

What is the sacrament of penance and reconciliation?

The sacrament of penance and reconciliation is a rich source of grace. Also known as confession, it was instituted by Jesus Christ to offer us forgiveness for offenses committed against God.

Every time we sin, we hurt ourselves, other people and God. In the sacrament of reconciliation, we acknowledge our sins before God and his church. We express our sorrow in a meaningful way, receive the forgiveness of Christ and his church, make reparation for what we have done and resolve to do better in the future.

The sacrament involves five elements:

- 1 **Contrition:** We are sincerely sorry for offending God and have a firm resolve not to repeat our sins.
- 2 **Confession:** We speak about our sins aloud to a priest.
- 3 **Penance:** The priest prescribes an act of penance as a part of our healing.
- 4 **Act of contrition:** We offer a prayer in which we express to God our sorrow for sin (see example inside).
- 5 **Absolution:** The priest speaks the words by which “God, the Father of mercies” reconciles a sinner to himself through the merits of the cross.



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How to prepare for a good confession

Confession is not difficult, but it does require preparation.

- 1 We should begin with prayer, placing ourselves in the presence of God, our loving Father. We seek healing and forgiveness through repentance and a resolve to sin no more.
- 2 Then we review our lives since our last confession, searching our thoughts, words and actions for that which did not conform to God's command to love him and one another through his laws and the laws of his church. This is called an examination of conscience (see next panel).
- 3 We tell God how truly sorry we are for our sins.
- 4 We make a firm resolution not to sin again.



Sample examination of conscience

I am the Lord your God: You shall not have strange gods before me.

Have I treated people, events or things as more important than God?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have my words, actively or passively, put down God, the church or people?

Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Do I go to Mass every Sunday (or Saturday vigil) and on holy days of obligation? On Sunday, the Lord's Day, do I avoid, when possible, work that impedes worship of God, joy in his day and proper relaxation of mind and body? Do I look for ways to spend time with family or in service to others?

Honor your father and your mother.

Do I show my parents due respect? Do I seek to maintain or restore good communication with them when possible? Do I criticize them for lacking skills I think they should have?

You shall not kill.

Have I harmed another through physical, verbal or emotional means, including gossip or manipulation of any kind?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I respected the physical and sexual dignity of others and of myself?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken or wasted time or resources that belonged to another?

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Have I gossiped, told lies or embellished stories at the expense of another?

You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse.

Have I honored my spouse with my full affection and exclusive love?

You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Am I content with my own means and needs, or do I compare myself to others unnecessarily?

The rite of reconciliation

Confession may be face-to-face or anonymous, with a screen between you and the priest. Choose the option that is the most comfortable for you.

- 1 The priest gives you a blessing or greeting.
- 2 Make the sign of the cross and say, "*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was [give the number of weeks, months or years] ago.*"
- 3 Confess all of your sins to the priest. (If you are unsure or uneasy, tell him and ask for help.)
- 4 Say, "*I am sorry for these and all of my sins.*"
- 5 The priest assigns a penance and offers advice to help you be a better Catholic.
- 6 Say an act of contrition, expressing your sorrow for your sins (see sample below).
- 7 The priest, acting in the person of Christ, then absolves you from your sins.

An act of contrition

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.