

## The Confession

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I was haunted by the thought of watching the other Catholic kids in my class stand up and take Communion while I sat in the pew with the teacher and the handful of Protestants. My legs started shaking up and down, knocking on the maple pew in the back of St. John's Catholic Church. I had to figure out what sins the others were confessing, so Father would think that I was ready for Communion.

Week after week, I had followed Dad through the wooden doors of St. Mary's Catholic Church, a sixty year old church in downtown Hot Springs with a turn of the century facade. I had read and sung with everybody else during Mass while we watched Father work behind the altar. The first time I did the whole Mass all the way through like everybody else with no mistakes, Dad bought me a brownie and a lemonade downtown.

I had started going to Catholic school in the first grade, and in the second grade, my class received instruction for our First Confession and First Communion. I paid attention to the instruction, because they told us that if we didn't, we couldn't get our First Communion. And before we got our Communion, we had to have our First Confession.

At home, Dad had asked me about the instruction while he pulled out pictures of his First Communion. His favorite was a picture of him and Grandpa on their front porch. Dad was in a white sport coat with black pants and shiny black shoes. Grandpa had his hand on Dad's right shoulder, and they had the same kind of reluctant smile with their lips closed and stretched across their faces into the corners of their mouths. I knew Dad wanted me and him to take a

picture like that in front of our house. Before Dad put the picture up, he said, “We've got to get you a white jacket.”

Father had arranged to lead religion class the day before the Confession. He said he was subbing for Ms. Clardy, and we all laughed. Father had stopped in sometimes, but it was never for the entire class period. And we never had his full attention. But on the day before our First Confession, he was completely focused on us.

Father was in his full dress coat, a black robe-ish garment that went down to the tips of his wingtip shoes and had a line of black cloth buttons down the front. Father looked like a saintly Fonzie in that outfit. Father adjusted his glasses on his head and folded his hands together:

“Tomorrow is your First Confession. It is a big deal. Before you can take the living flesh and blood of Christ, you have to confess your sins, and there is a certain way to do it. And you must do it right.”

For the rest of the class, Father drilled us on the Act of Contrition. He ended the class when we started asking questions about whether accidentally killing someone counted as mortal or venial. He said that he was ready for lunch and that we were too.

As the line to the Confessional started winding down, my nightmare of missing my First Communion seemed possible. I had no idea what kinds of sins to tell Father to make him happy, so I decided to just make some up.

I used all of my sources – the *Home Alone* movies, the villains on Saturday morning cartoons, and a couple of stories from shows on TV Land. I started making my list in my head; I mouthed them to myself to practice, and when the confessional door opened, I felt ready.

The Confessional smelt like Dad's bathroom. Right in front of the door was the kneeler with the screen in front of it. I sat in the chair across from Father to show him I was brave and to figure out if I was passing or failing the test.

Father sat in his black suit and black dress shirt with his white collar and the green stole hanging from his neck to his knees. I sat down and crossed myself, "Bless me Father for I have sinned. This is my First Confession."

Father raised his head from the closed Bible he held in his lap and looked into my eyes, "Tell me your sins, my child."

"Well, Father, it is kind of long." His face stayed blank, and his eyes stayed bored.

"Go ahead." He had become a statue.

I ran down my list. "I lied, cheated, stole, coveted my neighbor's wife, and coveted my neighbor's goods. I killed some ants with a magnifying glass. I lied to my Mother. I lied to my Father and disrespected him. I took the Lord's name in vain." The priest's face stayed stone still. I had to turn it up a notch.

"I burned down our neighbor's shed. I stole money from the grocery store." I was getting a reaction then. I pursued the task like a poacher after King Kong. "I punched an old lady. I kicked a cripple kid in the leg. I threw red paint on a crucifix." It went on like that, and his mouth dropped like he was watching a man swallow swords on a unicycle. Then, he closed his mouth and grinned.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Father."

He opened his Bible, and he started reading the part that Jesus said about the golden rule. He absolved me for my sins with the promise that I wouldn't do them again. I agreed. It sounded like a fair exchange.

“For your penance, I want you to say the rosary once for every person that you hurt. Say all the mysteries. By my count, you need to do it about thirty times. Let's make it thirty for safety.”

I wanted to stop what was happening, but it was too late. That was just too much prayer. But, if I fessed up to the lie, then I would have to do a confession for lying to a priest to the priest that I lied to. That was too much.

“Thank you, Father.”

I shook his hand and left. I walked through the glass doors up to the altar. The church had gotten darker. Only me and a couple of other kids were still there. I knelt down and started praying.

“I believe in the Father almighty...”

“Our Father...”

“Hail Mary...”

“Hail Mary...” etc.

The noon sun rose and fell in the sky. The priest finished the confessions hours ago, and I was still kneeling at the altar praying. At one point, I sat on my heels. Father came out and gave me a brief lecture about physical displays of reverence to my Savior. I listened. I didn't want anymore “Hail Mary's.” My knees started falling asleep and then they started hurting. I moved to a kneeler and kept going. A kid from my class came in and handed me my make-up work.

It was 3:00. My Mom was in the parking lot waiting for me. I started talking fast, talking in abbreviations... “Oh Mary, you are good. Help us. We are evil.” “Our Father, it's your world. Bring us Heaven. Amen.”

I rattled through the last rosary at 3:14. I left the Church with my make-up homework, and I went to the parking lot where Mom was waiting in the car.

“Hey, sweetie. What took so long?”

“Nothing. I had to finish up some work real quick.” I wanted to say that I had to ask the teacher about something, but the thought of one more Hail Mary was too much.

“So what did you do at school today?”

I buckled my seat belt and met her eyes in the rear view mirror. “Nothing.”

She started to back out of her parking spot. “You always say 'nothing'.”