

## Come Home to God's Mercy – The Sacrament of Reconciliation

### Why should I go to Confession?



Every time we sin, we hurt ourselves, other people and God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation (also called Penance or Confession) was given to us by Christ to help us reconcile with Christ and his Church when we have committed harm. Through the Sacrament, we acknowledge our sins, 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. During his public life, Jesus both forgave sins and reintegrated sinners into the community. This is the goal of the Sacrament of Confession: to forgive sins and to provide reconciliation with the Church. The Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation involves four parts: contrition, confession, penance and absolution.

**Contrition:** a sincere sorrow for having offended God and the most important act of the penitent. There can be no forgiveness of sin if we do not have sorrow and a firm resolve not to repeat our sin.

**Confession:** confronting our sins in a profound way to God by speaking about them —aloud— to a priest.

**Penance:** an important part of our healing is the “penance” imposed in reparation for our sins.

**Absolution:** the priest imparts the words which reconcile a sinner to God through the merits of the Cross.

### Which is it: Confession, Penance or Reconciliation?

Any of these is fine. The liturgical rite is officially called the Rite of Penance & Reconciliation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes the Sacrament is known by many names:

“...*the sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin” (CCC no. 1423).

“...*the sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction” (CCC no. 1423).

“...*the sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a ‘confession’ —acknowledgment and praise— of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man” (CCC no. 1424).

“...*the sacrament of forgiveness*, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent ‘pardon and peace’” (CCC no. 1424).

“...*the sacrament of Reconciliation*, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: ‘Be reconciled to God.’ He who lives by God’s merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord’s call: ‘Go; first be reconciled to your brother’” (CCC no. 1424).

### Why do I have to confess my sins to a priest?

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, our faith in the forgiveness of sins is tied to faith in the Holy Spirit and the Church: “It was when he gave the Holy Spirit to his apostles that the risen Christ conferred on them His own divine power to forgive sins: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (976; cf. John 20:22-23).

### Will the priest ever repeat what I have said in my confession?

A priest can never reveal to anyone what he is told in a confession. This obligation of absolute secrecy is most serious and is called the sacramental seal (CCC no. 1467).

### What if I'm not comfortable going face-to-face?

You can receive the sacrament face-to-face or with a screen or grated window between you and the priest. Most confessionals have a screen behind which you can kneel during your confession if you prefer.

### Won't the priest remember what I said? I'm embarrassed. I don't want him to think badly of me.

The priest's purpose is not to keep a check-list on people, but to be an instrument of Christ in receiving someone's sorrow, bringing forgiveness and helping people move forward. A priest hears a large number of confessions. He is not there to judge the person, but rather the nature of the sin, and to offer counsel and encouragement to overcome the sin and to grow spiritually. He too goes to confession, so he knows how it feels to confront one's own sins and ask for forgiveness.

### Why does the priest sometimes ask for more information?

The priest may ask for additional information simply to clarify what happened, to understand if the action you confessed was a one-time occurrence or a pattern, and to assess the person's understanding of the situation.

### How often should I go to Confession?

Catholics are required to receive the Sacrament at least once per year. However, if you are aware of having committed any mortal (serious) sin, you should receive the Sacrament. That being said, all are encouraged to take advantage of the Sacrament on a regular and frequent basis. Frequent reception helps us keep aware of our spiritual progress and provides the grace to overcome our sins.

### Can I receive Communion without going to Confession?

When you receive the Eucharist you affirm that you are in a state of grace, reconciled with God and the Church. Since the Sacrament of Confession provides that reconciliation, if you are in a state of mortal sin you must abstain from receiving the Eucharist until you go to Confession. A mortal sin consists of a serious action through which a person turns away from God's law and charity, fully understands it is wrong and chooses to commit it freely.

If you have committed venial sins, you may still receive the Eucharist. Venial sins are sins which wound our relationship with God, but consist of less serious matters than mortal sins or are performed without full knowledge or consent. Penitents are encouraged to confess venial sins regularly, since the repetition of these sins can lead to more serious sin.

### I'm divorced. May I receive the Sacrament?

If you are civilly divorced and have not remarried or were validly married after receiving a declaration of nullity for your prior marriage, you may participate in the Sacrament. If you have remarried outside of the Church and have questions about your situation, we encourage you to speak with your parish priest.

### How do I find out when the Sacrament is offered?

Parishes offer Confession regularly throughout the year: if you contact the parish office, they will be able to tell you. Additionally, in the Diocese of Worcester, our parishes as part of the initiative, Come Home to God's Mercy, will be offering additional time for the Sacrament every Tuesday evening. Please consult your parish bulletin for exact times and dates .

Content adapted from *Light Is On For You* resources.