Reconciliation FAQ

**What is the difference between Confession, Penance and Reconciliation?**
Those three names are commonly used interchangeably for the Sacrament in which sins are forgiven.  The Sacrament is called “Confession” because the penitent makes a verbal confession of his or her particular sins.  It is called “Penance” from another element of the Sacrament – the good action that the priest asks the penitent to perform as a token of his or her sincerity, and as a way to bring some good into the world in reparation for the sin committed.  And finally “Reconciliation” refers to the final effect of the Sacrament:  the penitent is reconciled with God and the Church.

**What is the origin of this Sacrament?**
It is no exaggeration to say that the very reason that Jesus Christ came into the world was for reconciliation:  to reconcile us to the Father and to one another.  The very first message in the New Testament, on the lips of John the Baptist, was:  “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2)  After the death of John the Baptist, this message was taken up by the Lord Jesus.  During His life on earth, the Lord forgave the sins of various people He encountered.  And after His Resurrection, he told His Apostles to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in His name to all the nations. (Luke 24:47)

**Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest?**
This is founded on the clear instruction of the Lord.  After His Resurrection, the Lord appeared to His Apostles, breathed on them and said:  “Receive the Holy Spirit.  Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

(John 20:22-23)

**Why can’t I just as well confess my sins directly to God?**
Christ instituted the Sacraments as He did because we are physical creatures living in a visible world.  We know by seeing and hearing.  All of the Sacraments involve an actual encounter with a person who speaks and acts in the name of Christ (in most of the Sacraments, a priest) so that we can know what is happening.  In most of the Sacraments, no one objects to that.  For example, no parents ever want to internally ask God to give their new child the grace of rebirth; they want the priest and the water and the words, because then they know their child has been baptized.  Only in regard to Reconciliation are people inclined to become very “spiritual” and want everything to be internal, and only between them and God.  This is on account of our pride – which is also the root of every sin.  Humility is the way back to God; and the confessional is a great school of humility.

**How do I prepare for Confession?**
Before actually approaching the Sacrament, one makes an “examination of conscience.”  This is the effort to recall one’s sins – I look to see what is “on my conscience.”  It is often helpful to do this by using a published guide that reminds us of the range of typical sins.  There are many versions of such guides – often based on the Ten Commandments.

**When is the Sacrament of Reconciliation available?**
All Catholic parishes have [scheduled times](https://www.sacredheartdanbury.org/mass-times-) at which a priest is available for Reconciliation.

**What if none of those times are feasible for me?**
It is always possible to make an appointment for Reconciliation by contacting a priest.  You may make an appointment to meet the priest in the reconciliation room or to meet at the parish office or rectory.

**What is a reconciliation room?**
The Sacrament of Reconciliation can be celebrated anywhere, but it is most convenient to use a reconciliation room.  Sacred Heart is equipped with a reconciliation room that allow the penitent the option to kneel behind a screen to confess anonymously or to sit face-to-face and speak with the priest.  (This is the difference between a reconciliation room and the older “confessionals,” in which the penitent was always kneeling anonymously in a small booth, with the priest in an adjoining booth.)

**Where is the reconciliation room in our church?**
The reconciliation room is located at the front of the Church, to the right of the Altar.  The reconciliation room has a light to indicate when the priest is present and available for the next penitent.

**What should I do to receive this Sacrament?**
You begin by entering the reconciliation room and either kneeling at the screen or sitting down in the empty chair.  Your essential responsibilities are (1) to make your confession and (2) to express contrition for your sins by saying a prayer called the “Act of Contrition” and (3) to do the penance assigned after leaving the reconciliation room.  The priest’s two essential responsibilities are (1) to assign a penance and (2) to give absolution.  He may also give some advice or encouragement in the course of the Sacrament, but what is essential is the absolution that imparts the forgiveness that comes from God.  For a detailed outline of the ritual, including the text of the Act of Contrition, click here.

**It seems there is a lot to remember.  Do I need to take a copy of this outline with me when I approach the Sacrament so that I don’t forget anything?**
You can certainly do that.  But you need not be worried about forgetting some detail.  Priests are very accustomed to prompting people as necessary, and making sure that everything that needs to happen does.

**Some of my sins are really bad and difficult to talk about. Do I have to confess these too?**
Even though these sins are hard to admit, they are the most important to confess.  Serious sin (often called mortal sin) cuts one off from a fruitful relationship with God.  In order to restore this relationship, it is necessary to confront the sin and take responsibility for it.

**Will what I tell the priest remain a secret?**
Yes. The priest is bound to absolute secrecy concerning the sins he hears in this Sacrament.  He may neither divulge it, nor use the information in the governance of the parish.  This obligation is called the “seal of confession,” and under no circumstance can this seal be broken.

**How often should I go to confession?**
The Church requires that Catholics go to confession at least once a year, especially to confess serious or mortal sins. Such sins must also be confessed before receiving Holy Communion. But since we are all sinners, going to confession every month or two would certainly be a healthy practice.

**Should I be concerned that the priest will be upset or disgusted with me on account of the seriousness of my sins or the length of time since my last confession?**
No.  In fact, the priest will be very happy that you have come to this Sacrament of healing and forgiveness.  Few things are more gratifying for a priest than to hear a serious or overdue confession.  The priest leaves the confessional knowing that something important has happened, and humbly grateful that he could be an instrument of God’s mercy and healing.