

The Gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Some people see the Sacrament of Reconciliation only as an obligation. It is most commonly known as “Confession”. An essential part of the Sacrament is the confession of our sins. If we have a contrite heart with a true desire to change, we show this by speaking our sins out loud to the priest, not as a human being, but as God’s intermediary.

This sacrament is not simply an obligation. *It is a gift.*

“Confession” is a sacrament known by several names (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1423-1424). It is called a Sacrament of Conversion because it expresses our desire to change. It is called a Sacrament of Penance because we receive penance and do that penance as a sign of our desire to change. It is called Confession because we confess our sins. It is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation because reconciliation with God is why we come to the Sacrament. It is the gift of God’s forgiveness shown in Jesus’ death on the Cross.

God is the one who has the power to forgive sins. We can’t do it on our own. That’s why God, out of love, sent his Son Jesus to die for us on the Cross. Jesus had the power to forgive sins (see Mark 2:7) and he gives the ability to forgive sins to the Apostles in John 20:19-23. So we provide this guide for you to help you receive the gift of God’s forgiveness. It is a great gift. Cherish it in love.

Before coming to the Sacrament we should examine our conscience to know what sins we need to confess. To do so, we must first realize what sin is. To sin is to break God’s Commandments, not just the Ten Commandments narrowly defined. To sin is to do anything that hurts or breaks our relationship with God. Mortal sin is a clear offense that offends God because we choose our own desires above God in a way that breaks the relationship. We do the same thing in our relationships with other people. We also do things that can hurt our relationships with people without breaking the relationship. In our relationship with God, we call these sins venial.

When we realize we have hurt or broken our relationship with God through sin, we cannot restore the relationship to what it is meant to be, but God can. We just need to come to him with a contrite heart, meaning that we are truly sorry for our sins and have a true desire to change.

People who do not really understand our sense of sin have coined the term “Catholic guilt.” They sometimes think that we think we are not good and are always sinning. What defines sin? What is it that we need to ask ourselves to examine our conscience?

One way we can examine our conscience is to think about the ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ which can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraph 1866. Or we can ask ourselves which of the Ten Commandments we have broken (Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21)

The same people that speak of Catholic guilt, also may not understand why we confess our sins to a priest. As Catholics, we know that it is only God who can forgive sins but Jesus shares in that power (Mark 2:7) as the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father. Jesus gives this power to the Apostles (and thus priests) in John 20:21-23. We should also understand that there is a real value in freely speaking aloud our sins to a priest. Are there not times we feel we need to get something “off our chest?” This is part of confessing, admitting our imperfections and seeking God’s forgiveness and help that we might change. This is the real gift of this Sacrament.

In the Sacrament we receive a penance. Why? The penance is not punishment but an act to express our sorrow for our sins and help us change (conversion). It may be to do a kind act for someone, read a passage from the Bible that might relate to your sins or to say prayers like the “Our Father” or “Hail Mary” seeking God’s help and Mary’s intercession to help you sin no more. The penance is not to pay a price for our sins. The price has already been paid by Jesus when he died for us on the cross so that our sins would be forgiven.

We say an **Act of Contrition** in the Sacrament to express our sorrow and our desire to change.

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.

Then the priest will give you absolution, the words of God's forgiveness.
The words the priest uses reminds us that our sins are forgiven by the death of
Jesus on the Cross.

Prayer of Absolution

God, the Father of mercies,
Through the death and 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.

Penitent: **Amen**

The priest then says words of dismissal, such as "Go in Peace" to which you
respond "Thanks be to God" truly giving thanks for the gift of this sacrament
through which we receive God's forgiveness. It is through this sacrament that we
can be renewed in the joy and hope of our faith.

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