

How to go to Confession



“Many people who believe they can simply pray to God and be forgiven, whatever they’ve done, long for the chance to tell someone out loud, someone who will then declare God’s forgiveness and give them some penance, some way of expressing their sorrow and growing closer to God at the same time.... For all of the well-meaning priests who try to gently let someone off the hook in the confessional, or who—in attempting to demonstrate the mercy of God—are perhaps too quick to say “it’s okay, you’re only human” (true as that is), I have

always been so grateful for the simple acknowledgment by a simple priest that I had done something that was, yes, stupid and destructive, but that mercy was mine.”¹

Making a good confession requires the demanding task of self-reflection. Spiritual writers agree that ongoing self-examination is a basic ingredient in spiritual progress. So prepare for confession by thinking about your sins, feeling sorrow about your break from God, and making a firm resolution —asking God’s help—not to sin again. This activity is called examining your conscience. You can find many guides for examining your conscience.

Call your parish to find out the times for confession, or make an appointment with a Catholic priest for confession. Then go to the parish at the appropriate time. You may want to go to confession in the box called a confessional, to the room of reconciliation (which allows you to be either anonymous or face to face with the priest. If you’ve made an

¹ From the blog, *The anchoress*, by Elizabeth Scalia: *The Heavy Grace of Confession*, dated September 17, 2010. Found at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/theanchoress/2010/09/17/the-heavy-grace-of-confession/>

appointment, you may meet in the priest's office or other appropriate place.

The Rite of Reconciliation

1. The priest will greet you with words of welcome, and he may begin by making the Sign of the Cross, saying "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

2. Next, you say something like the following:

For your first confession

Make the Sign of the Cross and say:
"Hello, Father. This is my first confession. These are my sins..."

For your next confessions

Make the Sign of the Cross and say:
"Hello, Father. It has been (*say how long*) since my last confession. These are my sins..."

3. Tell your sins simply and honestly to the priest. Don't be embarrassed. The priest, too, goes to confession regularly. Also, your sins are not likely unique. You must confess all your mortal sins (very grave sins) and how often you think you committed them, as well confessing as your less serious sins. Do not knowingly leave out anything you know is serious and wrong.

4. When you are done naming your sins, please say:
"...I am sorry for these sins, and for all the sins I cannot remember."

5. Listen to the advice the priest gives you, and accept the penance from him. A penance is a penalty (usually consisting of prayer, fasting, etc.) to be undertaken as an expression of remorse and sorrow for sin.

6. Then say an Act of Contrition for your sins.

Act of Contrition

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have mercy on me, a sinner.

or

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.

or

Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the Lamb of God;
you take away the sins of the world.
Through the grace of the Holy Spirit
restore me to friendship with your Father,
cleansing me from every stain of sin
in the blood you shed for me,
and raise me to new life
for the glory of your name.

6. The priest then will extend his hands over your head, and say the words of absolution.

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

7. The priest will then conclude with words, such as: “Your sins are truly forgiven. Go in Peace,” or “God bless you,” or “Go in peace,” or something like that.

8. You respond: “Thanks be to God,” or “Thank you, Father.” Make the Sign of the Cross and leave.
9. If in the church, go to a pew, kneel and pray. Thank God for his love and mercy. Perform your penance as soon as possible.

General comments

1. You can go to any priest anywhere. In a confessional, the priest does not know who is confessing to him. You do not tell the priest your name or give any details that would identify you.
2. Tell your sins briefly; do not go into detail. However, in confessing a sin of impurity, tell what kind it is (thought, desire, adultery, fornication, etc.). In confessing a sin of theft, tell the amount or value of the object stolen.
3. If you are not sure whether or not you were guilty of some sin, confess the sin but tell the priest you are not sure you committed it.
4. Go to Confession often and regularly, even though you have no mortal sins to confess. Confession is not just a way of getting rid of your sins; it gives you grace and helps you overcome future temptations. The Church only requires us to go to confession annually, if we have a mortal sin on our conscience. Frequent confession is not a duty imposed by the Church; it is simply a wise recommendation. Try to go 3-4 times each year to start.
5. As we grow in the spiritual life, the obvious sins tend to diminish. When that happens, we need to examine ourselves more carefully to uncover the hidden attitudes, judgments, and intentions that are still self-centered and not Christ-centered.