

Six stories of sin

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue



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In all the years I have known all the priests I have ever known, not one has ever violated the sanctity of the confessional, to my knowledge; which is a remarkable and refreshing sentence, when you think about it, because privacy in matters of spiritual tumult is a basic and essential tenet of our faith.

Yet over the years I have heard many riveting stories of things said to priests while the priests and the tellers of the tales were not formally engaged in the sacrament of reconciliation, and I repeat some of these in amazement, because they are funny and poignant, and taken collectively they say something about how sweet and weird and complicated we are as a species. To wit:

- One stolen used tire immediately exploded upon first use by the thief, which he took to be a direct and unequivocal sign from the Mercy. The thief returned the tire to the original owner. The priest who told me this story said he had asked the man why he would return a ruined tire, and the thief had said, with some surprise, because it wasn't my tire, Father—aren't you paying attention?
- The admission of assault (but not battery) upon a squirrel (*Sciurus griseu*, the western gray or silver squirrel) by a home owner, occasioned by what the home owner characterized as "continual deliberate provocation" by the squirrel in question, upon which the home owner's temper finally snapped, and he did roar at, threaten, insult, denigrate, and impugn the squirrel, about which the home owner felt awful later.

- The theft of a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* from a college bookstore to use as a source text for a paper due the next morning. When the student's paper earned an F on account of egregious plagiarism, the student destroyed the book on account of John Milton being directly responsible for the F.
- Running up the score in a Catholic Youth Organization sixth-grade basketball game because Coach B, the coach of the losing team, had once dated and rudely dumped Coach A's wife, long before Coach A and his wife had married, but Coach A had never forgotten the way his wife was hurt by the awkward end of that previous relationship, and he, Coach A, given the sudden opportunity for vengeance, could not help himself. Even when his team was up by 24 points early in the second half, he told his team to apply a full-court press against the other team for the rest of the game, for which he, Coach A, felt guilty the next day and sought a conversation with a priest. When the priest asked him if he would like to confess, Coach A said, well, no, we only won by 32, that's not a sin, Father—winning by 50 would be a sin.
- The theft and secret delivery to Goodwill of a woman's pair of white go-go boots by her longtime boyfriend, who told the priest he just could not stand to see them in the closet any more, after eight long years of finding those tacky things leering at him when he opened the closet every morning and evening—that's like 6,000 forced sightings of those awful boots, Father, she never wore them once, and she would never throw them out or give them away, even though she never wore them once and said many times she would never ever wear them as they were associated with some unpleasant memory, but she would never give them away, Father, even though I all but begged her to do so, and finally I just couldn't take it anymore.

The priest said politely that this didn't seem like such a bad thing, really, just a little contretemps that could be smoothed over by an honest talk, and the man said well, that's the problem, Father, I blamed it on the dog, and now she wants me to take the dog to the vet to make sure she, the dog, has passed everything successfully, and there might even be those little shoe nails in the heels of the boots, like cobblers use, which could cause serious intestinal distress, and a visit to the vet costs a hundred dollars just for the visit, let alone X-rays and a thorough interior examination, which might require anesthesia. Once you get into anesthesia you are talking serious money.

I should probably stop here, because it's so tempting to leave you with the image of this earnest fellow staring anxiously at the gentle priest, hoping for some pastoral

wisdom, as the priest tries desperately not to burst out howling with laughter, but another priest friend of mine told me a story the other day about a woman who finally snapped after 20 consecutive mornings of finding her daily newspaper in a wet huddle in the street right below the mailbox, how hard would it have been for the delivery person to place it in the dry mailbox rather than just drop it in the street, how hard is that? After which she waited by the mailbox on the 21st morning, and when a battered car drove by slowly and an arm extended and her newspaper flew out and landed in the street she shrieked and cursed and shouted; but then when the car stopped and backed up jerkily she saw the driver, a sleepy elderly man wearing a worn baseball cap, and she suddenly felt terrible and selfish and arrogant.

In this case, when the priest asked the person telling the story if she would like the sacrament of reconciliation, she said yes, Father, she would, for thoughtlessness of that scope was a sin, she thought, and she would like to ask the Creator for forgiveness for being so chippy about such a small thing and being so rude to someone who very probably had a much harder life than she did.