



The Sacrament of Penance or, Reconciliation “GOING TO CONFESSION”

Confession is the Sacrament of God’s forgiveness. All of us commit sin, because our nature is weak. Some of our sins are less serious, while other sins are more serious. Venial sins harm our relationship with God, but not in a serious way. Mortal sin is so-called because it “kills” in us the grace which we receive from our relationship with God, and it harms that relationship in a serious way. The guilt we often feel for our sins is a natural reaction to this – we know that we have done wrong, because we have a guilty conscience. *Confession is the remedy* – we are restored to grace, when we confess our mortal sins; likewise, when we confess our venial sins, we are given the grace to do better in the future, and to avoid sin as much as possible. So, in confession, we tell the Lord our sins, confessing our faults to him, and we receive the assurance of his forgiveness.

Why does the priest hear confessions? Because a priest is one who always acts in the person of Christ. By virtue of his ordination, he has received the same power to forgive sins in God’s name that Christ gave to his Apostles after his resurrection from the dead: *“And he breathed on them, and said to them: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”* (Gospel of John, Ch.20, vs. 22-23). The priest therefore has the faculty to absolve sins, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Doesn’t God forgive me already when I pray to him by myself? Well, yes, God forgives us of our sins and is merciful. But we need to tell him that we are contrite, that is, truly sorry for them. In our private prayers, God does not usually provide an immediate, audible response! We need the assurance of the Sacraments for that – they are the means by which Christ wishes to give us grace in this life; he established the Church for that very purpose. When the priest absolves us, we can be sure that Christ has heard our sorrow, has forgiven our sins, and has taken away the guilt and the burden of them. We lay our sins at his feet, we leave them at the Cross, and we promise to try better in the future. In this way, we are reconciled to God and to the Church (that is, to each other).

What do I need to confess? In order to receive Holy Communion, we must be in a state of grace. This means that we have no mortal sins on our conscience. So when we go to confession we must confess mortal sins, if we have committed any. We may also mention venial sins, especially those which we are trying hard to avoid but keep falling into. While we are not obliged to confess *all* venial sins, we must confess all mortal sins. One general principle to keep in mind is this: we should not deliberately hide anything from God in confession. If we forget something small, then we should not worry. We should prepare ourselves for confession by taking time to think of our sins, so as to make a thorough and honest confession. It’s worth it in the end – we feel much better once it’s off our chest!

How do I know if the sin I have committed is a mortal sin or just a venial sin? This is easy! For a sin to be called ‘mortal’ it must fit all 3 of these criteria:

- It must be grave/serious matter
- It must be done willingly, that is, with one’s full consent (deliberately).
- It must be done knowingly, that is, one is fully aware of what one is doing.

There is, of course, a difference between mortal sins! Some are obviously more serious – murder, or adultery, for example. Others perhaps less obvious – causing serious harm to someone else; sexual activity outside of marriage; deliberately missing Mass on Sunday; cheating/fraudulent behaviour on an important scale, for example. Venial sins are the little sins we commit from day to day, such as using bad language, losing our temper, insulting somebody, etc. Don’t worry if you are not sure – the priest will help you.

Can I ask the priest a question about my life, or my sins/bad habits, or anything like that? Yes! You can ask the priest for help with any aspect of your life during your confession. He is there to help you, and give advice. You

can be candid and honest – because whatever you say is said in complete confidence. The **Seal of the Confessional** means that the priest may **NEVER**, under any circumstance, reveal what he hears in confession.

How often do I need to go to confession? This very much depends; strictly speaking, you should go as often as you need to. If you have a serious/mortal sin on your conscience, go to confession as soon as you can. Otherwise, about once a month seems reasonable. The minimum requirement of the Church is that we go once a year, in Eastertide, but we should be more regular than that, in order to live good, holy lives as Christians. If we let it slip... then we should get back into a routine! There is plenty of opportunity to go to confession, and you can always just ask the priest.

Why is there a grille/barrier in some confessionals? Can't I go face-to-face with the priest? It is important that for those who wish it, the confessional is confidential. In other words, there is no need for the priest to know who you are, and you have every right not to identify yourself. Confession is anonymous – even if the priest needs to ask a question or two, he will never ask your name. Also, the priest has a right to be behind the grille, for reasons of propriety. The grille in our church is such that if you wish to see the priest face to face, you can – but otherwise, he can hear you without seeing you. This is a good compromise, and allows you to be confident and honest, without any embarrassment.

What is my “penance” for? When do I need to fulfil it? The priest, before giving you absolution and asking you to make an act of contrition, will give you a penance. Usually this is a short prayer, or several short prayers, but it might also be a good work or a little act of self-denial. It is best to do this penance immediately after you leave the confessional box, so that you don't forget. By completing the penance we continue to repair our relationship with God which was damaged or broken by sin, and we also continue the interior conversion that brought us to say sorry to God in Confession. We show him that we love him and want to do better.

Will the priest be angry with me? No! Although many have had bad experiences of confession in the past, priests nowadays are all trained to hear confessions with compassion and tenderness. Priests are sinners too, and need to go to confession regularly as well, so they understand the penitent. A priest “might be a lion in the pulpit, but must be a lamb in the confessional.” The priest should never get angry or judgemental – but he is there to judge, in some degree, how we are doing; if we are not repentant of our sins, or are living in a permanent state of sin, he may decline to give absolution. This is very rare, but if you are in that situation, he will help you to try and resolve it. For example, if you are in an irregular marriage, he will probably ask you to come and see him privately to see whether it can be regularised. The priest never makes any decisions in anger, but always in compassion and mercy. That is the way Christ deals with us when we pour out our hearts before him and tell him our troubles and our worries, and ask him to forgive us our sins. Priests always say that in confession they never sense how bad people are – they only sense how *good* people are. If they were really wicked, they wouldn't be coming to confession!

Does the priest remember what he hears in confession? Almost never. A priest hears so many confessions that he almost never remembers anything that he hears in confession, and he's heard it all! Many priests say that it is a great grace of their ordination that they never remember anything in confession at all. This should console us – we can be candid and honest in confession. Not only is the priest not allowed to reveal to anyone what he hears in confession, but he would not remember it anyway. We are free to tell Christ, through his priest, whatever we need to tell him.

It seems that Catholics can just tell their sins to the priest, and they get off ‘scot free’! Is this true? No, it's not true at all! No sin is so great that it cannot be forgiven; but even great crimes need to be dealt with justly. A Catholic who confesses their sins honestly and contritely does indeed receive the forgiveness of God, but there is still a debt to pay, either in this life (through good works, owning up to failures, accepting criminal punishment if applicable) or in the next (in purgatory). If they are not sorry for their sins, then absolution has no effect on them whatsoever, and they add to their sins the serious sin of sacrilege, by making a dishonest confession. Confession is between the soul and God – and while you can fool yourself, others, and the Law of the Land, you cannot fool God. Absolution is always given on the condition that we (a) truly repent of our sins (we show this by making an Act of Contrition), and (b) do penance for our sins (by saying the prayers the priest gives us to say, and by living a life of virtue).

HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION

Don't worry too much about what to do, the priest will always help you with what to say.

BEFORE CONFESSION

- Take time to prepare yourself well. Pray to the Holy Spirit to enlighten you, to stir up your conscience, and to help you to remember your sins.
- Make an "Examination of Conscience" – this is simply to go through your life since your last confession, and see where you have not lived according to the Gospel or the Commandments of God. Some people find it easier to think about the 10 commandments, or about the 8 Beatitudes, to see where they might have gone wrong. Others just sit quietly for a while, in the queue for confession, to examine their souls and remember what it is they have to say.

IN THE CONFESSIONAL BOX

- Enter the box and shut the door behind you.
- Either kneel down, or sit down.
- The priest may begin with the sign of the cross, or you may say "**Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.**"
- Tell the priest how long it is since your last confession, if you can remember.
- Then begin to tell the priest your sins, since your last confession. You can take your time. Confess all serious sins, and perhaps those less serious ones that you have difficulty overcoming.
- The priest will only ask questions if he has to, to be sure he has understood you well. Then he will give you some advice.
- Listen to the priest's advice, and ask him any questions if you need to.
- The priest will then give you your penance to say. You say this only once you have left the confessional box.
- The priest then invites you to make a good Act of Contrition. If you don't know one by heart, he will help you by asking you to repeat one after him.
- Then the priest gives you Absolution. Make the sign of the cross as he says the words, "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."
- Then your confession is over. The priest may say something like: "Go in peace, the Lord has forgiven all your sins. Pray for me, a sinner too."

AFTER CONFESSION

- Go into the main part of the Church and find a place to sit quietly on your own.
- Say the penance that the priest has given you, the prayers he has asked you to pray.
- Then thank God in your own words for the gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation which you have just received. Tell the Lord that you love him, that you want to do better in the future, and that you will try your best to avoid sin and live a holy life, for love of him.
- Say a quick prayer for the priest who gave you absolution.
- Resolve to make a really good Communion the next time you come to Mass.