

SEVEN TIPS FOR A GOOD CONFESSION FROM A SAINT AND SPIRITUAL GUIDE

“My child, never allow your heart to abide heavy with sin, seeing that there is so sure and safe a remedy at hand.”

This is the advice of St. Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, in a chapter on going to the sacrament of penance.

Here are some of the tips the saint offers us:

1. The saint recommends regular and frequent confession (his suggestion was weekly and always before receiving Communion, but norms for receiving the Eucharist were different then).

He encourages confession, “although your conscience is not burdened with mortal sin; for in confession you do not only receive absolution for your venial sins, but you also receive great strength to help you in avoiding them henceforth, clearer light to discover your failings, and abundant grace to make up whatever loss you have incurred through those faults.”

2. He emphasizes the need for “heartily sorrow” and a “steadfast resolution to correct” our sins in the future.

“Some people go on confessing venial sins out of mere habit, and conventionally, without making any effort to correct them, thereby losing a great deal of spiritual good. Supposing that you confess having said something untrue, although without evil consequences, or some careless words, or excessive amusement — repent, and make a firm resolution of amendment: it is a mere abuse to confess any sin whatever, be it mortal or venial, without intending to put it altogether away, that being the express object of confession.”

3. “Beware,” he says, “of unmeaning self-accusations, made out of a mere routine, such as, ‘I have not loved God as much as I ought; I have not prayed with as much devotion as I ought; I have not loved my neighbor as I ought; I have not received the sacraments with sufficient reverence,’ and the like. “Such things as these are altogether useless in setting the state of your conscience before your confessor, inasmuch as all the saints in paradise and all men living would say the same.”

4. Instead, the saint recommends: “Examine closely what special reason you have for accusing yourself thus, and when you have discovered it, **accuse yourself simply and plainly of your fault.**”

“For instance, when confessing that you have not loved your neighbor as you ought, it may be that what you mean is, that having seen someone in great want whom you could have helped, you have failed to do so. Well then, accuse yourself of that special omission: say: ‘Having come

across a person in need, I did not help him as I might have done, either through negligence, or hardness, or indifference, according as the case may be.

“So again, do not accuse yourself of not having prayed to God with sufficient devotion; but if you have given way to voluntary distractions, or if you have neglected the proper circumstances of devout prayer — whether place, time, or attitude — say so plainly, just as it is.”

5. St. Francis de Sales says it is important to get to the root causes of sins: “Do not be satisfied with mentioning the bare fact of your venial sins, but accuse yourself of the **motive cause** which led to them. For instance, do not be content with saying that you told an untruth which injured no one; but say whether it was out of vanity, in order to win praise or avoid blame, out of heedlessness, or from obstinacy.”

6. He also notes the importance of giving sufficient context. “Say whether you continued long to commit the fault in question, as the importance of a fault depends greatly upon its continuance: for example, there is a wide difference between a passing act of vanity which is over in a quarter of an hour, and one which fills the heart for one or more days.” It’s thus helpful, he says, to mention “**the fact, the motive and the duration of your faults. ...**”

“Do not spare yourself in telling whatever is necessary to explain the nature of your fault, as, for instance, the reason why you lost your temper, or why you encouraged another in wrong-doing.

“Thus, someone whom I dislike says a chance word in joke, I take it ill, and put myself in a passion. If one I like had said a stronger thing I should not have taken it amiss; so in confession, I ought to say that I lost my temper with a person, not because of the words spoken so much as because I disliked the speaker; and if in order to explain yourself clearly it is necessary to particularize the words, it is well to do so; because accusing one’s self thus simply one discovers not merely one’s actual sins, but one’s bad habits, inclinations and ways, and the other roots of sin, by which means one’s spiritual Father acquires a fuller knowledge of the heart he is dealing with, and knows better what remedies to apply....”

7. Finally, St. Francis recommends sticking with the same confessor, when possible: “Do not lightly change your confessor, but having chosen him, be regular in giving account of your conscience to him at the appointed seasons, telling him your faults simply and frankly, and from time to time — say every month or every two months — show him the general state of your inclinations, although there be nothing wrong in them; as, for instance, whether you are depressed and anxious, or cheerful, desirous of advancement, or money, and the like.”

The Introduction to the Devout Life was written in the early 17th century for the laity. It can truly be referred to as a “timeless classic,” since the book still today offers a guide to beginners in the spiritual life — and not just beginners, since as with any relationship, our friendship with God requires returning again and again to the basics.