

Confession

Notes from the Catechism

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"
- John 20:23

"Those who approach the Sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion."
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1422)

"Conversion is accomplished in daily life by gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, the exercise and defense of justice and right, by the admission of faults to one's brethren, fraternal correction, revision of life, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness. Taking up one's cross each day and following Jesus is the surest way of penance." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1435)

"Only God forgives sins. Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, 'The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' and exercises this divine power: 'Your sins are forgiven.' Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1441)

"The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1455)

"Confession to a priest is an essential part of the Sacrament of Penance: 'All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession.....'"
(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1456)

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 the sinners into the community. This is the goal of the Sacrament of Confession: to forgive sins and to provide reconciliation with the Church.

The rite for the Sacrament of Reconciliation involve 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 the priest.

Penance: an important part of our healing is the "penance" the priest imposes in reparation for our sins.

Absolution: the priest speaks the words by which "God, the Father of Mercies" reconciles a sinner to Himself 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).

We bring our failings to the Church, then, because Jesus imparted to His apostles, their successors, and through them to all ordained priests, His own power to forgive sins, to restore and reconcile the sinner with God and also the Church. This power to forgive sins is often referred to as the "power of the keys," the power entrusted to the Church when Jesus told St. Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19). This power is manifest and operative in the sacrament of Penance.

*Excerpted from A Guide to the Sacrament of Penance:
Discover God's Love Anew, Bishops of Pennsylvania, 2002)*

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

A priest can never reveal what he is told in a confession. This obligation of absolute confidentiality and secrecy is most serious. In fact, a priest who violates the seal of confession is punished with automatic excommunication.

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 or reconciliation rooms 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/ don't want him to think badly of me.

The priest's purpose is not to keep a checklist on people, but to be an instrument of Christ in receiving someone's sorrow, bringing forgiveness and helping the 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.

Why does the priest sometimes ask for more information?

The priest may ask for additional information simply to clarify what happened, to understand if the action you confessed was a one-time occurrence or a pattern, and to assess the person's understanding of the situation.

How often should I go to Confession/Reconciliation?

As the Code of Canon Law tells us, Catholics are required to receive the sacrament at least once per year (more often if they have committed any mortal, or serious, sins). That said, parishioners are encouraged to take advantage of the sacrament at least monthly. This practice 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 at Mass. 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, however, since the repetition of these sins often lead to more serious sin.

Which is it: Confession, Penance or Reconciliation?

Any of these is fine. The Rite itself uses the words Penance and Reconciliation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes the sacrament is known by many names:

"...the Sacrament of Conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin."

"...the Sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction."

"...the Sacrament of Confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a 'confession' – acknowledgment and praise – of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man."

"...the Sacrament of Forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent 'pardon and peace.'"

"...the Sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: 'Be reconciled to God.' He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: 'Go; first be reconciled to your brother.'"

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1423-1424)

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 or have questions about your situation, we encourage you to speak with your parish priest. Another excellent resource is a brochure published by Our Sunday Visitor, called "What the Church Teaches: Annulments," available in the literature racks of many churches.