that area of our lives. And where self-improvement can cost us any amount of money, all growing in the spiritual life requires is the courage to turn to the Lord and say to him "Bless me, for I have sinned."

And so preparation for confession doesn't seem like it's simply a one-sided issue, it should be pointed out that the priest himself has his own preparation involved. Although priests act *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ), we are also fallen human beings in need of God's mercy, so we too regularly go to confession and know firsthand how uncomfortable it can be to acknowledge our faults to another. Furthermore, the instructions for celebrating the Sacrament, which are included in the ritual book, expect that the priest spend time in prayer before he hears confession. He should be asking the Holy Spirit to be a witness to charity, as well as for wisdom in counseling the penitents he will soon encounter. Therefore, the common theme for both priest and penitent is prayer. When all God's children turn to him in prayer, it is no wonder that the result is healing. He comes to us as the Divine Physician; we simply need to look to him for a cure.