

How to Make the Best Use of Confession

Forgiveness
Reconciliation
Healing
Peace

Confession doesn't sound all that attractive to most people.

Lifelong Catholics, myself included, were trained to “go to Confession” long before we had any understanding or experience of real sinfulness. We knew that we would continue committing the same petty and normal “sins” of childhood and we’d often fret over what to tell, knowing we hadn’t done anything deserving of God’s eternal wrath, yet seeing a harsh mirror in the “examination of conscience” lists in the catechism.

Many who became Catholics later in life – Catholics by choice, I often say – come from faith traditions that see no need for Confession. ***God alone forgives sin. Why do we need to confess to a priest? Who can believe that God would withhold forgiveness of sins until a priest spoke some special words of absolution?***

I too have had my own journey of skepticism, during which I have come, with some difficulty, to a renewed understanding and appreciation of this sacrament. Without going into details, there have been periods in my own life during which I couldn’t really see the point of this sacrament, and when I went to confession it was more out of routine than conviction.

For me as a priest, the experience of hearing confessions of people much better and holier than I gave me a renewed appreciation for this sacrament. When I let myself become aware of how grace was working in other peoples’ lives, I began to discover the movement of grace in my own life.



How do you picture Jesus' love for you? If you see Him as Good Shepherd, do you welcome his approach and loving care?

I began to understand that in the relationship between God and me, I am not the one who takes the initiative. It doesn't depend on anything I do or don't do. ***God is always the one who acts, the one who takes the initiative. The only thing I can do is respond to what God does.*** It's within this movement between God and me that Confession as a sacrament finds its meaning and purpose.

You see, if human communication is to be real, it must have some outward expression. Even though God reads my thoughts and feelings, my desires and intentions, I cannot fully communicate with God unless all of me is somehow involved. The twelve-steps of Alcoholics Anonymous really got it right. The fifth step requires that one admit "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs," after the "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" in step four. The outward expression to "another human being" is seen by AA as the necessary prerequisite for us to let God heal and forgive, as well as the subsequent steps of making amends for the wrong we have done.

It is not well known, but a Catholic priest, Fr. Ed Dowling, SJ, was a close friend of Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, when he was writing down the twelve steps as a way of expressing why and how the AA program works. Fr. Dowling, in turn, drew heavily on the ***Spiritual Exercises*** of St. Ignatius Loyola in assisting Bill with his work. (See *The Soul of Sponsorship*, by Fr. Robert Fitzgerald, SJ.)

The insight of Catholic faith and sacramental practice, affirmed and validated by the success of twelve-step programs, is that ***forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing are inseparable from one another, and inseparable as well from the outward expression of our need to be forgiven and healed.*** It is often said that we really really don't know what we think or feel until we hear ourselves say it.

I'd like to explore with you a *simple* and *real* way to prepare for confession, and to celebrate the healing and reconciliation that is God's gift in this wonderful sacrament.

Confession: Letting God Be the Guide

Confession of our sinfulness can't merely be an interior dialogue between ourselves and God. It is only when we express ourselves outwardly that our whole person gets involved. It's easy to fool ourselves if we think our sinfulness is nobody else's business, but just a matter between "me and God." ***Our sins - even our most "private" and secret sins - always involve a disruption in our relationship with others, including making ourselves less than we should be for others.*** Sacramental confession is our opportunity to engage the Church as the Body of Christ, the embodiment of those whom we have hurt as well as the instrument and assurance of God's forgiving love. The priest, representative of Christ and the Church as one, is a partner in this exchange.

In view of this, how can we best prepare for and make our confession?

I suggest first thinking about sin from God's point of view. Usually we think of sin as "hurting" or "offending" God, perhaps even "making God mad." Then we see confession and penance as somehow making up to God, trying to get back in his good graces. This is a traditional view, and I'm not saying it's totally wrong, but it's utterly inadequate.

In Jesus we have the assurance of God's unconditional love and forgiveness: Jesus has already won forgiveness for us. It's up to us to accept it. It's really not accurate to think of our spiritual life as trying to get close to God. It's far more realistic to think in terms of ***God intensely loving us so much that he's trying to get close to us.*** In this view, sins are the barriers that we set up that block or hinder God's approach. We effectively say: "God, don't get too close. I have things that I love more than you. I don't trust you enough to let you into those places in my life that are still ruled by my fear and selfishness." Sometimes these attachments are things we don't even realize: old attitudes and habits that we take for granted or cling to for security.

Picture this. Imagine yourself as God, brimming over with love for you, trying to get close to you. What do you see? In other words, what do these barriers of sin look like from God's perspective? What does God see that you perhaps don't see because other things, much closer, are in the way? After all, if God is moving toward you, it may be the things that are farthest from your mind that are the barriers closest to God, the things God encounters first and that block his way. This could be some long forgotten sin that you may have buried under the surface of your consciousness. This could be an unhealed wound or a responsibility that you've run away from that you try not to acknowledge, but which refuses to go away.

Whatever it may be, the important thing is that, while you may not see it clearly, God does. And it blocks him from getting closer. Therefore the first step in preparing for Confession should not be to make your own list of sins to tell. The first step should be to pray and ask God to reveal to you what he sees, the barriers he encounters that prevent him from getting closer to you.

We often talk about the need to get closer to God. What we really need is to let him get closer to us.

If we ask him, he will let us know what barriers he finds that prevent him from getting closer to us. He is eager to forgive and heal them, if only we acknowledge them and put them in his hands for forgiveness and healing. How he lets us know the barriers he sees will not be in a loud voice or a blinding flash of light. It will be by subtle nudges and insights, gently saying in some way, "Here, look at this. Put it in my hands to take care of. Trust me"

Then, rather than a "laundry list" of sins, what we bring to confession may be just one thing, whatever it is that God has made clear to you is the sin or barrier that he most wants to heal and forgive. And he asks you to bring it to him in confession with confidence.

There will be other barriers. Those will be for other times. God will point them out, one by one, as we let him draw closer and closer. This is a reason why a regular and frequent schedule for coming to confession is important. It's an integral part of letting God get closer, inviting him to be more and more a part of our lives.

Fr. Tom Welbers, 2014

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How To Go To Confession

- ➔ **Usually it's best to let the priest take the lead.** Different priests have different styles, but most will say a word of welcome or greeting, or will lead you in the sign of the cross. Respond to whatever he says. If he is silent, then it's best to begin yourself with the sign of the cross.

If you need help making your confession, don't be afraid to ask the priest to help you. Priests are very used to this, and are always glad to help.

- ➔ **Say how long it's been since your last confession.** Obviously if you have been away for a long time, it's a very different situation than if you go regularly – every few weeks or few months.

- ➔ **Then, tell your sins simply and without going into great detail.**

Sin always creates a burden on your heart; it's not just a matter of breaking rules. Therefore, when you tell what your sins are, don't try to make a list. Rather, ***tell what is burdening your heart.***

Remember that the things we do (or fail to do) can put up barriers to God in certain aspects of our lives, not letting God in. If we have said no to God in a significant way, that's what is traditionally called “mortal sin.” Mortal sin is basically saying with my whole heart, “I want it my way, and I don't care about God's way.”

If you are trying to live a good life, and take union with God seriously, mortal sin will probably not be an issue. But we all still clutter up our lives with all kinds of stuff that has more to do with self-will than God's love. What we traditionally call “venial sin” is really the clutter that slows God down when God is coming to us in love, and distracts us when we should be responding with love to God.

God does not so much want you to “try harder.” God simply wants you to put these faults and failings in his hands for forgiveness and healing, with the willingness to let God remove them from your life.

It may be helpful to use the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and other words of Scripture to help “examine your conscience,” but avoid trying to make a lengthy, comprehensive list. Ask God to inspire your heart to know what to say.

- ➔ After you have told your sins, the priest may say some words of counsel or encouragement. If you have a question about your confession, feel free to ask it. However, especially if there are other people waiting, remember that this is not a counseling or spiritual direction session. Arrange for that at another time.
- ➔ Some priests may ask you to say the “**act of contrition.**” This may be the prayer you memorized years ago or find in a prayerbook, or perhaps a simple prayer such as “My God, I am sorry for my sins; have mercy on me.” Usually it's best, however, at this time to **listen to the words of absolution** which the priest says to signify God's forgiveness in this sacrament.
- ➔ Then the priest will say something like “Go in peace and may God bless you.” You can respond with “Amen” or “Thank you, God bless you too, Father.”