

FIRST CHAPTER SAMPLE

Forty Penances

for Spiritual Exercise

living the great gift of mercy



Stephen Joseph Wolf

Forty Penances for Spiritual Exercise

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dedicated to parish priests
celebrating week after week
the sacrament of reconciliation

How to use these *Forty Penances*

These exercises have two kinds of users in mind.

1st - an Individual Seeker

reflecting on how the Lord is moving in your life:

Take the time to go slowly, and keep it simple.

Wherever you find yourself drawn,
linger for pondering, perhaps breathing
with a particular word or phrase.

Consider one exercise each day for forty days.

2nd – a Faith Sharing Group

perhaps meeting over six weeks:

Use what is helpful and ignore the rest;
keep it simple.

If someone in the group knows the song,
you have a song leader. If one person leads
the rest can follow; the tunes are simple
and from the Church tradition.

Group members can take turns being the *Leader*
week to week, but it works best if there is only
one *Leader* of each session.

Within each session, group members can take
turns being the *Reader*, though no one should
be compelled to be a *Reader*.

The *Leader* is encouraged to allow, by timing it,
one full minute of silence before announcing
the next exercise.

But keep it simple.

FORTY PENANCES for Spiritual Exercise
living the great gift of mercy

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Introduction

I think in rows and columns. Can't help it. Having worked as an accountant for fourteen tax seasons, something happened in my brain and I think in columns and rows. A couple of years ago while praying about it being time again to go to confession myself, a scribbled list of penances came forth, forty of them, forty penances for which people had later returned with gratitude.

Pondering them, I saw a spreadsheet of parish spirituality, intersections of Trappist with Jesuit and Franciscan with the Rule of Saint Benedict. Giving them a rough order along the lines of the *Spiritual Exercises* laid out by Saint Ignatius of Loyola seemed a natural thing to do.

This may have been nothing more than a distraction from my own need for the sacrament of reconciliation. Still, I used this outline on some retreats and it seemed helpful. So, here it is.

Some Catholics have forgotten that part of the sacrament of Reconciliation-Confession-Penance is *accepting* the penance suggested by the priest. You can ask for a different penance.

Since the point of a penance is not to *earn* forgiveness but to *celebrate* it, I have tried to avoid naming the sin that might prompt a penance. There might not be just one!

So what is a sin?* To be a *sin* the thing has to cross three thresholds. The priest is listening for an action (or an omission) that is

1st wrong, *and*

2nd known by the person to be wrong, *and*

3rd freely done (or freely omitted).

Just so you know. (See also paragraphs 1846-76 of the Catechism.)

Take a look at those three. Indeed, there are times when someone is very sorry for something that is not really a sin, because it is simply not wrong. You and I may see someone doing something that looks just plain wrong, but it may not be a sin because the person doing it does not know it is wrong. And there is a lot of bad doing that is not a sin because it is done by a person who is not acting in freedom.

This underscores the vocation of the serious and good work of conscience formation.

This is also why the job of judging is God's job alone. The rest of us do not have enough data. We may be capable to judge that something is wrong, but you and I can never judge whether someone else has sinned.

These forty penances all surfaced in the midst of celebrations of the sacrament. I have learned to simply trust the better-than-even chance that they come from the Holy Spirit and go from there.

Reconciliation is more about God's mercy than anything else.

Early in the Gospel of Mark (2:1-12) a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus by his friends. Jesus is so impressed with the faith of the friends and their love for this soul that he gives him the greatest of God's many gifts: mercy.

The *powers that be* did not like this uppity action because, as they said, only God can forgive sins. Jesus sees again the greatest gift from God being ridiculed by the *powers that be*. So as a kind of proof, that they might know that the Son of Man has *authority* to forgive sins, he tells the paralyzed man, "Rise, pick up your mat, and go."

We ask God for all kinds of things, and that is great as far as it goes. This healing story reminds me that God has indeed created a world with an abundance for all, and the bulk of the human suffering which does not have to happen does happen because of human selfishness. The real gift of the Giver is loving-mercy, merciful-love, the mercy that requires power and authority.

My hope is that even one of these spiritual exercises might help you to celebrate this great gift of God's mercy.

Rev. Steve Wolf

Songs of thank-ful-ness and praise,

Jesus, Lord, to you we raise,
 Man-i-fest-ed by the star
 To the ma-gi from a-far;
 Branch of roy/-al Da-vid's stem
 In your birth at Beth-le-hem;
 Prais-es be to you ad-dressed,
 God in flesh made man-i-fest.

Man-i-fest at Jor-dan's stream,
 Pro-phet, Priest and King su-preme;
 And as Ca-na's wed-ding guest,
 In your God-head man-i-fest;
 Man-i-fest/ in pow'r div-ine,
 Chang-ing wa-ter in-to wine;
 Prais-es be to you ad-dressed,
 God in flesh made man-i-fest.

Grant us grace to see you, Lord,
 Mir-rored in your ho-ly Word;
 May our im-i-ta-tion show,
 In your like-ness may we grow;
 Pure and ho-ly may we be
 At your great E-pi-pha-ny;
 May we praise you, ev-er blest,
 God in flesh made man-i-fest.

Text: Christopher Wordsworth, 1862, altered

Music: 77 77 D, SALZBURG; Jakob Hintze, 1678

Exercises 1-7 (1st Week) Reality of God's Complete Love

SONG (from page 10), all together

LEADER:

Listen to a love letter from God to you:

My Beloved,
I have made you in my image, one and unique,
not like anyone ever has been
or ever will be made in my image.
Having made you, I know you, all the
great things your ego wants everyone to know,
those things you do not want anyone to know,
and everything you do not yet know yourself.
And in knowing you, I love you,
neither because of your strengths
nor in spite of your weaknesses;
there is nothing you can do
that will make me love you,
and there is nothing you can do
that will keep me from loving you.
Remember this always: that I love you just is.
- God

Pause for one minute of silence now and after each exercise.

1

Psalm 46

Stress can be called a “condition for the possibility” or a “near occasion” for many kinds of sin. A sin is often a very human response to stress. Suitable for many a penance, Psalm 46 gives a picture of stressful trouble: earthquake, storm, mountains falling into the sea... Note the words God uses to cut through it.

One good way to pray with most psalms is called *lectio divina* (‘lek-see-oh div-‘ee-nuh), which begins with listening for, even choosing, the word or phrase that speaks to you, and sitting for a bit to breathe and repeat the word or phrase until you exhaust it, or it exhausts you.

One monk’s take: *Sit with it without thinking about it.* Many like to sit with what a friend called *the phrase that prays* for 20 minutes to an hour, but a penance has to be do-able. So the usual suggestion is for a few minutes.

Whenever a penance is a scripture passage, “if you forget which scripture to pray, let the Lord lead you to a better one.”

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and our strength,
an ever-present help in distress.
Thus we do not fear, though earth be shaken
and mountains quake to the depths of the sea,
Though its waters rage and foam
and mountains totter at its surging.

Streams of the river gladden the city of God,
the holy dwelling of the Most High.

God is in its midst; it shall not be shaken;
God will help it at break of day.

Though nations rage and kingdoms totter,
he utters his voice and the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us;
our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

Come and see the works of the Lord,
who has done fearsome deeds on earth;
Who stops wars to the ends of the earth,
breaks the bow, splinters the spear,
and burns the shields with fire;

“Be still and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,
exalted on the earth.”

The Lord of hosts is with us;
our stronghold is the God of Jacob.

2

Psalm 131

God is God and I am not. God is God and my parents are not. And yet, God has used my parents, even in their imperfection and humanity, to say to me *something* (not everything but *something*) about who God is.

My suspicion is that the 4th commandment, to honor our parents, is rooted more in this mystery than in either the concepts of justice and mercy or the best ethic of society providing for the elderly, as wise as those teachings are.

Psalm 131

Lord, my heart is not proud;
nor are my eyes haughty.
I do not busy myself with great matters,
with things too sublime for me.
Rather, I have stilled my soul,
Like a weaned child to its mother,
weaned is my soul.
Israel, hope in the Lord,
now and forever.

3

A Tree Gives Glory To God By...

Does cheating come from belief in the big lie that “I am not good enough”? Each of us is made in God’s image in a unique way. No one ever has been or ever will be made in God’s image in this particular way. God does not ask any of us to become someone else; rather God is asking each of us to let God keep forming and growing us into that one human person God created us to be.

Take a walk and look for a tree that grabs you. If you cannot walk or go outside, call to mind a tree in your imagination or from your memory. Get close enough, and far enough away, to let the tree fill up your whole frame of vision: the tree is all you see. Breathe, and repeat these words in your heart:

A tree gives glory to God by being a tree.

Thomas Merton (Trappist Monk)

New Seeds of Contemplation

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Consider inserting your name:

_____ gives glory to God by being _____.

4

Isaiah 43:1-5

Is it possible for God to work through a good counselor? You bet. In my first adult encounter with depression, healing happened in a religious experience. Part of the groundwork for that conversion was a simple and profound exercise suggested by my counselor. Linda asked me to make a list of my strengths and weaknesses. It may help here to know I was a certified public accountant before entering seminary. Now having been a priest longer than I was an accountant, still I think in columns and rows.

After a few days of pondering, finishing one tax return before starting on the next, I scratched out a list. There were more weaknesses than strengths. Gazing on the sacred scratch pad, debits and credits began to line up. Surprise! For each of the few strengths there was a weakness to match it. Then I was able to name offsetting strengths for the rest of the weaknesses. The debits and the credits were in balance. At least I thought they were.

The next counseling session, eager was I to go over my new balance sheet. Linda simply smiled and instead asked me to fold the weaknesses behind the strengths, and several times a day to look at only the strengths. It was a task almost impossible. My suspicion has since been that after three decades of trying to eradicate my shortcomings, they had become the lens through which I saw myself. The big surprise was how painful it was to keep admitting that I have gifts. Often do I recognize this in people around me. So here is one retired accountant's take on the balance sheet of a human person created in the image of God:

BAPTIZED* HUMAN PERSON
BALANCE SHEET
FROM CONCEPTION TO DEATH

ASSETS	LIABILITIES & NET WORTH
Unique Creation	Original Sin*
Natural Talents	Human Weakness
Human Virtues	<u>Sinful Tendencies</u>
Faith/Hope/Love	TOTAL LIABILITIES
<u>Charisms</u>	<u><i>Imago Dei</i>**</u>
<u>TOTAL ASSETS</u>	TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET WORTH

** In accounting this part of the balance sheet is called "equity," or "net worth."

In the human person, created in the image of God, the value, weight, significance, goodness, etc. (*assets?*) will **always** be greater than that of the weaknesses (*liabilities?*) of that person. In double entry accounting, this difference is called “net worth.” Can we call this excess the stamp of the image of God, the *imago dei*? This can never be taken away. And there is more.

God does not love us only because of our goodness, and God will not stop loving us because of our weakness, or even sin. There is nothing that we can do to make God love us, and there is nothing that we can do that will keep God from loving us. That God loves us simply is. How many of us spend our entire lives coming to terms with this truth!

So, what is the penance? It is the most difficult passage that I have ever prayed, and I do not suggest it at random. I will find myself telling the penitent that there is a penance that is only for those who can handle it; “do you think you can handle it?” No one has yet asked for a lighter one.

Ask God whether God wants you to hear these words. Insert your name into this love letter delivered for all time through the prophet Isaiah, and let your God speak it to you:

Isaiah 43:1-5a

But now, thus says the Lord,
who created you, _____,
and formed you, _____:
Do not fear,
for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name:
you are mine.
When you pass through waters,
I will be with you;
through rivers,
you shall not be swept away.
When you walk through fire,
you shall not be burned,
nor will flames consume you.
For I, the Lord, am your God,
the Holy One of _____, your savior.
I give...ransom for you...
Because you are precious in my eyes
and honored,
and I love you,
I give (a ransom)
...in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I am with you...

5

A Walk to Search for Beauty

Can you name something like money or porn or prestige that you are treating as an idol?

Take a walk. If you want your walk to be in nature's beauty, fine. You can do this one on the street where you live or where you work. Just take a walk, and look for things beautiful.

When you sense something beautiful, a cloud or bird or garden or architecture or tree or children playing or car or squirrel or clean house or radio music or jogger or kite flying or paint job or good natured arguing or driver singing or well cut lawn or well dressed neighbor or dog or cat or creek or flower or or or... When you sense it stop!

Acknowledge in your heart the beauty you see! And thank God, who is so far beyond the human categories for beauty that saints have called God *Beauty-Itself*. Thank God also for the gifts of being able to notice and give thanks.

While walking and noticing and thanking, remember to breathe.

6

Psalm 104

When life goes from hum to drum its meaning can get lost in boredom. *There are no boring days; only boring people:* words spoken by a college friend and I wanted to hit him. My real fear was that I might be a boring person. How much acting out do we do in the pride-filled reach for relevant recognition?

A Benedictine monk at the Saint Meinrad monastery shares a helpful mantra:

Humility is reality; pride is illusion.

In a full day of hiking and breathing these words, I added a third piece:

Humility is reality;

pride is illusion;

fear too: illusion.

We make our journey as pilgrims and not as wandering nomads. We have a destination (heaven) while also called to help build up the kingdom of God here and now. When one's gifts aren't used, a pilgrim can be easily bored.

And what does boredom have to do with pride? If I take myself too seriously, if I think I am too good for this world/family/business/community, if the world is not doing a very good job of entertaining me, then my view of myself is way yonder beyond too serious.

An antidote for this state of being can be to step back and take a good gander at all of creation and by God's grace see our place in it that is so significant without having to always seem to be. Take a breath for a longer psalm:

Psalm 104

Bless the Lord, my soul!

Lord, my God, you are great indeed!

You are clothed with majesty and splendor,
robed in light as with a cloak.

You spread out the heavens like a tent;
setting the beams of your chambers
upon the waters.

You make the clouds your chariot;
traveling on the wings of the wind.

You make the winds your messengers;
flaming fire, your ministers.

You fixed the earth on its foundation,
so it can never be shaken.

The deeps covered it like a garment;
above the mountains stood the waters.
At your rebuke they took flight;
at the sound of your thunder they fled.
They rushed up the mountains,
down the valleys
to the place you had fixed for them.
You set a limit they cannot pass;
never again will they cover the earth.

You made springs flow in wadies
that wind among the mountains.
They give drink to every beast of the field;
here wild asses quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of heaven nest;
among the branches they sing.
You water the mountains from your chambers;
from the fruit of your labor the earth abounds.
You make the grass grow for the cattle
and plants for people's work
to bring forth food from the earth,
wine to gladden their hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread to sustain the human heart.

The trees of the Lord drink their fill,
the cedars of Lebanon, which you planted.
There the birds build their nests;
the stork in the junipers, its home.
The high mountains are for wild goats;
the rocky cliffs, a refuge for badgers.

You made the moon to mark the seasons,
the sun that knows the hour of its setting.
You bring darkness and night falls,
then all the animals of the forest wander about.
Young lions roar for prey;
they seek their food from God.
When the sun rises, they steal away
and settle down in their dens.
People go out to their work,
to their labor till evening falls.

How varied are your works, Lord!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, great and wide!
It teems with countless beings,
living things both large and small.
There ships ply their course
and Leviathan, whom you formed to play with.

All of these look to you
to give them food in due time.
When you give it to them, they gather;
when you open your hand, they are well filled.
When you hide your face, they panic.
Take away their breath, they perish
and return to the dust.
Send forth your spirit, they are created
and you renew the face of the earth.

May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord be glad in his works!
Who looks at the earth and it trembles,
touches the mountains and they smoke!
I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God while I live.
May my meditation be pleasing to him;
I will rejoice in the Lord.
May sinners vanish from the earth,
and the wicked be no more.
Bless the Lord, my soul! Hallelujah!

*Humility is reality;
pride is illusion;
fear too: illusion.*

A country music song waiting to be written?

7

God's Ones

When Caesar wanted to know how many people were subject to him, he ordered a census, a counting up. When the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus, he asked whose image was stamped on the coin. When they answered, "Caesar's," he said "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17; Matt 22:21; Luke 20:25).

We human creatures can be counted up, and we encounter limitations of resources. But there is no limit to God's love. And God's complete love for another, even my enemy, takes nothing away from God's complete love for me. Do you believe this? What a world if everyone did.

One of my seminary teachers often used this illustration, of God counting us up, not 1, 2, 3,to the 7 billion, but God counts us this way: 1, ... each uniquely made in God's image.

The penance: Imagine God taking a census, and when God's finger comes to you, let God's finger rest on your breast, and breathe in God's timeless and infinite love.

Pondering the 1st Week - Exercises 1-7

Ponder in silence whether in Exercises 1 thru 6 something like one of these surfaced:

a seed planted,

something I anticipate taking root and growing within me, and growing me.

a memory provoked,

part of my story, my journey, my identity, whether pleasant or sad.

a question raised,

something unknown suggesting research, discussion with others, or more pondering.

an action prompted or resolution made,
a way God is calling me to become myself.

*Allow at least three minutes for silent pondering,
and then the group may either discuss the ponderings
(restraining the urge to "fix" anybody)
or stay in silence until time is up.*

When time is up: Are there any intercessions
from the group?

Our Father ... *and a stanza from the song on page 10?*

GOING TO CONFESSION

I avoided the sacrament of reconciliation for years because I had forgotten how to go. Please don't. The most difficult part is showing up. We go to confession in our hearts every Sunday at the beginning of Mass, and say together, *Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.* And then the priest prays an actual prayer of absolution for those everyday sins.

If you have forgotten how to go, or how to say an act of contrition, either look it up on the internet or, better yet, just go and ask the priest for help with the process. If the priest is perturbed by this, give sympathy for his bad day, thank him for trying, and go find another one.

The sacrament of reconciliation is in a sense the big gun for those major things that we keep dragging around like a ball-and-chain. In my own life of faith, when there are one or two or three things still dragging down my freedom, it's time again for the sacrament of dynamite. Again, the hard part is showing up.

And again, many Catholics do not seem to know that it is the priest's job to propose a penance, and then the penitent, the one confessing the sins, is on for either accepting the penance or asking for another one. We might not be ready yet to send a greeting card to an estranged relative or reach out to a neighbor, and that's a fair thing to bring up.

My Favorite EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

from World Youth Day 2002

Following the example of the prodigal son (Luke 15) reflect on your life with neither condemnation nor complacency, and allow the Holy Spirit to show when you have acted contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ in thought, word or deed.

IN RELATION TO GOD

- Am I offering myself for spiritual growth? How? When?
- Is my heart set on God, so that I really love God above all things?
- Are private prayer and Sunday worship a priority?
- Have I love and reverence for the name of God?
- Am I hesitant or ashamed to give witness in my life to my faith in God?
- Do I turn to God only when I am in need?
- How am I responding to my baptismal commitments to witness to Christ and to be a person of faith, hope and love?

IN RELATION TO OTHERS

- Are there any relationships that are giving me concern today?
- Am I quick to forgive and slow to judge?
- Do I use others as a means to an end?
- Do I take care of people who are poor or sick or defenseless?
- Am I sincere and honest in my dealings with others?
- Have I been the cause of another person committing sin?
- Do I care for and respect the environment in which I live?

IN RELATION TO MYSELF

- Do I truly believe that I am made in the image and likeness of God and therefore am one of God's wondrous creations?
- Am I too concerned about myself, my health, and my success?
- Do I really live as a Christian and give a good example to others?
- What do I spend most of my time thinking about?
- Have I kept my senses and my whole body pure and chaste as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Do I bear grudges; do I contemplate revenge?
- Do I seek to be humble and an instrument of peace?

A CELEBRATION OF RECONCILIATION

- A. Exchange greetings with the priest.
Then together make the sign of the cross:
+ *In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*
- B. If you want, ask the priest to say a prayer for you,
or to help you.
- C. You then confess your sins.
The priest may help you by asking questions and
offering encouragement and advice.
- D. The priest will propose an act of penance - an act of
amendment of life and satisfaction of sin.
- E. You will be invited to express sorrow for sin
(or to make an act of contrition).
You may recite the *Act of Contrition*, compose your
own prayer of sorrow, or use these or similar words:
*Father, I have sinned against you
and am not worthy to be called your son/daughter.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.*
- F. The priest offers a prayer of absolution using the
ritual prayer of the Church. You respond: *Amen.*
- G. The priest may invite you to praise God, saying:
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
You may respond:
God's mercy endures for ever.
- H. The priest may send you forth, saying:
*The Lord has freed you from your sins.
Go in peace.*
You may respond:
Thanks be to God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I make no claim to having invented any of these penances; these are the sources I remember. If there is theological trouble with any of them, the fault is my own. If an attribution is omitted, please let me know so I can make it right.

Sin, Introduction, page 8. One of the precepts of the Church is to confess sins at least once a year, which becomes essential in cases of serious sin (Catechism paragraphs 2041-43). *For a sin to be mortal* (also called serious or grave), *three conditions must together be met:*

*Mortal sin is sin whose object is **grave matter** and which is also committed with **full knowledge** and **deliberate consent**.* (Catechism paragraph 1857)

Love Letter from God, page 11: from *31 Days of God's Love-Call*, meditation rendering of scripture from the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, Stephen Joseph Wolf, idjc press, 2013.

#1 page 12, *Sit with it without thinking about it*. Thomas Keating, OCSO, & Tom S., *Divine Therapy & Addiction*, Lantern Books, 2009, page 39.

#3 page 15, *A tree gives glory to God by being a tree*. Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Direction Books, 1961, page 29.

#4 page 17, *Balance Sheet*. Franciscan friar of the 15th century Luca Pacioli is called by many the father of double-entry accounting.

#6 page 21, *Humility is reality; pride is illusion.*

From Fr. Vincent Tobin, OSB, on a retreat at Saint Meinrad Abbey in Indiana.

#7 page 26, *God's Ones.* The 1 1 1 1 1 census of God is from a class of Fr. Larry Hennessey at Mundelein Seminary north of Chicago. Once doing this in a classroom of children, I missed one little boy, and he ran up front and said, "Do me too!" Thanks, Larry.

Scripture

Psalm 8:5	40	Mark 1:15b	74
Psalm 23	31	Mark 1:32-38	85
Psalm 27	79	Mark 3:1-6	66
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