

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE



Why should I go to Confession?

Every time we sin, we hurt ourselves, other people and God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (also called Penance or Confession) was given to us by Christ to help us reconcile with Christ and his Church when we have committed harm. Through the Sacrament, we acknowledge our sins, express our sorrow in a meaningful way, receive the forgiveness of Christ and his Church, make reparation for what we have done and resolve to do better in the future. During his public life, Jesus both forgave sins and reintegrated sinners into the community. This is the goal of the Sacrament of Confession: to forgive sins and to provide reconciliation with the Church. The Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation involves four parts: contrition, confession, penance and absolution.

- **Contrition:** a sincere sorrow for having offended God and the most important act of the penitent. There can be no forgiveness of sin if we do not have sorrow and a firm resolve not to repeat our sin.
- **Confession:** confronting our sins in a profound way to God by speaking about them — aloud— to a priest.
- **Penance:** an important part of our healing is the “penance” imposed in reparation for our sins.
- **Absolution:** the priest imparts the words which reconcile a sinner to God through the merits of the Cross.

Why do I have to confess my sins to a priest?

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, our faith in the forgiveness of sins is tied to faith in the Holy Spirit and the Church: “It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them His own divine power to forgive sins: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (976; cf. John 20:22-23).

Will the priest ever repeat what I have said in my confession?

A priest can never reveal to anyone what he is told in a confession. This obligation of absolute secrecy is most serious and is called the sacramental seal (CCC no. 1467).

What if I'm not comfortable going face-to-face?

You can receive the sacrament face-to-face or with a screen or grated window between you and the priest. Most confessionals have a screen behind which you can kneel during your confession if you prefer.

Won't the priest remember what I said? I'm embarrassed: I don't want him to think badly of me.

The priest's purpose is not to keep a check-list on people, but to be an instrument of Christ in receiving someone's sorrow, bringing forgiveness and helping people move forward. A priest hears a large number of confessions. He is not there to judge the person, but rather the nature of the sin, and to offer counsel and encouragement to overcome the sin and to grow spiritually. He too goes to confession, so he knows how it feels to confront one's own sins and ask for forgiveness.

How often should I go to Confession?

Catholics are required to receive the Sacrament at least once per year. However, if you are aware of having committed any mortal (serious) sin, you should receive the Sacrament. That being said, all are encouraged to take advantage of the Sacrament on a regular and frequent basis. Frequent reception helps us keep aware of our spiritual progress and provides the grace to overcome our sins.

Can I receive Communion without going to Confession?

When you receive the Eucharist you affirm that you are in a state of grace, reconciled with God and the Church. Since the Sacrament of Confession provides that reconciliation, if you are in a state of mortal sin you must abstain from receiving the Eucharist until you go to Confession. A mortal sin consists of a serious action through which a person turns away from God's law and charity, fully understands it is wrong and chooses to commit it freely. If you have committed venial sins, you may still receive the Eucharist. Venial sins are sins which wound our relationship with God, but consist of less serious matters than mortal sins or are performed without full knowledge or consent. Penitents are encouraged to confess venial sins regularly, since the repetition of these sins can lead to more serious sin.

I'm divorced. May I receive the Sacrament?

If you are civilly divorced and have not remarried or were validly married after receiving a declaration of nullity for your prior marriage, you may participate in the Sacrament. If you have remarried outside of the Church and have questions about your situation, we encourage you to speak with your parish priest.

If it has been a while since your last confession, remember, "Do not fear" (Is 41:10). The priest will help guide you. And feel free to take this guide with you! (For more information, visit www.usccb.org/confession.)

How to Go to Confession...

1. PREPARATION:

Before going to confession, take some time to prepare. Begin with prayer, and reflect on your life since your last confession. How have you — in your thoughts, words, and actions — neglected to live Christ's commands to "love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37, 39)? As a help with this "examination of conscience," you might review the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes (Ex 20:2-17; Dt 5:6-21; Mt 5:3-10; or Lk 6:20-26).

2. GREETING:

The priest will welcome you; he may say a short blessing or read a Scripture passage.

3. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS:

Together, you and the priest will make the Sign of the Cross. You may then begin your confession with these or similar words: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [*give days, months, or years*] since my last confession."

4. CONFESSION:

Confess all your sins to the priest. If you are unsure what to say, ask the priest for help. When you are finished, conclude with these or similar words: "I am sorry for these and all my sins."

5. PENANCE:

The priest will propose an act of penance. The penance might be prayer, a work of mercy, or an act of charity. He might also counsel you on how to better live a Christian life.

6. ACT OF CONTRITION:

After the priest has conferred your penance, pray an Act of Contrition, expressing sorrow for your sins and resolving to sin no more. A suggested Act of Contrition is:

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things.

I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.
(*Rite of Penance*, no. 45)

7. ABSOLUTION:

The priest will extend his hands over your head and pronounce the words of absolution. You respond, "Amen."

8. PRAISE:

The priest will usually praise the mercy of God and will invite you to do the same. For example, the priest may say, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good." And your response would be, "His mercy endures for ever" (*Rite of Penance*, no. 47).

9. DISMISSAL: The priest will conclude the sacrament, often saying, "Go in peace."

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE



Before celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, one should prepare themselves with an examination of conscience. An examination of conscience is a “prayerful self-reflection on our words and deeds in the light of the Gospel to determine how we may have sinned against God” (— Glossary, ***The Catechism of the Catholic Church***).

There are various types of examinations of conscience but regardless of which one you use to prepare yourself for the Sacrament it should be rooted in Scripture; particularly, the Ten Commandments and Beatitudes. Below is an example of Examination of Conscience that can help you prepare for the Sacrament.

A Brief Examination of Conscience: Based on the Ten Commandments

I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.

Have I treated people, events, or things as more important than God?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have my words, actively or passively, put down God, the Church, or people?

Remember to keep holy the Lord’s Day.

Do I go to Mass every Sunday (or Saturday Vigil) and on Holy Days of Obligation (Jan. 1; the Ascension; Aug. 15; Nov. 1; Dec. 8; Dec. 25)? Do I avoid, when possible, work that impedes worship to God, joy for the Lord’s Day, and proper relaxation of mind and body? Do I look for ways to spend time with family or in service on Sunday?

Honor your father and your mother.

Do I show my parents due respect? Do I seek to maintain good communication with my parents where possible? Do I criticize them for lacking skills I think they should have?

You shall not kill.

Have I harmed another through physical, verbal, or emotional means, including gossip or manipulation of any kind?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I respected the physical and sexual dignity of others and of myself?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken or wasted time or resources that belonged to another?

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Have I gossiped, told lies, or embellished stories at the expense of another?

You shall not covet your neighbor’s spouse.

Have I honored my spouse with my full affection and exclusive love?

You shall not covet your neighbor’s goods.

Am I content with my own means and needs, or do I compare myself to others unnecessarily?

Christ’s Two Commandments

How well do we love God and others? Do we love as Christ calls us to? In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ gives us Two Commandments: “He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments’” (Mt 22:37-40).

Not sure what love is? St. Paul describes it for us in his Letter to the Corinthians. Is this how you love God and others? “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails” (1 Cor 13:4-8).