

Confessional FAQ's

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It's been awhile since I've been to confession, where do I begin?

Take a deep breath! The sacrament of reconciliation celebrates a moment of God's forgiveness and healing, so don't be anxious about doing it "wrong." If you are truly sorry for your sins and simply admit them, there is really no wrong way to "do confession." In order to receive the most fruit from the sacrament, here are some tips for preparation:

- Take the time before God to reflect on what you have done and what you failed to do. What were your real reasons? Don't try to ferret out every small sin – serious attitudes of sin come to mind readily. *Be honest!*
- Arouse a heartfelt sorrow by reflecting on how your sins push you away from God and hurt others who need you. *Ask for His forgiveness and healing!*
- What routines or habits rule your life? What positive patterns should you develop? *Be realistic! Ask for guidance!*

What kinds of things should I confess?

The sacrament of Reconciliation restores the life giving presence of God in our souls which is lost whenever we turn our back on God by serious (or grave) sin. For a sin to be grave it must be (1) a serious matter, (2) which is freely, willing and (3) knowingly done. In other words, a grave sin is doing something seriously wrong, which we know is wrong and still chose to do it anyway. We should always confess these sins. Yet there are many other ways in which we turn our back in less serious ways towards God. In these cases, don't worry about remembering every particular failing. Instead focus on patterns of behavior that you want to change. Keep in mind:

- Conversion of heart requires change and growth. It is more than simply stopping some vice; it is about growing in the corresponding virtue. For example, if you are judgmental, then practice looking for and praising the good in others. Our task is to become more like Christ. This begins with prayer, reflection and asking yourself what kind of person does God want me to become. Then commit yourself to taking practical, concrete steps towards that goal.
- Remember our feelings themselves are not morally good or bad. Morality begins with our deciding what we will do with our feelings. Also being tempted is not sinful; a thousand temptations do not equal one sin. Yet we must avoid putting ourselves in temptation's way, lest we easily fall into sin.
- Forgiveness is not the cessation of feeling angry or hurt, it begins with the commitment not to take revenge but act for the other's good.

Doesn't God always forgive us if we are sorry? Why do I have to confess my sins to a priest?

Of course God forgives us if we are sorry for our sins, and yet we can have difficulty both in honestly admitting our failures and in really being confident that God has forgiven us. God knows how difficult it can be for us to experience forgiveness, and so he gives us a sacramental guarantee. The first gift that the Resurrected Christ gives to his apostles is the gift of peace and forgiveness. So although, after the crucifixion, the apostles lock themselves away in the upper room in fear and shame, the Resurrected Jesus breaks through their guilt, walks into the room and says "Peace be with you." He then continues: "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them." (John 20:23). So Christ gives the power to forgive sins to His Church, not for His sake, but for ours. When we leave the confessional, we can be confident that God has completely forgiven our sins. There is nothing so freeing as the feeling of real forgiveness. *Enjoy it!*

Now that I'm ready for Reconciliation, what are the steps of the sacrament?

There are four basic steps to the Rite of Reconciliation:

I. GREETING. The priest greets the penitent, and they begin with the sign of the cross:
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Then the penitent says: ***Bless me Father, for I have sinned.***

It has been _____ (this is a moment of forgiveness, don't be embarrassed by length of time) since my last confession.

II. CONFESSION OF SINS AND ACCEPTANCE OF SATISFACTION. The penitent confesses his or her sins. If necessary, the priest helps the penitent to make an integral confession and gives suitable counsel. The priest proposes an act of penance which the penitent accepts to make satisfaction for sins and amendment of life.

III. ACT OF CONTRITION (IN THESE OR SIMILAR WORDS)

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.

IV. ABSOLUTION AND DISMISSAL. The priest then prays the prayer of forgiveness and absolution and then concludes: ***The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.***

It can be embarrassing to confess my sins; won't the priest think less of me if he knows my sins?

Certainly, it can be embarrassing to admit when we've sinned, but humility is the foundation of our relationship with Jesus. In the Gospel, Jesus is most compassionate with who humbly recognize their failings. Conversely, he is most challenging to those who nurture a sense of self-righteousness. Let's face it: we all sin and we know it. Yet one of devil's greatest temptations is to paralyze us through feelings of guilt and embarrassment. This keeps us from allowing God to

forgive us. So instead of worrying or anguishing about our failings, focus instead on God's unconditional mercy and forgiveness. Also, from the priest's perspective rest assured that:

- The priest will never reveal anything that is said in the confessional. The "seal" of confession is a sacred bond and among priests, there is universal commitment to preserve this trust.
- Practically speaking, in the course of a year, a priest hears thousands of confessions. So it's simply impossible to remember the content of every confession. Also, there seems to be only so many ways in which we fail as humans. Within the first six months of my own priesthood, I think I heard everything under the sun. So don't think that your sins are unique enough to truly be embarrassed about. Sin is ordinary. Grace and forgiveness are extraordinary!
- Moreover, in the moment of confession, the priest is acting in the person of Christ. When he says, *I* absolve you of your sins, he is not speaking in his own person, but in the person of Christ. So just as a doctor is speaking professionally, and not necessarily personally, when he offers a diagnosis to a patient, so too, a priest is not in the confessional to satisfy personal curiosity, but to bring God's healing and forgiveness. From a priest's perspective it is a profound and humbling moment, because he recognizes he is the instrument of a grace and power which transcends his own abilities.

Finally after confession, don't just say your penance; take time to enjoy the feeling of being forgiven. Appreciate God's gift; *Thank him!* Then commit yourself to take one concrete step to grow. *Be practical!*