

Dear Parishioners,
Greetings in the Lord.

We have offered confession for one hour before the 5 PM mass and ½ hour before the 7 PM mass on Saturday. We also offer confession for an hour plus before the 11 AM mass on Sunday. In the past, we priests have always stayed in the confessional until everyone in line got to confession (unless we had to celebrate the mass). Our bishop has told me to stop this practice. I share with you excerpts from a letter of our judicial vicar who had a similar situation at his parish:

1. By offering so many confessions, we may have inadvertently given the wrong impression that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the only way that God has provided His mercy for the forgiveness of sins.
2. We may have inadvertently encouraged scrupulosity in some souls.
3. In order to offer all the confessions we do, we are regularly violating the Church's clear preference that confessions should take place at a time *other than* during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.
4. We may be in danger of burning our priests out by offering so many hours of confessions for devotional purposes in many cases.

I believe it might be the right time to do a little more catechesis and instruction on sin and reconciliation and the various means God provides to experience his mercy.

Our Doctrine

We hear from the Council of Trent, "*Anyone who is aware of having committed a **mortal sin** must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.*" (Council of Trent (1551: DS 1647; 1661; CIC, can. 916) There is also a precept of the Church which obliges us to confess **serious sins** at least once a year (CIC, can. 989; Council of Trent (1551: DS 1683; 1708). There is even a devotional aspect beyond the precept that suggests that confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is helpful in the spiritual life (CCC 1458). This is surely our Catholic Faith.

Remedy for Daily Faults

Venial sins, that is, those little daily faults and 'peccadillos', are not the specific object of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It may be novel to some, but the Church actually believes that these **VENIAL, EVERYDAY SINS** even some which include serious matter, **CAN BE ABSOLVED BY MEANS OTHER THAN CONFESSION**. For instance, the Catechism clearly spells out for us that the Eucharist, "*is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins.*" (CCC 1436 - Council of Trent (1551: DS 1638). The Catechism goes on to say that "*Reading Sacred Scripture, praying the Liturgy of the Hours and the Our Father – every sincere act of worship or devotion revives the spirit of conversion and repentance within us and contributes to the forgiveness of our sins.*" (CCC 1437). Every time we come to Mass and pray the "I confess" and "Lord, have mercy", the priest concludes this prayer with what is called the "absolution": "*May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.*" THIS IS ONE OF THE WAYS WE RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY. We can clearly say that this absolution is **not meant for mortal sins**, which must be confessed in the

special sacrament of reconciliation. But IT IS A TRUE ABSOLUTION FOR DAILY SINS. I want to make it clear for those who are tempted towards **scrupulosity: VENIAL, EVERYDAY, SINS DO NOT HAVE TO BE CONFESSED IN THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION TO BE FORGIVEN.**

Danger of Scrupulosity

Speaking of scrupulosity, I believe that lately this spiritual ill has arisen among the faithful, and it needs to be addressed. There is a growing phenomenon of people only going to Communion if they have immediately gone to confession; a practice, that while commendable for some who are constantly in a state of mortal sin, is **generally to be avoided**, especially seeing that **most people mistake their daily faults for mortal sins**. The result of this phenomenon is the proliferation of the number of penitents who are, in effect, confessing only venial sins, with a misplaced notion that without sacramental absolution, they would not be worthy of receiving Holy Communion. I would like to directly confront this growing confusion and error. **Not all sin, even if it concerns grave (serious) matter, is mortal.** As you are no doubt aware, mortal sin must involve **grave matter, full knowledge and with complete consent**. (CCC 1858 and 1859). Mortal sins are the proper object of the Sacrament of Confession. Venial sins can be forgiven in many other ways, as mentioned above.

Confessions and Mass

There is also the added difficulty of the Church's preference that we not hear confessions during Mass. While there is no prohibition of the practice, there is a clear preference that it not take place. Rubric #13 of the Order of Penance says, "*[The faithful] should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated.*" This is in keeping with the desire that the faithful remain actively participating in Mass instead of engaging a separate sacrament during Mass: "*The faithful are to be constantly encouraged to accustom themselves to going to confession outside the celebration of Mass, and especially at the prescribed times. In this way, the sacrament of Penance will be administered calmly and with genuine profit, and will not interfere with active participation in the Mass.*" (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 35) We have unfortunately made the **exception** the rule, and it is something that needs to be addressed.

Priest Burnout

Currently the priests are more and more frequently hearing hours and hours of devotional confessions, often in a rapid-fire manner without much time for counsel, all while Mass is going on, or as he is rushing to say Mass without adequate time for his own preparation. It is not infrequent that a confessor remains till the Creed is said, or longer during some Masses. I'm afraid also, that on account of these lines, those who are patiently waiting with mortal sins needing to be confessed are not able to make use of this saving sacrament before the priest's natural stamina gives out and confessions have to end.

Changes to Our Confessional Practices

Because of these problems and the need to remedy them, in consultation with the other priests of the parish, I am implementing several changes for the following reasons: (1) to move us towards a healthier practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and preserve the energy of our priests; (2) to move us towards the Church's ideal of letting the Mass be the Mass and confession time be confession time; (3) to reduce the danger of people falling into scrupulous practices; and (4) so

that the faithful may regularly turn to the other means that God has provided for the remedy of their daily sins

Here are the changes I am making and the encouragement that I offer:

1. **Confessions will cease when Mass begins, even if there is still a line waiting.**
2. Confessions will continue to be celebrated at the times we have established.
3. Penitents are encouraged to make use of the **ordinary means for absolving daily faults**, which may even be serious at times, such as the full and active participation in the Penitential Act at Mass, praying the Our Father, and especially the reception of Holy Communion.
4. The faithful are advised to **avoid devotional confessions if the lines are already long**, so as to make generous room for those who are truly in need of confessing mortal sins.
5. While there is no way to set a standard for every individual soul, the minimum for practicing Catholics is to confess your sins once a year. Frequent confession could be defined as once every six weeks. **It is not advisable to confess venial sins more frequently than this.**

A word to the scrupulous: If you are questioning whether or not you have fallen into mortal sin, **by the fact that you are questioning it, it is likely you have not.** Mortal sin requires full knowledge and free consent. While you may inadvertently fall into serious sin, you cannot inadvertently fall into mortal sin. Habitual sins, like addictions, are also considered to diminish the freedom of the sinner. While the matter may be serious, it does not always put you in a state of mortal sin.

God is not cruel. God loves you. God shed His blood so that you may be free from your sins. God gives you many ways through His Catholic Church to access this mercy, of which the Sacrament of Reconciliation is only one.

We have a good problem. We have a parish full of people who are aware of the need for God's mercy and wanting to experience it. But let's not create further problems from our misunderstanding of this great mystery of faith.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. Peter J. Iorio, Pastor
Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church