



Frequently Asked Questions About the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Introduction

Many people have questions about the Sacrament of Penance. This booklet has been prepared in order to try to respond to the most common of them. It does not deal with questions about the actual structure of the Sacrament of Penance, which is described in the companion resource, "Guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation." You may have questions that are not addressed adequately here or at all. Please do not hesitate to bring those questions to the priests in your parish or to seek solutions on the many excellent sites on the web, including TheLightIsOnForYou.org.

It is our hope that those who have questions about the Sacrament of Penance may find this FAQ booklet useful in helping to overcome whatever hesitations they may have in coming to receive the sacrament. It is also hoped that Catholics who frequently receive this sacrament may find this small booklet a means for greater appreciation of what they already esteem.

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1. Why do I have to confess my sins to a priest?

That's the way Jesus set it up on Easter Sunday evening. He told his apostles that just as God the Father had sent him — and God the Father sent him to save us from our sins — so he was sending them. He breathed on them the power of the Holy Spirit, giving them God's power to forgive sins, since no one can forgive sins but God alone. He told them that whatever sins they forgive are forgiven and whatever sins they retain are retained (Jn 20:21-23; Mk 2:7). Since the apostles were unable to read minds, the only way that they would know which to forgive and which to retain is if people told them their sins. Jesus thus established the essential structure of the sacrament of confession. Just as he uses priests to give us his Body and Blood at Mass so he uses them to give us His mercy in Penance.

2. Was the Sacrament of Penance always the way it is now?

The Catechism succinctly teaches, "Over the centuries the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord has varied considerably. During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation. To this 'order of penitents' (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime. During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the 'private' practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day" (CCC 1447).

3. Why do people vary in calling it the Sacrament of Penance, Confession or Reconciliation?

The names emphasize different aspects of the sacrament. Penance refers to our repentance, sorrow and resolution to amend our life with God's help. Confession refers to the act by which we tell our sins to the priest. Reconciliation refers to the goal of the celebration by which the sinner is reconciled to God and the Church (see CCC 1423-1424). The ritual for the sacrament is called the Rite of Penance, but is fitting to refer to it with any of these titles. In fact, the Catechism refers to it also as "the Sacrament of Conversion" and the "Sacrament of Forgiveness."

4. What do I need to do to make a good confession?

The sacrament consists of three actions on the part of the penitent: contrition, which sorrow for one's sins; confession, that is examining one's conscience and telling one's sins to the priest; and penance, namely a desire to make up for one's sins and amend one's life. Together the three are called the "acts of the penitent."

5. How do I examine my conscience well?

One does so by asking for God's help and prayerfully examining one's actions in the light of Christ's teaching and example. Some review their behavior by the Ten Commandments, others by Christ's command to love God and love others, others by their correspondence to the beatitudes, others by comparing their behavior to the most important Christian virtues, and others by the seven "capital" sins (pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, lust and gluttony). It is not enough merely to focus on how one's broken God's "rules," but rather how one has damaged his relationship with God and others and hurt himself interiorly. It is also important to examine for sins of omission.

6. How do I grow in contrition?

There are two types of contrition: sorrow over hurting one we love (called perfect contrition) and sorrow over getting caught or over the punishment that comes because of sin (imperfect contrition). We should ask God to help us achieve that perfect contrition in which we are sorry for having wounded the God who loves us and whom we should love in return. Meditation on the consequence of our sins — Christ's brutal death on the Cross — often helps us to grow toward perfect contrition.

7. How does our sorrow translate into penance?

When we are truly sorry for our sins, we regret having ever done them. That leads naturally to our trying to remedy the damage caused by sin and to having a firm purpose of amendment to avoid that and other types of sins in the future. The priest normally assigns us a penance (for example, prayer, fasting or other types of self-denial, sacrifices, almsgiving, spiritual or corporal works of mercy, or service of neighbor) as medicine to begin to repair the damage caused by sin, but this penance is light in comparison to the infinite harm our sins have done in bringing about Christ's death. So we should voluntarily do penance to seek, with God's help, to expiate our sins and repair that damage (CCC 1460)

8. What are the qualities of a good confession?

A good confession is humble, sincere and complete. It's humble when we accuse ourselves of our sins with a deep sorrow for having offended the Lord while imploring his loving mercy. It's sincere when we tell all of our sins honestly and truthfully, without exaggerating or excusing them. It's complete when we confess all of our mortal sins, including the number of times we have committed each one.

9. What is sin and what sins need to be confessed in the Sacrament of Penance?

Sin is an offense against God that ruptures our communion with Him and with His Church (CCC 1440). It is far more than "breaking the rules," but is a failure to love God and to love others, which causes real damage in all our relationships. There are sins totally incompatible with love for God and others (mortal sins, in which genuine love is "dead"), and ones in which love is less grievously wounded (venial or "easily forgiven"). The Church says that all grave or mortal sins must be confessed as soon as possible (CIC 988).

10. What is a mortal sin?

A mortal sin involves an action whose object is grave matter that is committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent. Grave matter is generally understood to be something that violates the Ten Commandments. Full knowledge means that one is aware that God or the Church he founded considers the act sinful (even if one doesn't totally understand why it is sinful). Deliberate consent means a consent sufficiently intentional to be a personal choice (CCC 1857-1859).

11. What are the consequences of a mortal sin?

A mortal sin "results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back" (CCC 1861). This is why it is so important for mortal sins to be confessed to a priest as soon as possible.

12. What is a venial sin and what are its consequences?

"One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave manner, but without full knowledge or without complete consent. Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly reparable" (CCC 1862-1863).

13. What did Jesus say and do about sin?

Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). His first public words were “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mt 4:17). He healed the sins of the paralyzed man and of the woman caught in adultery (Mk 2:5; Jn 8:11). He preached on God’s desire to reconcile us with the beautiful images of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son (Lk 15). He taught us how to be brutal toward sin, instructing us in the Sermon on the Mount us that it would be better to rip out our eyes or cut off our hands if they were leading us to sin than to do nothing and lose our bodies and souls forever in Hell (Mt 5:29-30). He taught us to pray to the Father to forgive us our sins and to bring us to forgive the relatively smaller debts of those who sin against us (Mt 6:12; 18:21-35). On the Cross, as he prepared to die to take away our sins, Jesus’ salvific words were, first for sinners in general, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” and then for one sinner, the Good Thief, in particular (Lk 23:34,43). After his resurrection, not only did Jesus give the apostles the ability to forgive sins in his name but commanded them to preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins” to all nations (Jn 20:21-23; Lk 24:47). That’s what the Church continues through preaching the need for repentance and making Jesus’ mercy available through the Sacrament of Penance.

14. I know mortal sins must be confessed, but should I also confess the venial sins I’m aware of?

The Church strongly recommends that we confess our every day faults (venial sins) because it can help us “to form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies (patterns of weakness that can lead us to sin), ... be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. (CCC 1458; CIC 988). Confession of our venial sins shows our hatred of all sin because even venial sins are against the love of God and neighbor.

15. Should I go to confession if I’m only aware of having committed venial sins?

Yes. We should not stay away from confession if we’ve committed only venial sins, since the sacrament not only forgives our sins but gives us God’s grace to fight against temptation. The great saints, who were filled with love of God and seem for the most part to have avoided mortal sins, have confessed very frequently, because the sacrament helps us to grow in God’s grace. It reveals to us our need for God’s help in the “little things” of the day and leads us to ask for that help.

16. Should I go to confession if I haven’t committed any sins since my last confession?

No, you should stay at home and wait for your canonization papers to arrive! Seriously, if it’s been several weeks since your last confession, you have probably not examined your conscience very carefully. “The just man,” the Book of Proverbs tells us, “falls seven times a day” (Prov 24:16). If you’re struggling to find matter to confess, examine your conscience on your sins of omission, on the seven capital sins or on whether you in fact love the Lord with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength (Lk 10:27).

17. If I forget to confess a mortal sin, is my confession still valid and my sins forgiven?

Yes. If one through bad memory or nervousness forgets to confess a mortal sin, the person’s confession is valid and all his or her sins will be forgiven. The person should, however, mention that forgotten sin in the next confession to receive advice and a proper penance. If this is a routine occurrence, it is probably an indication that one is either confessing too infrequently or not fully aware of the true horror that is a mortal sin, because one should not forget mortal sins easily. If, on the other hand, a penitent deliberately refuses to mention a mortal sin in confession, none of the person’s sins will be forgiven, the person will remain in the dangerous state of mortal sin, and will be guilty of the additional sin of sacrilege.

18. How often do I need to confess?

The Church recommends that Catholics receive the Sacrament of Penance frequently. Strictly speaking, after they’ve reached the age of reason, Catholics are obliged to confess their serious sins at least once a year (CIC 989), but the minimum should not be made a maximum. Catholics should come to confession as soon as possible after they’ve committed a mortal sin. If they’re seeking to grow in holiness, the regular practice of confession at least once a month is commended.

19. What are the effects of the sacrament?

The Sacrament of Penance is a spiritual resurrection bringing us to life again after we were dead through mortal sin (Lk 15:24). It reconciles us with God in loving friendship and restores us to his grace. It is normally followed by peace, joy, serenity and spiritual consolation. The sacrament also reconciles us with the Church, repairing or restoring the damage our sins have done to our communion with others. The sinner also auspiciously anticipates the judgment that will come at the end of his life, choosing the path of life over the path of death (CCC 1468-1470).

20. Can a priest reveal what he has heard to others?

No. A priest can never reveal the sins a person has confessed. This is known as the "Seal of confession," which admits of no exceptions (CCC 1467). If a priest were to violate the seal of confession he would be automatically excommunicated (CIC 1388). Over the centuries several priests have died and many have been imprisoned because they refused, even under threat of torture and execution, to break the inviolable seal of confession. This is one of the most beautiful aspects of the sacrament and of the priesthood: the priest who hears our confession, in order to protect the secrets we have whispered to God through him, will allow himself to be imprisoned, tortured or even killed. That's how seriously he and the Church take the seal and the sacrament.

21. What is the priest's role in the sacrament of confession?

"When he celebrates the sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep, of the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgment is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner." The priest is called, practically, to lead "the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy" (CCC 1465-66).

22. What if I feel nervous about going to the sacrament?

Remember, first, that in the sacrament you are fundamentally talking to God through the priest. God loves you, wishes to forgive you, and desires to embrace you with the joy with which the prodigal son was embraced in Jesus' parable (Lk 15:11-32). Moreover, know that you will not say anything that the priest has not heard before. Do not be afraid. If you are nervous, please just tell the priest that you're nervous and he will help you.

23. What if I haven't been to the sacrament for many years? How do I prepare? What do I say?

First, don't be afraid. Jesus said, "Heaven rejoices more for one repentant sinner than for 99 righteous persons who never needed to repent." The priest will probably be so happy you've returned to confession after many years that you will make all the hours he spends in the confessional seem light. Second, try to prepare with the help of a good examination of conscience sheet, but the priest will know that you cannot remember your sins with the precision of someone who came the previous week. Third, get the largest sins off of your shoulders first. Fourth, don't be afraid to ask the priest for help; most confessors are experts in leading someone in your circumstances through an examination of the "big stuff" in the confessional. Finally, don't wait. Come back to be reconciled to your loving Father, set off the celebration in heaven, and share your Father's joy!

24. I'm reluctant to go to confession because I don't know the Act of Contrition by heart.

Confession is not meant to be a memory test. It is good when Catholics have memorized one of the many beautiful acts of contrition, which sum up all of the sentiments and resolutions a Catholic should have in coming to confession. But if you do not know an Act of Contrition by memory, you can always express your sorrow and firm purpose of amendment in your own words, ask the priest to help you, or pray, "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner who loves you!"

25. What if I'm not comfortable going to confession face-to-face?

If you prefer to go to confession anonymously, that's fine. Most churches have traditional confessionals or reconciliation rooms with the option to confess either face-to-face or kneeling behind an opaque screen. In Church law, both the priest and the penitent have the right to opt for the screen if for whatever reason they find that more comfortable.

26. What if I prefer to go to confession to priests at nearby parishes or at Catholic shrines or chapels where confessions are available each day?

The most important thing is that you go! You can go to any Catholic priest in good standing with the faculties to hear confessions. You may find over time, however, that you will be helped more in your struggle against sin by a good confessor who has gotten to know you than by confessing to various priests, none of whom really know you.

27. Can I confess my sins over the telephone or via the internet?

You can confess your sins in any number of ways – many have confessed to bartenders and hairdressers over the centuries – but you cannot receive sacramental absolution via the internet or on the phone.

28. Can I be forgiven of the terrible sin of abortion?

Yes! Pope John Paul II once wrote to women in your situation, “The Church is aware of the many factors that may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong, but do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.” Come, begin the process of healing. If you would prefer to confess to a priest who has experience ministering to women who have abortions, please contact Project Rachel (508-651-3100, help@projectrachelboston.com, www.projectrachelboston.com) and they will put you in touch with such a priest. (Priests must be given faculties explicitly by their bishop to absolve the sin of abortion. Cardinal Seán O'Malley has granted these faculties to all priests in the Archdiocese of Boston.) The Project Rachel website contains testimonies from dozens of women who have found reconciliation and healing through Project Rachel and some very moving comments about the Sacrament. Project Rachel also offers an extensive retreat program.

29. Do I have to go to Confession before receiving Holy Communion like everyone did years ago when I was a child?

If you are conscious of having committed a mortal sin, then, yes, you must first go to receive Jesus' forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and be restored by Him to loving communion before you can come to receive Him in Holy Communion. The reason why young children must receive the Sacrament of Penance before first Holy Communion is to ensure that they have cleaned their inner “temples” to receive the greatest Guest of all. The same principal applies to all of us. If one has not committed any serious sins since his or her last good confession, then it is not necessary to confess before receiving the Holy Eucharist.

30. May I receive the sacrament if I'm divorced?

If you are civilly divorced but have not remarried or were validly married in the Church after receiving a declaration of nullity for your first marriage, then, yes, you may receive the Sacrament. If you have remarried outside of the Church or have entered into a cohabitating relationship, then those predicaments must be addressed before you can receive absolution. Pope John Paul II addressed this situation in 1981. “The church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon sacred scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church that is signified and effected by the Eucharist. ... Reconciliation in the sacrament of penance, which would open the way to the Eucharist, can only be granted to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage. This means, in practice, that when, for serious reasons such as, for example, the children's upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they ‘take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples’” (FC 84). If you're in these circumstances, you are encouraged to talk to a priest in the light of God about your present situation and possibly begin an investigation of whether your first marriage was valid.

31. Can a priest ever rightly deny me absolution?

A priest will normally try to do everything he can never to have to deny someone absolution. But on some rare occasions he will find himself in a situation where he has no choice. This occurs when the penitent lacks one of the three elements that make for a good confession: either the penitent confesses no sins even after the priest assists in examining the conscience; or the penitent does not even have imperfect contrition for the sins committed; or, most frequently, the penitent lacks a firm purpose of amendment to address a situation of serious sin, like a living arrangement incompatible with the Gospel. In such cases, the priest will normally pray with the penitent so that he or she may receive God's help to remedy a situation from which the person may presently see no way out.

32. I've heard that in some places people receive "general absolution" all at once, without needing to go individually to a priest. Is this valid?

The Church teaches, "In case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with general confession and general absolution. Grave necessity of this sort can arise when there is imminent danger of death without sufficient time for the priest or priests to hear each penitent's confession. Grave necessity can also exist when, given the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors to hear individual confessions properly in a reasonable time, so that the penitents through no fault of their own would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time. In this case, for the absolution to be valid the faithful must have the intention of individually confessing their sins in the time required. The diocesan bishop is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist. A large gathering of the faithful on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity" (CCC 1483). For practical purposes, outside of an imminent danger of death situation, these conditions would never obtain in our Archdiocese. Moreover, if a penitent sought to have recourse to a general absolution as a means of avoiding individual confession and absolution, the confession would be invalid.

33. Can my sins be forgiven outside of the Sacrament of Penance?

God, who created the sacraments for our salvation, is Himself not bound by them. Our sins are first forgiven, of course, through the sacrament of baptism. For post-baptismal sins, the Church has always taught that, for example in a danger of death situation without the possibility of recourse to the sacrament of confession, God could forgive our sins if we pray to him with perfect contrition. The reality is, however, that we can never know if we've made a perfect act of contrition. The Church teaches, therefore, that "individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession" (CCC 1484). The great gift of this sacrament is that, if we confess all our serious sins with sorrow and a firm purpose of amendment, we do not need to doubt whether our sins have been forgiven. God created this sacrament so that we might know that he has forgiven us through the ministry of priests.

Abbreviations

CCC: Catechism of the Catholic Church

CIC: Code of Canon Law

FC: Familiaris Consortio

These materials have been adapted from the Diocese of Fall River's "Be Reconciled to God" Initiative in 2009, with permission of Fr. Roger Landry.