

“Bless Me, Father....”

After Mass, I ran home as fast as I could, up the stairs and into the den. I passed my mother on the way.

“Hey...what’s the rush?” she asked.

“Homework,” I blurted out, “test tomorrow.”

I could see the puzzled look on her face. I had never deliberately gone to a dictionary in my life. I pulled Webster from the shelf and quickly paged to the “C” section.

“What a nice surprise,” she said as I turned the pages as quickly as I could. “I’m so glad to see you take an interest in your studies. Finally.”

I found the page I wanted: co...con...conc...concu...concupine.... concupiscence....there it was.

Concupiscence: n, L concupiscere, to desire ardently.

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“I need to study, Mom. Call me for dinner.” She gave me a big smile as I headed to my room, closed the door and locked it.

I pulled out my Baltimore Catechism, the small volume of Roman Catholic dogma that had been given me by the Bishop when I was in the fourth grade. It was the section on sin that interested me. Actually it was sin that interested me, period.

54. Q. What is mortal sin?

A. Mortal sin is a grievous offense against the law of God.

59. Q. Which are the chief sources of sin?

A. The chief sources of sin are seven: Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth; and they are commonly called capital sins.

I thought so. Concupiscence wasn't one of the big ones after all.

I lay down on my bed and thought about what happened this morning when I went to Confession before Mass.

I hated going in the dark little stall, Monsignor's face hazily visible through the cheesecloth covering of the small grating, kneeling down and saying the obligatory, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned...." I always confessed the same things. Lying. Swearing. Thoughts about girls.

The confessional was like a small tomb, just enough room to kneel, surrounded by dark wood, the entrance protected by a very heavy, wine colored drapery, musty smelling and deeply stained where thousands of hands had parted it on entering. It had never been cleaned, I was sure. I carefully parted the fabric in a place that looked more or less unscathed by generations of yucky concupiscent hands.

Confession was supposed to be confidential, almost anonymous but the Monsignor knew who I was, alright. I served Mass for him three mornings a week and always at the ten o'clock Mass on Sundays. When my sins piled up, sometimes I went to Confession in other parishes so that the priest wouldn't know who I was.

"I lied, Father."

"How many times, my son."

"Around ten times, Father."

"And are there any more?" the Monsignor asked me.

"I swore, Father, around fifty times," I said.

"Anything else?" he asked, without interest.

"Yes Father," I answered truthfully. "I have had impure thoughts." I could see Father Augustino adjust his posture. He placed his ear closer to the cheesecloth covering over the grating in the confessional.

“How many times, my son?” he whispered.

“I don’t know, Father. Many times.”

His admonitions never focused on my seeming inability to tell the truth nor my foul mouth. Father Augustino’s only interest in my juvenile transgressions seemed to be God’s view of my habitual experimentation with my plumbing. His council always involved terms like “self abuse,” avoiding “the occasions of sin” and banishing the accursed “impure thoughts.” This morning, after my traditional litany of transgressions against the catechism’s admonitions, he sternly reprimanded me for being “concupiscent.”

“Whoa,” I thought, “concupiscent?” but I didn’t say anything. There were some things I didn’t want to take up with Father.

Assigned two Rosaries for my penance, I whipped through the obligatory Our Father’s and Hail Mary’s in short order, but my mind was on one thing and one thing only. This sin business was mystifying. Lying was bad and swearing was bad, but both were “venial” sins, no big deals according to the catechism. But on the subject of *desiring ardently* I was, according to the Monsignor, mortally sinning just as often as I could manage. That is to say, very often indeed.

Mortal sin, I remembered, meant that I would be condemned to eternal damnation if I died without properly seeking absolution. Murder, deliberately missing Mass on Sunday and Holy days, concupiscence...all were capital offenses in the sight of God. Mortal sin was mortal sin regardless of flavor, I was told over and over again.

But avoiding the occasion of sin with my particular mortality affliction meant avoiding all members of the opposite sex on Earth. This seemed overly harsh and, as a matter of fact, unlikely to succeed.

Then I put away the catechism and pulled out from under my mattress a copy of Mickey Spillane’s “*I, the Jury.*” I turned to the dog-eared good part about the woman taking off her clothes in the dark with Mike Hammer, private eye. I now realized I was about to be engaged in some serious concupiscence but it was not spelled out as one of the really big sins. So why was Father Augustino making such a big deal out of it?

I had issues. I resolved to ask the Monsignor about them the next morning.

In St. Anselm's Church, the little Portuguese parish over which Monsignor Augustino presided, I reviewed my thoughts. He was a man in his mid fifties, thin and dour in his demeanor and talked with a slight accent.

He was fond of telling everyone his name derived from a very famous fourth century theologian, Saint Augustine. Father would lecture us altar boys, saying that Augustine was an expert concerning matters lustful.

"Saint Augustine prayed to become pure. Remember that, boys," he would admonish us, hoping no doubt to impress us with the holy man's piety and dedication to avoiding all things concupiscentual. It was only many years later while reading "The Confessions," that I found out what his prayer really was: "O Lord, help me to be pure....but not yet."

The Monsignor had a selective memory when it came to quotes and as it turned out Augustine, unlike the Monsignor, was having way too much fun in the concupiscent trade to stop.

After serving Mass, I asked Father Augustino if I could ask him a question. He was putting away the chalice and communion plate into the tabernacle, gave me a glum, resigned look. Sitting down in the corner of this sparsely furnished little sacristy where all the ceremonial garments were stored, he said, "What is it, my son?"

"Why is self abuse so bad, Father?" I asked him point blank. "Is it as bad as murder? Aren't they both mortal sins?" After a long morose look at me, he spoke.

"Because one is spilling seed intended only for procreation, my son," he answered. I knew enough about the procreation business by then to understand the implication. It was mind boggling. Seed was for planting only and should not be tossed roughshod around rocks and infertile soil. The agricultural metaphors failed to convince me. Worse, I now knew how to translate his gardening jargon into real words. Infertile soil was at the very center of my mortally offensive activity.

Father Augustino continued. "And while mortally sinful, it is less grievous than murder."

“What about while you are asleep?” I asked. “Sometimes I wake up with spilled seed all over my sheets.”

The Monsignor looked upwards as if to seek the council of a much higher power for inspiration and proceeded to introduce me to a new term: “nocturnal emission.” That didn’t count.

“But what,” I asked him, “if I have an impure thought dream?” Did that count?

“No,” he answered without hesitation. It didn’t count because it was not deliberate.

I shuffled my feet. This was embarrassing. “Ok,” I said, “but what if I saw a good looking girl during the day and she kissed me even though I tried to avoid her and my dream had impure thoughts because of this? Did that count?”

Probably not, he lectured. Not if I was indeed asleep. I could see that Monsignor Augustino was getting restless and started looking at his watch.

I still wasn’t sure about mortal sin equity. Somehow killing someone seemed worse to me than spilling seed or missing Mass. “Sorry, my son, we will have to take this up at another time. I have an appointment I must keep.” On the way out after I changed my clothes, taking off the surplice and cassock and hanging them up in the altar boy closet, I looked over at the Monsignor’s residence. He was getting into his car with a set of golf clubs.

Running home, I wondered if there might be evil people who had impure thoughts about someone they were going to murder. Then if they killed the person would there be double jeopardy? And if they deliberately missed Mass on Sunday because they were killing someone, would that be triple jeopardy? When I got home, locked myself in my room, and picked up my catechism and turned again to the part about sin. I figured that accumulated or multiple Mortal Sins should have a good name, way better than *mortal*. Was there a *Lethal Sin*?

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.....” After my litany of lies, cursing and seed spilling, I asked him, “Father, is there such a thing as a *Lethal Sin*?”

There was a long pause. “A what?” he asked in a voice rather louder than your average Confessional hushed tone.

“A *Lethal Sin*, Father.”

He lowered the volume on his voice and whispered, “And what would you consider to be a ‘lethal sin’, my son?” he asked reluctantly.

“Well someone that murdered a person while spilling seed during the time he should have been at Sunday Mass. That would be three Mortal Sins at the same time.”

Father Augustino sighed. “No, my son, there is nothing called a ‘lethal sin’ by Holy Mother the Church. Each of these sins would be mortal.”

“What would the punishment be, Father?” I asked, pursuing my line of thought. “Wouldn’t you be more than just eternally damned?”

There was a long silence this time. Finally Father Augustino said, “Eternal torment would be punishment enough.” he finally said.

“But....” I started to say. The Monsignor interrupted me.

“Say three Rosaries for your penance and avoid all occasions of sin and prurient behavior.” Then he absolved me of last night’s concupiscence.

While cranking out the Rosaries I wondered about missing Sunday Mass. I had a big problem about that. I wondered if it would be wise to bring it up in my next Confession.

And what in the world did “prurient” mean?

First thing when I got home I grabbed the dictionary.

Prurient: adj, L pruriere, to itch, crave, be wanton

“Bless me, Father.....”

While delivering newspapers on my route the next morning early, I parked my bike on the sidewalk to take one to my best customer. Mr. Walker gave me the

biggest tip of all, two dollars, when I collected the paper delivery bill each month so I always put his right on his doorstep instead of tossing it with my best newspaper slider like the rest. Mr. Walker was a great guy. Mr. Walker also had a daughter that I was completely in love with. Judy was in my class at school, but wouldn't give me the time of day. She was going with a guy in high school, so I figured I didn't have a chance to date her anyway.

But as I turned to go back to my bike, I saw her silhouette through the window shade on the second floor and she was obviously getting dressed for school. All I could see was this shadow moving around but...my pubescent imagination went on autopilot. "Intimate apparel" was involved. Infertile soil was involved. My brain was cooking up a prurient stew. I was in very serious concupiscent trouble. "Damn!" I said aloud. It just up and ambushed me this time. I groaned under the weight of my impending eternal damnation. Mickey Spillane would not be needed this night, I knew.

After finishing my paper route for the day, my thoughts sinning like crazy all the way, I pedaled to St. Anselm's for Mass. While I was reciting the Latin responses to Father Augustino's salutations, I was thinking of the missing Sunday Mass big one and, of course, the Judy Walker big ones. Apparently they both counted. If I wasn't careful, I knew, there was a *Lethal Sin* coming right up whether or not it was defined in the Baltimore Catechism.

Up until now I had never even considered missing Sunday Mass a problem because I was an altar boy. Every Sunday as regular as going to school during the week, I served Mass.

But it occurred to me during the Agnus Dei and later during my vigorous bell ringing, that my real motive in going to Mass on Sunday might not be piety at all, but greed, disguised cleverly in the Baltimore Catechism as "Covetousness."

Regular altar boys got chosen to serve at weddings and funerals. It was the custom after a wedding for the best man to tip the altar boys at least five dollars. But I lobbied like a Halliburton salesman in Iraq for funerals. Everybody at funerals felt bad so their tipping was proportional to their degree of sadness. Once I got a crisp twenty dollar bill from a weeping loved one for looking sad while I spread vast amounts of foul smelling incense during the singing of "Dies Irae" at the requiem Mass. After that I often practiced sad looks in my bedroom mirror.

I was very reluctant to bring up this particular subject to the Monsignor because he had a nose for sin and asking questions about one of the Seven Deadly ones might affect my bottom line. If I couldn't serve Mass as the down payment to weddings and funerals, I probably would miss Mass a lot of Sundays. That would definitely be a *Lethal Sin* I calculated. So after the service was over and I had put away my surplice and gown, I pedaled over to the Cathedral of the Assumption on K Street to go to confession there.

".....it has been one day since my last Confession. These are my sins"

The Cathedral was huge and clean compared to St. Anselm's and I was almost certain that the squadron of priests there did not know me. There were so many priests at the Cathedral they put their names on the outside of the Confessional to identify themselves. I noted Father Francis' name in case I needed anonymity in the future. "Father, may I ask you a question?" I asked after my habitual concupiscent admissions.

"Of course, my son," the anonymous Father Francis said.

"If I deliberately miss Mass on Sunday, that is a mortal sin isn't it?"

"Yes, it is a grievous offense against God."

"Is missing Mass worse than murder?"

There was the usual, obligatory I was beginning to believe, pause. "Murder is a more serious offense but missing Mass is also grievous because it is a slight to the worship of God."

"If I miss Mass on purpose, Father, and I die before repenting, will I go to Hell forever?"

There was no hesitation about this. "Yes, my son."

"And if I murder someone I will also go to Hell forever?" I continued.

There was a very long pause this time. "Yes, my son."

"So both grievous sins are forever, Father?"

I detected a note of impatience in his voice as Father Anonymous gave me a short lecture about the nature of sin and how terrible it was in small or large doses.

“But Father,” I said, “I’m confused. “I take trigonometry in school, and it turns out that two times infinity is still only infinity.” I started to say more when he interrupted me.

“Ten Our Father’s and ten Hail Mary’s for your penance, my son. Avoid all occasions of sin. Ego te absolve...”

The discussion was over. I was beginning to wonder if priests really understood much about sin.

“Bless me, Father.....”

Two weeks later on Saturday afternoon, I went to confession at St. Anselm’s. The lies and swearing items were a lot less this time. I could vaguely see through the grill that Father Augustino seemed to be pleased since he didn’t comment. Then I confessed to Judy Walker thoughts in such embarrassingly large numbers and detail that Monsignor began to cough.

After my ten Rosary penance...incidentally, this was a new record for one of my Confessions...was doled out solemnly by the Reverend with much emphasis on avoidance of that particular place on my paper route, I asked him a question.

“Father, is it a sin to accept a tip at weddings?”

“No, my son,” he whispered. “Weddings are joyous occasions and the happy couple is just showing their gratitude and joy.”

“But funerals aren’t joyous occasions, Father. Is it a sin to be happy when they give a tip after a funeral?”

There was one of Monsignor’s long pauses, then one of the sighs I had begun to recognize. “No, it is not sinful to accept a token of gratitude at funerals either. The bereaved are expressing their grief with a tangible gift. That is all. There is no grievous matter involved here.”

“What if you accept a gift from someone you had impure thoughts about during a funeral service?” I asked.

I could see Father Augustino looking at his watch. I assumed there was going to be a stern reminder of avoidance, but instead he said, “There are many waiting for Confession, my son. We will take this up later.”

Ten Rosaries takes a long time. I knew the prayers in English of course, and in Latin because I was an altar boy, but I had also learned them in Portuguese just from hearing them so often. I practiced them and timed them. It turns out that Latin is the fastest. But even in Latin, ten Rosaries takes around an hour. I wasn't going to bring up the Mass dilemma at all, but I still had one problem considering sins of the flesh. As I rattled off Hail Mary's and Our Father's with the precision and speed of a Latin Gatling gun, I planned my next Confessional discussion with Monsignor Augustino.

“Bless me, Father....”. It was several weeks later, just after serving Sunday High Mass, the Palestrina coral vocal “Amen” still ringing in my ears, that I went to Confession.

This had been a particularly sin free time for me except for several astounding nocturnal events involving my classmate, Judy. I had studiously averted my eyes from the Walker residence every morning while hand delivering the newspaper to their front porch. No occasion of sin for me was too small to avoid. Even Mr. Hammer's female clientele were unembellished in my active imagination. I didn't want to be encumbered by other issues. This time, I was determined to have the Monsignor unravel for me what I perceived as unfair gender equity when it came to concupiscence and mortal sins.

Father seemed quite at peace when I finished vocalizing my meager transgressions and assigned a penance pittance: three Our Fathers and three Hail Mary's, an all time low for me.

“Father, can I ask you a question?” I asked.

“Yes, my son. What is it?” he calmly replied.

“You told me that it is a mortal sin to spill my seed on purpose, didn't you Father?”

“Yes, my son, I did. And you have been heeding my instruction apparently.”

“And the reason it is a sin is because it is wrong to spill seed except for procreation?”

“That is correct, my son,” he replied.

“Well, Father,” I said into the grill, “girls don’t have any seed as far as I know. If they do self abuse, are they committing a Mortal Sin?”

My question was a very logical one. While my procreative knowledge was limited at best, I knew Girls didn’t have seed but they did have eggs. I was not at all sure whether eggs were spillable or not but it seemed grossly unfair for the Creator to make something outrageously pleasurable for boys mortally sinful while girls got off Scot free.

Monsignor Augustino had been taking a sip of water from a glass in his compartment. He coughed so hard, water came out of his nose. He continued to make a lot of noise for some time, until finally he said, “We will discuss this at a more appropriate time, my son. There are people waiting for their Confession.”

“Sit down, my son,” the Monsignor told me after Mass the following Sunday. I sat. We had both just changed from our sacramental vestments into street clothes.

“What’s up, Father?” I asked.

There was a long pause, not unlike the ones when I went to Confession. “You have been a fine altar boy,” he said. “Your Latin responses are precise and your movements respectful and exact.”

“Thank you, Father,” I said.

“Unfortunately we now have too many altar boys. I think it might be time for you to have a kind of promotion. I have talked to Father Francis at the Cathedral. He has been to Mass here and remembered you. He thought that you would make a fine addition to the diocese. He will be expecting you for Mass next Sunday at 10:00 AM.”

On the way home I thought this over. Bigger and better weddings and funerals was a good thing. Now I wondered about Father Francis' take on sin. I started to organize my concupiscent thoughts and prurient behavior.

It was about an hour before Mass. While I was waiting for Confession, sitting in a pew, Judy Walker walked past and up the aisle. I closed my eyes for a few minutes, then got up, walked over to the nice clean, spacious Cathedral confessional and knelt down. Father Francis was presiding.

I took a deep breath.

“Bless me father,” I began.