

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*I offer this short article because of my experience of hearing confessions where people come in, say they have no sins, but just want the grace of the sacrament.*

*Fr. John Bartunek advises a regular deep examination of conscience to uncover hidden attitudes, judgments and intentions which are imperfections that need grace.*

*The imperfections then can be confessed as well as confessing “all the sins of my past life especially against” and then mention a particular virtue such as justice or chastity.*

## **Should I Still Go To Confession If I Have Nothing To Confess?**

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FR. JOHN BARTUNEK, LC



*Dear Father John, I recently heard someone mention the term “**devotional confession**.” I think this is what I need, but I am not sure what it really is. Is this the kind of confession we do when we are no longer living with habitual mortal or venial sins? Is this where we re-confess old sins to gain the benefit of the sacrament? But if it is, isn’t that scrupulosity? Any guidance will be appreciated.*

Your question, it seems to me, can be summarized like this: How can I receive the graces of confession when I am not falling into obvious sin (the kind I used to experience so often)? This is a good question, because of **a widespread bad habit**. The bad habit **is thinking that confession only exists for those times when we sin so grievously** that we experience a spiritual earthquake. Without a doubt, **this is the primary purpose of the sacrament – to open a way of reconciliation for a baptized Christian who has fallen into grave sin**. But popes and spiritual writers in recent centuries have repeatedly and energetically encouraged all of us to practice frequent, regular confession. Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to go to confession weekly, as did Saint John Paul II. Obviously, these giants of the faith weren’t confessing mortal sins every week, so what was the reasoning behind their practice of frequent, regular confession?

## **Benefits of Frequent Confession**

Every sacrament imparts its own particular grace. **The sacramental grace of confession is primarily the forgiveness of sins, but it is also, secondarily, the spiritual strengthening of the soul**. This is why it is called a sacrament of healing. It heals (reconciles) our relationships with God and with the Church, which have been wounded or broken by personal sin, and at the same time strengthens those

relationships. When we break a bone, the body will repair it with an extra dose of calcium, so that the bone is actually stronger at the breakpoint after the healing than it was before the injury. Something similar happens with confession. God pours out his strengthening grace in a special way on the aspects of our spiritual organism, so to speak, that we present to him in confession.

Now you can understand why the devil works so hard to keep us away from frequent, regular confession. If our relationship with God has been ruptured (by mortal sin), he doesn't want it reconciled. But even if it has just been wounded (venial sin), he doesn't want it strengthened.

This sacrament, however, proffers even more benefits to the soul than the sacramental graces of forgiveness and strengthening. **Making a good confession requires the arduous task of self-reflection. Ongoing self-examination is, all spiritual writers agree, a basic ingredient in spiritual progress.** We have to discover, with God's help, how miserable and needy we really are, spiritually speaking, in order to open ourselves confidently and eagerly to God's action. Going to confession is also like doing a major spiritual workout. **Through the process of self-examination, repentance, confession, and penance,** we exercise every major spiritual-muscle group:

- the theological virtues (faith, hope, love for God),
- humility (it's not exactly self-inflating to kneel down and systematically expose our faults and failings),
- justice, prudence, fortitude (it takes courage to step into a confessional),
- and self-denial.

This sacrament is like a gymnasium of Christian virtue. Frequent and regular workouts therein will do wonders for our spiritual health.

## What to Confess?

Now we can come to the nitty-gritty of your question. Any valid confession will inundate your soul with these benefits, and the more conscientiously you participate in the sacrament, the better your workout will be. **To be valid, a confession needs both sincere repentance (which includes the intention of fulfilling your assigned penance), and the actual confession of sin.** When we have obvious sins on our conscience, that it is easy. But as we grow in the spiritual life, the obvious sins tend to diminish. When that happens, **we need to examine ourselves more carefully to uncover the hidden attitudes, judgments, and intentions that are still self-centered and not Christ-centered.** Scripture warns us that we do not know how deep our selfishness goes: “But who can detect his own failings? Wash away my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12). This is an excellent topic to discuss in spiritual direction.

**Yet sometimes we identify failings that were not willful; we just fell into them out of weakness or lack of reflection.** Here we can enter a gray area between venial sin, for which we are in some way directly responsible, and what spiritual writers call “**imperfections**,” for which we are only remotely responsible, if at all. A good example of this is internally judging and criticizing other people. **Sometimes we notice ourselves doing that only after we have already been doing it for a few minutes, and we didn’t really consciously decide to start judging them.** It is an injustice, but **it stems from deep-seated selfish tendencies, not willful lack of charity** (unless we keep doing it even after we notice we were doing it).

When the material of confession is in this gray area, it is a healthy practice to end the confession by referring to some past sins that were more obvious. If they have already been confessed, we don’t need to confess them again in detail (that would, as you

suggest, be a step towards scrupulosity), but bringing them anew to the Lord is an excellent way to show him that we are truly sorry for all of our sins and failings. So, for example, if in the past your obvious sins had to do with theft, bribery, or fraud, you could finish your regular confession now by saying something like, “... **I confess these sins [the ones you have already mentioned] and all the sins of my past life, especially those against the virtue of justice. These are my sins.**”

Now that we have explored some theoretical and practical aspects of regular, frequent confession, you may be wondering, “How frequent and regular should my confession be?” If Mother Teresa went weekly, that’s not a bad yardstick. But that’s not always practical, and it may make you feel pressured. **Confession every two weeks** will be a turbo boost to your friendship with Christ, and, in today’s corrosive culture, **monthly confession is almost the minimum required for someone who is serious about spiritual progress.** But remember, **the Church only requires us to go to confession annually if we have a mortal sin on our conscience.** Frequent confession is not a duty imposed by the Church; it is simply a heartfelt, wise recommendation.

*Yours in Christ, Fr John Bartunek, LC, ThD*

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