

FR BERNARD FOX WAS WITH US LAST WEEKEND - THIS IS AN ARTICLE HE WROTE RECENTLY FOR THE MILL HILL FATHERS' MONTHLY MAGAZINE



How do you feel about Going to Confession?

Be honest. How do you feel about going to confession? What images enter our head? Do you think differently about this sacrament now compared to when you were young and maybe went to confession every week?

As we prepare to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation in the coming months, it is good for us to be clear about what we are doing.

Getting absolution is not just the **wipe of a face cloth over our souls** to make them clean so we can feel good again until the next time We also need to be clear about the God we are approaching in this sacrament, what our Lord is really like for us: Is he the big policeman in the sky that I have every reason to fear? Or is he more like the God described by Jesus in the Gospel ... Someone who leaves 99 sheep to go off in search of the lost one?

I would like to invite you to think about two contrasting figures in the Bible who can help us here: the prophet Jonah and St Joseph.

God asked Jonah to go North East, overland, to Nineveh (modern day Iraq) and warn the people there that if they did not change their behaviour, they would be heading for disaster. But what did Jonah do? He bought a boat ticket and headed west to Tarshish, in the south of Spain, to flee from God. He did not think it was a good idea for God to show mercy to the pagan Ninevites. He actually **thought he knew better than God**. Well, friends, isn't this what we do when we sin?

The literal meaning of the word to sin in New Testament is **hamartain**, a Greek word meaning to **miss the mark**. Rather than just breaking the Commandments, it means to engage in behavior that will not lead to our **growing into the men and women God wishes us to become**. This was Jonah's position. He had his own idea of what the good life was ... *and there is a lot of the Jonah in us, too* but, as with the prophet, we should not despair for the Lord who calls us is merciful and we always get a **second chance**.

When Pope Francis met a group of families in Manila in 2015 he suggested two bodily actions in the life of St Joseph that we might copy in our own living: The Pope calls these actions **Resting in the Lord** and **rising with Jesus and Mary**.

To know the will of God, says Pope Francis, we must pray; 'If we never pray we will never know the most important thing of all: God's will for us ...' St Joseph, during his **rest and sleep** welcomed the Word of God, and became attentive to the intimate sound of his voice.

Then there is the second movement. 'Like St Joseph, once we have heard the voice of God, we must shake off sleep ... we must **be up and doing**, says the Pope. 'St Joseph heard the voice of the Lord's angel and answered God's call to take care of Jesus and Mary.'

When we listen to the Word of God and act on what it is asking of us, we are like Joseph, we are **doing God's will** and our inner peace and happiness is assured.

And now to Confession. How do we make our confession? Most of us have been used to only confessing our SINS, and the **negative things** in our lives and many of us have ended up with something akin to a shopping list. 'I was uncharitable, I had impure thoughts, I gossiped, I missed Mass once etc'. For many of us this leaves us sometimes frustrated and we may even wonder whether it is worthwhile continuing to go to confession. Is there any alternative?

Some years ago I read an article by Cardinal Martini of Milan in which he explains how **he** goes to confession. I found this so helpful that I have followed his suggestion ever since when I go to confession myself. It is this: 'Begin with the POSITIVE in your life' says Cardinal Martini. Confess to God, present in the person of the priest, the good things that have happened to you, the good that you were able to do through his help. You may have been able to forgive someone who hurt you. You may want to thank the Lord for a new grandchild in the family or for good news from your doctor or because he helped you get through a difficult time in your life or for the peace that the Lord granted you after a serious row with your neighbour. You might just acknowledge before God at this moment what gives you **joy** in your life. It is important that I acknowledge those moments when God's goodness and power were present in my life the times when I responded to his promptings. We might want to thank God for times that, through his help and grace, we **listened to his voice** and obeyed – and were able to do good as a result.

Having done this, you can now move on to telling God **what makes me feel ill at ease, what I would like to do away with in my life**. This may be more useful than firing off a list of formal sins ('I had impure thoughts, missed my morning prayer twice, was uncharitable to my husband etc').

Martini suggests saying things like 'my relationship with such a group (or person) is not authentic. I regret not being able to pray. **I feel ill at ease in the grip of my sensuality**, or those desires that I would rather be without, those images that haunt me.'

I come to confession not just asking God to wipe away my sins but to **change my heart** (metanoia) so that I can move ahead with less heaviness in me, less sadness, less pride. I place all of this in the power of the crucified and risen Christ by the power of the Church (represented by the priest).

You may feel strange trying this different approach to going to confession and you may need to talk to a priest beforehand and explain how you wish to celebrate Reconciliation, and get him on board. But, believe me, it is very much worth the try!