



FORTY WEEKS



EXPERIENCE OF THE WHOLE-LIFE CONFESSION FOR PARTICIPANTS AND PRIESTS

Experience of Whole Life Confession for Sacred Story Institute

As part of Sacred Story Institute's first research project, laity from six parishes in the Seattle Archdiocese prayed the *Sacred Story Examen in Forty Weeks*. One hundred and eighty of the participants made the Whole-Life Confession after the 12th week of the program. Below is just a sampling of the experiences from the laity and priests who participated in this extraordinary experience. Be Not Afraid!

Reflections from participants receiving the Sacrament

- ✠ At first I was VERY anxious about the confession part of this whole journey. However, as I worked through the weeks previous to the whole-life confession, writing my letter to Christ made sense. As I wrote and prayed, my anxiety began to lessen with each day. By the time I made my confession I felt Christ sitting next to me and I felt like this was simply the right thing to do. Sitting in the church, waiting for "my turn" I felt very little anxiety. I hadn't been to confession since High School and that was a long time ago. I now feel like I understand what a blessing it can be and I know that I will go to confession again and again. Be Not Afraid!
- ✠ I have struggled with Confession my entire life. I went into the Church on Thursday night and sat on the aisle so I could bolt out if I decided I just couldn't do it. During the service before I thought about just sneaking out, but I really felt the Lord pushing me to go in. When I went into the Confession I found the experience to be the most blessed and peaceful experience of my life. Fr. put me at ease and was very non-judgmental and totally compassionate. I am someone who goes to Confession every 1-12 years because of a bad experience with it when I was in the 6th grade. Fr. and I discussed it at length and I can't describe the relief I feel. The Lord is so very full of forgiveness and Fr. made the experience so comfortable. Please don't miss the experience. My days have been filled with peace and joy since my whole life Confession. I have

resolved to make regular use of Reconciliation in the future. God bless you all and I'll be praying for you!

- ✘ The whole-life confession is a wonderful experience. The opportunity to reflect on all the positive and negative patterns in your life and how they manifest themselves in the present day is itself a gift of illumination. The whole-life confession provides an opportunity to accept and release the past to prepare for the future.
- ✘ Going to Confession is a completely freeing experience. Admitting the errors of one's ways and asking forgiveness provides the opportunity to begin again with a clean slate. Being absolved from sin goes straight to the heart and heals the hurts and failures that harbor there. Where else in life do we get a "do over"? With Christ, forgiveness is a gift He is always ready to give, if only we ask.
- ✘ I had a very graced experience. Although I make a practice of regular confession (about once a month), this confession was a different experience, both in quality and in the kind of preparation I put into it. Try not to be afraid. Recognize that the devil will not want you to do this and will throw obstacles in your way. Don't let him win. Show up. Then get up and go to confession. You don't have to go in the first wave. Tell yourself, I'll take the next candle, whoever it is, and even if it's the one you didn't want, take it anyway, and go. You might struggle a great deal, but think of it this way: with all that work, will Jesus leave you by yourself? Hardly.
- ✘ It was very difficult to write my whole life confession letter to Jesus. However, it was a very rewarding experience to confess my sins over the last 30 plus years. As a returning Catholic, the Sacred Story journey has helped me to dig deeper into my faith and relationship with God, family, church and community. The whole-life confession will enable you to correlate your weaknesses to your behaviors, understand we are prone to make bad choices, and through prayer and the grace of God we can face these issues and persevere!
- ✘ Do not let fear hold you back from this experience or from doing anything good. The exact moment you fear is the moment that opens a new door in life to rest of God's Sacred Story for you. Let the Lord be your strength by crying out to Him in your fear. He wants to help you.
- ✘ I strongly encourage you to make a whole life confession. The entire exercise in preparing for the confession and the prayer that accompanied it was one of the most spiritual events of my life. I found looking for the links between life events and/or people that may affect my habits and sinful behaviors very enlightening. The exercise was not without emotion. You name the emotion and I probably experienced it. The hours before I was to give my confession, I did feel very anxious and found myself asking Jesus to walk with me. By the time I entered the confessional, my fear was gone and although a bit weepy, found reading the letter and confessing a very easy thing to do. I had never felt as "clean" spiritually as I did after this confession was over. I feel motivated to continue to discern the connection between my habitual sins and events/people, but more importantly, I feel a renewed desire and feel that I

have the ability to avoid these sins in the future. I want that ability to be accurate and to last. I just need to remember to ask Jesus for strength and to stay by my side.

- ✘ Trust that the Holy Spirit has guided you to consider this journey and that where you are, what you might uncover through this process, is leading you closer to God with every moment spent with Him. God is with you every step of the way, leading you and guiding you closer to him - and what can be closer than a conversation with God, a personal letter between you and Him. The benefits of the process and time spent on the whole-life confession far outweigh the anxiety and fear that you might experience. You are not called to re-confess but to look at the pattern of sin throughout your life and use this insight to create a dialogue with Christ - to guide you deeper to why you do what you do and to use that information in such a way that the priest, Christ here on earth in that moment, can help you discover ways to work through your pattern of sin and not to just confess, but to dig deeper and become wiser. Take the leap of faith. If you are even considering this journey, recognize that consideration as a personal call from Christ who is guiding you and holding you close every step of the way.
- ✘ Writing my letter as if I were walking or sitting with Jesus was very grounding and assuring. The first writing is a good one. I did not 'groom' it. I read it a few times, added, but kept it pretty well intact as that experience with Jesus, a relaxed conversation about my needs and the dynamics the previous weeks had uncovered. 'My inner child was screaming' as if I were making my first reconciliation at age 6 - but remembering 'Be not afraid' and calming prayer, reading the letter made it all just a conversation with a fellow traveler on the journey - a good and caring person and priest. His eyes were the loving eyes of Christ. I realize this is just a piece of the journey - not a test or all-or-nothing task that I have to get right - just a loving, long-term journey, exploring me, the relationships of my life, and the value and love Christ sees in me. We are held in His love.
- ✘ I had really never made a good honest confession before. It was always something I half-heartedly did, mostly to set a good example for my kids during Advent or Lent. The Sacred Story process helps me put down on paper the sins and patterns of sins that I previously had not been brave enough to admit or confess. It felt good to get them on paper and I knew I wanted to confess them but I was very nervous about it. I actually read my letter out loud a couple times to practice. Being in church with the other Sacred Story participants and seeing them with their letters further gave me courage. The priest really helped me relax and had wonderful advice after I had confessed.
- ✘ This experience has been one of the most fulfilling things I have done for my soul, self, and well-being. Lifelong habits of sin grinding me down over the years have receded. Going through the 12 weeks, finishing with the letter to Christ, and reading it to a priest at confession, has new strength and made my spirits fly. I am so pleased with the letter and it's response I plan on giving it to my children, with minor modifications, for their use at my eulogy if they so choose. Thank you and God for providing the wonderful opportunity and making it happen.

- ✘ I have been really busy of late and so even though I had labored over my letter, I hadn't been especially anxious about attending confession. Instead, when the day arrived, I was more concerned because I had arrived late at the service and wasn't sure of the procedure, I felt unsure why I was there and felt maybe I was wasting an opportunity. However, once I was before the priest and started reading through my letter, the floodgates opened. So many of the real anxieties and struggles I've lived with were there before me on the page. The priest was wonderfully patient and let me say what I needed to. His kindness and his attentive listening were remarkable. I cried hugely, wished I'd brought more tissues, but had a sense of relief and release. I felt I had come before my God and been heard, my soul laid bare. The days after my confession were very interesting. I felt a lightness about my being. I paid closer attention to the good things in my life and tried to leave some of the fears and anxieties behind. I'm not sure how long this newfound sense of freedom might continue, but the confessional experience was a tremendous surprise, quite unexpected. I came to the church, rushed, distracted and not ready for the gift of peace and reconciliation bestowed upon me. Our God is good, forgiving and generous in His love.
- ✘ Making your whole life confession is so freeing! It makes you more reflective about your life, but not just the past. It helps you see the "why" of your choices. With this knowledge and awareness you are better able to make choices. I found a lot of my guilt about my past dissipated. I find I look at events in my life in a different way, not as a bad happening, but an opportunity to grow. The whole life confession helped me become a more mature Christian.
- ✘ Do write your letter to Jesus. Be frank and open about how you feel about Him and your relationship. Once you write it down, tell Him how you feel about your shortcomings (sins), reread it and rewrite it...pray about it...you'll become confident through the Holy Spirit that YOU CAN DO THIS...with much prayer. YOU WILL DO IT! You'll be greatly refreshed...my reaction was IT WAS SO EASY AND I WAS PLEASANTLY SURPRISED! Oh, just so you know, I was anxious beforehand...but, Our Lord was too in Gethsemane. He triumphed to become the SAVIOR OF THE WHOLE WORLD...that includes YOU and me. I will pray for you. Thank you to Bishop, our priests and fellow participants who prayed for me. DEO GRATIAS! ALLELUIA! '
- ✘ I knew Our Lord was waiting just for me. I felt a surge of joy knowing that He was loving and accepting me in all my smallness and simplicity. My letter in many ways was like a small child presenting a crayon drawing to their Father to put on the fridge. Jesus was thanking me for trusting Him and coming to Him. I went home filled with hope, peace and joy in the future. I felt loved and forgiven, encouraged and worthwhile.
- ✘ I was absolutely terrified. As Thursday of last week approached, the more anxious I became. I read all of my notes again and again. Reading the Encouragements helped calm me, but I was still frightened. I prayed a lot, thought about how St. Ignatius fought "the dark side" and went to church, praying for help. Father Madigan put me at ease and made the experience very cathartic. It still wasn't easy, but I am so grateful to God and everyone who is on this journey

with me. An hour after the confession, my heart felt lighter. The anxiety is gone, I felt better. Thank you Father Bill and Father John from the bottom of my heart. Raise be to God!

- ✘ The act of writing the whole life confession was far more daunting and challenging than the act of making the confession. Although I was not sure that I could make the confession face to face with my confessor, although drawn to tears several times, I made it through face to face, and I believe that made it even more of a true blessing for me. This was a very guilt liberating, spiritual exercise, and I feel God's grace in helping me with honesty and courage to see out through. Father Bill's continual words of encouragement over these past weeks have helped me to keep going.
- ✘ The whole-life confession was an opportunity to really lay it all out there on the line- the root causes of why I sin, those sins for which I have the deepest sorrow, and a submission to the Lord to help me break the pattern. When I go to regular Reconciliation, I find myself searching for very specific, daily sins. This was a rare opportunity to explore sinfulness on a much deeper, broad level. As scary as that might sound, it was more a turning point AWAY from my repetitive sins than a dwelling on them. I am so glad I did it.
- ✘ I prayed for a most understanding priest to whom I could do my first life confession. My prayers were answered. He talked to me with an unconditional love and without judgment. He showed me the presence of God in my life. I went away with an impression that I am Jesus' "beloved". It was the most wonderful experience. I am very grateful for Sacred Story.
- ✘ The whole-life confession is one of the best things I have ever done in my entire life. Because I go to confession regularly I did not expect the whole-life confession to be so profound. I wrote my letter before the Blessed Sacrament and tried to penetrate the depths of the state of my soul. I followed the guidance that the program offered. I thanked God for so much. I honestly disclosed my sin the best I could in my letter. It wasn't pretty - and yes, it was all-embarrassing to admit. During the week prior to my confession I prayed to the Holy Spirit. The amazing thing is, that at the whole-life confession, - Just the act of being there - of surrendering myself to the Lord - brought me to tears. It was though I was forgiven and cleansed before I began my confession. Father was so kind and loving. Perhaps my honest attempt at penetrating the depths of my sin, and the realization of my human insufficiency and limitations - the cry for mercy, drew the cleansing relief of tears. I know I have work to do still, but this type of confession is so beneficial and definitely worth any amount of effort you put into it!
- ✘ I didn't know about the whole life confession until after I had made the commitment to take the Sacred Story journey. I know it was mentioned in the literature, but I didn't get it. Then when I heard that the whole life confession was a part of the process, I was very nervous. As someone new to the Catholic faith the thought of doing a whole life confession was overwhelming. However, each part of the process leading up to the whole life confession helped me identify patterns and see connections between my experiences and my behaviors and see where I fell short of living a Christ-like life. The writing exercises helped me focus on just having a

conversation with Jesus. That imagery was very helpful. Going to the Reconciliation service I was very agitated and emotional. I was afraid I wouldn't do it "right". I am so grateful that I went through the process. It's like going through an evaluation and being surprised at being affirmed rather than criticized. This is more like a self-evaluation where you come out feeling healed and forgiven, reaffirmed about the depth of God's love for you. Thanks so much to all the priests who made this possible.

- ✘ This was a profound experience. It was unlike any confession I have ever experienced. By writing my letter to Jesus, I was able to complete my thoughts which made my confession more authentic and truthful. My priest was so loving and I left with great joy, relief and a heart full of gratitude and love for my Lord.
- ✘ I found that following the prayerful walking with Jesus exercise caused me to awaken to sins I have confessed before but had avoided total honesty in the process of relating them because of the deep shame and self-justification I harbored of them. The last week, continuing the spiritual exercises, after my life confession, revealed another which I plan to confess again but without self-justification. I feel there will be many more sins in this category which will be revealed to me as we continue.
- ✘ I thank God for this grace and healing in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Was phenomenal, to be able to go through this exercises that helps me to find the source of my weakness, failures, vices and sins. As we learned that the sins have many avenues (tentacles), I can associate frequency, graveness, intensity, people... in all, been able to go deep enough to find the root of the problem, get a hold of it and yank it for good. With God's grace I can become a better person, find the peace and joy in every situation and hopefully help someone along the way. There is no substitute for Reconciliation. If we are not soul-healthy, we cannot do God's will. We need to pray for our Priest. Without them we can't have the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- ✘ The opportunity to pray about and write for 2 weeks leading up to the confession help dissipate the anxiousness I felt. I still cried but not the sobbing that I had done reading my story to myself. There is such a peace reading your own whole-life confession. I do think I will come back to it in my journey periodically.
- ✘ For me it was a wonderful experience, a great blessing. Being elderly there were years of experiences to look at of course. There was certainly anxiety at first as I tried to look into issues with Jesus. This very process became a great blessing and drew me closer to the Lord I believe. For the time we were directed I continued to go through the process of looking at my issues in the presence of the Lord. By the day of the evening for confession I was blessed to ask God to help me flow with the day. Almost all of the anxiety was gone; I looked forward to the blessing. And what a great and wonderful blessing it was. It has brought me more confidence and a closer relationship with the Lord. I would not want anyone to miss this great opportunity.
- ✘ This was a truly incredible experience. It was through the process of examining my life that I came to such a deep understanding of how the events from my earliest days have impacted me

in the present and how important it is to open my heart completely to the Lord. He knows all so there is nothing I can hide, but by allowing myself to truly examine my life and present it to him brought me an awakening experience I'd never realized was possible. To open your heart completely to the Lord to allow his servant to help guide me through the journey has brought me tremendous peace and lifted a burden from my heart that I have never fully realized the extreme weight of. The peace this process has brought me is beyond anything I had hoped for.

- ✘ I was extremely afraid and anxious going into the experience that I was extremely tempted to back out because I did not feel that I was thorough enough or had prepared well enough. I felt extremely scattered and judgmental of myself. I had notes flying everywhere, editing the letter and re-editing the letter up until the very last minute that I entered the confessional. However, I just drove myself to the Church. What really resonated with me and motivated me was the constant reminder not to let fear direct my life. I was consoling myself along the way by repeating that God would be pleased with any attempt and any effort and that this very situation was another example of the fact that I can't save myself, God is in control and that I need Him in my life. I wanted to have this action of not giving into the fear, allowing it to paralyze me, to be the first step toward the path toward my new life story with God as its author. DO IT!! Don't allow the fear to paralyze you!! You will be amazed by the results.
- ✘ I was afraid. So afraid! I started crying in the pew even before I gave my whole-life confession. I almost ran out the door of the church I was so afraid and overcome with emotion. But instead I prayed hard for courage and peace. And before I could think about it anymore, I chose a priest to hear my whole-life confession. To do it before I lost all courage. And WOW. I am so glad I didn't run. What a wonderful experience!! I told my priest how scared I was and how I almost fled. He held my hands and heard my confession. It was truly powerful to fully experience what turning away from fear and embracing God can really do. It brought home so much of the previous weeks lessons from Sacred Story. Truly it was one of the most powerful experiences of my life.
- ✘ In February, my grown children, grandchildren and friends had a 70th birthday party for me that I will never forget. After the whole-life confession, I remember thinking that as a result of these two events, I could die happy. Then, I began to think, no what I can do now is LIVE happy! I did not really find it to be intimidating, but rather freeing. I feel that I found as much relief in the writing of the confession as I did in the confession itself. I feel the way it was presented removed fears and doubts. Thank you for providing this opportunity.

Reflections from participating priests

- ✘ "The confessions evince that the program touches the exercitants. The idea of writing a letter to Jesus Christ frees these people to speak their inmost thoughts and feelings. I have been moved by the depth of these confessions. They are heart-felt. A notable aspect is that the letters tend to reflect multi-year

feelings and thoughts. This ensures that trivia are left behind; long-standing shadows congregate and receive focus. In all of these meetings, holiness comes forward.”

- Fr. Emmett Carroll, SJ (St. Cecilia Church, Bainbridge Island)

✘ “I was touched and encouraged by the whole-life confessions in the Sacred Story project. Truly the in-depth preparation and unique formula for the confession proved to be a source of special graces of wisdom and conversion for the participants.”

-Fr. Bob Egan, SJ (Seattle University)

✘ “I was greatly moved by hearing the confessions of persons in the Sacred Story spiritual program. They had prepared for the sacramental encounter with deep reflection and awareness of God’s compassion and their need for it, and expressed themselves and their sorrow from the depths of their being. I felt privileged to give them the forgiveness of God and of the church.”

-Fr. David Leigh, SJ (Seattle University)

✘ “The Sacred Story program addresses a very serious need in adult faith formation. Many Catholics have lost touch with any sort of felt-need for the kind of transformation and healing that can come through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As a result, long-festering inner woundedness, guilt, and shame can drag the faithful into a persistent spiritual malaise, a genuine desolation. In some, perhaps most cases, the existence of this malaise as well as its deeper causes never come to awareness. Moreover, feelings of guilt and shame and the fear of judgment can, in a powerful but often unacknowledged way, hold the faithful back from reaching out for the healing offered in the Sacrament. As I observed when participating in the whole-life confession part of the Sacred Story program, Sacred Story guides participants very gently through a process of self-examination. It helps them to reexamine the ragged edges of sin in their lives—their own personal sin and the sin of others that has wounded them—and to relocate those dimensions of their experience in the larger story of God’s love for them, the love revealed in Jesus, but also the love that has accompanied them all along the way, even in their times of darkness. The power and grace of this experience was evident to me in the expressions of release and relief on the faces of those who shared their stories with me. “

-Fr. Jim Voiss, SJ (Seattle University)

✘ “I am very grateful for the opportunity to have heard Sacred Story whole life confessions. It was evident that all of the participants dedicated much prayer and thought to prepare for the sacrament and it was a privilege for me to hear them. I was especially struck by the depth of sharing which recalled the sort of intimacy usually only possible as part of a lengthy retreat. In the end, I feel I was blessed to receive much more than I gave and would welcome the opportunity to participate in the Sacred Story project again.”

-Fr. Eric Watson, SJ (Seattle University)

✘ “What made a deep impression on me with most of them was their ability to place their lives within a context—what I would call a context of grace—so that they were not simply confessing a list of sins that only reveals the symptoms. Also, I noticed how many expressed gratitude to God for what they have received and what they now have; even grateful for the sins and shortcomings which brought them to this moment of conversion, and the awareness of their need for God.”

-Fr. Tim Clark (*Our Lady of the Lake Church, Seattle*)

✘ “It was a profoundly moving experience for me as a priest to receive the whole life confessions of those who participated in The Sacred Story program. It was a very sacred experience to be the recipient of life stories that went deep into the heart of the penitents. Many wept with both sorrow and joy as they opened their lives to the healing power of Jesus and for the first time let his forgiveness and love flow deep into their wounded past. Many came to the exercise with a certain amount of fear and trepidation but walked out with a new freedom --- the freedom of a loved and forgiven child of God”.

-Fr. John Madigan (*Holy Rosary Church, Seattle*)

✘ “Hearing these full life confessions was a unique experience for a priest. Often in the confessional we priests hear hurried confessions or confessions that seem routine. The wonderful thing about these confessions was that they were all the fruit of much thought and prayer. These penitents wanted to be there – even if they were frightened by the depth of the experience. Here people were putting the pieces of their lives together by God’s grace, and were in the midst of a prayerful process that would help them heal from what their memories and prayers had revealed. I would recommend this way of celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation to all priests.”

-Fr. Kurt Nagel (*Holy Family Church, Kirkland*)

✘ “I thought the Confessions were good and thoughtful. I had many of the penitents tell me that it was a very helpful and freeing process. It was especially helpful for them to see the trends that were traced throughout their lives and recognize how that sin has touched and warped many aspects of their lives. Many found it an emotional and deeply moving experience.”

-Fr. Hans M. Olson (*St. Mary Magdalene Church, Everett*)