

## PREPARING YOUR FIRST CONFESSION

The task of self-examination leading to a first confession that covers all your life probably seems daunting. This chapter offers practical guidance in the art of self-examination and outlines the process leading up to the point when you will be ready to arrange for your confession. It offers suggestions about the time to take and the frame of mind in which to approach the searching of conscience. It sets out two stages. The first phase is one of unaided recollection of past life, the conscience working spontaneously. The second consists in questioning one's life in the light of the Scriptures. A series of exercises of reflection is given to help focus your awareness of sin more sharply.

Now that you are on the brink of this self-examination, you are bound to have lots of feelings. What are they? It is a good starting point to ponder them; you might find it helpful to write down what these feelings are. Naming sins is going to be a significant part of your life in the next few weeks; naming your initial feelings about the task ahead is a valuable preliminary.

Here are some of the feelings you may experience.

- My memory isn't good. I would never remember more than a fraction of what I ought to confess, so I am afraid the confession is going to be inadequate.
- It will take forever to delve into the past and I don't have much time.
- I am afraid that if I spent a lot of time thinking about my faults and mistakes, and all the ugly things about me, I'll get depressed. They might engulf me in a sense of unworthiness, and my sense of self-esteem is low enough as it is.
- I am confused about many things I have done and felt. Are they sins or not? I don't know. In the church, they are saying that some things that used to be regarded as wrong are now considered okay. At times I have felt comfortable doing things that were traditionally supposed to be off-limits.
- Where on earth do I start? Certain obvious things come to mind, but I'm not good with words. How shall I set about uncovering the full range of things that have been wrong in my life?
- I am apprehensive about including things I know perfectly well are going to happen again after confession.
- I am afraid I'll be so nervous during the confession that my mind will go blank and I will have wasted all the effort of self-examination.

Do you have feelings to add to these? Maybe your feelings are mixed, so that you are partly eager to get on with it and partly put off by the difficulty of self-examination.

The important thing now is to speak about your feelings to God. Usually we censor them and pray only about selected issues that we suppose are more acceptable to the Lord than the ones we hold back. But the essence of confession is the conscious

disclosure of the whole truth of ourselves, as we are aware of it to God. That is how we open ourselves to God's acceptance and the changes God wants to bring about in our lives from within. A first step, then, on the way to confession is sharing with God *all* our feelings about the approach we are making to the sacrament of reconciliation.

A second step is to consider, in the light of these feelings, what you want to ask from God. Trust that God wants and is able to give you the help you need. So go ahead and ask for what you need. Remember the point made in the opening pages of the book; it is God who leads you to reconciliation and enables you to respond.

### *The Indwelling Spirit of God*

You may be one of those who needs to focus now on the greatest gift God can ever give. You have already received it! It is the gift of the divine Spirit dwelling deep within you, living and active in your heart. You may belong to that very large number of Christians who imagine God almost exclusively as "out there," above and away from you, influencing you from a distance. It makes a vital difference to get in touch with this truth—the Holy Spirit belongs to our innermost being. Self-examination takes on a completely different quality when we discern that the Holy Spirit knows us intimately *from within* and is able to stir up and bring to light what we need to confess as it draws us to experience forgiveness through Jesus. We are not on our own and we do not have to cudgel our brains to discover our sins! Our approach to penitence changes when we grasp that we don't have to manipulate ourselves to whip up the right sense of sorrow for sin and true desire for renewal of life. These things are gifts that the Holy Spirit wants to open up in our hearts. They are gifts of grace.

Here are some passages of Scripture that you can meditate on in order to be touched again by this awareness of the Holy Spirit.

- a. Ps. 139 expresses dramatically the searching intimacy of God's knowledge of us.

- b. In John 7:37-39 Jesus affirms that the Spirit flows in our heart. The King James version reads "belly" while the Greek original means "guts." The Holy Spirit works in us at gut-level!
- c. John 14:16-23; 25, 26 teaches that the Spirit dwelling within us is no mere hazy presence, but a teacher and guide always bringing the truth to light.
- d. Romans 8:26, 27 teaches that the Spirit knows our innermost selves so profoundly that it prays within us at a level deeper than our conscious minds.

What are these passages saying to you?

If we come to think of the examination of our conscience in terms of listening to what the Holy Spirit brings up, many of our fears and difficulties will be lessened. Take, for example, the issue of completeness. Of course my confession will not literally be complete or exhaustive. Many things have been forgotten forever, and I could never hope to describe every instance of repetitive wrongdoing. What I can realistically expect is that the Holy Spirit will bring to my attention the significant sins that call for forgiveness and healing, and these will stand for the rest which are inaccessible to consciousness. My work in self-examination is to cooperate with the Spirit and open my eyes to memories and areas of the heart it is exposing to the light. I am to lift the censorship by which I habitually suppress the weak, dark, damaged and guilty parts of myself. The Spirit knows all these aspects of myself that I tend to banish into the shadows. In self-examination I am allowing the Spirit to invite them up into the light of Christ. The time will come when further prayer and reflection adds nothing new to the gathering up of these elements; then the confession will be as complete as it is meant to be.

You may also be afraid that self-examination will plunge you into depression. Yet the Holy Spirit is the giver of love and is out to heal all hatred, including self-hatred. Where it is at work there may indeed be the pains of growth and the sting of truth, but there will also be the tell-tale signs of a certain taste of

freedom and enlarged joy. Any bitter state of gloom and self-revulsion is a sign of resistance rather than repentance. The Spirit can be trusted not to crush us or bring us into despair; God has no interest in inducing heavy bouts of tortuous introspection in which we wring our consciences dry or pry into our depths. We may approach self-examination with the healthy expectation that along with a sobering pain over what we have done, we will be given the grace to look at our sins with some detachment and that we will even anticipate a certain joy in advance at the thought of absolution. We can feel strengthened by the thought that the Holy Spirit has built us up to the point where we can now bear to face hard truths about ourselves, which we could not deal with until now.

Finally, get rid of any idea that self-examination is a mere compilation of sins to be gotten through as quickly as possible. In and of itself, the process of self-examination is an opportunity for the Spirit to give you many gifts. A lot of growing, learning, discovering, making connections, receiving insight and awareness can happen in this time, a new grasping of the mystery of how intricately and fatefully your life is bound up with that of others, and God's. Take your time, or as was said at the beginning of the book, take God's time.

At this point it may help you to know that self-examination for a first confession typically takes between three and six weeks. Imagine a month given to the process and don't be surprised if it takes a little less or a little more.

### *Getting Started*

You may begin thinking about the practical side of self-examination by asking yourself by what means you are going to bring the results of your heart-searching to the sacrament of reconciliation. Many people imagine that they will have to carry everything in their heads and then let it all pour out spontaneously during the time of confession. This is a mistake. It is not only permitted to bring written notes to use in the rite, it is strongly recommended. Why strain yourself to perform a great feat of memorization? In fact it is asking for trouble to rely on unaided

recall. This is no mere speech being memorized, but an account of things that fill you with shame. In the stress of the moment it is likely that certain sins would be unconsciously blocked and you would inadvertently fail to confess things that you had originally intended to bring up. It will trouble you to realize the omissions later.

Making notes during self-examination helps us to articulate our sins. They appear before us in black and white, and once they are noted down we can move on to others. As the days go by we can add to the notes, alter them, and bring about some kind of order. You may find headings and key words sufficient or you may want to write things out in full in a form you could simply read out in the confession. Do what you find comes naturally. However if you keep a journal, do not use it for this purpose. The notes are never to be kept after confession. They must be destroyed not only because they should never be read by any other person, but because forgiveness involves truly letting-go of our sins and handing them all over to God. You should not want to hold on to them even symbolically by keeping the written record.

Second, how much time will you devote to self-examination? Experience shows that it is usually ill-advised to spend hours at one time. It is easy to get bogged down in long heavy sessions of introspection. Shorter times of not more than half an hour, with a few days interval between each one, are much more effective and manageable. You have no doubt experienced the value of sleeping on a problem. Instead of making a snap decision you wait until the next day and find that some clarification has emerged during the period of incubation. This also happens in self-examination. We ponder one point or one aspect of our life and relationship with God and then set it aside for a spell while we go about our normal routine. As we work and sleep our unconscious selves (under the stimulus of the Holy Spirit) continue the reflection, and the next time we focus we are able to put our finger on what we need to confess.

Third, what method will you use? Just sitting down and hoping for the best, or letting your mind wander aimlessly here

and there amongst your memories, produces very disappointing results. The exercises I set out further along in the book follow a particular method. It is not a hard and fast system, but neither is the pattern merely arbitrary.

The first stage is to divide our life up into five or six phases and then to take each in turn, recalling our experiences of those years and bringing to mind particular sins which weigh on our consciences in any way. This exploration of our memories provides the biographical backbone of the confession. The second stage is to challenge and stimulate our conscience with fresh meditation on the gospel and the teaching of the Scriptures. Hard questions about holiness, justice and love are faced in a focused way. This should help to articulate more sins that were not seen before, and they can be noted down in the life-story sequence laid out during the first stage. The third stage involves reflection on the patterns of sinning, which can be discerned in the material noted so far. Typical faults and threads of behavior running through the various phases of our life may be noticed. It is possible now to go further in pointing to our root sins and putting our finger on the inner motivation underlying some of our sinful behavior. This awareness can be woven into the confession.

The integrity and simplicity of a confession is greatly helped by observing these disciplines. A fairly obvious discipline is avoidance of unnecessarily implicating other people. There is no need to use others' names in confession, and very few good reasons exist for disclosing the sins of particular people. There are instances when, for example, a person has been seriously wronged by a parent, partner, or child and this has given rise to revenge or obsessive mistrust. In confessing this behavior it may be necessary to allude to the original wrong that has been done to us, but generally speaking we avoid confessing other people's sins.

Another discipline is to use plain language and avoid evasive generalizations. Part of the role of the confessor is to make sure your confession is honest and intelligible. He or she might have to challenge you to be specific and concrete if you use opaque expressions like "I have been impure" or "I have been proud."

To say "I have been uncharitable in my family life" is too vague; the words reveal nothing. In one case, it might turn out to refer to a perfectly justifiable, robust showing of anger in response to a husband's selfish demands; on another's lips it could refer to beating of infant children as a result of an uncontrollable drinking problem. Use expressions that you are confident will give the Christian sister or brother hearing your confession a clear idea of the particular behavior you are confessing. One great philosopher has left us the motto, "Truth is concrete."

Finally, it is good to strip away from the confession unnecessary material that might have gotten woven in during the process of self-examination. You may find a sequence of very similar incidents described in a repetitive way; one typical instance can be allowed to stand for others. Eliminate any irrelevant details, elaborate anecdotes, fancy psychological explanations and all excuses! Take out references to any temptations which were never translated into action.

### *Beginning Your Life Review*

Your life is unique. Savor that fact and don't minimize it. It has a form and pattern of its own, however conventional or messy it might appear. What are the different stages of your life? How has it unfolded with the passing years and how have changes in circumstances divided it into distinct periods? Choose to divide your life into perhaps half a dozen distinct periods. Some of these may simply reflect the human life-cycle: "childhood," "adolescent years," "from the time I started work until I got married," "since the children left home." Some may be marked off by the impact of illness, divorce, bereavement, or military service. Other epochs may be related to religious awakening, or turning-points such as "coming out" for a gay person, or embarking on a new career. When your particular headings have occurred to you, write each one on a separate sheet of paper.

This stage is meant to be a time for recalling each phase of your life *fully*. It is an adventure in taking stock and meeting again the particular self you were at each stage, together with the people your life was bound up with. There is a great value

in having the courage to unlock your memory and face what may have been virtually forgotten for years. You may discover marvelous, touching and humorous things as well as banal, evil and painful ones. Do not think of self-examination as exclusive preoccupation with the negative and sinful. In the first place, sin is woven into the very texture of life and you will not be able to discern it unless you look at the whole picture. The Spirit is seeking to show how God was with you, however hidden, in everything. Second, the appreciative weighing of your good experience—the gifts given, opportunities, achievements, loves, friendships and so on—bring us to the realization of how much sin there is in simple ingratitude. You are a rare human being indeed if you have not undervalued the gifts of God in life and clutched instead at gratification from what the wisdom of God warned you to avoid, as Adam and Eve did in the Genesis story. Confession is a form of praise. We come to be reconciled, not by narrowly focusing on the successes sin has had in our life, but by glorifying God, through gratitude for God's hold on us, God's forbearance, tenderness and loving offering of Christ to us.

Always begin a session of self-examination by praying for the Holy Spirit to help you. You may then start with any of the stages of your life, and those people drawn to confession because of a particular sin weighing on their conscience will approach that first. It will make sense for many to begin with childhood, the years following the onset of rudimentary moral awareness. Moving phase by phase through your life-story gives a feeling for our development as persons and the stages of our growth (and regression) in awareness, responsibility and faith. We recognize that each period of our life has certain challenges and temptations and therefore typical sins of resistance. For example, adolescence is usually marked by sins committed in the struggle for independence and identity and in the exploration of sexuality. In the years after the initial infatuation of falling in love has waned, married couples face particular challenges to loyalty and love, and so on.

There are two tendencies to be careful of as you deliberate what to confess from each period. First, there is a temptation

to impose a kind of adult censorship on early memories. A large number of adults have surprisingly strong residual guilt over certain painful examples of childhood wrongdoing, but in self-examination brush them aside as too immature or trivial to deserve mention. While we ought to keep a sense of proportion, we have no business suppressing from our confession matters which still cause shame in retrospect. The sins of childhood are the sins of childhood! It can be important for an adult to feel forgiven by God for some act of cruelty to an animal, or a habit of forcing a little brother to take the blame for one's petty acts of vandalism, or for gleefully participating with one's peers in racist taunting, and so on.

Second, there is a temptation to feel obliged to use traditional religious jargon because we think the church expects it, even though such language fails to correspond to our real convictions. It could be dishonest, for example, to refer dramatically to "committing fornication before marriage" as a blanket statement to cover all sexual behavior. Instead, it is better to think honestly about how God expects you to grow into sexual maturity and try to put into your own words what was wrong about specific relationships. Did willful self-deception mask the lack of any interest in cherishing the other? Did you manipulate the other's feelings for selfish ends? Did you trivialize sex?

After a number of sessions of self-examination which have taken you through to the present, you may feel drawn to go back and add further things to the various pages of your notes. After some time elapses the memory yields more, connections are made and gaps begin to be filled. Long-forgotten relationships and events emerge from the shadows. Eventually though, perhaps after a couple of weeks, you will probably find yourself unable to come up with anything more. Now is the time to let God use the Scriptures and other exercises to probe and challenge your heart further.

### Exercises of Self-Examination

The exercises that follow do not attempt to provide a comprehensive catalog of sins for you to survey. That would be a very questionable undertaking; it would shortcut your responsibility and could never pretend to be exhaustive. They attempt instead to help you approach your relationship with God, the world, yourself and your neighbor for a number of different angles, so that blind spots in the workings of your conscience might be exposed. They point to places in Scripture where "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). They ask questions that might help you to identify sin in contemporary terms. Obviously the exercises are going to overlap, and so though they are arranged in sequence, the order does not have to be followed exactly.

The Scripture passages which form the basis for most of these exercises are classic ones for the disclosure of God's will for human life, such as the Lord's summary of the Law, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and St. Paul's great words about love in I Corinthians 13. You probably know of other places in Scripture which challenge your conscience and search your heart. Look them up as well and expose yourself again to their power. Some might want to read through an entire gospel, such as Luke's, to face the living Christ and hear again about the life of true discipleship.

Take only one exercise at a time, for otherwise you might succumb to the temptation to skate over the surface. Let the Scripture passage work on you first and make your own responses to it. Then ponder the questions that follow. They are not necessarily the obvious and straightforward ones, but are meant to suggest a wide range of behavior to which a commandment of God is seen to be relevant when we follow the Spirit and not

merely the letter. The fact that a particular kind of action is not mentioned is no indication that you aren't meant to confess it!

Keep in mind that God's will can never be captured in formulae and neat definitions. Consider whether your particular role in life brings with it responsibilities towards God and others which not everybody has. Check whether you tend to stay with one main definition of sin and overlook the many other complementary and mutually corrective images that Scripture gives: not only transgressing commandments but grieving the Holy Spirit, turning away from holiness, missing the mark, living by the flesh, conforming to this age, following the broad and easy path, and so on. Fix your mind on the positive virtues, of which sins are the shadow, the symptoms of our resistance and dread of pure goodness. Think of your gifts and positive qualities, and consider how you taint or misuse them.

## MAKING YOUR FIRST CONFESSION

With self-examination now complete, there are two final steps to consider. For many the first consists in tackling any remaining inhibition which might be causing them to hesitate. Do not be surprised or discouraged if you find yourself experiencing a last-minute reluctance to go ahead with making your first confession. All sorts of reasons may come into your mind for calling a halt to your intention to use the sacrament of reconciliation. You may find yourself arguing that since so few of your friends have done this it cannot really be so significant, or that you feel enough relief having done just the self-examination. You may be put off by the effort needed to find a confessor. Perhaps the results of your self-examination may be causing you more shame than you had anticipated, and you may now be deeply embarrassed by the prospect of disclosing your sins in confession. If you find yourself getting cold feet, pray about it honestly. Remember how some of the disturbed people whom Jesus healed first put up a resistance to him. There is part of us that clings to guilt as a kind of possession, and puts up a fight when the prospect of letting it go in absolution comes close. The reasons we find for not going ahead with sacramental confession when it is just within reach are usually pretexts



for staying with the status quo. Think of this reluctance as a classic temptation to stay at a safe distance from the challenging and healing touch of Christ, and step through the barrier.

The second step is finding a confessor. Many people will already have consulted their rector, another priest on the staff of their parish, or their chaplain. They will have shown this book to the priest and explained that they are using it as a guide in preparation. Others who have prepared their confession on their own now face the choice of a confessor.

Unless there are good reasons for going elsewhere, the natural person to choose as your confessor is the priest who is also your pastor. You may find it disturbing at first to think of revealing very secret things in your life to someone who is a regular part of it; you may imagine the priest treating you differently afterwards. This is the time for you to recall the seal of confession, and show your trust in your priest. Far from raising a barrier between priest and parishioner, this sacramental sharing can often form a wholesome bond between them "in Christ."

What are good reasons for going to another priest? One reason is if you are related to your pastor by blood or marriage. It is inadvisable to go to an ordained spouse, son, or daughter because of the close personal involvement. Similarly, a close personal friendship with your pastor often indicates that a more objective outsider would make a more helpful minister of the sacrament. Still another reason for choosing a different priest is a situation where you have been involved in sinning *with* your pastor.

Finally, some priests have no personal experience of the sacrament either as confessors or as penitents. There are "low church" and "liberal" traditions in the Episcopal church where the use of the sacrament of reconciliation receives virtually no encouragement. If after discussion your priest shows definite reluctance, confusion about the value of the rite, or tries to dissuade you, it is best simply to affirm your desire to use this sacrament and say that you will need to go elsewhere for this particular ministry. Remember how the Exhortation in the Prayer Book encourages you to seek out "a discreet and understanding priest." Do not feel in the least obliged to go for confession to a priest who has left

you in any doubt as to his discretion and understanding. On the other hand, there are many priests with only a *limited* experience of the rite who desire and need more. Your trust in them, in spite of their limitations, is very valuable. By making your confession to such a priest, you are helping her grow and learn.

You may also be able to find another priest by asking around in local parishes or finding out where the hearing of confessions is advertised. There may be a nearby parish whose catholic tradition will include the ministry of the rite of reconciliation. If you are fortunate enough to live within reach of one of the religious communities of the Episcopal church, members will be able to put you in touch with a suitable priest. You would also be justified in asking your bishop for a recommendation.

The time to arrange the actual appointment for confession is when you feel the process of self-examination is coming towards completion. It may have occurred to you to turn up for one of the regular times for confession that are advertised in some parishes, but there is a risk in this. Others may come in the same hour and not leave enough time for your first confession, or you may not leave enough time for theirs. You may need three-quarters of an hour or longer. It is much better to arrange a personal appointment of an hour's duration. Discuss with the priest beforehand where you would like to make your confession. It makes sense to choose a private room or chapel rather than a more open situation in a church, as you may feel more secure in the certainty of not being seen, even from a distance. As I mentioned earlier, the use of confessional booths is not recommended, especially for first confessions.

On the day itself you will want to spend some time in prayer as a preparation. You may be drawn to meditate on a passage of the gospels which invites you to the joy of repentance, such as the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:1-7) or the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee (Lk. 18:9-14). Psalms 25, 32, 40, 51 and 130 are very suitable prayers for the day of confession.

Be prepared for the stirring of strong emotions just before and during the confession. It is common to feel very nervous and vulnerable. Why not? Don't apologize or try to stifle your

feelings. If you feel calm, well and good; there is no need to force sorrowful feelings. If you do feel moved and tearful, well and good; how often the Scriptures speak of tears of sorrow and repentance, actual tears. Often tears take men by surprise, but it is part of the whole healing experience to let it happen. Everyone should take a handkerchief or several tissues!

There will be some preliminary choices to make. Which form of the rite have you chosen? Tell the priest which one you prefer. The second form is a natural choice for a first confession because of its richer and somewhat stronger language. Then there is the choice of posture. Kneeling is a very appropriate posture for coming to the Lord for forgiveness and healing; there are many accounts in the gospels of men and women kneeling before him. It expresses neediness, humility, receptivity to blessing and it is the traditional posture in the western church for reconciliation. Therefore expect to kneel at least for the absolution and laying on of hands. (If you have a physical infirmity which makes kneeling impossible or painful, explain to the priest why you will need to sit or stand for this.) It used to be the case that you knelt for the whole confession, from start to finish; there would be a prayer desk or rail for support and the priest would sit to one side. There would be no eye-contact with the minister of the sacrament. Some people still find this helpful. The kneeling posture and formality emphasize the objectivity of the sacramental action; this is not a counseling session.

However it is more usual now to sit at least for that part of the confession during which the priest offers "counsel, direction, and comfort." There can be a greater openness and freedom of exchange at this time if both are able to sit back a bit and look one another in the face. It is quite common too for the one making the confession to sit for the whole service up to the absolution, and it is less of a strain for some, especially if the confession is long. You feel more at ease and supported if the priest has the same posture as you do. Think it over and explain to the priest what you prefer.

When the time comes for the priest to give you counsel, what can you expect? First, your confessor may ask you for some

words of explanation about a part of the confession which did not seem clear. You may be asked to be more specific, or describe the circumstances that might make a difference to the gravity of the sin. The priest may ask you to reconsider whether certain things you have mentioned were really sins or not. There is no need for you to fear a "post-mortem" or inquisition, though; the confessor is not with you to analyze or judge, but to apply to you personally and briefly the good news of God's mercy in Christ. A priest who understands the ministry of reconciliation knows how to strengthen you in the moment of humiliation with words of assurance that God is lovingly active in your life, and is giving you a fresh beginning and grounds for hope.

Sometimes the confessor will be moved to read to you a passage of Scripture that seems to speak to your condition. Knowing how deep the roots of our sinfulness are, the confessor will not presume on the scant basis of your confession to give you a moral prescription that will remedy a certain sin in your life. But the priest may have advice about how to pray about it, how to resist a certain temptation more effectively, how to reach for healing in a particular area, how to look at a sin in a different light so that ways of outgrowing it begin to seem possible. You may be asked whether there are particular things in your confession about which you would like some counsel. The priest may discuss with you certain appropriate expressions of your repentance, such as asking others for their forgiveness, or making amends in certain cases to those you have wronged. The priest may offer you the opportunity to discuss at some future time, in the same condition of absolute confidentiality, matters in the confession which seem to call for extended counseling. This is always an offer only. You do not have to agree to make up your mind there and then, and it will be entirely up to you to take the offer up later.

Feel free to express at this time any "scruples and doubts" (in the words of the Exhortation) that still trouble you about your relationship with God. Do not hesitate to ask for clarification if you do not understand the meaning of the counsel you have been given. It is true, however, that the aptness of the

counsel is not always apparent all at once—not even to the confessor who is trying to be receptive to the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit's inspiration is sometimes surprising or unusual. The impact of the message may strike home only after you have gone away and meditated on it.

Finally the priest may recommend an act of devotion for you to do privately afterwards as a way of setting your seal on the sacramental act and affirming your reception of forgiveness and desire for renewal of life. It may be described as an "act of thanksgiving" or the traditional term "penance" may be used, which dates back to the early days when penitents undertook a spiritual discipline or good work as a kind of compensation to offset their wrongdoing. This "act of thanksgiving" may consist of a prayer, a psalm, a hymn or canticle. It is often the reading of a passage of Scripture or a period of meditation on a particular truth of the Christian faith. Occasionally the recommendation may be to ask for a particular gift or grace in your daily prayers in the coming week, or to pray every day for a week for a particular person you have been having difficulties with. Note that the "penance" is always a single act or a short series, and never implies an enduring obligation.

At the words of absolution, your faith tells you that you are now at the very heart of the mystery of forgiveness through the cross of Christ. The words are as effective and immediate as Jesus' words to the paralytic. Receive them with the same gratitude and trust that you give to the Prayer of Thanksgiving in the eucharist. After that prayer the bread and wine on the altar is no longer ordinary food but the body and blood of Christ; after these words you are no longer the same, but have been restored to union with God.

The laying on of hands is not only a symbol of restoration to good standing in the church, but a ritual used in the healing ministry of the church. As thousands can testify, there are times when the healing effect of prayer can be felt physically. It is possible that with the laying on of hands you might feel a sensation of warmth or the flowing-in of energy. This is one indication that an inner healing is taking place and you can be thankful for it.

Some confessors will offer extempore prayer after the absolution and give you a blessing. After the dismissal it is a frequent custom for the priest to offer you the "kiss of peace" that we exchange during the eucharist, a gentle hug or handshake which expresses your restoration to the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit," the community of forgiven sinners who seek to love one another as Christ loves them.

It is ideal if you can spend some time in prayer on your own in the church or some other quiet place right away. You can make your act of thanksgiving, pray for the priest who was the minister of the sacrament, ponder the advice and encouragement you receive, promise your forgiveness of those who have wronged you, and express the joy and relief you feel. Psalm 103 is a good prayer of praise for this moment.

#### *Sacramental Confession and the Rhythm of Repentance*

The experience of forgiveness in depth gives us a new beginning in life and its keynote is joy. This joy is not merely relief at being freed from guilt, but the restoration of a profound sense of God's love for us in Christ. The joy we feel is an overflow of God's joy in us. Jesus compared God to a woman who loses a precious coin: "And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Lk. 15:9, 10). The rhythm of repentance in Christian life is the constant pattern of returning to God and sensing the joy of God in our return. We keep on rediscovering that God has the power to use even our worst sins and lapses to draw us closer. This is the secret of God's victory in the cross and resurrection of Christ. The rediscovery of God's inexhaustible patience with us and unconditional readiness to accept us again fully as sons and daughters overcomes the damage we have inflicted on our life through our sin. But it does not merely offset or repair the damage and restore the status quo. The heart of the good news is that *grace abounds*. The experience of restoration by the free gift of God does not set the clock back to where we were. It takes us further, and intensifies our relation-

ship. In being forgiven we can find ourselves closer to God, more grateful, more appreciative, more trusting than we were before we wandered off into sin.

After your first confession, consider how you want and how God wants this rhythm of repentance to be built into your life from now on.

The first thing to seek is the gift of turning to God the instant you become aware that you have done something wrong, expressing your sorrow and asking for forgiveness there and then. It takes much practice and faith to learn this resilience whereby we keep on renewing our trust in God's forgiveness time and time again, on each occasion taking up our life again without holding on to regret and anxiety.

Second, you will want to set aside certain regular times for self-examination. Some make this part of a daily discipline, but it is appropriate for everyone to spend a little time before the eucharist on Sunday in looking back over the week. This time is not to be narrowly focused on sin. It is a time for reflection on what we have done, what we have been involved with, what we seek awareness of our life, what is truly going on and how we have been responding to God's invitations to love. Out of this awareness we are stimulated to give thanks, praise, to intercede, to ask for what we need, and to confess our sins and receive forgiveness. If we come to the eucharist after this kind of exercise of awareness, the absolution given in the liturgy can be appreciated and heard as God's living word of pardon.

Then there is the question of the place of sacramental confession throughout the course of your life. There are rare cases where people make their confession only once in their life; afterwards, they find forgiveness adequately mediated by prayer and in corporate worship. But the majority of those who make their confession discover such benefits that they want to return to the sacrament again in the future. There are two ways in which you can integrate sacramental confession into your life. The first is to reserve the rite for any crisis that may come in the future. You know that in the event of a serious lapse or alienation from God, you will be able to return through the rite of reconciliation.

The second way is to make sacramental confession a regular part of your spiritual life, a discipline of renewal and recommitment. The frequency of confession varies from person to person quite legitimately, and it may take some experimentation to discover what rhythm most helps you. It is typical to find that after a certain lapse of time an inner pressure or invitation recurs, drawing us to a renewal of discipleship and a fresh experience of grace. Usually the length of the intervals between confessions is related to the effectiveness of our memory. We can recall events of the last twelve weeks with reasonable accuracy; looking back over the last twelve months in any detail is much more difficult. An alternative pattern of regularity is based on the church's year. The climax of the Christian year at Easter summons us to make our confession in Holy Week. Similarly we prepare for Christmas by making our confession during the Advent season. We can begin the penitential season of Lent by making a confession and also prepare for the feast of Pentecost in the same way. The discipline is an objective one that transcends purely personal impulses, and helps to emphasize the corporate dimension of reconciliation while deepening our appreciation of the church's seasons of faith. If you were to celebrate the rite of reconciliation at these times, and also go at the end of the summer, you would have a strong discipline which is typical of many serious and committed Anglicans who have a rule of life to help them grow in discipleship.

A final point. As you experience God's gift of forgiveness, remember that you are called to be a witness to God's offer of reconciliation through Christ. Reconciliation is not a boon for certain individuals, but the only hope for the world. How can you welcome others into the experience of reconciliation that you have been given? By your baptism and the renewal of the grace of baptism in the sacrament of reconciliation, you share in the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to God's people. Take a full part in extending God's gift to others and be ready to testify to the peace of God which passes all understanding given in the sacrament of reconciliation.