

7 SECRETS
of
CONFESSION

Vinny Flynn

Introduction by Fr. Michael Gaitley, MIC

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TO FR. PETER, OFM

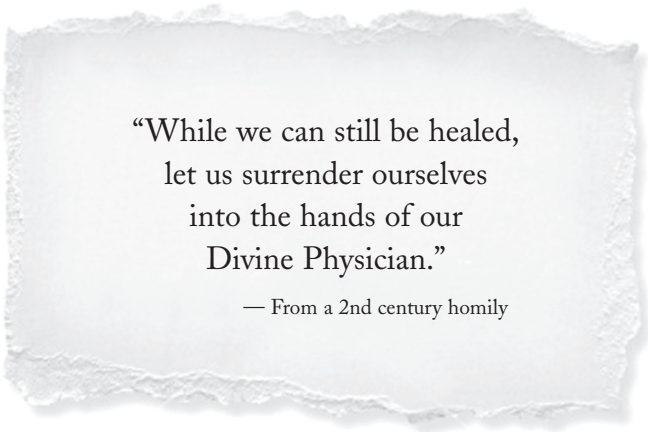
*my confessor and lifelong friend, who has
laughed and cried and prayed with me,
reflected to me the merciful face of the Father,
and walked patiently with me on the
path to healing and holiness.*



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and provide us with invaluable editorial
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“While we can still be healed,
let us surrender ourselves
into the hands of our
Divine Physician.”

— From a 2nd century homily

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Author's Note

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INTRODUCTION

“Fear is useless. What is needed is trust.”

Mark 5:36

In the *Diary of St. Faustina*, Jesus tells us, “Pray for souls that they be not afraid to approach the tribunal of My mercy” (975). I believe that people *have* been praying for this intention and that this book will help many come back to confession.

When I was in the seminary, I used to go to confession every Saturday morning, even though I didn’t have to. It was my weekly meeting with Jesus to encounter His love in the Sacrament of Mercy, and it gave me so much peace and joy. But getting there wasn’t easy. Nearly every time, before confessing, there’d be a barrage of what I believe were spiritual attacks.

The most common attack was fear, and it usually hit me as I was waiting in the confession line. In fact,

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the closer I got to the confessional, the more the fear would grow, usually accompanied by thoughts such as, “The priest is going to yell at you.” ... “You’re the worst sinner; there’s no mercy for you.” ... “You won’t remember any of your sins and will look like such a fool.” ... “He’s going to be shocked at your sins.” ... “You just confess the same sins over and over, and this time God has had enough of you.”

These thoughts and the waves of anxiety that accompanied them did not make sense. After all, for years I’d had a great devotion to the message of Divine Mercy. My image of God was most definitely the image of Jesus full of love and mercy.

Yet, despite everything I knew of His mercy, I couldn’t always shake these thoughts and fears. I’d fight them by praying what had become my constant prayer, “Jesus, I trust in You” — but it wasn’t easy. It was like every time I got into the confession line, amnesia would set in, and I’d forget all I’d learned about God’s mercy.

Then, one day, I read a passage from the *Diary of St. Faustina* that has helped me perhaps more than any other. Jesus said to Faustina:

Every time you go to confession, immerse yourself entirely in My mercy, with great trust, so that I may pour the bounty of My grace upon your soul. ... Tell souls that from this fount of mercy souls draw graces solely with the vessel of trust. If their trust is great, there is no limit to My generosity.

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No wonder the weekly attacks focused on fear! Satan wanted to rob me of the graces of confession, and he knew that fear kills trust. So, after reading this passage, I made a firm resolution to approach the confessional in the same way I approach Jesus — with contrition and great trust in his mercy. That resolution has helped, but there's often still a battle.

Thanks to *7 Secrets of Confession*, the battle has become easier to fight. Vinny's "7 Secrets" are like seven explosions that blow away the obstacles keeping us from the Sacrament of Mercy. If you've ever dragged your feet on the way to confession, gotten discouraged about confessing the same sins over and over, or wondered how your confessions could be

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more fruitful, then you'll love this book. It turns what many see as a tiresome obligation into a precious, longed-for encounter with the Lord.

Whether you go to confession every week or haven't been in many years, this book will help you rediscover and fall deeply in love with the gift of God's mercy in this incredible sacrament. I'm deeply grateful that Vinny hasn't kept these secrets to himself. And when you read this book, you'll be grateful, too. It truly is an answer to prayer.

Fr. Michael Gaitley, MIC

Father Michael Gaitley is the director of The Association of Marian Helpers in Stockbridge, Mass. An extremely gifted writer and popular speaker, he has authored several books, including *33 Days to Morning Glory*, *Consoling the Heart of Jesus*, and *The 'One Thing' Is Three*. He has also created a comprehensive, parish-based program for the New Evangelization, called Hearts Afire (www.AllHeartsAfire.com).

FOREWORD

Beyond the Grocery List

*With joy and trust
let us rediscover
this sacrament.*

Pope John Paul II

Let's start by being honest. Confession was never my idea of a fun thing to do on a Saturday afternoon. Or any other time, for that matter.

Somehow, the prospect of telling another human being things I didn't even want to admit to myself wasn't very exciting. It was always awkward, often

difficult, and sometimes downright humiliating — especially when the priest was less than patient and understanding.

I “Have to Go”

But, being a “good Catholic,” I wanted to receive Communion, and I knew I couldn’t rightfully do that if I had serious sin on my soul. So, whenever I became conscious that I had committed serious sin, my guilt would prod me to go to confession.

This is what confession meant to me. I never thought of it as something to be desired just for itself. It was simply a means to an end, a way to have my sins forgiven so I could worthily receive Communion. Sure, sometimes I’d feel better afterwards, but I still wouldn’t have gone if I didn’t feel I had to.

There were even times when my regret for my sins was caused more by the thought of my having to go to confession than by any feeling of right or wrong, or of what I would now call true contrition. Instead of “Oh, no! I’ve offended God,” it was “Oh, no! Now I have to go to confession.”

Confession and Communion were two entirely different things to me, and their only relationship was that one was the prerequisite for the other. I *wanted* to receive Communion, so I *had* to go to confession.

“Grocery List” Confession

Because of the limited understanding I had about confession, my whole focus was on sin, which to me simply meant bad behavior. It was when I was *bad* in “thought, word, or deed.”

So I kept a list in my mind, a “grocery list” of bad thoughts, words, and actions. When there were too many items on my list, or when one of the items seemed *too* bad, I’d realize that I shouldn’t go to Communion until I had been to confession. So I’d gather up my courage and force myself to enter the confessional, hoping the priest wouldn’t know who I was. Sound familiar?

In my mind, God was only indirectly involved. Confession was between me and the priest. I’d rattle off my grocery list of sins and recite the little Act of Contrition prayer I had memorized as a child. The

priest would then forgive me in the name of God and give me a penance to do; and I'd leave the confessional with a sense of relief, knowing I was starting over and could receive Communion once again.

Was this all bad? Of course not. We need to have an awareness of sin and forgiveness. And it certainly would have been wrong for me to receive Communion if I had serious sin on my soul.

But my understanding of confession was so limited and narrow in its focus that it kept me from discovering the real beauty and value of this sacrament — beauty and value that even a young child can learn to understand if it's presented properly.

During the last few years, as I've traveled around the country giving talks and missions, I've come to realize that many Catholics have this same limited understanding of confession, and that there's a great need for clear teaching about this great sacrament.

Rediscovering the "Secrets"

As I explained in my earlier book *7 Secrets of the Eucharist*, there are no real secrets here, but simply

truths that for some reason have lain hidden in the heart of the Church and need to be rediscovered.

“Now more than ever,” writes Pope John Paul II, “the People of God must be helped to rediscover ... the sacrament of mercy.” And he adds,

Let us ask Christ to help us to rediscover the full beauty of this sacrament ... to abandon ourselves to the mercy of God ... and with his grace set out again on our journey to holiness.

So, if you have not yet experienced confession as a wonderful, personal encounter with God; if you do not yet look forward to going to confession with the same eagerness and expectation with which you go to receive Communion, then please read on. It may change your life.

*S*ECRET 1

Sin Doesn't Change God

*God is not subject to eclipse or change.
He is forever one and the same. ... I trust in You,
Jesus, for You are unchangeable. ...
You are always the same, full of mercy.*

St. Faustina, Diary 386, 1489

To really understand confession, we need to understand sin. We need to realize what sin *is*, what it *does*, and (perhaps most importantly) what it *doesn't do*.

As I mentioned in the Foreword, I used to think of sin simply as bad behavior. It was when I thought

or said or did something wrong. Gradually, I learned to think of these bad behaviors as also offenses against God. Little offenses were “venial sins,” and they only bothered God a little. Serious offenses were “mortal sins,” and, in addition to preventing me from receiving Communion, they made God really mad at me. Confession, along with the penance that the priest would give me, was something I had to do to “make up for” what I had done, so that I could go to Communion and so that God wouldn’t be mad at me anymore.

How wrong I was! Sin isn’t just about behavior; it’s about relationship.

You and I are not here by accident. And we weren’t created absent-mindedly by a God who was just playing with clay because He was bored and had nothing else to do.

We exist because God is a Father who wanted children — children whom He created “in his own image and likeness” (Gen 1:26-27) so that they could receive His love and ultimately come to share in His own divine life in the Trinity.

As Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical

letter, *Rich in Mercy*, God is not merely the creator:

He is also Father: He is linked to man ... by a bond still more intimate than that of creation. It is love, which not only creates the good but also grants participation in the very life of God. ... For he who loves desires to give himself.

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And Pope Benedict XVI, in his first homily as pope, adds,

We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved.

Wow! You exist because God thought of you and loved you! This God, this Father, who willed us into life and longs to give Himself to us, has revealed, over and over again, that His love for each of us is personal and forever, and that His focus is not on our behavior but on our relationship with Him.

God has not simply created us, but has fathered us, and He continues to father us forever:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3 RSV).

“See, upon the palms of my hands, I have written your name” (Is 49:16).

“Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you” (Is 54:10).

“I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me” (2 Cor 6:18).

How does this relate to sin? Sin is when we refuse to let God father us. It’s when we fail to respond to His love and guidance, refusing to live in this personal, loving relationship with Him as His sons and daughters. As theologian Scott Hahn expresses it,

The essence of sin is our refusal of divine sonship.

This refusal, of course, inevitably results in various behaviors which we call sins, but the specific behaviors are not really the problem. They are symptoms or expressions of the problem. The real problem is in our

hearts, in our refusal to accept and respond to the Father's love.

Does this refusal, along with the resulting sinful behaviors, change the Father's love and destroy our relationship with Him?

No. And that's the whole point. As Pope John Paul II explains in his reflections on the parable of the prodigal son,

The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son.

Rich in Mercy, 6

After all, it was his own son who was involved, and such a relationship could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behavior.

Rich in Mercy, 5

Our behavior, no matter how bad it may be, can never undo the reality of our relationship to God as His children, and *nothing* can ever change His love for us.

As St. Faustina writes,