

*Essentially, God doesn't need
a priest and confession
to forgive our sins, we do!*

On Penance, Absolution, and the Forgiveness of Sins

By Dr. Randall Smith

■ My friend Danny O'Boyle was telling me a story about going to confession the other day. "When I got there," he said, "there was this big long line for confession. So when the door of the confessional opened up, I jumped in front of everybody else, knelt down, and said: 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I just jumped in front of everybody in line to come to confession.' And you know what? The priest went ahead and gave me absolution." "That doesn't seem quite right," I told him. "Nah," said Danny. "Father still got me in the end. After the absolution, he said: 'Now, my son, for your penance, go to the end of the line and say Hail Marys until everyone else is finished with confession.'"

Confession is an odd thing. Not only do you go into a little room and actually *say*, out loud, all your deepest, darkest sins. But from a voice inside that little room, you hear words

of forgiveness, *even before* you've done your penance. How does that work? Shouldn't you have to do the penance *first*, and *then* get absolution? The answer, of course, is no. Why not? Because doing penance isn't a way of *earning* God's forgiveness, nor, for that matter, is going to confession itself. No, that forgiveness has already been won *for us*, by Christ. It was achieved by means of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, ratified by His resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension into heaven, and made present as a reality to this very day by the work of his Holy Spirit. So what's the penance for? It's not for *earning* the forgiveness of our sins. Making reparations for our gross rebellion from the God who has done nothing but love us infinitely is simply not within our power. What we *can* do, however, is say "yes" to God's forgiveness—the forgiveness He com-

municated to us through the sacrifice of His Son, and which He continues to communicate to us even now through grace and the Holy Spirit. And how do we say that "yes"? Well that's where confession comes in.

People ask me all the time: Why does God need a priest and confession to forgive our sins? My answer is: God *doesn't* need a priest and confession to forgive our sins. He's *already* forgiven our sins. *We* need the priest and the confessional. *We* are the ones who need to reflect deeply on our lives, becoming aware of the ways in which we have gone astray. *We* are the ones who need to get up the courage to pronounce our sins, *out loud, in words*, to an actual person, so that the sound will ring, meaningfully, in our ears, and in our hearts. And *we* are the ones who need to hear the words of forgiveness, so that we will know, in the moment of our shame and humility, that God has forgiven us. Sacraments make present, in an embod-

ied way, God's love for us. Asking why we "need" the sacraments is like young men asking me whether they really "need" to send a card and some flowers to their girlfriends on Valentine's Day. "But she *knows* I love her, doesn't she?" they insist. "Does she really *need* these *material things*?" "Well," I tell them, "from years of being an idiot myself, let me give you this advice: she may indeed know that you love her, but here's the thing, *you still need to send the card and the flowers!* In fact, you're going to need to *embody* your love in *concrete acts of love* every day." Asking whether you really "need" the sacraments is a little like asking whether you really "need" to kiss your spouse? You could just love her from a distance, I suppose — "spiritually" — but it sort of takes all the fun out of it. And as embodied humans, a lot of people seem to think the kissing part is pretty important. I am an adult convert to Catholicism who used to think confession

If you want a challenging pontifical graduate program —

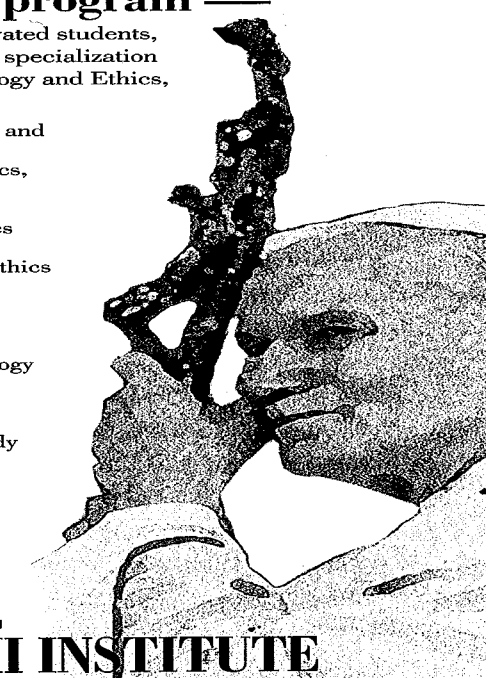
with a distinguished faculty and motivated students, consider joining us now for the M.T.S. specialization in Marriage and Family or Biotechnology and Ethics, S.T.L., S.T.D., or Ph.D. degree.

- Fr. Antonio López (Dean): Systematic and Sacramental Theology
- David Schindler (Provost): Metaphysics, American Culture, Gender
- David Crawford (Associate Dean): Moral Theology, Family Law, Bioethics
- Joseph Atkinson: Biblical Theology
- Michael Hanby: Biotechnology and Ethics
- Nicholas Healy: Philosophy and Culture, States of Life
- Margaret McCarthy: Theological Anthropology, Love and Sexuality
- Fr. Paolo Prosperi: Patristics, Christology
- Kenneth Schmitz: Philosophy
- Mary Shivanandan: Theology of the Body and Family
- Fr. José Granados: Theology of the Body

For an academic catalog,
contact 202-526-3799 or
information@johnpaulii.edu
McGivney Hall
620 Michigan Ave., NE
Washington, D.C. 20064
www.johnpaulii.edu



**THE PONTIFICAL
JOHN PAUL II INSTITUTE**
for Studies on Marriage & Family at The Catholic University of America



was just about as crazy a thing as a human being could do, but I've found that the physical act of confession is pretty important. It's like the kiss of God.

But if God has already forgiven us, and if confession makes that forgiveness present to us in concrete, visible, audible ways, then what's the penance for? Well, even if someone forgives you, that doesn't mean you are yet, in yourself, *forgiven*. "Forgiving" is something the other person does; "being forgiven" is a change-of-being that has to happen *in you*. So yes, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection from the dead shows that God *has* forgiven us, but the question is: Have we *internalized* that forgiveness? Have we yet *become forgiven*? Has the forgiveness offered to us by God *changed us*? Have we yet truly said "yes" to his transforming love?

Have you ever done something wrong, and even after the person you've harmed has said, "I forgive you," you just couldn't accept it? So you continued to walk around with your head hung down like a guilty dog, who has done something he knows he shouldn't have. What's the problem? Don't you think you're *good enough* to be forgiven? Or is it that you don't believe *the other person* is good enough to forgive you? Poor God, what does he have to do to show us that we are truly forgiven? *Die on a cross*? Even then, some people refuse to believe it. Perhaps they just prefer to remain miserable.

Or perhaps it's just that we like to keep our options open. Because, of course, that's the other reason someone might not have truly "accepted" forgiveness: because deep down, they know they want to do it again. And *that's* what they don't want to let go of.

Let's say I steal something from you. In stealing, what I have done is that I have made myself into a thief. Now let's say that, because you love me, and because you want nothing more than to reconcile with me,

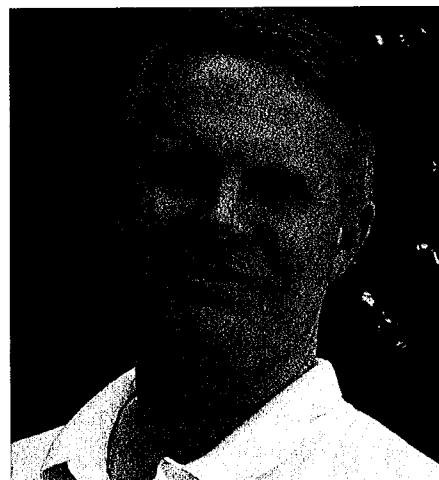
make me your friend once again, and see me move forward and flourish, you forgive me. The act of stealing is done and in the past. You have forgiven me. The question for me now is: *Am I still a thief*? It would be a mistake, would it not, for me to think that the forgiveness was the final step in the process. Rather, the forgiveness is the first step: it opens the door to a changed relationship and a new life. But it's my "being-a-thief" which needs to change. What needs to change is my heart. Accepting the love and forgiveness of another is the first step. The next step

**US Postal Service Statement of Ownership,
Management and Circulation**

Publication Title: Homiletic and Pastoral Review; Publication Number: 0018-4268; Filing Date: 09/28/2011; Issue Frequency: monthly, except bi-monthly in June-July and August-September; Number of Issues Published Annually: 10; Annual Subscription Price: \$34; Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 1348 10th Ave, San Francisco, CA 94122; Contact Person: Catherine Harmon; Telephone: 415-387-2324; Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: Same as Known Office of Publication; Publisher: Joseph Fessio, S.J., 1348 10th Ave, San Francisco, CA 94122; Editor: David Meconi, S.J., 3601 Lindell Blvd, St. Louis, MO 63108; Managing Editor: Catherine Harmon, 1348 10th Ave, San Francisco, CA 94122; Owner: Guadalupe Associates, 1348 10th Ave, San Francisco, CA 94122; No Known Bondholders, Mortgages, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities; Tax status: The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months; Issue Date for Circulation Data below: October 2011; **Extent and Nature of Circulation:** **Average No. of Copies Each Issue During the Preceding 12 Months:** Total Number of Copies: 11,260; Paid Outside-County Mail Subscriptions: 8,302; Mailed In-County Mail Subscriptions: 0; Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: 0; Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 9; Total Paid Distribution: 8,311; Free Distribution by Mail Outside-County: 2,584; In-County: 0; Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 0; Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 5; Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 2,589; Total Distribution: 10,900; Copies Not Distributed: 360; Total: 11,260; Percentage Paid: 76.25%; **No. of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date:** Total Number of Copies: 8,802; Paid Outside-County Mail Subscriptions: 8,481; Mailed In-County Mail Subscriptions: 0; Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution: 0; Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 9; Total Paid Distribution: 8,490; Free Distribution by Mail Outside-County: 0; In-County: 0; Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS: 0; Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 5; Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 5; Total Distribution: 8,495; Copies Not Distributed: 307; Total: 8,802; Percentage Paid: 99.94%; Filed by Catherine Harmon; 09/28/2011

is for that love to change my heart and set me on a new course in life. No one, who truly loves you and forgives you, wants to leave you in your sin, any more than people who love and forgive alcoholics, really want them to remain enslaved to alcohol.

Doing penance after confession, is about making those first few steps in a new direction. It's about realizing that Christ's forgiveness isn't just something *out there*, somewhere in the disembodied void — a forgiveness that may come in handy some day when I'm facing either heaven or hell, so I'll keep it in my back pocket until then, like an ace up my sleeve in poker. No, God's love and forgiveness are meant to *transform me now*. God's transforming love doesn't *leave me in my sin*. The grace of the sacrament works by changing my heart. And if my heart is truly changed, then I need to begin to live differently, as well. God's grace will change me, but also I need to cooperate with it. So, after confession, I take those first few "baby steps" in a new direction by doing my penance, fully and faithfully.



Not because by doing these things I mistakenly imagine that I'm "earning" God's love and forgiveness. No, we love, as 1 John 4 tells us, "because God has loved us first." Thus, it is only by accepting God's love and forgiveness, that I can be changed. When I go to confession, it is precisely the *change in me* that I most want. I know from looking at the crucifix, before I go in, that God loves and forgives me. What I need to do now is "become" that forgiveness, and embody that love in my life by "putting on Christ." Going to confession can be humiliating. It can make you feel very small. In fact, it often enough feels like a kind of death. And it is: a death to self. But that "death to self" is necessary if we are to "live in Christ."

With regard to my friend Danny O'Boyle, we might say that, if he had done his penance that day, then if nothing else, he would have been placed in a position to learn a valuable lesson about what Christ meant when he said: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." It's a small step, perhaps, but not an unimportant one. ■

Born and raised near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Dr. Randall Smith graduated with a B.A. in Chemistry from Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. During his time at Cornell, he converted to Catholicism, and after college, went off to study his new-found Catholic faith. He subsequently earned an M.A. in theology from the University of Dallas, and then completed an M.A. and a Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame. And, although he has many beloved cradle-Catholic friends who resemble Danny O'Boyle, this particular story was the result of a sinful thought he had one day while waiting at the back of a long line for confession.