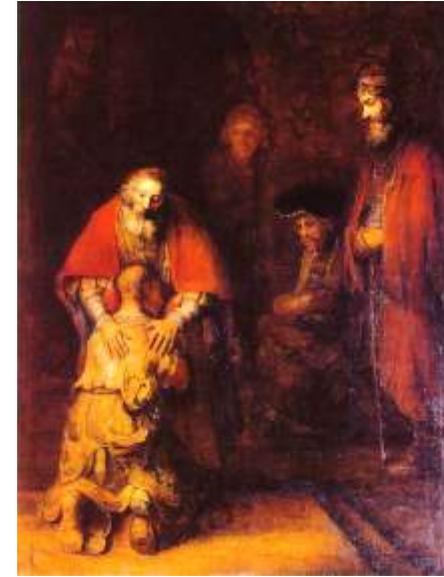


CELEBRATING FORGIVENESS
The Sacrament of Reconciliation at St Martins



The Return of the Prodigal Son -Rembrandt



The Parish
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Reviewing our lives regularly as Christian people is an important part of our spiritual growth. There are of course always dangers. Endless pre-occupation with ourselves can be a very negative and destructive thing but a regular examination of where we have come to on the pilgrim's path is essential if we are going to build on the gifts of the Spirit and grapple with our weaknesses.

Self examination before coming to the Mass used to be a common rule for many people and one that is in need of some revival. Saturday evening is always a good time to do this as well as before the major Christian Festivals that punctuate the liturgical year.

Devotional manuals in the past included forms of self examination which often confused us if not filling us with guilt. It is little wonder people quickly turned over those pages! Rather like a hypochondriac with a medical dictionary religious people could imagine that they had sins which they didn't know existed until they read all about them in these manuals. Rather like the very nervous first time penitent who, having read to the priest the entire list of sins contained in one famous manual, breathed a sigh of relief! The priest asked him if there was anything else he might have forgotten to which he replied, 'Oh yes father, I have been compiled by the Cowley Fathers'!

Attitudes to sin have changed. forms of spirituality have developed. Most of us would not consider it a sin if we attended a 'schismatic place of worship', eg the local non conformist chapel! Our views on sexual orientation and indeed sexual morality have changed. The devotional manuals have been ditched but with them went the whole practice of self examination leading to repentance and confession. The restoration of the practice could be very important not only for the life of the individual but also for the life of the Church.

The Rite of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Penitent: Bless me father, for I have sinned

Priest: The Lord be in your heart and on your lips, that you may rightly and truly confess your sins. In the name of the Father, and of Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent Amen

I confess to almighty God, to Blessed Mary, ever Virgin, and to all the saints, and to you father, that I have sinned in thought, and word and deed, through my own fault.

Say when your last confession was made. Then tell the priest your sins. When you have told him all the sins you can remember, conclude with the following words:

For these and all my other sins which I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry, firmly resolve not to sin, and humbly ask pardon of God, and of you father, advice, penance and absolution.

The priest may give you some advice and counsel, he will suggest a penance for you to perform and then give you absolution.

Priest

Our Lord Jesus Christ who has left power to his church to absolve all who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you your offences; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the Saints, whatsoever good you do or evil you endure, be to you for the remission of sins, the increase of grace, and the reward of eternal life: And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with you now and remain with you always. Amen

Go in peace; the Lord has put away your sins, and of your charity pray also for me a sinner. Thanks be to God

You then go and make your act of penance and remember with great thanksgiving the love and mercy of God shown to you.

If you are still in doubt about your way of life, review this self examination beginning with the first questions which can be summarised thus:

Is my life given? in one way or another, but given? in what way? to what? to whom? in every way, to love, to God? Can I really say today, before God, that I keep nothing back in my life for myself, but that for love's sake I am ready to give all, according to the Gospel.

If anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me

You will have noticed that this self examination is not a check list of sins. It is rather a collection of pointers and references to life in general. As you gently and prayerfully self examine your life against the teaching of Jesus, using his life and way of life as an example, ask the Holy Spirit to show you where sin reigns in your life.

Think about those sins and the effect that they have on you and others. All sin makes us less than God has called us to be. Self examination leading to repentance and confession heals and sets us free from the burden of sins committed, the guilt they often induce in us, and the fear of living authentic lives. Remember the words of the great father of the Church - St Irenaeus who once said that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive"

Let us be alive, to God, to others and to ourselves.

How do we set about it ?

It is good to talk as the telephone companies often tell us. It is good to share with another how we really are on the inside, despite the smile and general response we all often make when asked, 'how are you'? in reply we simply say, 'I'm fine' A Doctor friend of mine once told me that when a patient tells him they are *fine* he smiles and thinks to himself.

FINE = Frustrated, Insecure, Emotional, Neurotic. Yes, so much for being fine!

We all need to trust another enough to speak as they LISTEN. A spiritual director or soul friend can and does help us. Traditionally a priest has been this person for so many people. However, another person we trust can equally fulfil this role. If not a priest, this other person can only be a listening ear and any advice they give should always be in line with the teaching of the Church. They certainly can be a person who encourages and supports us, one who has empathy with our particular way of life as Christians. A person who does not judge or rushes to speak and informs us of their opinion! A wise friend will first listen and if necessary direct us to speak with a priest or another professional person who may be better able to help us. At the end of the day we all chat with friends about how we feel when we are not too well. Then we find a doctor if necessary to make a proper diagnosis of our condition! We then without question follow his/her advice as to how we may move forward.

As Christians, the Holy Spirit, our help and guide is always there to help us discern our conscience. We should begin any self examination by asking the help of the Holy Spirit. Allow the Spirit to illuminate our thinking. Make some space to be still, quiet and reflective.

Read the Scriptures. I would recommend the Gospel parable of the 'Return of the Prodigal Son' Sometimes we will see ourselves as that son, or the father or even the elder brother depending upon our particular situation. For the most part that parable speaks deeply to us about ourselves, sons and daughters returning to the Father following an examination of conscience that has led to repentance and confession.

And when all this is done, what then?

The purpose is not self satisfaction but to make this, as in all things, a worthy offering to God. We need to bring our self examination to Him and offer it up - that we might be confirmed in the good steps of discipleship and celebrate God's great gift of forgiveness for all that is unworthy. Our self examination will often lead us to see that we are living half lives, we are weighed down by past sins and the guilt they can often induce in us. So much so that this can hurt and diminish us in the present and so lead us to be filled with fear for the future. This is not good and it is not what God wishes for us.

Just as I am, the opening words of a well known hymn encourage us to come to God just as we are. Going to confession following a time of self examination is coming to God, returning to the Father. It is no longer, thank God, the mysterious and rather 'high church' thing that it once was for Anglicans. More people use this Sacrament than you imagine. For good reason this sacrament of the church is these days called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is what happens in the celebration of this particular Sacrament. An individual following an honest confession is given absolution (the assurance of God's forgiveness) and so reconciled to God. In a way it is a little resurrection, that which has died through sins influence is resurrected and restored. This is a work of grace - making the angels rejoice and the demons weep! *Laus Deo!*

What you need to do?

You need to have prepared yourself, to have sorted out the things you wish to confess. Your priest will help you in this preparation. He too knows what it is to make his confession!

Most people find it helpful to jot down some things on a piece of paper. Don't name anyone else in your confession even if they are implicated in your sins. Don't try and justify your sins or explain them away, and be honest. For example, don't tell the priest that you have stolen a rope and then forget to say that your neighbour's donkey was attached to it!

If its your first time coming to Confession the priest will have helped you

20: Health. Do I worry about my physical well being, or do I lack any concern about it at all? Do I live a life which is appropriate to my age? Do I fear suffering and illness? Do I, in ill health, become insufferable to others? Am I ready to die?

Concerning Certain States of Life

22: Marriage. How do I regard this state of life? Do I view it as an opportunity of consecration to God through the giving of myself to my partner and children?

23: Do I look to my partner and find a presence of the love of God calling for total commitment? In keeping with this view of faithfulness, what do I do I think about infidelity, separation and divorce?

24: Do I recognise in my children not only a blessing, but as it were a presence of God in my home? the guarantee and proof of my union with my partner?

25: Do I pay attention to my children's religious up-bringing? How do I set about this by word, example, by the general atmosphere of the home? Am I concerned to discuss with my children the meaning of vocation, of faith, and of life in general from a Christian perspective?

26: The Unmarried. Is my single state deliberate, endured or accepted? If it is endured, can I make it accepted?

27: Am I able to find in my single state, provisional or permanent, a greater availability for others, individually or collectively, in my family or elsewhere?

28: Do I have the courage to unburden myself to some trusted person about any sexual problems I may be experiencing? Am I pre-occupied with sex for the sake of sex or as an escape from the reality of life, of committed human relationship? Am I embarrassed by my sexuality, and about speaking of such in a healthy and open way?

29: Am I worried about growing old? Why? out of vanity? out of fear of becoming a burden to anyone? out of the worry that I am missing out on something? because of a desire to serve to the end?

their commitment to be being present at Mass with the Church every Sunday? Do I too easily miss Mass on Sunday because others with who I share my life or recreate do not share my commitment?

- 10: Do I spend some time each day in prayer, or at least pray the Lord's prayer or some other form of prayer. Am I aware of the difference between Liturgical prayer and personnel prayer? Do I pray with my family, especially with my children?
- 11: Am I aware of the needs of others? Do I look to see how can I help someone else whoever they may be?
- 12: What are the great political and social problems in my own country? Do I bring to bear Christian principles upon these in my thinking and discussion concerning these?
- 13: Am I a peace maker, a reconciler, even when I have been hurt or harmed by the actions, altitudes and words of others?
- 14: Do I pray for those who I don't like or have hurt me in some way?

Particular Questions - Stewardship

- 15: Money. Am I poor in the spirit of the Gospel (to know my need of of God) ? Or is gain the purpose of my life, in comfort and pleasure?
- 16: What do I do for those who are poor? Do I take seriously my commitment to give money to the Church to maintain its ministry and mission in the parish and beyond?
- 17: Time. How is my time divided? among work, leisure, sleep, prayer? Among my family, my friends and others? Do I have a rule of life? Ought I to have one?
- 18: Work. Does this constitute part of my spiritual life, or do I regard it as a secular thing? Is it fulfilling the will God? Do I make it an offering to God? Am I a good employer/employee?

Do I leave jobs that are my responsibility for others to do?
Am I am to work as part of a team? What are my relationships with those with whom I work?

prepare for this. He will guide you through the short Liturgical service.

At Saint Martin's we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Calvary Chapel. An appropriate place, at the foot of the Cross to come to Lord with the offering of our sins. Towering above the place where we make our confession is the great sign of the Crucified - the great sign of God's unfathomable love and mercy for us. What better place could we find to come to him just as we are.

Some people however, prefer to make their confession in the Chapel in the Vicarage or even in the Vicar's sitting room! This is often so because they wish to chat informally about their particular list of 'sins' before making their confession. This is a pastoral ministry of listening and of offering some guidance concerning what they are about to confess or not as the case may be.

What does the priest do?

The priest first of all sits alongside you as a fellow Christian Pilgrim, a sinner and a penitent. He is by virtue of his ordination a minister of God's grace. He is another Christ, speaking in the name of the Lord words of forgiveness and mercy to those who come seeking God's mercy and forgiveness.

The priest will listen carefully to what you say. He may ask you to clarify things you have mentioned. He will offer some advice and encouragement. However, this is not the best place to have a discussion. That can take place either before or after if you so request it.

After you have made your confession he may suggest a penance for you, that is something for you to do or say. He will then pronounce Absolution, the declaration of God's absolute forgiveness of all the wrong you have done. He will bless you and dismiss you in peace - reconciled, restored and forgiven. He cannot and will not reveal anything you have said in his presence to another living soul, not even to you unless you raise it with him later.

And then

Something of the Resurrection has taken place, and we move on a little further on the pilgrim journey. We may come away from this Sacrament feeling elated and relieved, especially if this was our first time or if we have not been to confession for a long time. We may, on the other hand, feel that it has become something of a routine, and feel nothing. God, and God alone is the true judge of our penitence. God is greater than our hearts and minds. We have come to this sacrament, open, honest, just as we are; and he always receives us as we are and gives himself to us in an abundance beyond our wildest imaginations.

As another of our hymns reminds us:

*There is a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there is a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty*

*There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgement given*

*For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.*

You can read the entire hymn in the Hymnal at 461

Self Examination

Some basic Questions

- 1: Is my life conformed to the will of God? Do I know what his will is for me. Does my personal calling contradict it? If I do not know it, what am I doing about it?
- 2: Could I discover the will of God for me more clearly within the life of the Church; through the help of a priest; or from responsible friends in a position to help me?
- 3: From whom, from what, ought I be detached in order to accomplish the will of God for me?
- 4: If I am already committed to a definite way of life, a vocation, eg. marriage, holy orders, my work, do I take time regularly to examine my faithfulness and to measure my progress? What still needs changing in my life?

General Questions

- 5: If the will of God for each of us is love, how am I responding to God's love for me?
- 6: What am I doing to try to know God as he is revealed to us in his Son, and as he makes himself known to us through the Church?
- 7: What am I doing with regard to my 'religious instruction'? Do I try to improve my understanding of the Christian faith? Am I actively encouraging my children in the ways of the faith? Do I set a good example for them and others?
- 8: What is my 'religious practice'? Do I regard it simply as a duty, is it simply done out of habit or upbringing or as an approach to the mystery of God. Have I lost that enthusiasm I once had? Have I lost that sense of wonder, adoration and love when in the presence of God?
- 9: Is my presence at the Sunday Mass something I look forward to? What are the practical demands upon me or my family of the being present with the Church at Mass? Do I seek to know and share fellowship with others at the Mass. Do I actively encourage others in