

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

We are truly made children of God in baptism and member's of Christ's Body, which is the Church; but that is not the end of the story. It is a wonderful beginning of the new life which is Christ's gift to us, but in our hearts there is not only a new potential for love and good acts, which is given and confirmed through grace; there remains also the age-old threat of failure and wickedness, which arises from self-seeking and the temptations from which we are never free. It is inevitable, therefore, that from time to time out of weakness or ill-intent we will act or fail to act in a way that puts barriers between us and the God who loves us. That is what sin is.

Whatever our own failure, however, God's love never fails and he always calls us back to repentance. His forgiveness, which is vividly illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11), is always available to us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Throughout our lives we need again and again to open our hearts to God's forgiveness for our failures large or small, just as the Prodigal Son turned to his father. That repentance leads us naturally to admit our faults in confession.

Confession, in which we face ourselves truthfully, is itself therapeutic, but the real healing and new grace and strength come from God's forgiveness. Christ is present in the sacrament. Through his Church and through the absolution pronounced in his name by the priest he gives us the grace and healing we need.

In preparing for this sacrament it may help if we begin by thanking God for his blessings this day, this week, this month. By doing this we are opening our eyes once again to the light of God's love for us. But as we do it we are bound to find that between us and the love of God there are things in ourselves that are getting in the way.

If you look at the setting sun, any obstacle in the way will appear as a black silhouette. If we look, thankfully and honestly, at God in prayer, things we have done or failed to do, things we have said, bitter feelings of grievance and resentment, will stand out quite clearly, getting in the way. These things are our sins. Sins are obstacles we put in the way of the love of God. Very serious sin will get so much in the way that its blackness can seem almost to blot out completely the light of God's love. But his love never fails, and it is because we know this that we are preparing for the sacrament of reconciliation.

If we find ourselves in darkness when we lift our eyes and hearts to God, and are not seeing the black shapes of our sins clearly enough to identify and describe them, which we must try to do in our confession, it may help to ask ourselves some questions. To see where our true faults lie we need God's help, so it is good to pray to the Holy Spirit in some such words as these:

Prayer to the Holy Spirit before Confession

Come, Holy Spirit, search my mind and heart. Help me to see clearly where I have gone wrong, to be truly sorry for it, and to confess it humbly and honestly. I ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An Examination of Conscience

The following questions will help you examine your conscience and identify the sins you need to confess. They are only guidelines; you may think of others which are more to the point in your case. As you consider each question, you may find it to be a good thing to write a list to help you when you make your confession.

- Is it too long since I last confessed?
- Was my confession honest and did I do the penance given me?
- Did I go to Communion without proper preparation or reverence?
- Did I miss Mass on Sundays or Holy Days through my own fault?
- Am I wilfully distracted or irreverent during Mass, and do I disturb others?
- Do I pray regularly each morning and night, or do I sometimes forget or not bother?
- Have I treated holy things with irreverence?
- Am I proud or conceited? Do I despise some people? Have I been ungenerous or stubborn?
- Have I been uncooperative or ungrateful with people who are trying to help me, such as colleagues, family or teachers?
- Have I been quarrelsome? or sulky? or jealous? or easily moved to anger?
- Have I turned my back on someone who needed my help?
- Have I failed to speak out against things I know to be wrong for fear of becoming unpopular?
- Have I prevented justice being done?
- Have I told lies to get out of trouble, to make myself seem better than I am?
- Have I refused to apologise when I hurt someone?
- Have I stolen things, or borrowed them without the owner's consent?
- Have I said unpleasant or spiteful things about other people?
- Have I bullied people, or used them to my own ends?
- Do I make friends with people because I like and respect them, or because they have power or influence or reputation?
- Have I been deliberately cruel or malicious?
- Have I led other people into wrongdoing?
- Have I harboured impure thoughts or given way to them?
- Have I had sex outside marriage, or committed adultery?
- Do I eat or drink too much?
- Finally, do God and other people mean anything to me, or do I live only for myself?

Before coming to the priest to make your confession, when your self-examination is complete, you may wish to make an Act of Contrition expressing your sorrow for what you have done, and promising to amend it, with God's grace, in the future. You can use some such words as these:

Acts of Contrition:

- i) O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you, and with the help of your grace I will not sin again.
- ii) Lord Jesus, you chose to be called the friend of sinners. By your saving death and resurrection free me from my sins. May your peace take root in my heart and bring forth a harvest of love, holiness, and truth.
- iii) O my God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins, and detest them above all things, because they deserve your dreadful punishments, because they have crucified my loving Saviour Jesus Christ, and, most of all, because they offend your infinite goodness; and I firmly resolve, by the help of your grace, never to offend you again, and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin.
- iv) God our Father, I thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins, for what I have done and for what I have failed to do. I will sincerely try to love you and others in everything I do and say. Help me to walk in your light today and always.
- v) O God, I am sorry for my unfaithfulness to the love you show me by the gift of life and the greater gift of union with you through the grace of baptism. I beg you to forgive my sins, heal the wounds they leave and strengthen me in my weakness. I thank you for your mercy which has drawn me to repentance and for the forgiveness you freely give me in the sacrament of reconciliation.

The form for Confession is found on page 447 of the Book of Common Prayer. It is also printed at the end of this pamphlet. The confession itself should be made simply, and clearly without making excuses or holding anything back. Your confession is between you and God. The priest is God's representative to pronounce His forgiveness through the words of absolution in the name of the Church. He may also add a brief word of advice and encouragement.

The priest will ask you to perform a penance - some prayer or religious act as a sign that you are truly sorry for the past and that you really want to do better from now on. The penance is best done as soon as possible after the confession. You may like to add to it this prayer for conversion and amendment.

Prayer after Confession

Merciful Lord, with a pure heart I thank you for taking away my sins. Let your Holy Spirit guide my life so that my soul may bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. Renew my desire to be your faithful friend and servant, increase my loving dependence on you, and grant me that joy and peace of heart which comes from doing your holy will. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is a good habit to go to confession regularly, even if you have not committed any very serious sins. There is a special grace of healing which comes from this sacrament and which helps build up our relationship with God even when we only have small things to confess. This sacrament is a great and powerful gift, and we should use it.

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The Form for Confession, from the *Book of Common Prayer*,
as used at Saint Luke's:

The Priest and Penitent meet at the appointed place for Confessions. The Penitent begins

Bless me, for I have sinned.

The Priest says

The Lord be in your heart and upon your lips that you may truly and humbly confess your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Penitent

I confess to Almighty God, to his Church, and to you, that I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone; especially [*here the Penitent names the specific sins to be confessed*]. For these and all other sins which I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry. I pray God to have mercy on me. I firmly intend amendment of life, and I humbly beg forgiveness of God and his Church, and ask you for counsel, direction, and absolution.

Here the Priest may offer counsel, direction, and comfort.

The Priest then pronounces this absolution

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The Priest adds

The Lord has put away all your sins.

Penitent Thanks be to God.

The Priest concludes

Go in peace, and pray for me, also a sinner.