

What is it like to hear confessions?

 bulldogcatholic.org/2015/04/01/what-is-it-like-to-hear-confessions

April 1, 2015



Q: What is it like to hear confession?

A: I was once riding in a shuttle-bus with a number of older folks on the way from an airport. They noticed that I was a priest and started asking questions about it. “Do you do all of the priest stuff?” “Yep.” “Even the Confession thing?” “Yeah. All the time.”

One older lady gasped, “Well, I think that that would be the worst. It would be so depressing; hearing all about people’s sins.”

I told them that it was the exact opposite. There is almost no greater place to be than with someone when they are coming back to God. I said, “It would be depressing if I had to watch someone leave God; I get to be with them when they come back to Him.” The Confessional is a place where people let God’s love win. The Confessional is the most joyful, humbling, and inspiring place in the world.

What Do I See During Confession?

I think there are three things. First, I see the costly mercy of God in action. I get to regularly come face to face with the overwhelming, life-transforming power of God's love. I get to see God's love up-close and it reminds me of how good God is.

Not many folks get to see the way in which God's sacrifice on the Cross is constantly breaking into people's lives and melting the hardest hearts. Jesus consoles those who are grieving their sins . . . and strengthens those who find themselves wanting to give up on God or on life.

As a priest, I get to see this thing happen every day.

I See a Saint in the Making

The second thing I see is a person who is still trying – a saint in the making. I don't care if this is the person's third confession this week; if they are seeking the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it means that they are trying. That's all that I care about. This thought is worth considering: going to Confession is a sign that you haven't given up on Jesus.

This is one of the reasons why pride is so deadly. I have talked with people who tell me that they don't want to go to Confession to their priest because their priest really likes them and "thinks that they are a good kid."

I have two things to say to this.

1. He will not be disappointed! What your priest will see is a person who is trying! I dare you to find a saint who didn't need God's mercy! (Even Mary needed God's mercy; she received the mercy of God in a dramatic and powerful way at her conception. Boom. Lawyered.)
2. So what if the priest is disappointed? We try to be so impressive with so much of our lives. Confession is a place where we don't get to be impressive. Confession is a place where the desire to impress goes to die. Think about it: all other sins have the potential to cause us to race to the confessional, but pride is the one that causes us to hide from the God who could heal us.

Do I Remember Your Sins? *NO!*

So often, people will ask if I remember people's sin from Confession. As a priest, I rarely, if ever, remember sins from the confessional. That might seem impossible, but the truth is, sins aren't all that impressive. They aren't like memorable sunsets or meteor showers or super-intriguing movies . . . they are more like the garbage.

And if sins are like garbage, then the priest is like God's garbage-man. If you ask a garbage-man about the gross-est thing he's ever had to haul to the dump, maaaaaybe he could remember it. But the fact is, once you get used to taking out the trash, it ceases to be

noteworthy, it ceases to stand out.

Honestly, once you realize that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is less about the sin and more about Christ's death and resurrection having victory in a person's life, the sins lose all of their luster, and Jesus' victory takes center stage.

In Confession, we meet the life-transforming, costly love of God . . . freely given to us every time we ask for it. We meet Jesus who reminds us, "You are worth dying for . . . even in your sins, you are worth dying for."

Whenever someone comes to Confession, I see a person who is deeply loved by God and who is telling God that they love Him back. That's it, and that's all.

In Confession I See My Own Weakness

The third thing a priest sees when he hears Confessions is his own soul. It is a scary place for a priest. I cannot tell you how humbled I am when someone approaches Jesus' mercy through me.

I am not over-awed by their sins; I am struck by the fact that they have been able to recognize sins in their life that I have been blind to in my own. Hearing someone's humility breaks down my own pride. It is one of the best examinations of conscience.

But why is Confession a scary place for a priest? It is frightening because of the way in which Jesus trusts me to be a living sign of His mercy.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once told priests that we scarcely realize what is happening when we extend our hands over someone's head in absolution. We don't realize, he said, that the very Blood of Christ is dripping from our fingers onto their heads, washing the penitent clean.

The day after I was ordained, we had a little party and my dad stood up and made a toast. He has worked his entire life as an orthopedic surgeon, and he was a very good one. My whole life, his patients have come up to me at one time or another and told me how their lives have been changed because my dad was such a good surgeon.

So, there my dad was, standing in the midst of these people, and he began to say, "My whole life, I have used my hands to heal people's broken bodies. But from now on, my son Michael . . . um, Father Michael . . . will use his hands (at this point, he got choked up) . . . He will use his hands to heal broken souls. His hands will save even more lives than mine have."

Confession is such a powerful place. All I have to do is offer God's mercy, love, and redemption . . . but I don't want to get in Jesus' way. The priest stands in judgment of no one. In the Confessional, the only thing I have to offer is mercy.

I Get to Sacrifice For You

Lastly, when a priest hears Confessions, he is taking on another responsibility.

One time, after college, I was returning to Confession after a long time and a lot of sin and the priest simply gave me something like “one Hail Mary” as my penance. I stopped.

“Um, Father...? Did you hear everything I said?” “Yes, I did.” “Don’t you think I should get a bigger penance than that?” He looked at me with great love and said, “No. That small penance is all that I’m asking of you.” He hesitated, and then continued, “But you should know . . . I will be fasting for you for the next 30 days.”

I was stunned. I didn’t know what to do. He told me that the Catechism teaches that the priest must do penance for all those who come to him for Confession. And here he was, embracing a severe penance for all of my severe sins.

This is why Confession reveals the priest’s own soul; it reveals his willingness to sacrifice his life with Christ. He sees our sins as a burden that he will take up (with Jesus!) and offer them to the Father, while offering us the mercy of God.

Remember, Confession is always a place of victory. Whether you have confessed a particular sin for the first time, or if this is the 12,001st time, every Confession is a win for Jesus. And I, a priest, get to be there. That’s what it’s like . . . I get to sit and watch Jesus win His children back all day. It’s flippin’ awesome.