

# Confession is freeing

Suppose you were to go to the sacrament of reconciliation, to confession, and after confessing your sins, the priest would say something such as, “For your penance I want you to travel to a distant city. This journey will involve long lines of traffic. When you arrive, you will stay in crowded conditions, and often eat food that’s not so good for you. During the day, you must also lie on hot sands and bake under the burning sun.”

No doubt, if such a penance was imposed you would flee the confessional. “What a fiend!” you might say. “Who could be so cruel?”

However, if we called the exact same experience a *vacation*, we would do all those things to ourselves!

My intent here is not to knock vacations. We all need them. However, since our vacation resorts are packed and our confessionals are fairly vacant, perhaps we need to re-examine our thoughts about life. The most primitive description of life is that we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Yet, our conditioned brains are often confused. Often vacations are fairly stressful experiences. As someone has wisely said, “The time you most need a vacation is when you return from vacation.”

On the other hand, confession can be a very peaceful and liberating experience. Often it’s our fear of confessing, not the actual celebrating of the sacrament of reconciliation, that controls us. We often associate the act of confessing with guilt and shame and blame. But only in the rarest of circumstances do most people experience blame or shame.

Often people will preface their confessions with something such as, “Before I confess, Father, I want you to know that it’s been a long while since I’ve been to confession.” My first response is always: “Welcome! I’m glad you’re here!”

Someone once asked me, “Father Joe, you’re human. Don’t you remember certain confessions more than others?” Without hesitation I responded: “I don’t remember anything I hear. (As an aside, the fact that I have a hard time remembering anything helps too! I think of that man who said: “I got so tired of forgetting things that I

write everything down on a piece of paper. Now instead of forgetting things, I forget where I put the paper.”) But I digress.

I see my role as confessor as being a channel of mercy, not of misery. Confession is meant to be a moment of freedom, of releasing stuff that burdens our spirits and clutters our vision of life. Any penance that I give is meant to help that person reconnect more intimately with God.

Confessing puts a burden on the penitent. But “reconciliation,” the proper name of the sacrament, is to help people reconnect to God. What we often forget in all of our spirituality is that God is searching for us! God is seeking us more than we are seeking Him. The story of the prodigal son first had the father looking for the son. The father loved the son even while the son was way in the distance, still filled with thoughts of self-recrimination and worthlessness. As we know from the parable, the son didn’t even get the chance to finish his confession before the father forgave him. In our culture of mind-numbing entertainment and advertising, we are conditioned to constantly pursue the next pleasure – the next vacation, the next car, the next computer, the next flat screen television, the next phone and on and on. Yet, the accumulation of each additional pleasure or thing doesn’t add up to more joy but often leaves us feeling more empty.

Our hearts really are restless until they rest in God. Part of that restlessness can only be healed by turning from the emptiness to the open arms of our God – arms filled with love and acceptance. In our frantic pursuit of the “next thing,” we sentence ourselves to pain and misery. When we turn back to God we find the peace the world cannot give.