

# Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



## Week Nineteen Encouragements & Wisdom

*E & W reflections are additional helps for your Sacred Story prayer journey. Reflect on them ahead of your prayer exercises for the week or outside of your fifteen-minute prayer windows during the week.*

### Beginning A Monthly Habit of Reconciliation for your *Sacred Story*

#### Q & A on Monthly Confession

**Q.** Does it make a difference whether I go monthly or not?

**A.** In a word, YES! Knowing that you will be going to confession at the end of the month, keeps you “conscious” and “attentive” in your daily walk with Christ. If you only go to confession infrequently, you pay far less attention to how you are thinking, speaking and acting in daily life. Becoming conscious of your life, your trends, your habits, and the links in your *Sacred Story* is the goal. Confession confers tremendous grace AND it also keeps us conscious—a major goal of the spiritual life.

**Q.** Should I go to the same priest each month?

**A.** In a word, YES! Find someone whose judgment you trust and with whom you can open up. Not many would think of shopping around each year for a new doctor. You want a doctor who knows you, your history and your needs. You want a doctor who has compassion because he knows your story. The care you receive from a doctor you know is much, much better. The same is true of a regular confessor. The person will come to know you, your history, the players in your story and your needs. Going frequently to the same priest also makes confession an opportunity for focused, helpful spiritual direction. I have for years combined my spiritual director with my confessor. Doing so creates great synergy.

**Q.** Should I continue to use the letter format that we used for the *Sacred Story* whole-life confession?

**A.** Yes, I would encourage this way of going to confession. It keeps us focused on Jesus and the personal relationship he wants to have with us. Writing a letter keeps us anchored “in our hearts” instead of “in our heads.” If you follow the practice of the simple, daily journal we encourage for *Sacred Story*, you will have the data necessary each month to make your ongoing letter to Jesus meaningful. Keeping your letters month to month also gives you wonderful prayer material for times of retreat and vacation. You can read over your letters to Jesus on these breaks in your year and see where you and the Lord have traveled that year and where you want to go in the future.

**Q.** How should I begin a practice of regular, monthly confession?

**A.** Start by identifying the priest and parish you want for your “regular” practice. All parishes list in their bulletins the hours of weekly confession. Most parishes also say that confession is available “by appointment.” Make an appointment with the priest you would like to see monthly. Let him know you want to begin a monthly practice of confession. Discuss with him why you are doing this and then set the time a place for a regular monthly appointment. Also let him know you would like to use a letter format for the substance of your monthly confessions. Believe me, you will feel very good about yourself when you formalize this practice to grow spiritually. You will also be given many graces. Regular *Sacred Story* prayer and regular confession will move you forward spiritually in very powerful ways. Oh, the places you will go!

**Q.** Will I *feel* holy if I go to confession regularly?

**A.** Hopefully not. But you might actually become more humble and holy. Those who want to be holy have to get use to not *feeling* holy. The more you wake up to your story with the Divine Physician as your guide, the more you will see elements in your story needing his healing and grace. The more this happens, the more you will throw yourself on his mercy and graces. And the more you understand areas of your life needing healing the more compassion you will have for others' stories. The more compassion you gain for yourself and others, the holier you will become—BUT you will not *feel* holy. It is a strange paradox. Simply put, feelings are not a good yardstick to judge holiness.

**Q.** Aren't priests too busy to hear monthly confessions from parishioners?

**A.** I understand the concern. Yet, in nearly 30 years of priesthood I have never felt burdened by a person seeking a confession, especially when they desire to grow in holiness and have made a commitment to their spiritual development. Also, I have never heard a comment from a priest in 40 years of religious life who has ever complained about having to hear confessions. It is a ministry that brings hope and consolation to priests. If you want evidence this read the comments from priests who have heard whole-life confessions for *Sacred Story*.

## *Priests' Reflections on Hearing Whole-Life Confessions*

“What made a deep impression on me with most of them was their ability to place their lives within a context—what I would call a context of grace—so that they were not simply confessing a list of sins that only reveals the symptoms. Also, I noticed how many expressed gratitude to God for what they have received and what they now have; even grateful for the sins and shortcomings which brought them to this moment of conversion, and the awareness of their need for God.”

“It was a profoundly moving experience for me as a priest to receive the whole life confessions of those who participated in The Sacred Story program. It was a very sacred experience to be the recipient of life stories that went deep into the heart of the penitents. Many wept with both sorrow and joy as they opened their lives to the healing power of Jesus and for the first time let his forgiveness and love flow deep into their wounded past. Many came to the exercise with a certain amount of fear and trepidation but walked out with a new freedom --- the freedom of a loved and forgiven child of God.”

“Hearing these full life confessions was a unique experience for a priest. Often in the confessional we priests hear hurried confessions or confessions that seem routine. The wonderful thing about these confessions was that they were all the fruit of much thought and prayer. These penitents wanted to be there – even if the depth of the experience frightened them. Here people were putting the pieces of their lives together by God’s grace, and were in the midst of a prayerful process that would help them heal from what their memories and prayers had revealed. I would recommend this way of celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation to all priests.”

“I thought the Confessions were good and thoughtful. I had many of the penitents tell me that it was a very helpful and freeing process. It was especially helpful for them to see the trends that were traced throughout their lives and recognize how that sin has touched and warped many aspects of their lives. Many found it an emotional and deeply moving experience.”

“The confessions evince that the program touches the penitents. The idea of writing a letter to Jesus Christ frees these people to speak their inmost thoughts and feelings. I have been moved by the depth of these confessions. They are heart-felt. A notable aspect is that the letters tend to reflect multi-year feelings and thoughts. This ensures that trivia are left behind; long-standing shadows congregate and receive focus. In all of these meetings, holiness comes forward.”

“I was touched and encouraged by the whole-life confessions in the Sacred Story project. Truly the in-depth preparation and unique formula for the confession proved to be a source of special graces of wisdom and conversion for the participants.”

“I was greatly moved by hearing the confessions of persons in the Sacred Story spiritual program. They had prepared for the sacramental encounter with deep reflection and awareness of God’s compassion and their need for it, and expressed themselves and their sorrow from the depths of their being. I felt privileged to give them the forgiveness of God and of the church.”

“As I observed when participating in the whole-life confession part of the Sacred Story program,

Sacred Story guides participants very gently through a process of self-examination. It helps them to reexamine the ragged edges of sin in their lives—their own personal sin and the sin of others that has wounded them—and to relocate those dimensions of their experience in the larger story of God’s love for them, the love revealed in Jesus, but also the love that has accompanied them all along the way, even in their times of darkness. The power and grace of this experience was evident to me in the expressions of release and relief on the faces of those who shared their stories with me.”

“I am very grateful for the opportunity to have heard Sacred Story Whole Life Confessions. It was evident that all of the participants dedicated much prayer and thought to preparing for the sacrament and it was a privilege for me to hear them. I was especially struck by the depth of sharing which recalled the sort of intimacy usually only possible as part of a lengthy retreat. In the end, I feel I was blessed to receive much more than I gave and would welcome the opportunity to participate in the Sacred Story project again.”

“The opportunity to receive as a priest the “Whole Life Confessions” of those who participated in The Sacred Story program was a moving and consoling experience for me. What they had to share took the form of a personal letter to Christ. This approach was a powerful reminder of my own role as that of humbly mediating Christ’s own presence, compassionate understanding and loving acceptance. In the “Whole Life Confession” months of prayer and reflection seemed to rise to a sense of consolation-- a transforming depth, that was, for each one and for me, as well, cause for joy and peace.”

