

It's the first Sunday of Advent and Christmas madness is in full swing – Santas, grinchies, elves, reindeer, sleighs and fake snow are everywhere. It's time, we are told, to start agonising about what we are going to eat, who we are going invite and most importantly what presents we are going to buy for our family and friends. But let's just stop for a moment and think about this a little. Imagine if you had a major life event coming up. Perhaps it's a big birthday, or your wedding day, and you invited all your family and friends. On the big day, they all turn up full of joy and then ... give each other presents. What about you? It's your birthday, but apart from turning up on the day, your guests don't bring you anything. They're too busy sharing gifts with each other. And what if some of them don't turn up at all? How would you feel if a good chunk of your invited guests went down the pub and give each other presents for your birthday there, instead of coming to your party?

I'm sure you can see what I'm getting at. Christmas is Jesus' birthday, not ours, or that of our families or our friends. Rather than agonising on what to buy for our family and friends, shouldn't we be agonising about what Jesus wants from us for his birthday?

Well, you may be surprised that the answer to this question is 'no'. It's 'no' because we don't need to agonise. Jesus and his Church have already told us what he wants from us for his birthday; it's in today's Gospel. He wants us to reconcile ourselves to him. He wants us to acknowledge our selfishness and turn back to him. He wants us to go to confession so that we can present ourselves with pure hearts to him on his birthday.

I know that some people here are not Catholic, yet, and so can't go to confession, yet. For others, life's traumas and troubles mean that confession may not be an option at the moment. To these people, may I say, hang on in there, keep coming to Mass and keep praying, God will not abandon you! But for the rest of us an Advent confession really is the best present we can give Jesus for his birthday.

We've got an Advent Penitential Service coming up on the 20th December at 10 am in Bodmin and that would be a great opportunity to give Jesus his Christmas present, particularly as we'll have a visiting priest hearing confessions as well, but if you can't make it on this day, Father Placidus or Fr Robbie will be available before and after most of our Advent Masses at the usual times.

But we all know going to confession is not easy. In fact, it's very difficult and painful. We mean well, we want to go, but busying ourselves with Christmas food, presents and decorations, however tedious, is still easier than going to confession .. and quiet often we just keep putting it off until it just never happens. We go through a debate with our conscience, which as St Cardinal Newman reminded us, is the voice of God. We put forward very good arguments to avoid confession, but they're really just excuses. I'll list a few of the more common ones, you may even recognise some of them:

1. I don't need to confess to a priest; my sins are between me and God. I can confess directly to Him.

I think it's best to let Jesus answer this one himself. After his resurrection he appeared before his disciples and said "For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" ¹Jesus himself gave his disciples, and their ordained successors, the right to forgive sins. If we want to be sure that our sins are forgiven, maybe it's best to go to the people he appointed?

2. I'm scared, embarrassed and ashamed, Father will be shocked, and I'll never be able to look him in the face again.

It can take mammoth courage to admit to our failings and weaknesses, but every priest will tell you he's heard it all a thousand times, so you're very unlikely to shock him. He also knows it takes courage; he too is a sinner and goes to confession himself, but if you're still apprehensive, we'll have a visiting priest at the penance service, or you can pop along to Fr Mark in Newquay or Fr Paul in St Austell. But most importantly, imagine what the Prodigal Son felt like coming home to his dad, the utter shame and embarrassment, and yet look at the reception he got. Yes, it can be painful to gather the courage, sometimes excruciatingly painful, but it really is worth it!

3. I haven't been for years; I don't know what to do or say, and after all this time, I can't remember everything.

Don't worry about what to say and do. There's a print-out in the confessional and Father will help you through everything. Just tell him that you haven't been for years and don't know

how to proceed and he'll help you along. Even if you've got a problem expressing your sins, ask him and he'll gently help you with that as well. There's nothing that encourages a priest more in the affirmation of his vocation than a penitent who comes to confession after years and years. They love it. That's why they became priests, so go on, make their day.

4. I don't know what to confess, I live a boring, quiet life.

The secret is to make a good examination of conscience. How can we do that? I find a good way is to refer to the "I Confess" prayer we often say at the beginning of Mass. In it we say that "I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do".² Look at each of these in your life. We often recognise our actions and words as being sinful, but have we considered our thoughts? Our internal resentment of our brothers and sisters that we may never have expressed as actions or words, but that stew in our hearts. Or how about things we have failed to do? Remember Jesus's account of the Last Judgement in St Mathew's Gospel where the goats on his left will ask "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison and did not come to your help?" Sometimes, the boring and quiet life is actually what we need to confess.

5. I mostly repeat the same little things over and over again. I can't face Father with the same failings yet again and then sincerely say that I will try not to sin anymore.

Pope Benedict XVI gave the best answer to this one. He reminded us that most of us clean our houses every week, but that the same dirt accumulates in the same places, so we have to do it all over again the following week.³

6. I don't need to go, I'm not a big sinner. I haven't murdered anyone or run off with the milkman or robbed a bank or anything like that.

It's true that we are only obliged to confess grave sins and are simply encouraged to confess less grievous sins, but what is a grave sin? The Church defines these, as sins of 'grave matter' committed with full knowledge and intention.⁴ The Catechism tells us that grave matter is specified in the 10 Commandments and reiterated in Jesus's answer to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do

²*Sunday Missal, People's Edition*, CTS, 2011, 523

³Miller, D 3.5 *The Healing Sacraments of Reconciliation & Anointing*, Oscott, 2007, p.5.4

⁴CCC 1855 - 1861

not defraud, Honour your father and your mother” and so on. ⁵ So, here’s a question for you: which one of these do we rarely associate with grave sin? May I suggest *Do not bear false witness*? We may not all be murderers, but boy, can we bear false witness – in our gossip, in our angry social media posts or in the elevation of ourselves over others. St John covered this most succinctly in his first letter in which he wrote: “If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves and truth has no place in us; but if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright, so that he will forgive our sins.” ⁶

7. I am beyond redemption.

People often say this as a joke. Nothing could be less funny. God’s mercy has been purchased for us by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. As a result, it is infinite. Jesus told us that the only sin that can’t be forgiven is a sin against the Holy Spirit. ⁷ What’s a sin against the Holy Spirit? It’s believing that I am beyond redemption; that my sins cannot be forgiven. So, please, let’s just not go there; the consequences are frightening.

God’s mercy is infinite, welcoming, gentle and above all loving, so come on, Jesus is waiting with loving anticipation for you to give him his Christmas present so that you in turn, can share in his present to you, which is eternal happiness. But there is a flip side, so let’s not forget what Jesus said to us in today’s Gospel: “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect”.

⁵ CCC: 1858

⁶ 1 Jn 1: 8-9

⁷ Matt 12:31-32