

# Information About the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Confession

## Facts About Reconciliation

- Up to half of active Catholics celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis, in the majority of cases once or twice a year. Some do so more frequently; about a third do rarely if ever.
- The most popular times for Catholics to celebrate Reconciliation are during the seasons of Advent and Lent, in preparation for Christmas and Easter.
- Catholics are required to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation and confess their sins to a priest when they are guilty of mortally sinful behavior. However, most Catholics today celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they want to, not because they have to. (See "What Is Mortal Sin?" below.)
- There are various formats for celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Some Catholics prefer a more personal occasion when they meet privately with the priest--this is called Individual Confession; others prefer a more public occasion when the parish community gathers to celebrate together--this is called Communal Penance.
- In either case, the person's confession of sin always takes place privately with the priest. You may do this face-to-face or behind a screen in the Reconciliation Room.
- You may participate in a Communal Penance Service even if you are not obligated or do not intend to confess your sins privately to a priest.
- Many Catholics today prefer to celebrate Reconciliation with a priest they know and who knows them. In fact, many Catholics find Reconciliation most helpful when it takes place in the context of continuing spiritual direction with a priest they know and trust.
- Most parishes schedule private confessions about 45 minutes before weekend Masses; most parishes schedule communal celebrations during Advent and Lent.
- You may celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation anytime by making an appointment with a parish priest.
- In the absence of mortal sin, you do not have to confess all your bad behavior. You may choose to confess the behavior which is most hurtful to yourself, others, or society; the behavior you are most sorry for; the behavior which is most frequent; or the behavior you most want to change.
- You may always visit with the priest about important issues or questions in your spiritual or personal life, but it is best to do this at a time when others are not waiting to see the priest.

- You should find the Sacrament of Reconciliation a helpful spiritual experience.
- You should always come away from Reconciliation with a sense of God's mercy more than a sense of your own guilt. (see Special Conditions below for special situations)

### **Frequency of Confession**

In the Church's view, what would be an appropriate frequency for confession? Fr. Reginald Martin OP, writing in *Our Sunday Visitor*, provides this guidance:

The Church's Code of Canon Law stipulates Catholics are bound to confess serious sins each year. "After [reaching] the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation...to confess serious sins at least once a year" (Canon 989). The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us we may not approach the Eucharist unless we are in the state of grace. It states, "Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the sacrament of penance" (No. 1415). The Catechism likewise observes those preparing for marriage should "prepare themselves for the celebration of their marriage by receiving the sacrament of penance" (No. 1622).

These, however, are "minimum" requirements; our baptism unites us in a community with every other baptized Christian. This community is damaged by sin and nourished by the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. The Catechism says: "The confession ... of sins, even from a simply human point of view ... facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man...takes responsibility for [sins], and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church" (No. 1455). How often we avail ourselves of the sacrament must remain a personal decision, but frequent - perhaps monthly - confession is probably a good idea.

### **How to Celebrate Reconciliation**

[Adapted from *Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance--Questions and Answers*.  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on the Liturgy (2002)]

1. Preparation--Before going to confession, the penitent reflects on God's love and mercy and exams his or her life. with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.
2. Going to Confession—After the priest welcomes you, both of you make the sign of the cross. Then you may wish to indicate facts about your life, the time of the last confession, difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the priest.
3. The Word of God—You or the priest may read one of the suggested scriptural passages.

4. Confession of Sins and the Act of Penance—Confess your sins. The priest then offers suitable advice and imposes an act of penance or satisfaction, which may include prayer, self-denial, or works of mercy.

5. Prayer of the Penitent—Pray a prayer expressing sorrow for your sins and resolving not to sin again. (Two suggested prayers are given here; you may also use a traditional “Act of Contrition” or a personal Act of Sorrow):

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.  
(Rite of Penance, no. 45)

(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, cleanse  
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. (Rite of Penance, no. 91)

6. Absolution—The priest extends his hands over your head and pronounces the formula of absolution, making the sign of the cross over your head during the final words. You answer, “Amen.”

7. Proclamation of Praise—Praise the mercy of God and give him thanks in a short invocation taken from Scripture, such as “Rejoice in the Lord and sing for joy, friends of God” (Ps 32:1-7, 10-11), “The Lord has remembered his mercy” (Lk 1:46-55), or “Blessed be God who chose us in Christ” (Eph 1:3-10) (Rite of Penance, no. 206).

8. Dismissal—The priest dismisses you with the command to go in peace. Continue to express your conversion through a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God.

### **What Is Mortal Sin?**

In the past, Catholic teaching distinguished between two types or degrees of sin: venial and mortal. More recently, many Catholic moral theologians and pastors distinguish human sinfulness in three categories: venial, serious and mortal.

Catholics are obliged to confess mortal sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. According to a long-standing teaching of the Church, behavior is mortally sinful if it fulfills three criteria:

- It must consist of a serious matter. In other words, the behavior must do serious physical or spiritual harm which severely damages or destroys oneself, another person, the community or God's creation.
- The individual must fully understand how serious the behavior is.
- The individual must freely choose to perform the behavior.

## **Formation of Conscience**

The Church recognizes that every individual must act according to his or her personal conscience (ie, what they sincerely believe is right or wrong in a given situation), even when it is wrong. This is not the same as saying "anything goes," or "if it feels right, do it." The Church also believes every person has a moral responsibility to develop a mature and sincere conscience which incorporates the convictions of the faith community expressed in church teaching; a mature and sincere conscience is more than a personal opinion.

## **Special Conditions**

### Irregular Marriage:

Persons in an irregular marriage (Catholics married outside the Church and previously married persons who remarry without an annulment) may not celebrate Reconciliation or the other sacraments, unless in danger of death. A person in an irregular marriage can resume celebrating the sacraments after obtaining a Decree of Invalidity (an annulment) and validating the civil marriage. Under certain conditions, some Catholics living in an irregular marriage may resume celebrating the sacraments with the approval of their pastor. Catholics in an irregular marriage should discuss their personal circumstances with a priest before making assumptions about their status.

### Abortion:

A Catholic who knowingly, intentionally and culpably procures, cooperates in procuring or provides an abortion incurs an automatic censure of excommunication. This censure must be lifted before a Catholic may celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation or other sacraments. In the Archdiocese of Dubuque, parish priests are authorized to remit the censure incurred by an abortion and may absolve properly disposed penitents from the sin of abortion. If possible, individuals who have incurred an automatic censure should arrange to meet privately with a priest at the parish office or during individual confession times.