

An Unbreakable Habit of Sin?

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Q: I'm not sure what to do. I've been praying and I've been to Confession (repeatedly), but I seem to commit the same sins. Even worse, I know that Jesus promised that we would receive a "closeness" to God when we called out for Him, but I haven't experienced that.

A: Thank you so much for writing. I think that your experience sounds a lot like most people in the Church. Now, when I say that, I don't mean "most people who don't care about getting close to the Lord" in the Church. What you described is what most people who are showing up and who long to be closely connected with God are experiencing every day. We want God so desperately, but we don't seem to be able to experience His Presence and His Power. So what do we do?

Well, it sounds like you already know what to do: prayer and the Sacrament of Confession. But it might be possible that you could enter into the Sacrament of Confession in a way that will be much more profitable for you. Actually, I know that you could (but I thought that I

would say it in a more “Minnesota Nice” way: “it might be possible...”). And it is going to involve approaching your sins and the Sacrament of Confession in a different way.

That being said, am I implying that you aren’t genuine in the confessions you are making now? Not at all. I have no idea what level of genuineness you are at. And God is so good that He can even take some pretty lame and half-hearted confessions of sin and do miracles with them. I mean, very few of us are truly sorry for our sins because of our purified and perfect love for God. Many times, we approach Confession because we know it is something we need to do or because we fear the reality of Hell. Again, if either of those are your primary reasons for going to Confession, please keep going! God is so good that He will take even the minimal amount of contrition and respond with His mercy. Do not avoid Confession simply because you aren’t perfect (that would be a little ironic, wouldn’t it?)

But we can definitely grow in our approach. The first area is our awareness of sin and how it relates to the Sacrament of Confession.

Consider the words you use when you go to Confession. Along those lines, what do you call the Sacrament? Many of us call it the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And this is a good thing because it is the end result; we are reconciled to God and to His Church. I often refer to Confession as “Reconciliation”. But remember: that is the result. Forgiveness and reconciliation are words that describe what God does. But what is our part in it? What do we do? We confess. And what do we confess? We confess our sins.

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This might sound strange to you that I am belaboring this point. But I have found that many people come to the Sacrament of Confession to tell a story rather than confess their sins to almighty God. We will say things like, “Bless me, Father...I’m really working on my temper lately and being short with my kids”. Or people will say things equally ineffective like, “I am struggling with selfishness (or anger or lust or pride, etc...)”. I say that this is “ineffective” because I am not confessing my sins; I am merely “sharing” what I am “working on” or “wrestling with”.

Clarification: are these sins being forgiven? Even if I haven’t “worded it right”? The answer: Absolutely. But you will not see a change as a result. Why not? Because a person who confesses in that way is often not interested in a change. They merely want to be “forgiven”. I’ve been there...maybe we all have. Many of us have shown up to the Sacrament of Reconciliation because we knew that we needed forgiveness or because we knew that we needed absolution before we could receive Holy Communion. That is a good thing! But that is not a life-changing thing. We confessed (and received forgiveness), but did not change. Why?

Because we did not renounce the root of the sin.

See, every turning to God requires us to turn away from something that is not of God. I know that I have gone to Confession many times, honestly turning to God, but without intentionally and firmly turning away from my sin and my attraction to sin. I have gone to Confession because I wanted mercy, but not because I wanted a real and lasting change.

This is where renouncing our sins comes into effect. Rather than saying, "I'm working on anger", it makes a real difference when we say, "I am guilty of acting out in anger" or "I am guilty of the sin of anger in the following ways...". It goes even deeper to say, at the end of the confession of this sin, "In Jesus' Name, I renounce the sin of anger". One could also say, "In the Name of Jesus, I renounce the root of the spirit of anger in my past/in my heart/etc...".

Believe me, this could make all the difference in the world in your life with Christ. You have been showing up and praying and asking for mercy. You have received it (again: God is so good that He does not hold back what we ask for!). But you may have not renounced the lies that you've become comfortable with. You may not have renounced the attraction or dependence you have towards the sins you commit. You may not have named and renounced (in Jesus' Name) the sins you have asked Him to forgive. Once you get into the practice of renouncing these lies, wounds, and sins (even outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation), you will experience an awakening in your spiritual life that you may have never known before.