

## How to Go to Confession

The steps to Confession are:

- Examination of Conscience (detailed procedure at bottom of page)
- contrition
- the actual confessing of your sins to God through His priests
- the assigning of penance
- Act of Contrition
- Absolution
- carrying out your penance

I will go through each of these in detail below.

### 1. Examination of Conscience

Before we get to the church, we mentally review our sins and determine what needs to be confessed. There are various methods of doing this, but one good way is to consider your Duties to God, Church, family, society and to yourself to see where you've failed to honor them. A detailed way of doing this is provided in the "[What to Confess: a guide to Examination of Conscience](#)" section at the bottom of the page.

A Catholic is *required* to go to Confession once a year (during Lent) and *also* at any time of the year he has mortal sin on his soul (is "not in a state of grace"), especially if he desires to receive the Eucharist. But weekly -- at least monthly -- Confessions are encouraged.

**What Penance is:** it is the Sacramental pardoning of the eternal effects of our sins for which we are truly contrite. It is effected by Christ, Who paid their eternal wages with His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, through His priests using proper form. Through the Sacrament, Christ gives us not only forgiveness, but grace to remain steadfast.

**What Penance is not:** psychotherapy. While the priest may give you some direction and advice in the Confessional, if you have general problems or spiritual issues you want to discuss, you should set an appointment to talk with him. This is especially true at a Confession before Mass where people are in line behind you and time is short.

### 2. Contrition

Contrition is *willful* regret for one's sins. It isn't a matter of one's "feelings" of guilt, but of conviction of the evil of sin and the resolution to sin no more. In other words, contrition is rooted in the will, not in the emotions. For example, some people are more emotional than others: some get a case of the "scruples" and feel shame or guilt over any little thing, whether it's sin or not; others can have committed murder and never "wallow" in guilt but are still truly contrite. The one is not necessarily more "holy" or making a better Confession than the other. What matters is their conviction -- their will to offend God no more, and their resolution to make reparations as far as possible, do their penance,

and patiently bear the temporal effects of their sins. *Without contrition, Confession is not valid.*

"Imperfect Contrition" (also called "attrition") is regret out of fear of God's just punishments for sin; "Perfect Contrition" is regret for having offended God. We must always strive for the latter, which always absolves sin in itself *if* it is coupled with the will to also receive the Sacrament.

One of the keys to confession is the desire to be rid of all of one's sins. If this is your will, if this is your desire, if you are willing to confess all of your sins and do your penance and resolve to sin no more, then your sins will be forgiven -- all of them, even those you may have *truly* forgotten about. But don't kid yourself, either, and think you can skip mentioning this sin or that one because you're embarrassed. Don't lie to yourself, to your priest, or to God, by omission.

### **3. Confessing Your Sins to God through His priests**

When you get to the church at the time the Sacrament is offered, you may or may not find a line of people standing or lined up in a pew outside the Confessional. Just take your place in line, keeping a wide berth of the Confessional itself if it is occupied by a fellow penitent. Please note that it is very rude to be near the Confessional when someone else is using it!

When you are ready to begin, make the Sign of the Cross and say, in a whisper, but loud enough so he can hear you:

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is (X days, weeks, months, years) since my last Confession. I accuse myself of the following sins.

You then name the sins you need to confess, indicating, in the case of mortal sins, how many times you've committed them. If you're unsure of exact numbers -- but only if you are unsure -- tell him "about how many" times you've committed the sin. Ex., "I've lied to my mother twice, I stole a candy bar from work once, I've had lustful thoughts too many times to count, etc."

Don't go into a lot of detail, don't name other people who may have sinned with you, but do tell him what he needs to know in order to understand relevant circumstances of the particular sins -- that is, circumstances that might mitigate your culpability or make you more culpable. For example, telling him about stealing a loaf of bread because you were starving will elicit a different penance and spiritual direction than if you tell him you stole a stack of money because you wanted to buy some porn. If you are unsure as to whether a particular act was a sin, tell him. As you speak, he may stop you to ask you questions for clarification.

When you are finished, indicate so by saying something like the following traditional words:

For these and all the sins of my past life, I ask pardon of God, penance, and absolution from you, Father.

Don't panic if you later recall sins you forgot to confess: remember that if you were willing to confess them but simply forgot, they are forgiven. If, at a later Confession, you start to confess sins that you committed before your last Confession but simply forgot to tell the priest, he may well tell you to skip telling him about them and to just relate sins you've committed since your last Confession. This is because, as said, sins you would have confessed, were *willing* to confess, but simply forgot to

confess, *are forgiven already.*

#### 4. Penance

Now the priest will give you penance to help you pay for the temporal effects of your sins. He might ask you to say certain prayers (the old "Say three Hail Marys"), he may ask you to read certain parts of Scripture. If there is restitution to be made, he might ask you to do so. Whatever he asks you to do, accomplish it as soon as possible after leaving the Confessional.

#### 5. Act of Contrition

Now you will make an Act of Contrition to express your sorrow at having offended God and resolving to sin no more. The traditional way of doing this is to recite aloud the prayer called "Act of Contrition":

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

If you have a hard time memorizing (which is OK!), you can pray aloud using your own words to the same effect -- i.e., expressing your contrition for having displeased God and resolving to sin no more and avoid the near occasions of sin -- but you should try to memorize the traditional Act of Contrition and teach it to your children. You can also have the prayer written out or on a Holy Card to carry with you in the Confessional. (Note: a "near occasion of sin" is a situation in which you are likely to sin. For ex., going to the mall might be a "near occasion of sin" for a kleptomaniac who hasn't learned to control his behavior; keeping company alone with a girl he is extremely attracted to in a sexual way might be a near occasion of sin for a man, etc.)

#### 6. Absolution

Now comes the good part (it may come *as* you make your Act of Contrition, so don't be confused if the priest starts whispering in Latin as you pray): Christ, through His priest, grants you absolution in a form that includes the words below. Without the words in italics (the very form of the Sacrament), the Sacrament is not valid:

Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat; et ego auctoritate ipsius te absolvo ab omni vinculo excommunicationis (suspensionis) et interdicti in quantum possum et tu indiges. [making the Sign of the Cross:] Deinde, *ego te absolvo* a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

*English:*

May our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you; and by His authority I absolve you from every bond of excommunication and interdict, so far as my power allows and your needs require. [making the Sign of the Cross:] Thereupon, *I absolve you* of your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He will pray a prayer for you:

Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi, merita Beatae Mariae Virginis et omnium sanctorum, quidquid boni feceris vel mal sustinueris sint tibi in remissionem peccatorum, augmentum gratiae et praemium vitae aeternae.

*English:*

May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints obtain for you that whatever good you do or whatever evil you bear might merit for you the remission of your sins, the increase of grace and the reward of everlasting life.

The Sacrament is now complete. The priest will dismiss you, perhaps with a final blessing. Thank him, cross yourself, and leave the Confessional.

### **7. Carrying out your Penance**

As soon as possible, carry out the penance you were given. Do all you can to avoid near occasions of sin, to bear patiently the temporal effects of the sins you've committed, to make restitution to anyone you've harmed. You may add penances of your own devising to the one(s) the priest gave you.

Please know that if you accidentally (or even purposefully, for that matter -- and God forbid) do your penance incorrectly, you are still forgiven. It is Christ's absolution, through the priest, that forgives your sins, not the penance. In other words, if the priest were to tell you to pray three Hail Marys, and you miscount and pray only two, and realize your mistake later, you are still forgiven. Go ahead and pray the third Hail Mary and get on with your life. Don't worry about not being forgiven.

## **What to Confess?** **A guide to Examination of Conscience**

*I John 5:16-17: He that knoweth his brother to sin a sin which is not to death, let him ask: and life shall be given to him who sinneth not to death. There is a sin unto death. For that I say not that any man ask. All iniquity is sin. And there is a sin unto death.*

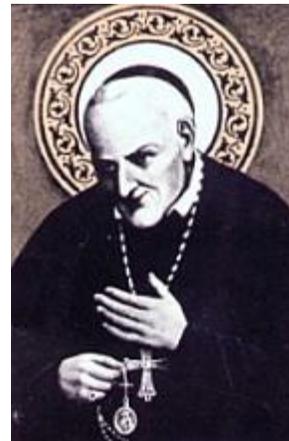
As said above, one *needs* to confess mortal sins ("sins unto death"), so a good grasp of what this means is imperative. For a sin to be mortal, it has to meet three conditions:

- **grave matter:** does it involve breaking one of the 10 Commandments, committing one of the Sins that Cry out to Heaven, or failing to uphold the 6 Precepts of the Church?
- **full knowledge:** did you know or *should you have known* that the act was sinful?
- **deliberate consent:** was your consent to this act sufficiently deliberate so as to be a choice? Were conditions present that influenced your ability to choose?

If you are unclear as to whether a sin meets all of the requirements above for a mortal sin, be safe and confess it, telling the priest of your lack of clarity so he can teach you so you'll know when you make examinations of conscience in the future.

As to venial sins (sins that don't meet the above requirements), *confessing them is definitely encouraged*.

If you are plagued by feelings of "not being forgiven" or being "unworthy" of the Sacrament of Penance, don't confess venial sins *that you are doubtful about* lest you find yourself with a case of "the scruples." A "scrupulous" person is one who has "an unfounded apprehension and consequently unwarranted fear that something is a sin which, as a matter of fact, is not" (Catholic Encyclopedia). This doesn't refer to isolated incidents, but to a habitual way of feeling or thinking, an unwarranted fear, a sort of emotional obsession; it doesn't refer to true questions as to whether such and such a behavior is a sin or not. Anxiety is involved, and often a felt doubt as to the power of confession, the genuine-ness one's contrition, and the extent of God's Divine Mercy. If you have a good Confessor, trust him and his advice, and tell him about any scruples you needlessly suffer from; he may be able to help you! And pray to St. Alphonsus Liguori, the great moral theologian who suffered from scruples himself and is now the patron saint of the scrupulous. For some practical advice in dealing with scruples, see "The Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous" written by Redemptorist priests.



Now, below are some questions to ask yourself regarding our duties in life, the answers to which might help you in examining your conscience and deciding what to confess. At least, the answers might help you to know where to focus your energies so you can become a better servant of God:

### **Duties to God and to Church:**

- Do I love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength?
- Have I given God the honor and time that is His due?
- Do I pray?
- Do I express my gratitude to God?
- Does something or someone -- a material thing, a person, a behavior, an attitude -- come between me and God?
- Have I used God's Name as a curse word or cursed God?
- Have I broken promises, oaths, or vows to God?
- Have I failed to treat sacred things and places with respect?
- Have I received the Eucharist while not in a state of grace?
- Have I kept Sunday holy by attending Mass and refraining from servile work?
- Have I lied to a priest during the Sacrament of Penance or intentionally failed to confess a sin I should have confessed?
- Have I defended God and His Church when it was necessary?
- Do I study my faith, according to my abilities, so I can defend the Church when necessary?
- Do I properly value the Church's disciplines and heritage?
- Do I pray for the Holy Father and the Church, including those in Purgatory?
- Have I experimented with magic, the occult, spiritism, willful psychic phenomena, ouija boards, etc.?
- Do I keep Sundays and Holy Days of obligation?
- Have I failed to go to Confession, at least once a year during Lent?
- Have I failed to do my Easter Duty (i.e., receive the Eucharist at least once during the Paschal Season)?
- Have I failed to follow the laws of fasting and abstinence?
- Have I failed to support the Church as my means allow?
- Have I obeyed the Church's marriage laws?
- Do I belong to a secret society such as Freemasonry, Skull and Bones, etc.?

### **Duties to Family:**

- Have I failed to perform my duties to my parents, spouse, or children -- as (mother/ father, daughter/son, wife/husband) and as a Christian whose duty it is to lead them to Christ and to pray for them and, if possible, with them?
- For husbands: Do I treat my wife with the respect and tenderness I would give to Our Lady? Do I treat her as my queen, bride, and friend? Do I strive to provide for her, protect her, and help her to feel cherished and needed without condescension or treating her as a child? Do I undermine her in her role as mother? Do I try to make her happy within the boundaries of God's laws? Do I use my headship as an excuse for laziness, cruelty, arrogance, misogyny, or in any manner inconsistent with the way in which I would treat Our Lady or the manner in which Christ treats His Church? Do I try to please and fulfill her sexually?

- For wives: Do I treat my husband with less than the respect and tenderness I would give to Christ? Do I treat him as less than my king, groom, and friend? Do I strive to respect his headship, nurture him, and help him feel cherished and needed? Do I undermine him in his role as father? Do I try to make him happy within the boundaries of God's laws? Do I nag or provoke him? Do I speak ill of him to others? Do I betray his privacy with my girlfriends or others? Do I try to please and fulfill him sexually?
- Is Christ the King of my household?
- Do I pray for my dead ancestors, family members, and friends, and for the souls of those in Purgatory who have no one to pray for them?
- Have I helped cause members of my family to sin?
- Do I try my best to empathize with the members of my family and to love them with a love grounded in Truth?
- Do the members of my family know they are loved? If not, is this my fault?
- Have I caused any member of my family to get unrighteously angry or to be unjustly hurt?
- Have I failed to apologize to and seek forgiveness from members of my family -- including children -- if there was need?
- Have I forgiven my parents, spouse or children for past faults?
- Do I give my family my time and undivided attention when possible?
- Do any of my habits -- spending habits, gambling, etc. -- deprive my family of support?
- Have I used artificial contraception or otherwise failed to keep my marital acts open to life? Have I used N.F.P. (Natural Family Planning) for frivolous reasons?
- Am I too lenient with my children? Do I set high enough but not unreasonable standards and reasonable boundaries? Do I use fair, reasonable, and consistent discipline?
- Am I too harsh with my children? Do I squelch the joy out of my children's lives with needless rules, "Pharisaic" attitudes, a lack of mercy, and an authoritarian -- as opposed to an authoritative -- approach to discipline? Do I discipline them in a way that humiliates them?
- Are my spouse and I consistent and unified as a whole in our discipline of our children?
- Do my spouse and I sabotage each other with regard to disciplining our children? Do I "force" my spouse to play the role of "mean parent" while I play "fun parent"?
- Have I been a good example for my children and/or the children of others, especially in terms of how I treat others and honor God?
- Do I have high enough and age-appropriate expectations of my children?
- Do I over-praise or under-praise my children?
- Do I prize goodness and grace in my children above anything else I prize in them?
- Do I teach my children the fullness of the Faith, encourage them to pray to their Guardian Angels, to their patron Saints, for the dead, etc.?
- Do I inspire my children's imaginations, and do all I can to encourage healthy curiosity and the ability to marvel by teaching them about God, His Church, His creation, the lives of the Saints, etc., and by exposing them to good books, music, art, museums, etc.?
- Have I found a good balance between protecting my child's innocence and teaching him about the world, in an age-appropriate way, so that he is not ignorant and naive or made to feel stupid or ridiculous about himself when in the company of others? Have I given him good weapons with which to resist the evils of the world while understanding and nourishing his social needs?

- Do I treat male children and female children with equal dignity, with respect for their God-given individual talents and vocations, with respect for Natural Law and their God-given differences as male and female but while *also* honoring *individual* gifts, talents, or callings that might not be stereotypical or average in terms of what my culture considers "masculine" or "feminine" enough for a given child?
- Do I allow my children appropriate expression of their emotions and help them to understand and become masters of their negative emotions?
- Do I help my children come to a humble, healthy, true sense of themselves as children of God, as individuals with unique vocations, and as possessing both virtues and faults?
- Do I instill in my children a sense of duty to God, to family, to others, and to themselves?
- Do I nurture the possibility of religious or priestly vocations in any of my children who seem to possibly have such vocations?
- Have I taught my children good manners and to be aware of the needs and feelings of others? Have I taught them to be especially courteous to the elderly, the infirm, the pregnant, and the otherwise challenged?

### **Duties to Society:**

- Do I love others as I love myself, with a love grounded in Truth?
- Do I evangelize with prudence and intelligence, and without being annoying, nagging, or judgmental?
- Do I pray for others, including for the dead, for those in authority and for my enemies?
- Have I taken anything I had no right to take? Have I failed to return anything I may have stolen in the past or otherwise make restitution?
- Have I cheated anyone out of anything that is rightfully theirs?
- Have I been honest in business, including paying my employees a fair wage?
- Do I treat my employees or those I supervise with dignity, respect, and consideration? ~and/or~ Do I give my employer his due and perform my job as best as I can?
- Do I treat service personnel (waitresses, waiters, clerks, busboys, maids, doormen, etc.) with dignity, respect, and consideration, and without condescension? Do I consider their time and feelings? Do I tip well, given my means, in cultures where tipping is considered the norm and, in essence, "wages"?
- Have I engaged in or do I condone illicit usury?
- Have I given to the poor as my means allow?
- Do I act as if I've been given the authority to judge others' souls?
- When engaging in fraternal correction, do I do so in the right way? (see "[Conversion of the Heart](#)" for more information)
- Have I participated in the sins of others by counseling them to sin, by commandmanding them to sin, by consenting to their sin, by provoking them to sin, by praising or flattering them in their sins, by concealing their sins that others have a right to know about, by partaking in their sins, or by silence even when the cause of charity demands I speak out?
- Do I give others the benefit of the doubt whenever possible?
- Do I impugn the motives of others, assuming the worst intentions with no evidence?
- Do I love the sinner while remaining truthful about sin?
- Am I forgiving to the contrite?

- Have I nurtured unrighteous anger in my heart?
- Am I vengeful?
- Am I a good, reliable friend to others?
- Have I spoken anything untrue about another (calumny or slander)? Have I, for no *good* reason, said things that were true but were also damaging to another's reputation (detraction)?
- Do I engage in malicious gossip?
- Do I betray others' secrets that I had no right to betray?
- Do I make promises I do not intend to keep?
- Have I cheated on tests or homework at school or otherwise plagiarized the work of others?
- Am I greedy and selfish?
- Am I envious of what others have?
- Am I too materialistic?
- Have I cursed another (i.e., called down physical or moral evil on a rational creature, not for the sake of a good, such as justice or punishment, but out of malice or for personal gain)?
- If possible, if candidates are available, do I vote responsibly, with the Kingship of Christ, the dignity of human life, and the principle of subsidiarity in mind?
- Given my station in life, my gifts, and vocation, do I care enough for the sick, hungry, thirsty, poor, and imprisoned?
- Do I show good stewardship by treating the earth as God's creation? Am I careful to not litter or pollute the earth or waste resources?
- Do I treat animals with care and appreciation and refrain from needless cruelty toward them? Do I go too far in the other direction and condone treating animals as if they're as beloved by God as human beings who are made in His Image and Likeness, as if they have or should have rights (as opposed to our having duties toward them which include treating them with great dignity and compassion and not allowing their enduring any needless suffering, etc.)?
- Do I show reasonable patriotism for my country (that is "country," not necessarily "government," and doesn't mean "blind patriotism")?
- Do I use my God-given talents in a wholesome way and for the benefit of others?
- Am I mindful of how my behavior or passivity influences others and conditions around me?
- Are there things I should have done but failed to do? Are there things I should have said but failed to say?
- Do I exhibit any thoughts or behaviors rooted in the idea that God's and our love for others is or should be conditioned by ideas of race or genetics? Do I treat all persons with dignity and charity no matter their ethnicity, race, religion, or sexual persuasion?
- Have I murdered anyone, including having an abortion, helping someone have an abortion, or failing to do my best to encourage someone *not* to have an abortion (abortion includes in vitro fertilization)? Have I participated in or encouraged euthanasia? Have I encouraged embryonic stem cell research? Have I encouraged unjust war?
- Have I intentionally and unjustly physically harmed someone?
- Have I used alcohol or any other drug recreationally to to the point where my judgment and will were affected?
- Have I been chaste according to my station in life (been faithful to my spouse, honored promises or vows as a religious or priest, not engaged in fornication or other sexual acts if unmarried, etc.)?

- Have I willfully looked at pornography for no legitimate reason (e.g. law-enforcement) or supported it financially?
- Do I dress and behave immodestly or without concern for how my appearance and behavior may lead others to the sin of lust?
- Have I engaged in solitary sexual sins (i.e., masturbation)?
- Have I *intentionally* lusted after someone? (Note: random thoughts that come to the mind are not sinful. They should be treated as akin to mere flies that should be shooed away. What is sinful is *deliberately* cultivating these thoughts, *deliberately* giving them your salacious attention, etc. Know that many great Saints had thoughts like these -- and even worse: it is quite common as one proceeds in holiness for extremely *blasphemous* thoughts and thoughts of *despair* to flash in the mind. Shoo them away, and know that it is the Evil One trying to make you feel hopeless. It is good at times like these to call on the Name of Jesus and fall back on the short aspirations to replace those thoughts with holy ones.)
- Have I engaged in homosexual or lesbian acts?
- Have I been kind and charitable to those who are struggling to overcome homosexual or lesbian temptations? Do I engage in name-calling, scapegoating, gossip, or making assumptions about those who suffer from same sex attraction? From another angle, do I have such a soft heart for homosexuals that I am too afraid or otherwise unwilling to speak out against acting on homosexual desires, or against gay "marriage," etc., when the time calls for it? Do I judge or talk about homosexual sodomy more harshly than I do heterosexual sodomy?
- Do I treat those who are suffering from gender dysphoria with compassion and love, refraining from name-calling, gossip, bullying, etc.?

### **Duties to Yourself:**

- Do I trust in God's mercy and love for me as a beloved child, or do I wallow in guilt for sins I've been absolved of?
- Am I too scrupulous and hard on myself, treating myself much more harshly than I would others I love?
- Am I too easy on myself?
- Am I honest with myself about my gifts and limitations?
- Do I overestimate or underestimate my importance?
- Do I treat myself as an icon of God, made in His image?
- Do I trust that God is in control or do I worry needlessly?
- Am I able to appreciate the fruits of His Goodness?
- Do I stand up for myself and my wholesome needs?
- Do I feel guilty for simply having negative *feelings*?
- Do I treat my body with care, try to eat well enough, sleep enough, etc.?
- Do I have a good sense of humor? Does that humor apply to myself? Am I able to laugh, especially at myself?