

The benefits of confession

The sacrament of Penance is a source of many blessings.

1. First of all, and most importantly, we receive **forgiveness of our sins**. We have sinned against the infinite majesty and love of God, and by ourselves we would have no way of making up. But, like the Prodigal Son, we go before our Father God in all humility and beg him to forgive us. We do not have to wait long to hear the words of absolution, which assure us that we are once again embraced with love by the Father.

2. Together with reconciliation with God comes **reconciliation with the Church**. As all members of the Church are one in the body of Christ, every sin harms the Mystical Body, just as every good act contributes to the spiritual welfare of the Church. Through confession to the Church's minister, we are reconciled not only with God but also with the Church.

3. Like all the sacraments, penance gives **sanctifying grace**, that habitual grace which is a sharing in God's own life and which, as its very name suggests, sanctifies us and makes us more like God. We are all called to be saints, and we are sanctified by God's life within us. If it were only for the sanctifying grace we receive in this sacrament, we would have ample reason to go to confession frequently.

4. In addition to sanctifying grace, we receive **sacramental grace**, a special help of God specific to each sacrament. The grace of this sacrament is the special help to avoid committing in the future the type of sins we have just confessed. As we mature in love for God we aim to leave our sins behind us or at least to commit them less often, and the sacramental grace is a big help in doing this.

5. Helped by this sacramental grace, confession gives us a **new beginning in the spiritual life**. Perhaps we have confessed only venial sins, but the soul, which had been "stained" with the guilt and habit of those sins, is now cleansed and purified, encouraging us to struggle harder to keep the soul pure. It is a bit like taking a shower and putting on clean clothes after we have been working in the garden. Once clean, we want to stay clean. And the more often we go to confession, the more often we renew our struggle and the more quickly we grow in holiness.

6. Then too, through confession we receive **spiritual direction**. Many priests offer at least a few words of encouragement, advice, or clarification of conscience relevant to what we have just confessed. It may be only a brief encounter but it can be very helpful in the spiritual life. It is therefore good to go regularly to the same priest, who will get to know us and help us grow in spiritual maturity.

7. We also benefit from the satisfaction or

penance which the priest asks us to undertake. Left to our own devices we might be inclined to do too little penance, but the penance which the priest gives us makes up at least in part for the temporal punishment owing for our sins, speeding us on the way to heaven.

8. Another very important benefit of confession, one never to be underestimated, is the **healing** which often accompanies it. People who were weighed down by bitterness, anger, desire for revenge, sadness, grief and even depression – sometimes for years – have after found that only after a good confession were they truly healed and interiorly renewed.

9. From a human point of view, confession helps us to grow in **self-knowledge**, when we examine our conscience as a preparation for confession, and in **humility** and **sincerity** when we confess our sins to the priest.

10. And finally, as the fruit of all we have mentioned, confession invariably gives great **joy and peace**, stemming from the knowledge that we have been forgiven and that the burden that was weighing us down has been lifted. Not for nothing did Jesus say, not once but twice, on giving the apostles the power to forgive sins: "Peace be with you." (Jn 20:19, 21) It is the indescribable joy the Prodigal Son experienced on being welcomed home by his father.

For all of these reasons, the sacrament of Reconciliation is truly one of the greatest treasures of the Church.

The frequency of confession

How often should we go to confession? Obviously there can be times in life when we *must* go. This is especially the case when we have committed a mortal sin, which breaks our relationship with our Father God. When we love someone dearly and have offended them in a serious matter, we are anxious to make up straight away, to restore our relationship.

It is understandable then that we cannot enter into the intimate relationship with God that is Holy Communion until we have first repented of our serious sins and have been absolved in the sacrament of Penance. The *Catechism* reminds us of this traditional teaching: "Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive Communion without having received absolution in the sacrament of Penance." (CCC 1415)

Anyone can commit a mortal sin, but we should have the honesty and love for God to confess that sin sacramentally before going to receive Holy Communion.

Then too, the obligation of confessing serious sins at least once a year remains in force: "After having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully

to confess serious sins at least once a year." (CCC 1457) But this obviously establishes only a minimum requirement. Anyone wanting to grow in love for God will take advantage of confession on a regular basis.

Pope John Paul II spoke often about the value of frequent confession. In an address to priests at the beginning of Lent in 1981 he said: "Confession periodically renewed, the so-called confession 'of devotion', has always accompanied the ascent to holiness in the Church." And on the 13th March 1999 he told priests hearing confessions in the basilicas of Rome: "It should not be forgotten that the so-called confession of devotion was the school which formed the great saints."

For some, monthly confession will be a good frequency. For others, fortnightly or even weekly confession is possible. What is certain is that those who receive the sacrament regularly will soon reap its spiritual benefits. If Jesus himself has given us the gift of this sacrament we would be most ungrateful and even foolish if we did not make frequent use of it.

Pope Benedict summed up the value of this sacrament in an address in Rome on the 16th March 2007: "The priest, minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, must always consider it his duty to make transpire, in words and in drawing near to the penitent, the merciful love of God. Like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, to welcome the penitent sinner, to help him rise again from sin, to encourage him to amend himself, never making pacts with evil but always taking up again the way of evangelical perfection. May this beautiful experience of the Prodigal Son, who finds the fullness of divine mercy in the father, be the experience of whoever confesses in the Sacrament of Reconciliation."

Fr John Flader, BA, DCL

Questions for discussion

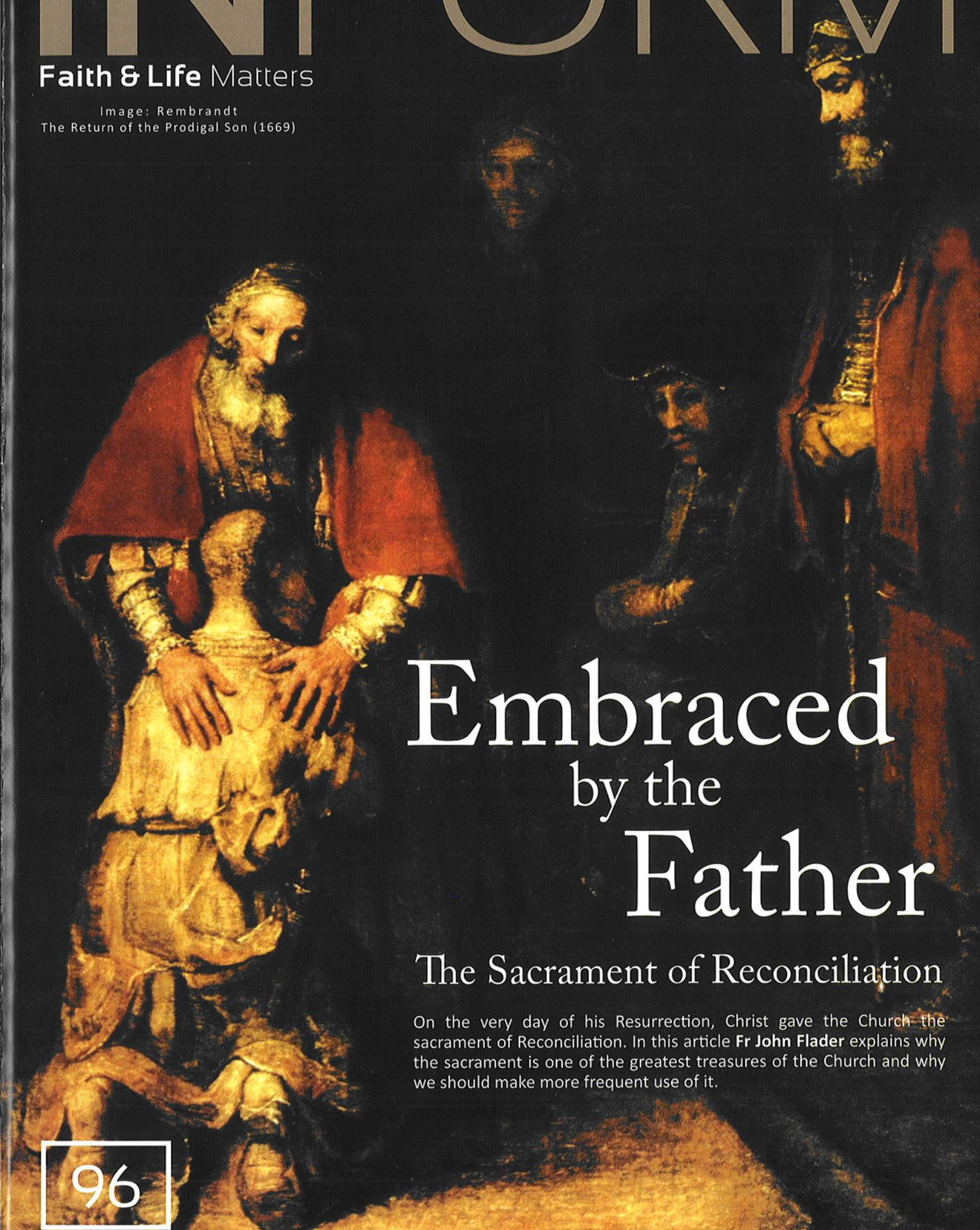
1. Which of the many benefits derived from the sacrament do you find most significant in your own life?
2. Can you recall any people who have gone to confession after a long time and have been truly uplifted by it?
3. Why do you think so few people today make regular use of the sacrament of Reconciliation?
4. What can we do to help more people take advantage of this sacrament?

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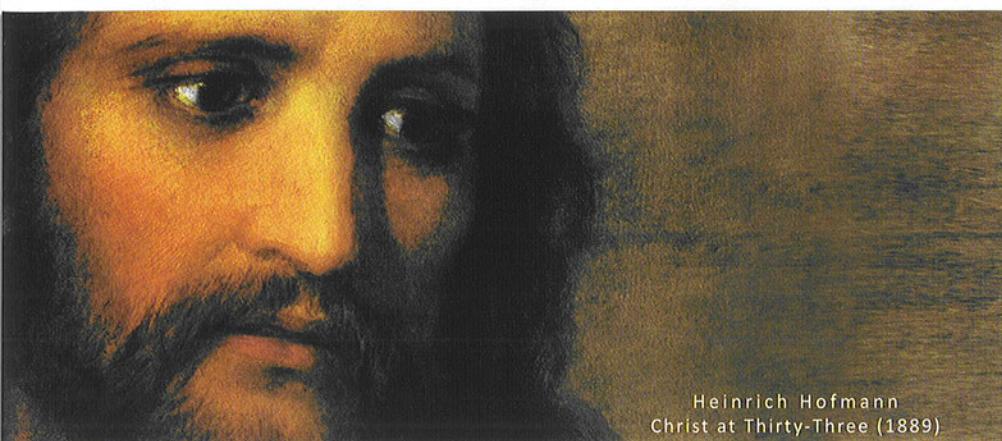
Image: Rembrandt
The Return of the Prodigal Son (1669)



Embraced by the Father

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

On the very day of his Resurrection, Christ gave the Church the sacrament of Reconciliation. In this article Fr John Flader explains why the sacrament is one of the greatest treasures of the Church and why we should make more frequent use of it.



Heinrich Hofmann
Christ at Thirty-Three (1889)

Some years ago when I was chaplain in a university residential college, a student who had recently returned to the practice of confession after a long time came to me and said: "Father, please pray for a friend of mine. We are going away on a study weekend, and I have encouraged him to go to confession. I told him that if he goes, I will do 500 times the penance the priest gives him." Needless to say, I was astounded and we quickly calculated how long it would take him to say 500 rosaries, in case the confessor gave a generous penance!

When I caught up with the student again a few days later I asked him how it had gone with his friend. He said with a smile that he was doing 100 times the penance. Naturally intrigued, I asked him what had happened. "The offer of 500 was only valid for the weekend", he said, "but he went to confession today." When I asked him what the penance had been, he answered with a look of relief: "an act of thanksgiving".

This anecdote highlights both the great joy experienced when someone goes back to confession after a long time and the resulting eagerness to share that joy with others by encouraging them to go as well.

It is the joy of the Prodigal Son when he finally returns to the house of his father, after squandering his possessions and living loosely, to tell his father that he has sinned against heaven and against him. To his amazement and great joy his father runs out to welcome him, puts his arms around him and kisses him, and asks that the best robe be brought out for him along with a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet. He asks that the fattened calf be slaughtered for the banquet "for my son here was dead and has come to life again, was lost and is found." (Lk 15:24)

This is the true celebration experienced in various degrees by everyone who confesses his or her sins and hears the words of absolution.

A broken relationship

Sin and forgiveness can best be understood in terms of the covenant relationship between God the Father and his children. Throughout the Old Testament God manifested himself as Father to the Jewish people. He took them as his own, taught them the way to eternal life,

provided for their needs, and protected them from their enemies. He renewed his covenant numerous times: with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David... In turn, he expected fidelity on the part of the people, a fidelity which was not always forthcoming. But, even when the people sinned grievously, he always took them back and forgave them as soon as they were sorry.

In the fullness of time God sent his only-begotten Son into the world to reconcile humankind definitively with the Father by his death on the Cross. The great suffering and finally the death of Christ on the Cross showed the depth of God's love for his people. The Father would stop at nothing to reveal how much he loved his children and to reconcile them to himself.

It is in this context that we see our sins as offences against a Father who loves us dearly. Sins are not merely violations of moral laws. They are lacks of love towards a person: the person of God our Father. In a nutshell, they are not broken laws but a broken relationship.

As in human relationships, when we have offended someone we feel the need to apologise, to tell the person that we are sorry. And we are not at ease until we hear that we are forgiven. Even then, we want to do something to make up for our offence and to renew our relationship.

Because of these deep-seated tendencies of our human nature, Jesus gave us a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. A sacrament, as we know, is an outward sign instituted by Christ that confers grace. Christ knew that we are not merely souls, but beings with a body as well as a soul. He knew that we needed outward, visible, signs by which we could confess our sins and hear that we are forgiven. And so he instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance, often referred to simply as Confession.

Of course, only God can forgive sins, since he is the one offended. But in order to make his forgiveness present and visible on earth, Christ shared his divine authority to forgive with the apostles, who in turn passed it on to bishops and priests.

"Receive the Holy Spirit"

It is significant that Jesus gave this sacrament to the apostles as his first gift to the Church

after his Resurrection. Having reconciled humankind with the Father by his death on the Cross, he instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation to apply the fruits of his saving sacrifice to individual souls. On the very evening of his Resurrection, when he appeared to the Apostles in the Upper Room, "he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven, when you hold them bound, they are held bound.'" (Jn 20:22-23) Through this sacrament we too can rise up from the tomb of our sins to the new life of grace.

We notice in Christ's words the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit, as we know, is the paraclete, the advocate, the one who pleads our cause before the Father. (cf Jn 14:26) As the eternal and infinite love between the Father and the Son, he moves us to sorrow for our sins and to a desire to be reconciled with the Father, and then he intercedes with the Father on our behalf.

We note too in Jesus' words how the need to confess our sins to the priest is implied. The apostles were told that when they forgave sins, the sins would be forgiven in heaven, and when they did not forgive – when they held the sins bound – they would not be forgiven in heaven. The apostles would have to judge whether they could forgive or not, and in order to make this judgment they would have to hear the individual confession of the penitent.

From the earliest centuries, the Church has always celebrated this sacrament with the individual confession of sins followed by absolution given by the priest.

'Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven'

(Jn 20:22-23)

The value of frequent confession

"For a constant and speedy advancement in the path of virtue we highly recommend the pious practice of frequent confession, introduced by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; for by this means we grow in a true knowledge of ourselves and in Christian humility, bad habits are uprooted, spiritual negligence and apathy are prevented, the conscience is purified and the will strengthened, salutary spiritual direction is obtained, and grace is increased by the efficacy of the sacrament itself."

Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, n. 87

The acts of the penitent

The celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation involves three acts of the penitent: contrition, confession and satisfaction. At the same time it involves the forgiveness of the sins by God through the intervention of the Church in the person of the priest.

1. Contrition

As with the Prodigal Son, the first act of the penitent is *contrition*. It is defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again." (CCC 1456)

This sorrow should be based on love, on having offended a Father who loves us more than any earthly father. To foster sorrow it can be helpful to consider the sincere repentance of the Prodigal Son, or the suffering that Jesus underwent on the Cross to make up for our sins.

In order for the sorrow to be genuine it must be accompanied by the resolution not to sin again. This does not mean that the person must be certain of not sinning again, for no one can have this certainty. It means simply that they must be determined to struggle to avoid falling again, even though they know they may not be successful.

And of course in order to be sorry we must first know what sins we have committed. We do this through a good examination of conscience before confession. The Ten Commandments provide a good outline for this examination, as do the many written examinations of conscience found in prayer books, booklets to aid in confession, etc. A daily examination of conscience each evening is also very helpful in growing in love for God and preparing for confession.

2. Confession

The second act of the penitent is the *confession of sins*. The Prodigal Son went home ready to tell his father that he was sorry for what he had done. Confession is a very personal act in which we acknowledge before

God, represented by the priest, the thoughts, words, deeds and omissions by which we have offended him. In doing so we take responsibility for our sins as did the Prodigal Son and we lay ourselves open to God's mercy and justice.

What sins must we confess? Our human nature moves us to want to confess and receive forgiveness for all the serious sins we have committed. In keeping with this desire, it

is not strictly necessary. As the *Catechism* says, "Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful." (CCC 1458)

3. Satisfaction

The third act of the penitent is *satisfaction*, which is the carrying out of some act of penance in order to make up at least in part for the sins we have committed. The Prodigal Son was willing to work as a hired servant if only his father would take him back. Every sin harms our relationship with God and his Church, as well as harming ourselves, and we must do something to repair the damage we have caused. We want to renew our love for God and our human nature calls on us to show it by deeds, not merely say it.

For this reason the confessor asks us to do something by way of satisfaction. It can be to say some prayers, perform some act of penance, do some work of charity, etc. In addition to the penance suggested by the priest, it is always good to do other penances on our own to make up for our sins and help us grow in virtue.

It is advisable to do the penance as soon as possible after the confession, so as not to forget it. If, as sometimes happens, we forget what penance the priest asked us to do, it is sufficient to do what that priest or other priests usually suggest in similar circumstances.

