

## **How a Catholic makes a good Confession**

Confession is one of the least understood of the sacraments of the Catholic Church. In reconciling us to God, it is a great source of grace, and Catholics are encouraged to take advantage of it often. But it is also the subject of many common misunderstandings, both among non-Catholics and among Catholics themselves.

**Confession Is a Sacrament:** The Sacrament of Confession is one of the seven sacraments recognized by the Catholic Church. Catholics believe that all of the sacraments were instituted by Jesus Christ himself. In the case of Confession, that institution occurred on Easter Sunday, when Christ first appeared to the apostles after his Resurrection. Breathing on them, he said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23).

**The Marks of the Sacrament:** Catholics also believe that the sacraments are an outward sign of an inward grace. In this case, the outward sign is the absolution, or forgiveness of sins, that the priest grants to the penitent (the person confessing his sins); the inward grace is the reconciliation of the penitent to God.

**Other Names for the Sacrament of Confession:** That is why the Sacrament of Confession is sometimes called the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Whereas Confession stresses the action of the believer in the sacrament, Reconciliation stresses the action of God, who uses the sacrament to reconcile us to Himself by restoring sanctifying grace in our souls. The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to the Sacrament of Confession as the Sacrament of Penance. Penance expresses the proper attitude with which we should approach the sacrament with sorrow for our sins, a desire to atone for them, and a firm resolve not to commit them again.

**The Purpose of Confession:** The purpose of Confession is to reconcile man to God. When we sin, we deprive ourselves of God's grace. And by doing so, we make it even easier to sin some more. The only way out of this downward cycle is to acknowledge our sins, to repent of them, and to ask God's forgiveness. Then, in the Sacrament of Confession, grace can be restored to our souls, and we can once again resist sin.

**Why Is Confession Necessary?** Non-Catholics, and even many Catholics, often ask whether they can confess their sins directly to God and whether God can forgive them without going through a priest. On the most basic level, of course, the answer is yes, and Catholics should make frequent acts of contrition, which are prayers in which we tell God that we are sorry for our sins and ask for His forgiveness. But the question misses the point of the Sacrament of Confession. The sacrament, by its very nature, confers graces that help us to live a Christian life, which is why the Church requires us to receive it at least once per year. (See the Precepts of the Church for more details.) Moreover, it was instituted by Christ as the proper form for the forgiveness of our sins. Therefore, we should not only be willing to receive the sacrament but should embrace it as a gift from a loving God.

**What Is Required?** Three things are required of a penitent in order to receive the sacrament worthily: We must be contrite or, in other words, sorry for our sins. We must confess those sins fully, in kind and in number. We must be willing to do penance and make amends for our sins. While these are the minimum requirements, here are steps to making a better confession.

**How Often Should You Go to Confession?** While Catholics are only required to go to Confession when they are aware that they have committed a mortal sin, the Church urges the faithful to take advantage of the sacrament often. A good rule of thumb is to go once per month. (The Church strongly recommends that, in preparation for fulfilling our Easter Duty to receive Communion, we go to Confession even if we are aware of venial sin only.) The Church especially urges the faithful to receive the Sacrament of Confession frequently during Lent, to help them in their spiritual preparation for Easter. Reconciliation (also known as Confession or Penance) is a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ in his love and mercy to offer sinners forgiveness for offenses committed against God. In Reconciliation, we acknowledge our sins before God and his Church.

We 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.

#### **FOUR STEPS TO RECONCILIATION**

**Step 1: Contrition.** Contrition is "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again."

**Step 2: Confession.** The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with other

**Step 3: Absolution.** The priest speaks the words by which "God, the Father of Mercies" reconciles a sinner to himself through the merits of the Cross.

**Step 4: Satisfaction.** An important part of our healing is the "penance" the priest imposes in reparation for our sins.

**STEP 1: CONTRITION.** Confession is not difficult, but it does require preparation. Before we enter the Confessional, we should begin with prayer. We should review our lives since our last confession, searching our thoughts, words and actions for that which did not conform to God's command to love Him and one another through His laws and the laws of His Church. This is called an examination of conscience.

#### **How to make an examination of conscience:**

Begin with a prayer asking for God's help.

Review your life with the help of questions based on the Ten Commandments.

Tell God how truly sorry you are for your sins.

Make a firm resolution not to sin again.

If you are unsure about how to confess or you feel uneasy

Ask the priest to help you – This is what Father became a priest to do: to make us friends with God again.

Place your trust in God – Our Heavenly Father is merciful.

Remember that God loves you – He wants to give you this free gift of His mercy and His love.

#### **STEP 2: CONFESSION: Receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

**Enter the Confessional:** The Sacrament of Reconciliation may be face-to-face or anonymous, with a screen between you and the priest. Choose the option that is the most comfortable for you.

**Begin your confession:** When you enter the confessional, the priest will give you a blessing or greeting. He may also share a brief Scripture passage. Make the Sign of the Cross and say, "Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been [X days, weeks, years] since my last confession."

**Confess your sins:** Confess all of your mortal sins to the priest in number and kind. Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us from our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.

**After you have confessed all of your sins:** Say "I am sorry for these and all of my sins." The priest will then offer you advice to help you be a better Catholic, such as how to better work with the graces that God is giving you in your life, or ways to combat your weaknesses or habitual sin. He will then assign a penance.

**Say an Act of Contrition:** This is a way of expressing your sorrow for your sins.

Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to confess my sins, do penance, and to amend my life. Amen. The priest, acting in the person of Christ, then absolves you from your sins.