

Detailed confession



Question: A friend told me he was insulted that, in confession, a priest asked him how many times he had committed a certain sin. How specific does one have to be when confessing sexual sins? And does one have to mention how many times a certain sin is committed?

– **Armel Audet**, via email

Answer: Serious or mortal sins need to be confessed in kind and number. Sexual sins are considered, objectively speaking, to be serious sins, and thus it is important to say how many times a certain sin was committed since one's last confession. This helps the priest gauge whether a mortal sin is a frequent problem or rare.

Likewise, mortal sins need to be specified to some degree: missing Mass, telling a serious lie, committing a certain sexual sin, being violently angry and so forth. Because sexual sins come in various types, it is also important to distinguish what sort of sexual sin is meant. Simply to say, "I sinned against the Sixth Commandment" or "I was impure" is not usually enough.

Thus sins of this sort should be confessed in kind and number. If the number is not exactly known, some estimate is fine.

In a way, it is like going to the doctor and saying, "I have had serious headaches." The doctor needs to know the nature and frequency of the headache: throbbing or dull, is one's eyesight affected, does it hurt more in the back or front of the head, etc. Then the doctor can help more and know if it is a serious matter.

It should also be said that, regarding sexual sins, one should avoid giving too much information. Too much information can

unsettle the priest and cause temptation. If a priest is confused, or needs some clarity, he can discretely ask, but should himself avoid asking in ways that humiliate or in any way seem to pry.

The goal is to have the necessary information, no more and no less.

Decorating the altar

Question: I have a couple of questions about the altar. I noticed in one parish in our area that the altar had six candles; at another parish, there are only two. Is there a proper number? Also, one group in another parish places flowers ringing the whole altar. But our pastor will not let us do this; he says flowers cannot be placed on the altar.

– **Agatha Morris**, Newark, New Jersey

Answer: As for the number of candles, there are different options and traditions. The General Instruction in the Roman Missal says, “The altar is to be covered with at least one white cloth. In addition, on or next to the altar are to be placed candlesticks with lighted candles: at least two in any celebration, or even four or six, especially for a Sunday Mass or a holy day of obligation, or if the diocesan bishop celebrates, then seven candlesticks with lighted candles” (No. 117). Since many altars today face the people, fewer candles have been preferred. However in recent years, following the lead of Pope Benedict, some have taken to placing six candles and a cross on the altar as was common before 1970.

As for flowers, your pastor is right.

The missal instructions state: “Floral decoration should always show moderation and be arranged around the altar rather than on the altar table” (GIRM, No. 305).

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