

## What is Confession?

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, (God) is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:8-9*

Johnny and his little sister Susie share a playroom, and Mom has told Johnny very firmly, “Don’t touch Susie’s toys. Leave them alone.” Mom leaves the room. Johnny picks up Susie’s favorite teddy bear (she’s taking a nap), and quite deliberately pulls out the stuffing. Then Mom comes back, Susie wakes up, and there are Tears.

Now what? “Johnny, did you hurt Susie’s teddy bear?” What is Johnny going to say? He has several choices. “Oh, no, Mom.” “We got into a fight and it just happened.” “Susie did it herself.” Or, maybe, “Well, yes, Mom, I did. I’m sorry.” There can be denial or cover-up. I can try blaming somebody else. Or **there is the honest way of facing the facts, admitting responsibility, taking the blame, and apologizing.** This last is the only real way forward.

It is not only Christianity that tells us to face facts and to take responsibility. Many people pay therapists to tell them this. Alcoholics Anonymous and all the “recovery” programs tell us this. If we’ll listen, our own consciences will only repeat what our mothers told us: ‘Fess up, tell the truth, and say you’re sorry.

Jesus tells us that this is also God’s way. If we really know ourselves, we will

know that we aren’t right with God. “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” (Rom. 7:19, and also the Prayer Book.) But if we repent and confess our sins, God will forgive us and welcome us back to himself with open arms. The Prodigal Son (see Luke 15) prepared his confession very carefully: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, and am no more worthy to be called your son.” But the father would not even let him finish: “Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, bring the fatted calf and kill it; this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.”

**Christianity is about the forgiveness of sins, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. God is far more ready to forgive us than we are either to recognize our sins or to return home.**

*Do I have to go to confession?*

Nobody *has* to “go to confession.” The traditional Anglican teaching is, “All may, none must, some should.” Every Christian *does* “have to” examine his conscience, confess his sins to God, and tell God he is sorry. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray every day, “Forgive us our trespasses.” Many people examine their consciences and confess to God in the privacy of their own prayers, share in the “general confession” in church, and find peace this way. But the Church also offers us the opportunity to talk to a priest in complete confidence, to get all the troubling garbage out of our systems, and to receive through the priest, as God’s representative, the assurance of God’s forgiveness. This is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or the

Sacrament of Penance, or simply “going to confession.”

Many Christians find regular confession a perfectly normal and valuable part of their Christian life. Others use it only for some special need. This might be a young person’s first adult commitment or a renewed one by an older person or a return to the faith after a lapse.

Preparing for confession can be rather terrifying, especially for an adult making a first confession. But it *is* worth the anguish to come through to the relief, forgiveness, and the welcoming love of God.

The British writer Rose Macaulay tells her own story in a series of letters to a priest friend. As a young woman she was quite devout. But when she became involved with a married man she knew quite certainly that adultery was incompatible with Christian practice, and deliberately chose to lapse from the Church rather than leave him. After some thirty years she came to repent of this involvement, realizing all the harm it had done, and to return to the Church. The correspondence tells of her months of gradually realizing her sin, making an appointment with another priest (not her friend), and once and for all confessing it, receiving absolution, and returning to regular prayer and Communion. “Morale now greatly improved; food better, as the prodigal decided,” she wrote. (*Letters to a Friend*, published by Atheneum, 1962.)

*How do I do it?*

Sacramental confession involves examining your conscience as thoroughly as

you know how and confessing *all* your sins, not just a few that particularly bother you. For a first confession, it is often a good idea to ask for advice in advance from a priest you feel comfortable with, and to make an appointment for your confession.

Your priest may give you some guidelines for examining your conscience, or you might use the Ten Commandments, or the Beatitudes. Many devotional manuals contain helpful lists of questions, though some of these are rather “fussy” and should be used with caution. Skip whatever doesn’t seem to apply to you. (Don’t be like the man who glanced through the list, handed it back, and said, “Well, I’ve done the lot.”)

Set aside some time when you can be alone, and pray for God’s help as you seek to understand yourself and your relationship with God. Take the outline you are using and a sheet of paper, and write down your sins as you find them. How have you hurt, betrayed, or offended God and other people, on purpose or by your own fault? Not all of our “problems” are sins, though many of them are. Remember that God cares about thoughts and motives as well as actions.

For your first confession, it is helpful to divide your life into sections, from the time you first became aware of right and wrong. Be specific, though not in a great deal of detail. (“I shoplifted several times in junior high,” rather than either “I have stolen” or “I stole six candybars on each of eight different occasions when I was eleven.”) Don’t go into long explanations. *Do not name other people or put the blame on them.* This is *your* confession. Mention other people or their connection with you only when this is

necessary to make your own sin clear: “I lied to my father.” (Sometimes someone else’s sin is clearly involved, as perhaps in a situation of abuse. This is not part of your confession, but it is quite appropriate to discuss it with the priest separately.)

Be as complete and honest as you can. If you are not sure whether something is a sin, but it bothers you, ask. If some particular sin especially embarrasses or humiliates you, *do not omit it*. **An honest confession must at least aim to be complete, and the sin that bothers you most is the one that most needs to be confessed.** God knows you through and through, and loves you. You are doing this in response to his love, because you want to be better, not because you are afraid. You do not know either yourself or God’s will perfectly, but if you do the best you can, he will welcome you with open arms and assure you of his forgiveness. When you are finished with your list, put it aside in a safe place.

When the time comes to make your confession, take your list, kneel down in the church, or sit in the priest’s office, and make your confession. There is a form provided for doing this, or you can be less formal and just read your list and say you are sorry and mean to do better. “For these and all my sins which I cannot now remember, I am heartily sorry, firmly purpose amendment, and ask of you, Father, penance, counsel, and absolution.”

Answer any questions the priest may ask. (If you let him think you do not “purpose amendment” -- that you intend to go right on mugging old ladies -- he may challenge you about this, and cannot give you absolution.) You may find that you commit

the same sins again (it takes time to break bad habits), but you must *really intend* to change.

The priest will give you a penance, probably a prayer to say, as an expression of your sorrow and as an offering to God. Then, by the authority given to him as a priest, he will pronounce God’s forgiveness of all your sins. You will return to the church, thank God for his forgiveness and love, say the prayer assigned, destroy your “sin list,” and walk out clean and renewed, ready to serve God with all your heart.

**But... but....**

There are two questions that often worry people about confession. The first is, “My sins are so terrible that I will shock or embarrass the priest.” Not to worry! He has heard everything. If he is a faithful penitent himself, he will know too much about the snakes and monsters in his own heart to be surprised at the worms in yours. You can and should be frank.

The second worry is, “Can I trust the priest? Will he tell, or will he hold it against me?” Yes, you can trust him. No, he will not tell. In confession you are talking to God, and the priest is only God’s ear. **The “seal of confession” is absolute.** The priest, because he is a priest, cannot and will not discuss what you say with *anyone*. He also will forget all about it in his everyday relationship with you.

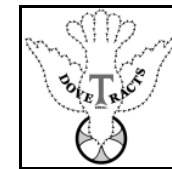
As you go on in your Christian life, you may want to make your confession regularly. Before Christmas and Easter are usual times, and you may want to schedule confession monthly or quarterly. In that case,

it is a good idea to stay with a priest you know. What really matters in confession is simply his priesthood, the authority God gives him. But in an ongoing relationship you may also be receiving spiritual direction, encouragement, support, and friendship, and here the human dimension also matters.

You probably will find as time goes on that you confess differently, as you come to know yourself and God better. That is perfectly normal, and a wise priest can help you with this growth process. A new convert may be looking chiefly for the assurance of forgiveness. Another person may instead experience primarily God’s grace for overcoming faults and growing in goodness. Either one will encounter the love of God, and may want to skip merrily out of the church like a child going to a birthday party.

Remember the Prodigal Son: it is *right* to make merry and be glad, for this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. **There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.**

*This tract is prepared as a guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Penance, as it has been taught in the Anglican (Episcopal) tradition.*



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