

Jesus knows that his Father will do what any of us do when we lose something valuable: we actively work to find it again. This is the God we meet when we come to confession.

What Confession Is

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is at the heart of Jesus' work to save and heal the world. It's the tangible expression of a loving Father's desire to find his children again. The first thing Jesus did after his Resurrection was to give his apostles the authority to restore us to the Father: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). From that point on, the Church's ordained ministers have carried out this work of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Confession was a feature of the life of the early Church. In the Letter of James, we read: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him . . . if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (5:14-15). Confession was often a public ritual, especially for serious sins. But by the early Middle Ages, the sacrament had taken the form it has today — primarily, a private exchange between a penitent and a priest.



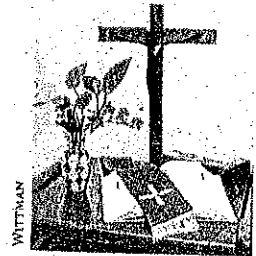
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it rests on other motives (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 303). We must admit that we've done wrong, and that we're responsible for it.

You probably know something about contrition if you're reading this pamphlet and thinking about coming back to confession. In a way, the willingness to be honest about what we have done is the most important part of reconciliation. It's easy to come up with a dozen ways to excuse our behavior, or at least take the sting out of it. Human beings are masters of rationalization and self-justification. But being reconciled begins with pondering what we have done in the light of Christ's two commandments of love, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Ten Commandments as a basis against which we can measure ourselves.

Scripture Passages for an Examination of Conscience

- Matthew 5-7
- Romans 12-15
- 1 Corinthians 12-13
- Galatians 5
- Ephesians 4-6



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2. Confession

The second part of Reconciliation is confession itself. The Church requires that we confess our sins to a priest. Why? Only God can forgive sins, after all. But the urge to confess our sins springs from a deep desire. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being" (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 31).

Let's turn the question around, then: Why *not* confess to a priest? The priest is bound to the strictest confidence. He cannot and will not say anything to anybody about what he hears in confession. And, because the priest absolves us "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," our forgiveness actually does come from God, through the channel of a human being acting in God's name.

The Three Parts of the Sacrament

Confession is the term commonly used for the sacrament, but the confession of one's sins to a priest is only one part of Reconciliation. The others are *contrition* and *penance* or *amends*.

1. Contrition

The process begins with a careful examination of conscience; contrition is perfect when it is motivated by the love of God and imperfect if



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Act of Contrition

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.

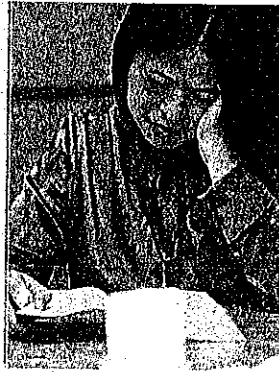
— *Rite of Penance*, No. 45

Reasons for avoiding confession usually boil down to a desire to avoid embarrassment and awkwardness. Do you feel ashamed about what you've done? That's fitting, but don't let embarrassment become an excuse to avoid love and forgiveness. Being willing to tell another person about your faults takes courage. Confessing our sins means that we must *name* them, not merely admit to certain "shortcomings." We take responsibility for concrete acts, which in itself is an act of humility. This counters pride — the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.

It's important to realize that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a ritual — like the Mass, like baptism, like all the other sacraments. There's an order to it. You say the words to confess your sins. The priest says words of absolution. It's not necessary to "feel" a certain way to know you are forgiven; though Our Lord knows we will sin again, if we have sincere contrition and desire to avoid further sin, the graces of the sacrament are always there.

3. Penance

The final part of the sacrament is the penance. Usually, the priest will ask you to say some prayers or



perform a simple act of charity. Like confession, penance is a concrete action. You *name* your sins; you *do* something to express your resolve to make amends. If we've harmed someone, we need to repair the damage as much as possible. This business of being forgiven and reconciled takes place in our everyday life. It's not happening in a "spiritual" realm divorced

from the real world. The penance the priest gives reminds us that we need to live differently, to take steps to avoid sin in the future.

The Words of Absolution

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and the resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

— *Rite of Penance*, No. 46

Coming Home

What awaits you if you come back to confession? You can expect freedom — freedom from your spiritual burdens, freedom to become the person you were meant to be. The sacrament holds out God's blessed promise of peace of mind, a joyful heart, and restored relationships with Our Lord and those you love. No wonder the Catholic Church urges us to make frequent use of the sacrament.

In this life, we always fall short of Jesus's example. We always need healing. We always need the precious gift of God's grace. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, grace and healing are ours for the asking.

Confession brings forgiveness. It makes us whole. It's the way home. That's the best answer to the question, "Why go back to confession?"



Call it sin. Call it wrongdoing. Call it failings, or transgressions, or brokenness, or "the human condition." It goes by many names. It's the desolate knowledge that things are not right because we have acted wrongly. Sin divides and shatters. It separates us from God, from those we love, and from ourselves.

Sin wounds our relationship with God and others as well as our human dignity. Faith reveals to us the destructive force of sin in our lives and the world.

— *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (USCCB)*, p. 245

This knowledge burdens us. We can't undo what we've done, but we long for relief — a new start, an end to guilt, freedom to act rightly, a path out of the wilderness. We want forgiveness. We want to be restored.

That's what God offers us in confession. The salvation that Jesus accomplished for the human race is something we can experience personally. Forgiveness is ours through confession. It's the road back to God. It's a channel of grace to live with new joy and freedom.



A few decades ago, the Catholic Church began referring to Confession as the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. It did this to emphasize *reconciliation*. That's the short answer to the question, "Why go back to confession?" We do it to be reconciled. *Reconciliation* literally means "to meet again." We've lost our way. Confession is the way back home.

What God Is Like

Many people stay away from the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they are afraid of God. He's perceived as a Judge or a Policeman — angry, suspicious, unforgiving. The truth of the matter is that God isn't like that at all. He is a loving Father who desperately wants us to return to him. In parable after parable, healing after healing, Jesus' message refutes the notion that his Father is a vindictive scorekeeper. God wants us back. He'll go to great lengths to find us.

When the Pharisees complained that he spent too much time hanging out with sinners, Jesus fired back: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?" Again, "What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds

it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost'" (Lk 15:1-10).

Perhaps the strongest reassurance we can have about the nature of God, however, is the story of the Prodigal Son, whose father runs to meet his wayward son and welcomes him back, rejoicing. That's what God is like, Jesus says. He's the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. He's like the woman who drops everything and turns her house upside down to find a single lost coin. He's the father who'll hasten to meet and embrace us, no matter how badly we have sinned against him. That's the kind of God we're dealing with.

And Jesus didn't merely explain what his Father is like; he went to the cross to redeem us, to secure for us his Father's mercy and forgiveness. Even as he is being mocked on the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them."



An Examination of Conscience

As Socrates stated, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Examining your conscience provides an opportunity to recognize sin and seek God's grace. How do you train your conscience? God's Word has provided us with the Ten Commandments for examining our consciences, as well as The Sermon on the Mount (see Mt 5-7), The Duties of Christians (Rom 12-15), and St. Paul's Hymn to Love (1 Cor 13).

Using the Ten Commandments to Examine Your Conscience

1. You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.

You will love and worship God when you realize how much God loves you. "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). St. Thérèse of Lisieux said that from heaven she would teach us to love Love, which is God. What or who do you love most? Is there a false god in your life?

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

You shall respect God's holy name. Our culture is filled with cursing, vulgar speech and irreverence for the name of God and Jesus. Some even use God's name to justify violence and anger. How do you speak of God? Listen to and practice Christ's prayer, "Hallowed [holy] be thy name."

3. You shall keep holy the Sabbath day.

You shall keep holy the day of the Lord, serving God devotedly. Sunday is a day for adoration of God and a day of rest from the stress and activities of everyday life. How strong is your devotion to the Holy Eucharist? What can you do to reclaim the Sabbath in your life?

4. You shall honor your father and your mother.

You shall respect legitimate authority in society. As authorities of the family, parents are to be not only respected, but also honored. Adults are expected to see to the care for their elderly parents. Children should learn from the virtues, prayerful life, education, and faith their parents have taught them. Parents, in turn, honor their children by caring for them and teaching

them the ways of the faith. How do you live up to your family responsibilities?

5. You shall not kill.

You shall shun murder, scandal, hatred, and vindictive anger. Jesus asks you to be for life. Vindictive anger, hatred, and scandal tempt us to be against life. Abortion, murder, and other forms of violence require us to respond by affirming life. What has been your attitude to the sanctity of life?

6. You shall not commit adultery.

You shall observe fidelity to your spouse. The Church teaches that sex outside of marriage undermines God's purpose of marriage, which is the union of husband and wife and the begetting of children (CCC 2378, 2380). Staying faithful today is a great challenge. Christ calls us to holiness and fidelity to God, spouses, children, friends, Church, the community, and society. How faithful have you been to these teachings?

7. You shall not steal.

You shall seek justice and peace in all your relationships with others. The Church teaches that the goods of the earth are meant for the benefit of everyone. Justice and peace are means to that goal. What does your conscience tell you about sharing resources? How do you treat people who are struggling financially, spiritually, or physically?

8. You shall not bear false witness to another.

You shall be committed to truth in dealing with others. Trust is the glue that makes society work. Lies hurt and cause damage. How truthful are you? Can others place their trust in you?

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

You shall have hearts that are pure and minds that are free of lust. Jesus says, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). The same applies to a woman who looks at a man with lust. Jesus teaches, "Blessed are the clean of heart" (Mt 5:8). Our culture is saturated with images that invite the opposite. How are you handling this challenge?

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

You shall be dedicated to generosity, especially to the poor. In matters of money, property, power, and success, people are motivated by greed and envy. This wrecks families, careers, and the wholesomeness of society. What role do material goods take in your life?

Steps in the Rite of Reconciliation

The penitent may confess face to face with the priest or privately behind a screen.

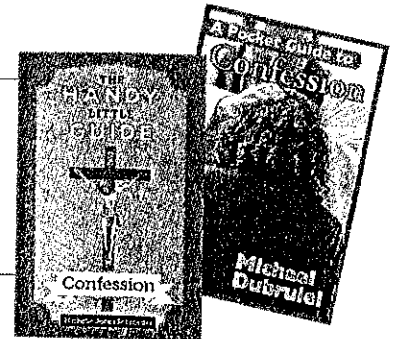
- 1 The priest will welcome you and invite you to make the Sign of the Cross. It will be helpful for the priest to know a little about you if he doesn't already, and the time of your last confession. You may choose to begin with the traditional opening, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (weeks, months, years) since my last confession." Relax. Be at ease. The priest is there to help you experience God's mercy.
- 2 Confess your sins in your own words to the priest. An appropriate way to conclude is by saying, "I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life." The priest will help you from there.
- 3 After you have confessed your sins to the priest, he will give you encouragement for your moral and spiritual growth. The priest then gives you a penance — which may include a brief prayer — and asks you to make an act of contrition. Then the priest absolves you from your sins. After this you may leave the confessional.
- 4 Complete the penance the priest gives you. Thank God for his mercy. Promise yourself and God that you will try to avoid these sins in the future. Talk to God and ask for his help especially in avoiding temptations — those near occasions of sin.

From the pamphlet **How to Make a Good Confession**
by Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem.
(P1359, available in packages of 50 starting at \$17.95.)



Recommended Reading:

The Handy Little Guide to Confession (T2206, \$4.95)
A Pocket Guide to Confession (T430, \$7.95)



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