



A Guide to Confession

PREPARING FOR RECONCILIATION

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), we encounter Jesus Christ, who after rising from the dead breathed the Holy Spirit on his Apostles — the first priests — and gave them the power to forgive sins in his name (Jn 20:23). The Heart of Christ burns with love for us and he wants us to experience his immense and unfathomable mercy by confessing our sins and receiving his forgiveness. This Sacrament gives us the consolation of God's pardon and strengthens our relationship with Christ and his Church.

PRAYER TO OUR LADY BEFORE CONFESSION

“Mary, Mother of Jesus and my Mother, your Son died on a cross for me. Help me to confess my sins humbly and with trust in the mercy of God, that I may receive his pardon and peace.”

RECOGNIZING SIN AND GROWING IN HOLINESS

As followers of Jesus, we need to examine our lives and recognize our sinful thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions so that we can bring them to God for forgiveness. Such an examination of conscience should be done regularly, always with trust in God’s mercy and love and in the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We all sin, but we do not all acknowledge our sins. It takes honesty and courage to reflect upon our refusals of God’s grace and our rejections of his law of love. Contemporary society is often blind to the reality of sin and sometimes even presents sinful behaviors or lifestyles as positive goods to be sought and desired. In his encyclical *Reconciliation and Penance* (1984), Pope John Paul II suggests that the defining sin of modern times is the “loss of the sense of sin” and reminds us of St. John’s warning: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8).

Sin is the deliberate violation of God’s law. Although sin promises illusory goods or happiness, it results in harm to the sinner, who is always the primary victim of sin. The Church teaches that there are two kinds of sin: mortal and venial. **Mortal sin** is a deliberate and free choice of something known to be seriously wrong that destroys our friendship with God and separates us from him (cf. 1 Jn 5:16-17). All of the following three conditions must be met for a sin

to be mortal: (1) it must be something serious; (2) it must be done with sufficient knowledge of its gravity; and (3) it must be done with sufficient freedom of the will. **Venial sin** is a minor offense against God's law that hurts our relationship with God but does not destroy it.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the ordinary way to have our sins forgiven. It is an encounter with the mercy of the living God, who meets us where we are in our weakness and our sins, and it powerfully deepens our psychological and spiritual growth. The source of many graces, it should be celebrated regularly and whenever the need is felt. Monthly confession is a healthy and effective means of growing closer to God and leading a balanced, Christ-centered lifestyle.

CONTRITION

We need **contrition**, or sorrow for our sins, to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and contrition *must* include a firm purpose to amend our life and avoid the near occasions of sin — that is, the situations, persons, places, and things that lead us to sin. Sorrow for sin is very different from sadness or self-hatred. As we draw closer to God, our sense of sin and sorrow for sin become deeper, just as do our joy, peace of heart, and purity of conscience.

ACT OF CONTRITION

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments, 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 sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin.”

HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION

- Pray to the Holy Spirit for self-knowledge and trust in the mercy of God. Examine your conscience, be truly sorry for your sins, and resolve to change your life.
- Go to the priest and begin with **the Sign of the Cross**. Welcoming you, the priest will say: “May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy,” or similar words taken from Scripture. You answer: “**Amen**.” Then say, “**Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been _____ weeks/ months/years since my last confession.**”
- Confess your sins openly and candidly. Tell the priest of all mortal sins and the number of times each was committed, and then you may confess some of your venial sins. (Although it is not strictly necessary to confess venial sins, the Church recommends that you do.) If you do not know whether a sin is mortal or venial, ask the priest. If you have no mortal sins, confess venial sins you have committed since your last confession; you may also mention some mortal sin from your past life for which you are particularly sorry, indicating that it has already been confessed.
- Then listen to the priest for whatever counsel he may judge appropriate. If you have any question about the faith, how to grow in holiness, or whether something is a sin, feel free to ask him. Then the priest will assign you a penance.
- Pray the Act of Contrition when the priest tells you.
- Listen as the priest absolves you of your sins and enjoy the fact that God has truly freed you from all your sins. If you forget to confess a mortal sin, you are still forgiven, but must mention it the next time you go to confession.
- Do the penance the priest assigns you.

If you are anxious or unsure of what to do, take this guide with you or tell the priest and he will make it easier for you.

AN AID TO YOUR EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

1. *I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.*

- Do I seek to love God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength (Dt 6:5)? Do I put anything or anyone above God? Do I pray daily?
- Have I had any involvement with the occult, witchcraft, wicca, ouija boards, seances, tarot cards, new age crystals, fortune telling, or the like? Have I put faith in horoscopes?
- Have I received Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin?
- Have I abused the Sacrament of Penance by lying to the priest or deliberately not confessing a mortal sin?
- Have I denied a truth of the faith out of concern for the respect or opinion of others?

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

- Have I used God's holy name irreverently?
- Have I blasphemed God, the Church, Mary, the saints, or sacred places or things?

3. *Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.*

- Do I try to keep Sunday as a day of prayer, rest, and relaxation, avoiding unnecessary work?
- Have I deliberately come late or left early from Mass without a good reason?

4. *Honor your father and your mother.*

- Do I honor and respect my parents?
- Have I deliberately hurt my parents?
- Do I treat my children with love and respect?

- Do I support and care for the well-being of all family members?
- Have I neglected family duties?
- Do I honor and obey my lawful superiors?

5. *You shall not kill.*

- Have I deliberately harmed anyone?
- Have I had an abortion or encouraged an abortion?
- Have I attempted suicide or seriously considered it?
- Have I abused drugs or alcohol?
- Have I led anyone to sin through bad example or through direct encouragement?

6. *You shall not commit adultery.*

For the married

- Am I faithful to my spouse in thought and action?
- Have I used artificial contraception,[‡] or been sterilized?
- Was I married outside the Church without proper permission of the Church?

For the unmarried

- Have I engaged in sexual activity with anyone of either sex?

For all

- Have I deliberately viewed pornographic magazines, videos or internet websites?
- Have I masturbated?
- Have I used impure language or told impure jokes?
- Do I dress modestly?

7. *You shall not steal.*

- Have I stolen or accepted stolen goods?
- Have I deliberately destroyed the property of others?
- Have I cheated anyone of what I owe?
- Do I gamble excessively?
- Do I share what I have with the poor and the Church according to my means?
- Have I pirated materials: videos, music, software?

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

- Have I lied? Have I sworn falsely?
- Have I plagiarized or been academically dishonest?
- Have I gossiped? Have I revealed secrets or confidential information without good reason?
- Have I ruined the good name of others by spreading lies or maliciously revealing their faults and sins?

9. *You shall not desire your neighbor's wife.*

- Have I deliberately and consciously permitted sexual thoughts about anyone besides my spouse?
- Do I guard my imagination and senses?
- Have I watched shows, plays, pictures or movies that contain impure scenes with the deliberate intention of being aroused by them? Am I responsible about what I read?

10. *You shall not desire your neighbor's goods.*

- Am I envious of the possessions, abilities, talents, beauty, or success of others?

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

- Do I love my neighbor? Is there anyone whom I do not love or refuse to love? Have I wished harm or misfortune on anyone?
- Do I forgive from my heart those who have hurt me? Do I harbor hatred or grudges? Do I pray for my enemies?
- Have I ridiculed or humiliated others?
- Do I seek to help others in need?
- Do I love myself as God loves me? Do I care for my physical, emotional, and spiritual health?
- Do I forgive myself for my sins after bringing them to God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Precepts of the Church

- Have I deliberately missed Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of obligation without a serious reason?
- Do I go to confession at least once a year when I have serious sins to confess?
- Do I receive Holy Communion, at least once during Eastertime?
- Do I take part in the major feasts celebrating Our Lord, the Virgin Mary, and the saints?
- Do I abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent (for ages 14 and over) and fast on one full meal on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (for ages 18-59)? Do I fast for one hour before Holy Communion (water and medicine allowed)?
- Do I contribute to support the material needs of the Church?

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