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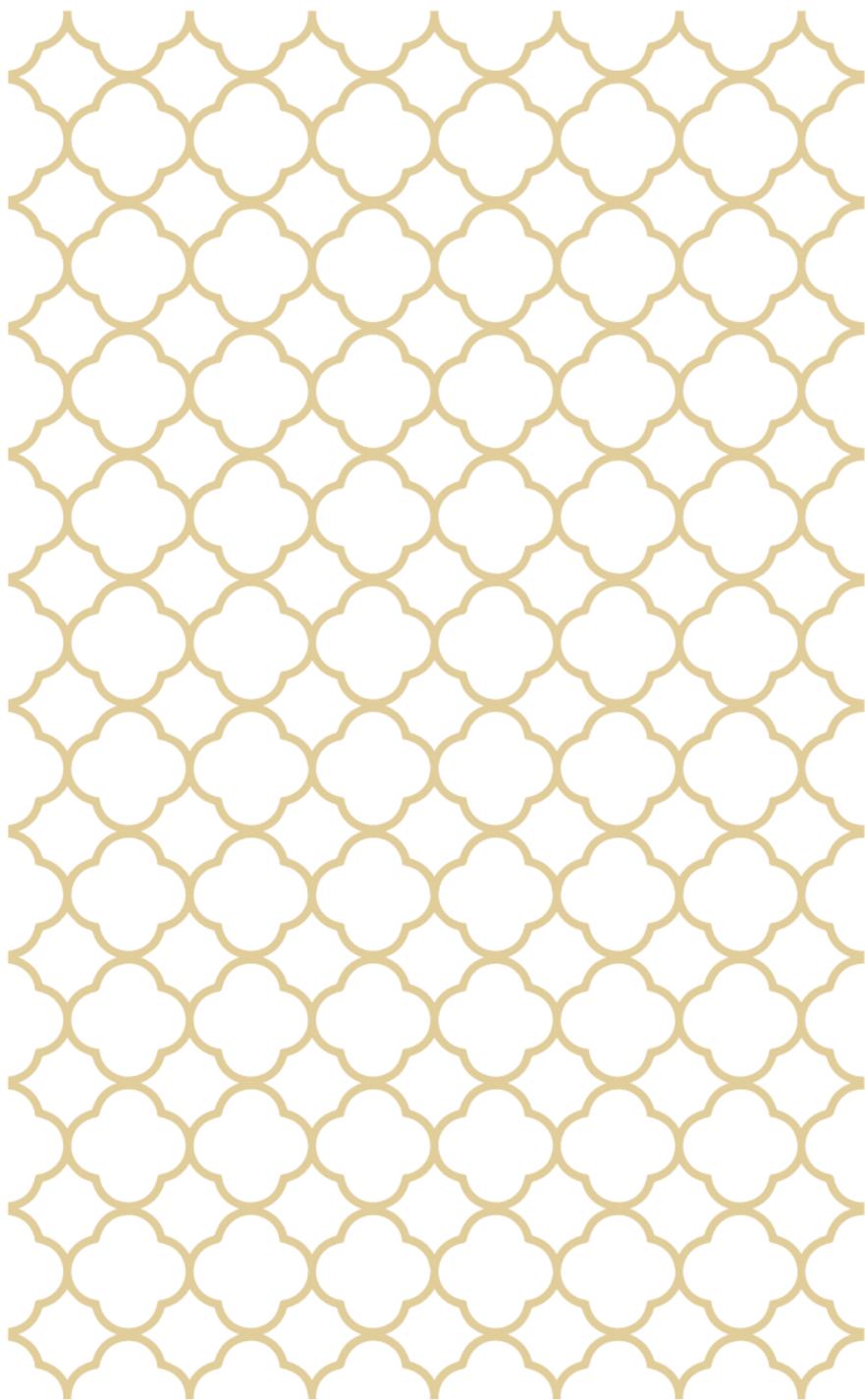
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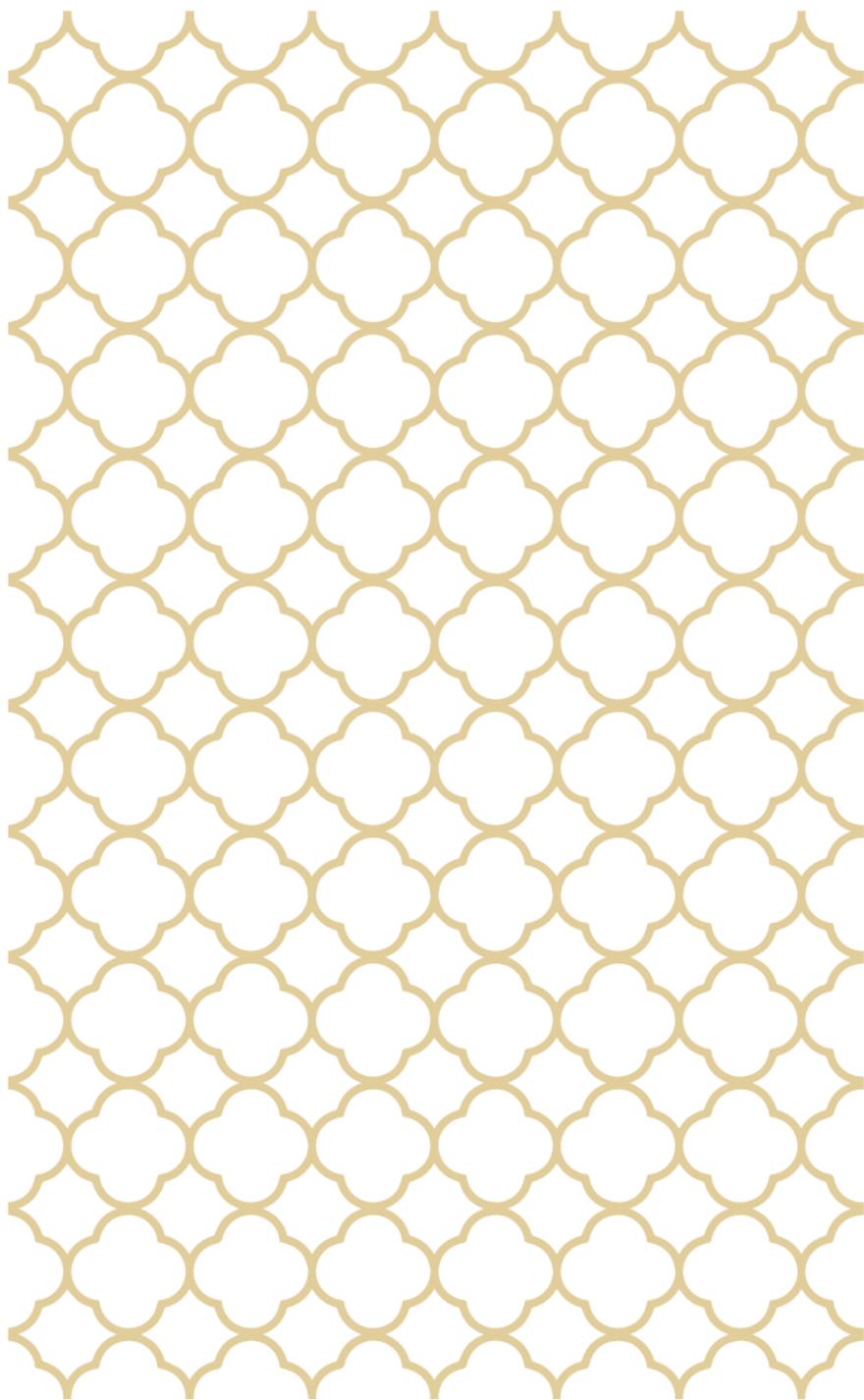
AN INVITATION

FR. JOSH

I do what I don't want to do, and what I want to do, I don't do. Does this sound familiar to you? Have you ever gone to the sacrament of Reconciliation, confessed your sins, received absolution and performed your penance, and then found yourself a couple of weeks later back in the confessional for the same sins? If you have, then I want to welcome you to the club.

Who are some of the other disciples of Jesus Christ who joined this club in their walk toward eternity? If I were to count them all, this book would be too long, but they include Doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Teresa of Avila, the incorruptible St. John XXIII, husband and father St. Mark Ji Tianxiang, and St. Philip Neri, the founder of a society of priests and brothers.

What do all of these people have in common? They are all disciples of Jesus Christ who struggled with the same vices over and over again for decades. St. Augustine struggled with sexually objectifying others, St. Teresa of Avila struggled with vanity about her appearance,



THE POWER OF CONFESSION

FR. JOSH

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just,
and will forgive our sins and cleanse us
from all unrighteousness.*

— 1 John 1:9

Alessandro Serenelli was a young man convicted of murder in the early nineteen hundreds. Growing up with an abusive mother, alcoholic father, and mentally ill brother, young Alessandro did not have an easy life. Shortly after he was born, his mother attempted to drown him. She was subsequently placed in an asylum, where she died. His mentally ill brother was also placed in an asylum.²

Because of their poverty, Alessandro and his father moved frequently, and the boy did not have a chance to form healthy, lasting friendships. He had no interest in religion. He kept to himself and got into the habit of looking at indecent pictures of women. Over time, his appetite wanted more than his imagination could offer.

Alessandro and his father eventually found themselves living in an old farm building, where they shared a kitchen with another poor family, the Goretis, who had seven children. When Maria Goretis was nine, her father died, and Maria, as the oldest daughter, took over the cooking and the care of her younger siblings so that her mother and older brothers could work in the fields.

Alessandro's father also worked on the farm. But Alessandro would stay inside and fantasize about Maria. Eventually, he tried to seduce her, but she was devout and loved the Lord. She rejected Alessandro's propositions and told him that his words and actions were sinful. This frustrated him, for he was accustomed to the immediate gratification that pornography offered.

Alessandro continued to harass Maria, and she continued to rebuff him. He finally decided that if she would not give him what he wanted, he would take it. When she was alone, Alessandro attempted to force himself on her. When she fought back, his lust turned to rage, and he stabbed her fourteen times.

Maria died within a day of being assaulted. She was eleven years old. Unrepentant, Alessandro lied at his trial and claimed he had killed her in self-defense when she attacked him. He was found guilty and, because he was not yet twenty-one years old, was sentenced to thirty years instead of life in prison.

During his first years in prison, Alessandro remained full of wrath. He was placed in isolation because he attacked other inmates. The Catholic diocesan bishop visited the prison often, inviting Alessandro to repent of his crimes so that he could be reconciled with God, but Alessandro rejected these invitations.

After six years in prison, Alessandro experienced something that he could not have imagined. The young girl's soul appeared to him in a vision. She was radiant, filled with joy. She picked fourteen flowers from a garden and handed them to Alessandro one by one. As she did this, he understood that she had forgiven him. For the first time since he committed the crime, he was sorry for it.

After this miraculous encounter, Alessandro repented, confessed his sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, and was reconciled with God and the Church. He allowed the Lord into the turmoil of his heart and finally experienced the interior peace he had longed for during his childhood and adolescence. His rage subsided, and he spent the remaining years of his sentence in a tranquil state.

After he was released from prison, he visited Maria's mother and asked for her forgiveness. They reconciled and received Holy Communion—the ultimate gift of reconciliation—side by side at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

WHAT IS THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION?

The 1885 *Baltimore Catechism* defines the sacraments as “outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace.” The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further explains that the sacraments are powers that come forth from the body of Christ (see CCC 1116). Notice how the Church describes the sacraments: They are gifts instituted by Christ himself. The Church has received these gifts from Jesus and now shares his powers with the world.

There are seven sacraments in the Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, the Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders. Each of these has a unique *form* (a how) and *matter* (a what). Since Jesus instituted each sacrament, the Church cannot change its form or matter.

For a sacrament to actually be a sacrament, the correct *form* and *matter* must be present. For instance, the *form* for the sacrament of Baptism is the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The *matter* for Baptism is water. If a minister simply poured water over another person’s head without using the exact words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the act would be invalid. Likewise, a minister

cannot baptize with oil because Jesus only invited his disciples to baptize with water.

The *form* for the sacrament of Reconciliation is the words of absolution proclaimed by the bishop or priest. The *matter* is not something we can touch, unlike with the other sacraments. The *matter* is threefold: the penitent's contrition, confession, and satisfaction (or penance).⁸ We will talk about each of these things later in this book.

The sacrament of Reconciliation is a gift from Jesus to each of us so that we can receive his mercy. The *Catechism* teaches,

Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as “the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.” (CCC 1446)

A fundamental truth and core teaching of our Faith is that God loves each and every single human being, desires to be in a relationship with us, and has a unique plan for us in our walk toward eternity. The sins we have committed and the sins committed against us by others have disrupted God's plan for us. However,



Part II

Forming a Conscience Rooted in Love

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said,

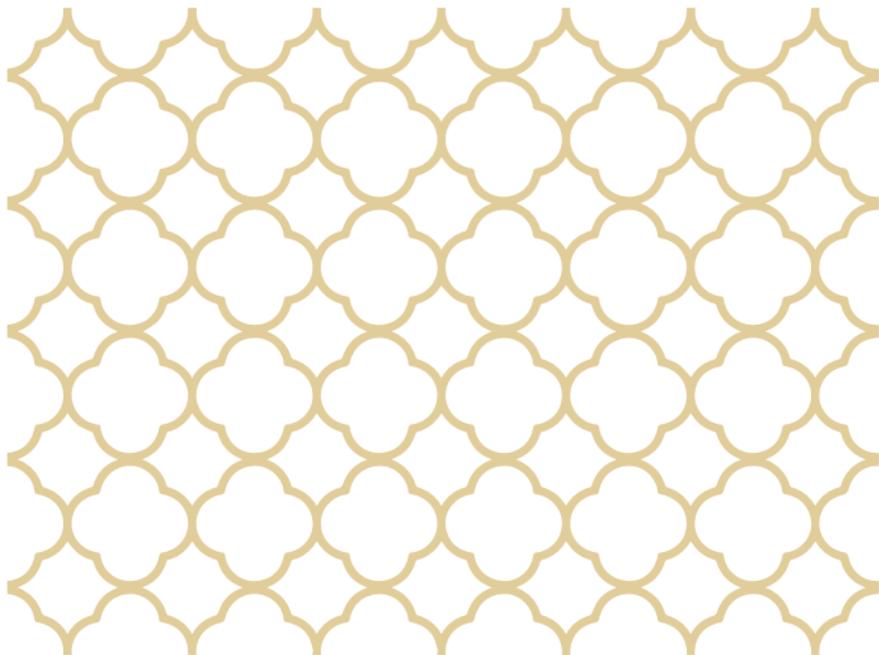
“I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.”

The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall

bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

— Genesis 3:1-21



THE PROBLEM: SIN

FR. MIKE

Did God say, “You shall not eat of any tree of the garden”? ... God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

For as long as I can remember, or at least since I began driving, my dad made it very clear to me that I was not to let the fuel gauge get below a quarter of a tank. I always thought this was because he was concerned for me. I thought he didn't want me to run out of gas late at night on some dark road far from civilization. He didn't want to come pick me up.

In fact, I thought my dad had created this rule *never let the fuel gauge get lower than a quarter of a tank* because it made him more comfortable. It was for his sake. Or maybe it was for my sake because he didn't want me to get stuck. Either way, I thought it was just a helpful piece of advice that I followed only because he asked me to. Just a helpful piece of advice that didn't really apply to me, because I was super good at letting the gas tank run out completely.

In fact, in one memorable moment in my life as a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old, I had been driving basically on fumes for a while. I was getting a little nervous that the gas gauge was that low, but I knew there was a gas station up ahead. As I was driving down the highway, the car engine completely stopped, and I just pressed in the clutch and coasted through the off-ramp, through the street, into the gas station parking lot, and right up to the pump. I remember putting the car in park and thinking, “Oh my gosh, that was phenomenal. I am amazing at this. My dad said, ‘Don’t let the gas tank get below a quarter full,’ but he doesn’t know my skills. His rule does not apply to me because I am the best I’ve ever met at allowing the gas tank to get to empty and still be able to drive.”

I thought my dad’s piece of advice was just arbitrary—“Don’t let it get lower than a quarter tank because, well, I picked a quarter.” The rule didn’t apply to me.

Fast-forward a number of years, and I’m ordained a priest. Now, having lived this way for years, I am very accustomed to allowing my gas to get below a quarter tank. I’m driving through the state of Iowa in the middle of nowhere, and all of a sudden my car begins to behave in an odd way. If I try to accelerate, it stalls out at a very low speed. I pull into an auto repair shop, and the mechanic takes a look at it and tells me that my fuel pump does not work anymore.

I said, “Do you have a replacement one?” He said, “We’re not going to get it in for another week or so.” I had to get to a wedding, and I said, “Well, shoot. How did this happen?” He said, “Well, any number of reasons. For example, do you often let your gas tank get below a quarter tank?” I was like, “I’m amazing at that.” He said, “Yeah, if you let your gas get below a quarter tank on a regular basis, the fuel pump has to work extra hard and it easily can end up getting burned out.”

In that moment I realized that my dad’s advice was not for his peace of mind or my peace of mind. It wasn’t arbitrary. My dad’s advice was completely in line with the nature of the car—my dad was telling me something about my car that I didn’t know, so that I could have a car that didn’t break down in the middle of nowhere in Iowa. In fact, my dad had not given me this rule because he thought I would get stuck out in the middle of nowhere. He gave me this rule because this is how cars are made.

When we look at the commandments of God, I think that sometimes we struggle because we do not know the reason God is saying, “Don’t do this. Always do that.” We look at the commandments and say, “How in the world could doing that be wrong?” Or “That doesn’t make any sense to me.” Or “How could that possibly be a sin? It doesn’t hurt anyone.”