

SACRAMENT OF Confession

Introduction It is not easy to go to Confession. If it is not hard enough to admit to ourselves that we have sinned against God and neighbor, then we have to tell our sins to a Priest, say we are sorry, and humbly ask for forgiveness! It is little consolation that the telling is done in private and that the Priest confessor may not ever tell another what we confessed.

Why then do we confess our sins to a Priest? Why not just tell God and ask forgiveness from God directly? The answer to these questions is rooted in Jesus' understanding of human nature and of sin.



St. John Mary Vianney
Pray for us.

Jesus understood human nature

Jesus knew, given our human nature, that to heal the wound of sin it is necessary to voice our faults to another and to hear another's voice tell us we are forgiven. And so on Easter night Jesus appeared to the Apostles, "breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (John 20:22-23; see also Matthew 16:19; 18:18). Jesus shared his own authority over sin and forgiveness with the Apostles (and with their successors, the Bishops, and with the Priests who collaborate in the ministry of the Church).

Jesus understood the nature of sin

Even the most secret sin offends God and all the members of the Church. We learn how Jesus and the members of the Church are related from St. Paul, who, while on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, heard Jesus ask him: "Why do you persecute me?" (see Acts 9:1-5). When we sin we must apologize, ask forgiveness, and be reconciled, not only to God, but also to the members of the Church. The Priest hearing confessions represents the Church community, exercising the "ministry of reconciliation" written about by St. Paul (2 Corinthians 5:18).

In the voice of the Priest in the confessional we hear the voice of Jesus, forgiving us, healing us, and restoring us. The Priest acts in the name of Jesus when he says to the penitent: "I absolve you from your sins." Our human nature is such that we want to hear those words; we need to hear those words.

Through the voice of the Priest in the confessional we hear the voices of the other members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, accepting our apology, forgiving us, and restoring us to fellowship. So, instead of having to confess our sins standing in front of the congregation in church on a Sunday morning, we can confess to and be reconciled by the Priest Confessor.

"What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door; he is the steward of the good Lord, the administrator of his goods."

– St. John Mary Vianney

Human benefits from Confession

There are humanly speaking numerous other benefits from confessing our sins to a Priest; it first of all responds to the need, after doing something bad, to unburden ourselves to someone (it is an added benefit when that "someone" will not, because he may not, tell anyone else). It is a relief to "fess up" to another, even if punishment follows. It is an even greater relief that our consciences are no longer burdened by sin. Who has not felt the lightness of heart that follows being absolved from sin in Confession?

Also, the penance imposed on us by the Priest in Confession responds to the human need to do something to make up for an offense we have committed. Consider the example of St. Peter. Three times Jesus asked Peter "Do you love me?" And three times Jesus told him to take care of his disciples, providing Peter with an opportunity to make up for the three times he denied knowing Jesus (see John 21:15-17). The penance imposed by the Priest is often not too challenging, like saying three Hail Marys. Whether the penance imposed is easy or hard, it serves as a reminder of the need to satisfy justice after we have sinned, and as an encouragement to do yet more penance for our sins than merely what the Priest imposed in Confession.

Spiritual benefits from Confession

Spiritually speaking, there are likewise numerous benefits. Spiritually speaking, there are likewise numerous benefits. First of all, we are reconciled as friends of Jesus, like St. Peter after his denial of Christ. We are reconciled too as friends of the members of his Mystical Body, the Church.

We receive in the Sacrament of Confession the gift of Sanctifying Grace, which is a share in the very life of God. We need the gift of Grace to be able to rise up out of our sins and try again, making progress in our imitation of Christ.

It is possible that the Priest in the confessional will give us a

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word of spiritual counsel and encouragement about changing the way we live so that we might not repeat the same sins, or at least not as seriously or frequently.

The examination of conscience we do in preparation for Confession deepens our humility, which is knowledge of the full truth about ourselves, our life's direction, and our strengths and weaknesses. The more we examine our conscience, the exercise not only becomes easier, but we also grow all the more in humility. We also grow in humility by actually confessing our sins.

"It is not the sinner who returns to God to beg his forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner and makes him return to him ... This good Savior is so filled with love that he seeks us everywhere."
– St. John Mary Vianney

Lastly, but most importantly, we will certainly receive in Confession a reminder of the unconditional, unbounded love of God for each person,

even those guilty of sin.

St. Catherine of Siena expressed God’s love in a prayer she composed, reflecting on why God would create human beings, knowing beforehand that they will commit sin. She prayed:

“Even though you saw that we would offend you, your charity would not let you set your eyes on that sight. No, you took your eyes off the sin that was to be and fixed your gaze only on your creature’s beauty ... Not that sin was hid from you, but you concentrated on the love [you had for creating mankind] because you are nothing but a fire of love, crazy over what you have made” (*Prayer XIII*).

This same love, which focuses on the loveliness of human beings, rather than on our sinfulness, is recalled and called upon in Holy Mass: in preparation to receive Holy Communion, the Priest Celebrant begs Jesus to “look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church.”

There is a risk, in speaking so forcefully about God’s unconditional and unbounded love for us, that some people might abuse it, thinking to themselves: “Sin is no big deal; God still loves me.” Yes, God still loves the sinner. Just as we cannot earn God’s love, so we cannot do anything to make God stop loving us, even by our sins. The message of God’s love should not lead us to be indifferent to sin; rather, it should inspire a hatred for sin and fuel our efforts to love our neighbor as the best way to respond in kind to God’s love.

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Conclusion

The confessional in the church and the Priest Confessor sitting there, waiting, serve as a reminder of the unbounded and unconditional love God has for each of us. It also reflects how well Jesus understood human nature and sin, providing assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

The sight of the confessional in the church and the Priest Confessor sitting there, waiting, will hopefully lure us to Confession with the promise of relief from the burden of sin and guilt (we have only to experience this relief one time to be made to want it again) and of putting things right with God and others.

St. John Vianney sat in the confessional of the church in Ars (France) for hours each day, waiting for penitents. Many came. They came, maybe because the saintly Curé of Ars prayed so long and hard for their conversion. They came with hope, trusting that God’s mercy is greater than all their sins. They came burdened by their sins, wanting relief, and needing to hear the words “I absolve you from your sins.” They left as friends of Jesus and of his Mystical Body, the Church.

Yes, it is not easy to go to Confession, but the spiritual and human benefits from confessing our sins to a priest far outweigh the difficulties. Will we let the embarrassment that comes from pride keep us from enjoying these benefits? May we use the Sacrament of Confession, this great gift from Jesus, frequently, soon, now.

Michael O. Jackels
Bishop of Wichita

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Memorial of St. John Mary Vianney

Frequently asked questions

“I weep because you do not weep,” St. John Mary Vianney would say to those who were indifferent towards their sins. “If only the Lord were not so good! But he is so good! One would have to be a brute to treat so good a Father this way!”

How often do I have to go to Confession? The Church obliges us to confess our grave or mortal sins at least once a year, if for no other reason so that we can worthily receive Holy Communion at least once a year, during the Easter season, which is another obligation we have as members of the Church (see Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 2042).

Because of the benefits from going to Confession, it is a good rule of thumb to examine your conscience and confess your sins, even venial ones, to a Priest once a month. Do not be satisfied with going to Confession once a year, or only before Christmas and Easter. If we have the misfortune of committing a mortal sin, it is best to go to Confession as soon as possible.

What is a “bad” confession? This is when the penitent knowingly omits telling a mortal sin to the Priest in Confession. A bad confession indicates a lack of sorrow and purpose of amendment, and so the sins are not forgiven (see CCC 1456). At the next Confession, the penitent should confess first of all having made a bad Confession, and then any mortal sins from that bad Confession, and any other mortal sins since that Confession. This is different from the Confession when the penitent unintentionally omits to mention the commission of a mortal sin; that sin is nonetheless forgiven with the absolution of the Priest Confessor.

What will the Priest think of me? As “another Christ,” the Priest is certainly happy that we are going to Confession. Also, the Priest will not likely be scandalized by our sins because he has heard it all before a thousand times over.

What will the Priest say about me? Nothing; his lips are sealed tighter than a drum by the seal of Confession. The Priest is threatened with the penalty of excommunication were he to reveal directly the penitent’s sins to another person or somehow make use of the knowledge learned about the penitent in the confessional (see CCC 1467).

What can I do to amend my life? Here is some advice on how to change the way we live:

- Have an action plan of what to do in order to sin at least less frequently or not as gravely;
- Avoid the occasions of sin: for example, if the sin is viewing internet pornography, limit or remove access to the internet;
- St. Catherine of Siena counseled people to cast out vice by building up virtue, for example, practice almsgiving to cast out sinful greed;
- As “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8), serve the needs of others, any other and any need (the more distasteful, the better), out of love;
- As pride often goeth before the fall into sin (see Proverbs 16:18), practice humility by:
 - « Acknowledging that sin is due “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” (from the Confiteor of Holy Mass)
 - « Saying to the person offended, “I am sorry; please forgive me”
 - « Confessing regularly to the same Priest Confessor
- Receive Holy Communion worthily as often as possible;
- Ask Mary in prayer for her motherly intercession;
- Praying in petition for help, strength, wisdom, mercy – all the things needed to live a Christian life, and that we cannot claim unless they are given to us by God.

“There are no two ways of serving God. There is only one: serve him as he desires to be served ... Do only what can be offered to the good Lord.”

– **St. John Mary Vianney**

What if I keep falling into sin? As many times as we fall into sin, that many times we must get up again, acknowledge our fault, say we are sorry, and beg the forgiveness of God in the Sacrament of Confession. We must never give up trying, for to do so is to give up hope. This is what the devil wants, for us to give hope that we can resist temptation, or that God can or will forgive us. In the end, the only ones at risk of losing heaven are those who say “I don’t, I won’t, or I can’t” – that is to say, “I do not believe,” “I will not repent and confess my sins,” or “I cannot stop sinning or be forgiven by God.” In such cases, God does indeed still love us, but we have refused God’s love, or rejected it, or denied it. As a result, we may find ourselves separated from God for all eternity, and that is hell. But as long as we can honestly say we are trying, then there is hope, and we are on the path that leads to heaven.

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Prayer before Confession

Receive my confession, O most loving and gracious Lord Jesus Christ, only hope for the salvation of my soul. Grant to me true contrition of soul, so that day and night I may by penance make satisfaction for my many sins.

Savior of the world, O good Jesus, who gave yourself to the death of the Cross to save sinners, look upon me, most wretched of all sinners; have pity on me, and give me the light to know my sins, true sorrow for them, and a firm purpose of never committing them again.

O gracious Virgin Mary, Immaculate Mother of Jesus, I implore you to obtain for me by your powerful intercession these graces from you Divine Son. St. Joseph, pray for me. Amen.

First Commandment: *“I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me.”*

Have I rejected or been indifferent to the existence of God?

Have I abandoned the practice of Catholic faith by formally joining another religion or a non-Catholic denomination?

Have I shown contempt towards or mistreated sacred persons, places, or things?

Have I been guided in making choices by something contrary to faith in God, for example, love for money, or superstitious and/or occult practices?

Have I become a member of a group that Catholics are forbidden to join?

Second Commandment: *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”*

Eighth Commandment: *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”*

Have I used the name of God in cursing or in casual speech?

Have I lied under oath (perjury)?

Have I lied to another person about a serious matter?

Have I failed to fulfill a vow or promise made to God or with God as my witness?

Have I blasphemed, speaking with hatred, reproach, or defiance about God, the Catholic Church or sacred persons, places, or things?

Have I taken enjoyment, been indifferent to, or failed to speak out when God, the Catholic Church, or sacred persons, places, or things were treated with contempt?

Have I rashly and harshly judged another person?

Have I destroyed another person’s reputation by speech or in writing?

Third Commandment: *“Remember to keep holy the Lord’s Day.”*

First Precept of the Church: *“Attend Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation.”*

Second Precept of the Church: *“Go to Confession at least once a year.”*

Third Precept of the Church: *“Receive Holy Communion during the Easter season.”*

Fourth Precept of the Church: *“Observe the days of fasting and abstinence.”*

Fifth Precept of the Church: *“Contribute to the material needs of the Church.”*

Have I participated in Holy Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation?

Have I willfully engaged in unnecessary shopping or work on Sunday?

Have I made a good Confession of my mortal sins at least once a year?

Have I received Holy Communion worthily at least once during the Easter season?

Have I purposefully made a bad Confession (intentionally omitting to tell my mortal sins) or knowingly received Holy Communion unworthily (while guilty of mortal sin or without fasting one hour beforehand)?

Have I intentionally disregarded the Church’s laws of abstinence and fasting?

Have I contributed a just amount of my time, talent, and money to provide for the needs of the Church in my parish, in my diocese, and in its worldwide mission?

Fourth Commandment: *“Honor your father and mother.”*

For minor children: Have I obeyed and shown respect to my parents and others who legitimately exercise authority over me (for example, teacher, Pastor, police)?

For adult children: Have I failed to give my parents material and moral support when in distress, sickness, loneliness, and old age?

For parents: Have I had my child baptized and prepared for First Confession, Holy Communion, and Confirmation? Have I fulfilled my duty to bring my child up in the Catholic faith? Have I provided for my child’s on-going religious education and formation? Have I neglected to provide my child, according to my means, with proper food, clothing, shelter, education, and discipline?

Fifth Commandment: *“You shall not kill.”*

Have I desired or planned to kill myself or another?

Have I murdered an innocent human being, including by procured abortion, abortifacient means of birth control, euthanasia, or embryonic stem cell research?

Have I encouraged or supported another person to procure an abortion, to use abortifacient birth control means, or to commit suicide?

Have I threatened and/or inflicted another person with bodily harm, or with verbal or emotional abuse?

Have I harbored or shown hatred, prejudice, or unjust discrimination towards another person, or sought revenge?

Have I led others to commit mortal sin by my scandalous words or actions?

Have I abused my body by misusing drugs or by an immoderate use of food (by overeating or excessive dieting), alcohol, or tobacco?

Have I endangered my life or health, or that of others, by reckless behavior (for example, driving under the influence of alcohol)?

Sixth Commandment: *“You shall not commit adultery.”*

Ninth Commandment: *“You not covet your neighbor’s wife.”*

Have I been impure in thought, word, or deed:

- Pornography, looking at media containing nudity and sexual situations?
- Willful fantasizing?
- Obscene, vulgar, or suggestive speech?
- Petting, foreplay reserved for marriage?
- Fornication, having pre-marital sexual relations?
- Adultery, having sexual relations in which at least one person is married?
- Contraception, having sexual relations that intentionally exclude conception?
- Rape?
- Prostitution?
- Seduction, making unwelcome sexual advances, wearing immodest dress?
- Preying upon children and youth for my sexual pleasure?
- Unnatural sexual activities, for example, with animals?
- Sodomy, having sexual relations with someone of the same gender?
- Masturbation, using my sexual organs for my own pleasure?
- Incest, having sexual relations with a close relative?

Have I participated in artificial insemination or fertilization, or surrogate parenthood?

Have I had myself sterilized for contraceptive purposes?

Am I living in a marriage blessed by the Church?

Have I abandoned my spouse and children through separation or divorce?

Am I romantically involved with someone when one or the other of us is not free to marry?

Am I living with another person as if we were married?

Seventh Commandment: *“You shall not steal.”*

Tenth Commandment: *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s goods.”*

Have I stolen, unjustly taking something of value that does not belong to me?

Have I vandalized another’s property, resulting in another’s serious economic loss?

Have I failed to pay a living wage, or failed to give a full day’s work for a full day’s pay?

Have I cheated, for example, in business, on my taxes, on a test, in sports, in games of chance?

Have I failed to pay a debt?

Have I gambled away what should have been used to provide for the needs of me and/or those in my care?

Have I willfully and grossly misused natural resources or abused animals?

HOW TO CONFESS SINS

The *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents* describes how to go to Confession:

- The Priest Confessor warmly welcomes the penitent, extending a kind greeting.
- The penitent makes the Sign of the Cross with the Priest: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”
- The Priest invites the penitent to trust in God’s mercy. This invitation may be followed by a reading from Sacred Scripture, but this is optional.
- The penitent then tells – as best as can be remembered – the number and kind of all mortal sins since the last Confession (providing any necessary details, not just being vague, for example, saying “I broke the Sixth Commandment”). It is recommended, though not required, to confess venial sins; if these are confessed, it is not necessary to include their number and kind. There is no required formula for telling our sins, but the penitent can say something like: “I confess to God and to you Father that I have sinned” followed by details like how long since your last Confession, age, gender, state in life (single, married, religious, priest).
- The Priest may offer some spiritual counsel or words of encouragement. He will then impose a penance to perform. It is permissible to ask for a different penance, if the penitent is for a good reason unable to perform the one imposed by the Priest.
- The penitent expresses sorrow for the sins confessed with an Act of Contrition, using either a traditional formula (see below) or praying spontaneously.
- The Priest then prays the Prayer of Absolution. The penitent responds by saying “Amen.”
- The Priest then says to the penitent: “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” The penitent responds: “His mercy endures forever.”
- Finally, the Priest dismisses the penitent, who responds by saying “Amen.”

Act of Contrition

(two forms)

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. Amen.

O, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you. I detest all my sins because of your just punishment, 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 occasion of sin. Amen.

PIOUS PRACTICES AS HELPS FOR THE AMENDMENT OF LIFE

Prayer: Raise your mind and heart in humble trust to God and make, at least mentally, some prayerful invocation for help in carrying out your duties and in enduring the hardships of life (see *Manual of Indulgences*, 25). Four highly recommended prayers are:

- 1) Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, praying to Jesus present in the Holy Eucharist with spontaneous prayers or traditional prayers, such as *Anima Christi*;

Anima Christi (translation by John Henry Cardinal Newman)
Soul of Christ, be my sanctification;
Body of Christ, be my salvation;
Blood of Christ, fill all my veins;
Water of Christ’s side, wash out my stains;
Passion of Christ, my comfort be;
O good Jesu, listen to me;
In thy wounds I fain would hide;
Ne’er to be parted from thy side;
Guard me, should the foe assail me;
Call me when my life shall fail me;
Bid me come to thee above,
With thy saints to sing thy love,
World without end. Amen.

- 2) Read prayerfully (*lectio divina*) the Sacred Scriptures;

The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI described *lectio divina* as “the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer [that] brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 25). The Holy Father went on to say that “if [*lectio divina*] is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.”

The first step is *lectio* or reading. Read the Bible passage reflectively to allow the text to sink in. The text can be from the day’s liturgical readings, or following some theme, or a consecutive reading of the whole Bible.

The second step is *meditatio* or meditation. Think about the text in order to take from it what God intends. When the text speaks to our heart, we have reached and received a precious fruit of meditation.

The third step is *oratio* or prayer. Speak to God from our hearts. If we know what the text says to us, what then do we say to God in response?

The final step is *contemplatio* or contemplation. Listen to God speak to us and respond with love more than with words. The way we live is the test of the authenticity of our prayer; we must take what we read in the Word of God and live it in our daily lives.

- 3) Recitation of the Rosary, meditating on the mysteries of our redemption;

- 4) Pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet.

Using normal rosary beads, begin with the Sign of the Cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Creed.

On each of the five large beads, pray: “Eternal Father, I offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of your dearly beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.”

On each of the ten small beads, pray: “For the sake of his sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.”

At the end of each decade of the Divine Mercy Chaplet, pray three times: “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world.”

Almsgiving: Give compassionately – led by the spirit of faith – of ourselves and of our material goods to serve others in need. We derive the greatest spiritual benefit for ourselves when our charity is practical and concrete, such as when we practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy (see *Manual of Indulgences*, 28; CCC 2447).

Fasting: Abstain voluntarily – in a spirit of penance – from something that is licit for our use and is pleasing to us. We are moved to regain mastery over our bodies and to conform ourselves to the poor and suffering Christ. Fasting is even more spiritually beneficial when it is joined to charity (see *Manual of Indulgences*, 31).