

## ANSWERING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS: FLEEING FROM DEADLY SIN

“Father, is that a mortal sin?” Though a valid question, it is one of the most vexing that we priests receive. The problem is that the question is much simpler than the answer. During the Lenten season, this question deserves a fuller response than I am typically able to give on the spot. Warning— if you are seeking a clear-cut answer, complete with an exhaustive list, you will likely be disappointed. For starters, a distinction among sins itself is based solidly both on Scripture and tradition. We read in 1 John 5:16: “If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is **not deadly**, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as **deadly sin**, about which I do not say that you should pray.” (emphasis added) This vital distinction also squares with common sense.

The term “deadly sin” refers to the death of the soul, insofar as serious sin deprives one’s soul of **sanctifying grace**. It **destroys the charity** in our hearts and that wound must be healed by means of recourse to God’s forgiveness. Venial sins do not destroy charity, though all sin wounds us in some way. At every Mass, we observe the Penitential Rite during which we recall our sins. But as the **General Instruction of the Roman Missal** (#51) states: “Then the priest invites those present to take part in the Act of Penitence, which, after a brief pause for silence, the entire community carries out through a formula of general confession. The rite concludes with the priest’s absolution, which, however, lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance.” This means that the absolution prayer at the end of the Rite lacks the character of sacramental absolution and ought not to be confused with it. At the same time, one is justified in seeing this rite as absolving our daily sins, more properly called venial sins.

A penitential rite within Mass is of ancient origin with the recitation of the Confiteor by the priest, though technically it was included **before** the priest recited the opening Introit (i.e. Entrance Antiphon). Liturgical studies reveal significant variations in Europe prior to a more codified liturgical practice following the Council of Trent in the 16th century. While it is **not absolutely necessary** to confess venial sins during confession, it is certainly **encouraged** and standard practice. The Sacrament of Penance is **not** reserved only for mortal sins. The distinction is neither always self-evident, nor does the Church proclaim that the only people in a confessional line are serious sinners—talk about bad form! But neither are we reduced to complete subjectivity when discussing serious (mortal) sins. What is clear is that for a sin to be mortal, **three conditions** must be **simultaneously** present: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.” (Rite of Penance 17, §12) One cannot accidentally commit a mortal sin!

Are there “lists” of sins? Surely, the bible contains multiple lists of sins. Consider **Matthew 15:18-19**: “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy.” Or check out Galatians 5:19-20. Catholic tradition produced the Seven Deadly Sins, the list having originated with a 4th century monk named **Evagrius Ponticus**. While the Catechism of the Catholic Church treats in some detail the *nature* of mortal sin, it does not provide an exhaustive list. Perhaps the reticence stems from the reality of other factors besides the particular act itself. **Unintentional ignorance** can diminish (possibly even remove) the subjective guilt incurred by an act, though the “principles of the moral law...are written in the conscience of every man.” (CCC #1860)

Clearly, the **Ten Commandments** are considered grave matter, properly understood. Obviously, lying under oath in a civil trial differs from telling a white lie. “When it is under oath, it is perjury. Acts such as these contribute to condemnation of the innocent, exoneration of the guilty, or the increased punishment of the accused.” (CCC #2476). This is clearly different than saying “Yes, the meatloaf tastes great” for fear of discouraging a young spouse. The two are not in the same ballpark—lies could be mortal or venial, depending upon the specific nature of the act. The proper forum for making distinctions resides in a **well-formed conscience** following a deliberate examination of conscience.

That’s where parents enter the scene. In today’s society, I am not at all surprised if some are ignorant of basic morality; they are not being taught these fundamentals in any meaningful way. Moral education takes **consistent effort** beginning with the very young, as parents inculcate basic concepts of right and wrong. Tendencies

towards lying or cheating must be met squarely and squelched, lest they become ingrained habits. Don't delay! I hope all will avail themselves of God's mercy during this Lenten season.

- A new **Gallup Poll** reveals that significantly more Catholics are **questioning** their Church membership than in the aftermath of the 2002 sexual abuse scandal. Today, 37% have questioned their membership, as opposed to 22% in 2002. That is a **15% swing**. Locally, on average 5000 fewer people attend weekly Mass than one year ago, a 3% drop. I fervently pray that we will begin to see that trend change for the better.
- Rome's *Scala Sancta* (i.e. Holy Stairs) have been restored, along with the frescoes lining the staircase, believed to be the **28 stairs that Jesus climbed** to face judgment before Pontius Pilate. An ancient Christian tradition holds that St. Helena brought them to Rome in 326 A.D., though the first written testimony dates from the early 9th century. Nearly 1,000,000 ascend on their knees annually, pausing on each step in an act of humble supplication. Wooden planks had protected the steps for 300 years, but now one may see the marble steps themselves. Word to the wise— you will very much feel each step in your knees!
- Pass the word— **“24 Hours for the Lord”** is coming from Noon Friday—Noon Saturday, March 29-30 in the Cathedral. Confessions will be offered continuously, along with Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (except during Mass). I am most grateful to priests from throughout the Archdiocese for their willingness to assist me in this vitally important Lenten opportunity to experience God's mercy.
- Out of 7.4 billion earthly souls, **1.31 billion** are **baptized Catholics**, representing **17.7%** of the world's population. The world grows by 1.1% annually, and the Church grew by 1%. The United States and Canada average out at 25% Catholic, while Europe is 40% Catholic. South America remains 86% baptized Catholics. The total number of priests dropped ever so slightly for the first time since 2010, as well as a 0.7% decrease in seminarians.
- While never of big fan of government intervention into some personal matters, I do fully support the MN House **hands-free cell phone bill** passed in a bi-partisan fashion. I have seen some close calls. And those potholes? Yikes! My new Minnesota License plate idea—“Land of 10,000 Lakes and Countless Potholes!”

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector