

Sacrament of Reconciliation

2019-2020



Parent Handbook

Make Confession a Family Affair

The best way to communicate to your child the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to ***frequent the sacrament as a family***. Pick an Advent penance service or a regular Confession time and go to Confession together. Even the children who have not yet celebrated their First Reconciliation will benefit from this endeavor because they will see how important the sacrament is to their older siblings and their parents. If your children do not see you going to Confession on a regular basis then they will grow to believe that the sacrament is not very important. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is offered weekly here at Blessed Mother Church on Saturday from 12:30 PM – 2:00 PM.

Sacramental Preparation Calendar 2019-2020

Parent Meeting

- Wednesday, September 11 Parent Meeting 7 pm – 8 pm St. John Bosco

First Reconciliation

- Saturday, December 14 Retreat 9 am – 11 am Parish Hall
- Sunday December 15 First Reconciliation 2 pm – 3 pm Church
- Reception 3 pm Parish Hall

First Eucharist

- Saturday, April 25 Retreat 10:30 am - 12:30 pm Parish Hall
- Confession 12:30 pm Church
- Sunday, April 26 First Eucharist 10 am Church
- Reception 11 am Parish Hall

At the ***Retreat on December 14, 2019*** the children will learn more about the Sacrament of Reconciliation through various activities. They will also practice how to participate in the service the following day. ***Child and parent will complete each activity together.*** Lunch will not be provided. Parents will have the opportunity to ask questions as well.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation on Sunday, December 15, 2019 will be a communal, parish penance service. Parents and family members are welcome to receive the sacrament as well. Priests from other Parishes will be available in the church. Please make sure that your child is dressed appropriately for this occasion.

Finally, please read the remaining pages in this handbook, as it contains teachings from the Catechism of the Catholic Church on this sacrament.

I pray you be filled with joy.

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Examination of Conscience

An “examination of conscience” is when you spend some time in prayer searching your heart and calling to mind the sins you have committed since your last confession. Since the Ten Commandments encompass the entire moral life, they are an excellent guide for making this examination. The following examination for adults was composed according to that format.

For Adults

First Commandment

- Am I ignorant of my catechism (Act of Contrition, Apostle's Creed, Ten Commandments, Seven Sacraments, the Our Father)?
- Have I willfully doubted or denied any of the teachings of the Church (heresy)?
- Am I a member of an anti-Catholic or secret society?
- Have I practiced any superstitions (horoscopes, fortune tellers, etc.)?

Second Commandment

- Have I used God's name in vain by way of profanity?
- Have I murmured or complained against God (blasphemy)?
- Have I maligned priests or others consecrated to God?
- Have I sworn by God's name (oath) either falsely or rashly?
- Have I broken any private vow?

Third Commandment

- Have I missed Mass on Sundays or holy days through my own fault?
- Have I been late for Mass through my own negligence?
- Have I been inattentive at Mass or otherwise failed in reverence for the Most Blessed Sacrament?
- Have I done unnecessary servile work (physical labor) or shopping on Sunday?

Fourth Commandment

- Have I been disrespectful to my parents or neglected them?
- Have I failed in obedience or reverence to others in authority?
- Have I mistreated my spouse or children?

- Regarding my children:
 - Have I neglected their material needs?
 - Have I failed to care for their early Baptism or their proper religious instruction?
 - Have I allowed them to neglect their religious duties?
 - Have I tolerated their keeping questionable company?
 - Have I otherwise failed to discipline them?
 - Have I given them bad example?
 - Have I interfered with their freedom to marry or follow a religious vocation?

Fifth and Eighth Commandments

- Have I quarreled with any one?
- Have I cursed anyone or otherwise wished evil on him?
- Have I taken pleasure in anyone's misfortune?
- Is there anyone to whom I refuse to speak or be reconciled?
- Have I lied about anyone (calumny)?
- Have I rashly judged anyone of a serious sin?
- Have I engaged in gossip (detraction) or spread scandal?
- Have I lent an ear to scandal about my neighbor?
- Have I been jealous or envious of anyone?

Sixth and Ninth

- Have I denied my spouse his or her marriage rights?
- Have I practiced birth control?
- Have I abused my marriage rights in any other way?
- Have I committed adultery or fornication?
- Have I touched or embraced another impurely?
- Have I sinned with others of the same sex?
- Have I committed masturbation or otherwise sinned impurely with myself?
- Have I harbored lustful desires for anyone?
- Have I indulged in other impure thoughts?
- Have I failed to dress modestly?
- Have I done anything to provoke or occasion impure thoughts in others?
- Have I read indecent literature or looked at indecent pictures?
- Have I watched suggestive films or programs?

- Have I permitted my children or others under my charge to do these things?
- Have I used indecent language or told indecent stories?
- Have I willingly listened to such stories?
- Have I boasted of my sins?
- Have I sinned against chastity in any other way?

Seventh and Tenth Commandments

- Have I stolen anything?
- Have I damaged anyone's property through my own fault?
- Have I cheated or defrauded other?
- Have I refused or neglected to pay any debts?
- Have I neglected my duties or been slothful in my work?
- Have I refused or neglected to help anyone in urgent necessity?
- Have I failed to make restitution?

Other Sins

- Have I knowingly caused others to sin?
- Have I cooperated in the sins of others?
- Have I sinned by gluttony?
- Have I become intoxicated?
- Have I used narcotics?
- Have I been motivated by avarice?
- Have I indulged in boasting or vainglory?
- Have I received Holy Communion or another sacrament in the state of mortal sin?
- Is there any other sin I need to confess?

The Act of Contrition

There are many different forms of the Act of Contrition. Instead of deciding myself which one the children should learn, I thought it would be better to simply provide for you the various forms of the prayer and allow you to decide. The first two are the most popular, but really any prayer that communicates to the priest that you are sorry for your sins and you resolve to avoid sinning in the future will work just as well.

Please try your best to make sure that your child learns the Act of Contrition before the day of First Reconciliation.

Act of Contrition #1

O my God, I am heartily sorry
for having offended Thee,
and I detest all of my sins
because of Thy just punishments,
but most of all because they offend Thee my God
who art all good and deserving of all my love.
I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace,
to sin no more
and to avoid the near occasions of sin.
Amen.

Act of Contrition #3

O my God, I am sorry for my sins.
In choosing to sin
and failing to do good
I have sinned against You and Your Church.
I firmly intend, with the help of Your Son,
To make up for my sins
and to love as I should.
Amen.

Act of Contrition #2

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.
Amen.

Act of Contrition #4

O my God, I am heartily sorry
for having offended Thee,
and I detest all my sins
because I dread the loss of heaven
and the pains of hell;
but most of all because they offend Thee, my God,
Who are all good and deserving of all my love.
I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace,
to confess my sins,
to do penance,
and to amend my life.
Amen.



Books on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

For Adults:

101 Inspirational Stories of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, by Sister Patricia Proctor.
Paperback: 251 pgs. Poor Clare Sisters (October 30, 2006).

Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness, by Jim Forest. Paperback: 174 pgs. Orbis Books (February 1, 2002).

Frequent Confession: Its Place in the Spiritual Life, by Benedict Baur. Paperback: 266 pgs.
Scepter Publications (January 1999).

Go in Peace: Your Guide to the Purpose and Power of Confession, by Fr. Mitch Pacwa.
Paperback: 124 pgs. Ascension Press (February 7, 2007).

Lord Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession, by Scott Hahn. Hardcover: 192 pgs.
Doubleday (March 18, 2003).

Pardon and Peace: A Sinner's Guide to Confession, by Fr. Francis Randolph.
Paperback: 185 pgs. Ignatius Press (March, 2001).

A Pocket Guide to Confession, by Michael Dubruiel. Paperback: 80 pgs. Our Sunday Visitor
(September 10, 2007).

The Untapped Power of the Sacrament of Penance, by Christopher J. Walsh. Paperback: 160
pgs. Servant Publications (August 2005).

Your Child's First Confession: Preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, by Rosemary
Gallagher. Paperback: 16 pgs. Liguori Publications (January 1994).

For Children:

Child's Guide to Reconciliation, by Elizabeth Ficocelli. Hardcover: 32 pgs. Paulist Press
(December 1, 2003).

Going to Confession, by Rev. Lawrence G. Lovasik. Paperback: 32 pgs. Catholic Book Publishing
Company (August 15, 1994).

Jesus Gives Us Peace: The Sacrament of Reconciliation, by Claire Dumont, Suzanne Lacoursiere, and
Gabrielle Grimard. Paperback: 48 pgs. Pauline Books & Media (January 1, 2006).

Making Things Right: The Sacrament of Reconciliation, by Jeannine Timko Leichner.
Paperback: 70 pgs. Our Sunday Visitor (January 2005).

Today I Made My First Reconciliation, by Dianne Ahern. Hardcover: 56 pgs. Aunt Dee's Attic
(April 30, 2004).

The Sacrament of Reconciliation: from the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*

What is the name of this sacrament? (cf. CCC nos. 1422-1424)

It is called the sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of Reconciliation, the sacrament of Forgiveness, the sacrament of Confession, and the sacrament of Conversion.

Why is there a sacrament of Reconciliation after Baptism? (cf. CCC nos. 1425-1426, 1484)

Since the new life of grace received in Baptism does not abolish the weakness of human nature nor the inclination to sin (that is, concupiscence), Christ instituted this sacrament for the conversion of the baptized who have been separated from him by sin.

When did he institute this sacrament? (cf. CCC no. 1485)

The risen Lord instituted this sacrament on the evening of Easter when he showed himself to his apostles and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:22-23).

Do the baptized have need of conversion? (cf. CCC no. 1427-1429)

The call of Christ to conversion continues to resound in the lives of the baptized. Conversion is a continuing obligation for the whole Church. She is holy but includes sinners in her midst.

What is interior penance? (cf. CCC nos. 1430-1433, 1490)

It is the movement of a "contrite heart" (Psalm 51:19) drawn by divine grace to respond to the merciful love of God. This entails sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed, a firm purpose not to sin again in the future and trust in the help of God. It is nourished by hope in divine mercy.

What forms does penance take in the Christian life? (cf. CCC nos. 1434-1439)

Penance can be expressed in many and various ways but above all in fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. These and many other forms of penance can be practiced in the daily life of a Christian, particularly during the time of Lent and on the penitential day of Friday.

What are the essential elements of the sacrament of Reconciliation? (cf. CCC nos. 1440-1449)

The essential elements are two: the acts of the penitent who comes to repentance through the action of the Holy Spirit, and the absolution of the priest who in the name of Christ grants forgiveness and determines the ways of making satisfaction.

What are the acts of the penitent? (cf. CCC nos. 1450-1460, 1487-1492)

They are: a careful examination of conscience; contrition (or repentance), which is perfect when it is motivated by love of God and imperfect if it rests on other motives and which includes the determination not to sin again; confession, which consists in the telling of one's sins to the priest; and satisfaction or the carrying out of certain acts of penance which the confessor imposes upon the penitent to repair the damage caused by sin.

Which sins must be confessed? (cf. CCC no. 1456)

All grave sins not yet confessed, which a careful examination of conscience brings to mind, must be brought to the sacrament of Penance. The confession of serious sins is the only ordinary way to obtain forgiveness.

When is a person obliged to confess mortal sins? (cf. CCC no. 1457)

Each of the faithful who has reached the age of discretion is bound to confess his or her mortal sins at least once a year and always before receiving Holy Communion.

Why can venial sins also be the object of sacramental confession? (cf. CCC no. 1458)

The confession of venial sins is strongly recommended by the Church, even if this is not strictly necessary, because it helps us to form a correct conscience and to fight against evil tendencies. It allows us to be healed by Christ and to progress in the life of the Spirit.

Who is the minister of this sacrament? (cf. CCC nos. 1461-1466, 1495)

Christ has entrusted the ministry of Reconciliation to his apostles, to the bishops who are their successors and to the priests who are the collaborators of the bishops, all of

whom become thereby instruments of the mercy and justice of God. They exercise their power of forgiving sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

To whom is the absolution of some sins reserved? (cf. CCC no. 1463)

The absolution of certain particularly grave sins (like those punished by excommunication) is reserved to the Apostolic See or to the local bishop or to priests who are authorized by them. Any priest, however, can absolve a person who is in danger of death from any sin and excommunication.

Is a confessor bound to secrecy? (cf. CCC no. 1467)

Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry and the respect due to people every confessor, without any exception and under very severe penalties, is bound to maintain “the sacramental seal” which means absolute secrecy about the sins revealed to him in confession.

What are the effects of this sacrament? (cf. CCC nos. 1468-1470, 1496)

The effects of the sacrament of Penance are: reconciliation with God and therefore the forgiveness of sins; reconciliation with the Church; recovery, if it has been lost, of the state of grace; remission of the eternal punishment merited by mortal sins, and remission, at least in part, of the temporal punishment which is the consequence of sin; peace, serenity of conscience and spiritual consolation; and an increase of spiritual strength for the struggle of Christian living.

Can this sacrament be celebrated in some cases with a general confession and general absolution? (cf. CCC nos. 1480-1484)

In cases of serious necessity (as in imminent danger of death) recourse may be had to a communal celebration of Reconciliation with general confession and general absolution, as long as the norms of the Church are observed and there is the intention of individually confessing one’s grave sins in due time.

What are indulgences? (cf. CCC nos. 1471-1479, 1498)

Indulgences are the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. The faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains the indulgence under prescribed conditions for either himself or the departed. Indulgences are granted through the ministry of the Church which, as the dispenser of the grace of redemption, distributes the treasury of the merits of Christ and the Saints.

Reconciliation

Jesus said to [the apostles] again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ~ John 20:21-23

THE sacrament of Reconciliation continues the work of conversion and forgiveness in the life of the Christian — a work that is necessary, because the inclination to sin is not removed in Baptism and our life as a child of God can be weakened and even lost by sin. As long as we live on earth, we must struggle against this inclination, and thus we demonstrate our choice to love God above all else, to be saints.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1:8), "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), even after Baptism. For this reason, Jesus gave to the Twelve the power to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, especially for those who have committed mortal (deadly) sin (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). In this way, we receive spiritual healing and salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

The Names of the Sacrament

The preferred name for this sacrament is "Reconciliation," because this name identifies the very

"Through the priest, God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner."



The Prodigal Son, by Gustave Doré, 1853-1883

purpose of the sacrament. The sacrament reconciles one with God and restores their intimate friendship. Nevertheless, each of the names given to this sacrament highlights important aspects. The name "sacrament of Conversion" emphasizes Jesus' command, *"Repent, and believe in the gospel,"* which is given to every person (Mk 1:15; see also Lk 15:18). The name "sacrament of Confession" points to the essential element of "confession" in which the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) both confesses his or her sins and a belief in God's mercy. The name "sacrament of Penance" is perhaps the oldest name for this sacrament and underscores the importance of doing penance as both a sign of thanksgiving to God for his mercy and an expression of the desire to repair the damage caused by sin. The last two names, "sacrament of Forgiveness" and "sacrament of Reconciliation," are closely united. Through the priest, who acts *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"), God delivers his forgiveness to the sinner who converts, confesses, and repents. In this

way, "God ... through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). This ministry is both a gift and a duty for the penitent (one seeking the sacrament) — as he or she is forgiven and reconciled, likewise he or she must forgive and reconcile as Christ's ambassador (see 2 Cor 5:20).

The Rite of Reconciliation

Although this sacrament may be received as often as desired, there are occasions when the sacrament is obligatory (required). The Church obliges all the faithful to confess their sins once a year. Also, the Christian is obliged to go to Confession before receiving Communion if even one mortal (deadly) sin has been committed (see 1 Cor 11:27).

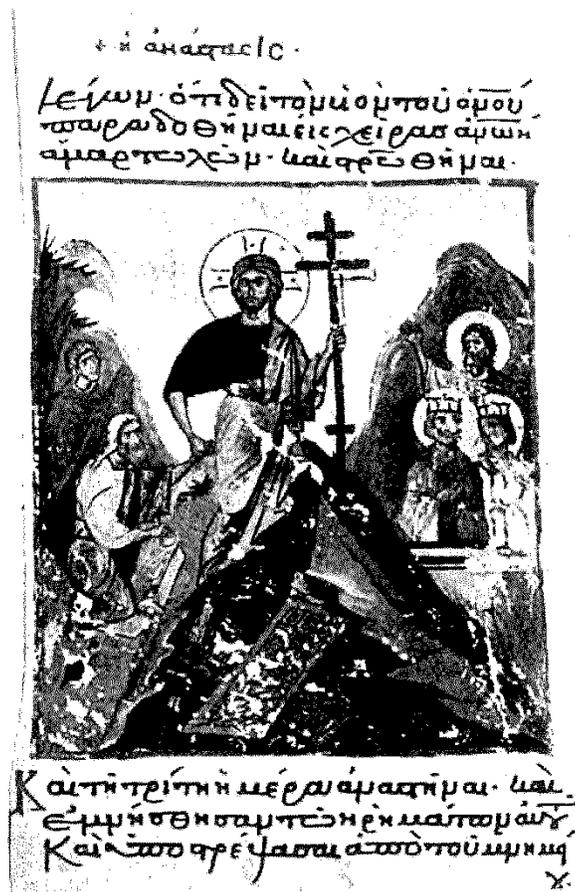
Jesus gave only the apostles the authority to forgive sins, and so bishops and priests, as the successors of the apostles, are the only ones with the authority to forgive sins (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). As part of this great authority, they are required to keep the "sacramental seal," that is, they must keep everyone's confession absolutely secret. Neither a bishop nor a priest may ever make known to anyone, for any reason, in any way, the confession of another person. Even if someone were to confess sins as serious as murder, drug dealing, or rape, they may never reveal even the smallest detail of the confession.

The essential elements of the Rite of Reconciliation are the sinner's repentance, confession, and intention to do their penance, and the priest's absolution. The first essential element, the sinner's repentance, be-

gins before the actual rite. Repentance or contrition is a gift from God in which one experiences sorrow (great pain and detestation) for sin: "therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Jb 42:6). Genuine repentance includes the choice of the sinner to make a firm resolution to sin no more. Many times, the weight of our sin, especially habitual sins, make it more difficult to make that firm resolution in the face of countless resolutions made and broken in the past, but Jesus gently invites us to come to him with our sorrows and burdens (see Mt 11:28). The sacrament is for the weak, so we need not worry about how many resolutions have been broken. When questioned on the limit to forgiveness, the Lord says, "[Not] seven times, but seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). With the Lord there is no limit to his forgiveness. Those who approach the sacrament in humble contrition will receive forgiveness from him: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:17). Those, however, who approach it in a spirit of complacency, accepting the fact that they will do wrong again, are not truly sorry and are not really seeking forgiveness. God honors the freedom he has bestowed on the human person. If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God: "Restore us to thyself, O Lord! Renew our days as of old!" (Lam 5:21).

Before seeking Reconciliation, the penitent must prepare to receive the sacrament by asking God's help in examining his or her conscience: "Behold, we

"If forgiveness is not truly sought after or desired, then God will not offer it. The proper attitude is a yearning to be reunited to God."



Jesus' descent to the dead, 12th century book of the Gospels

are before thee in our guilt, for none can stand before thee because of this" (Ez 9:15), and to grant the gift of contrition. Various Scripture passages may be used in examining one's conscience, for example, the Ten Commandments (see Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (see Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and on love (see 1 Cor 12-13), the conduct of Christians (see Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and the Spirit (see Gal 5:19-23).

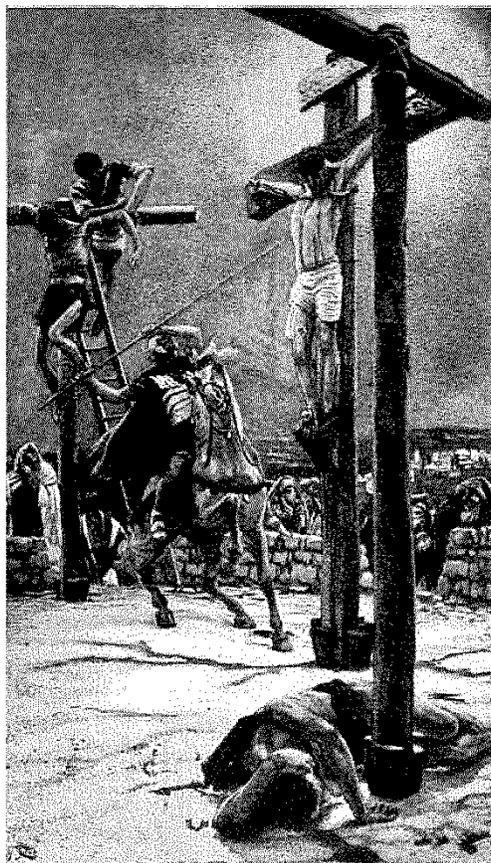
Following the examination of conscience, true repentance, and a resolution not to commit those sins again, the penitent is prepared to receive the sacrament, choosing to sit face-to-face with the priest or kneeling behind a curtain.

The actual Rite of Reconciliation begins with the priest's greeting and blessing of the penitent, which may be followed by a reading from Scripture. After this, the penitent begins his or her confession by making the Sign of the Cross and saying words similar to these, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned; my last confession was a month ago." Next, the penitent confesses to the priest every mortal (deadly) sin committed since the last confession, and the approximate number of times each one was committed. Intentionally withholding mortal sin from confession is the serious sin of sacrilege, because of his dishonesty and failure to trust in God's mercy. It is beneficial to the penitent to confess venial sins, a practice that helps in realizing the seriousness of these sins and how they, too, offend God and harm one's relationship with him. The confession is concluded with the penitent's own words or a traditional formula such as, "I am sorry for these and all my sins."

At the completion of the penitent's confession, the priest may ask questions to give suitable counsel.

Then, the priest gives some penance for the sinner to do in order that the person may begin to repair the damage done by his or her sin, to make satisfaction, and to make necessary changes to avoid sin in the future. Next, the priest asks the person to make an Act of Contrition aloud, such as the following: "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In

"The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation."



The piercing of the side of Jesus, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

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* 45).

The priest then grants the sinner absolution by extending his hand over the penitent: "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (*Rite of Penance* 46).

The priest may then offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good." The penitent responds, "His mercy endures forever." The rite concludes with a dismissal and a blessing, for example, "The Lord has freed you from your sins, go in peace."

After the priest's absolution, the penitent then does the penance given to him or her by the priest, in order to make reparation for the sin he or she committed.

The Effects of Reconciliation

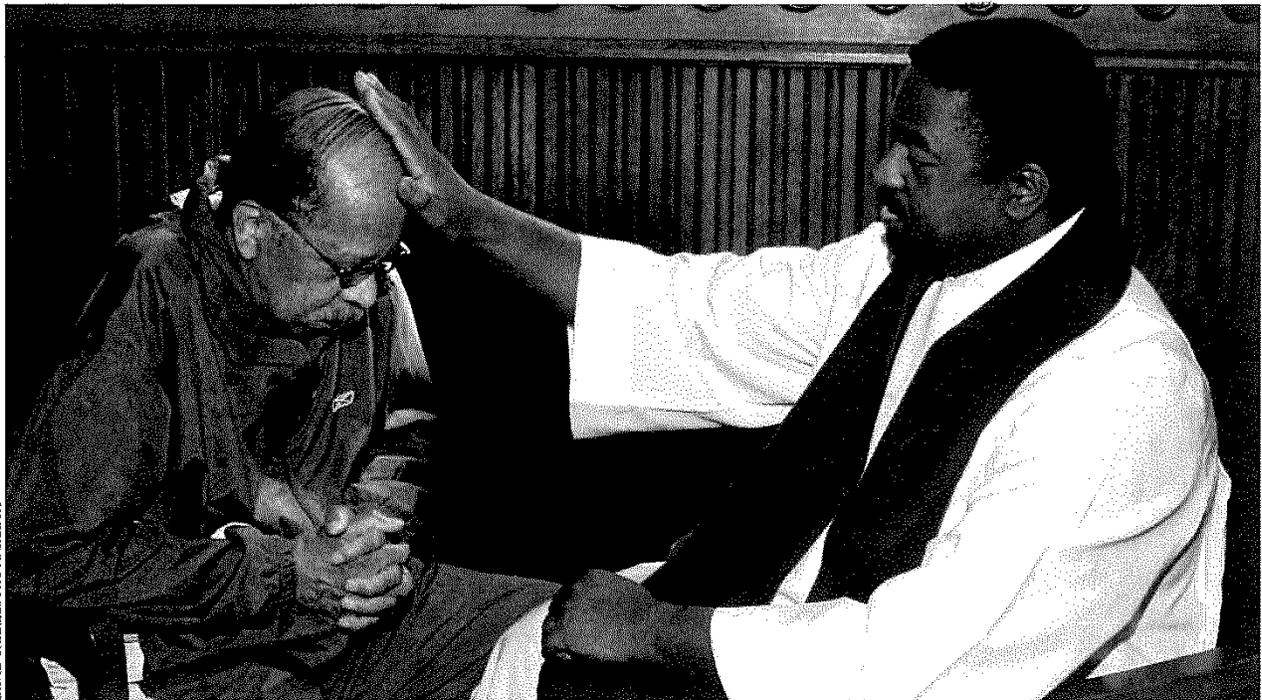
The sacrament of Reconciliation reunites the sinner with God. Through mortal sin, we destroy our intimate friendship with God. Sin separates us from

God by weakening his life within in us and causing us to neglect the abundant gifts he first gave to us in Baptism. Sinners become like the prodigal son, who separated himself from his father and squandered his inheritance (see Lk 15:11-32). So too we sinners must humble ourselves and beg our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, as the prophet cries: *"Hear, O Lord, and have mercy, for we have sinned before thee"* (Bar 3:2). The Father, who longs for our return, can then run to us, embrace us, and kiss us (see Lk 15:20). Again and again, when we fall, our Father offers his mercy to the truly repentant: *"[T]hou art merciful to all, ... and thou dost overlook men's sins, that they may repent.... Thou sparest all things, for they are thine, O Lord who lovest the living"* (Wis 11:23, 26).

in Christ, but also to every other baptized person. We become both children of God and brothers and sisters to one another in the Trinity-family, the communion of saints (see Gal 4:5-7, 1 Cor 12:12-31). For this reason, Reconciliation is also necessary to reconcile us with our brothers and sisters in the Church.

The separation from God and his family is the eternal consequence of sin, and it is fully pardoned in Reconciliation. Every sin, however, has temporal consequences connected to it. These temporal punishments are only partially remitted in Reconciliation. In order to be free of those consequences, the forgiven sinner must do penance to repair the harm done by his or her sin, that is, "to make satisfaction."

Proper reception of the sacrament provides sac-



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Reconciliation is a sacrament of mercy and healing

Reconciliation is the way for the baptized who have committed mortal sin to return home, to re-establish their intimate friendship with God. And our Heavenly Father is full of mercy, ever willing to reconcile the penitent sinner to himself: *"Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea"* (Mi 7:18-19).

Furthermore, mortal sin separates the faithful from the family of God, the Church. This is so because in Baptism, each one is united not only to God

ramental grace in abundance. These graces assist the penitent in making satisfaction, in growing in virtue and in fighting temptation. They are invaluable and they are a major reason for the recommendation for frequent reception of this sacrament. Not only are we strengthened in virtue but we learn, ever more, the dreadful reality of our sins so that we might strive ever more to avoid them: *"Therefore thou dost correct little by little those who trespass, and dost remind and warn them of the things wherein they sin, that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in thee, O Lord"* (Wis 12:2).

(CCC 976, 979-983, 1420-1484)

Confession to a Human Being

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. ~ Proverbs 28:13



AT ONE TIME or another, we have probably heard questions, or asked them ourselves, concerning the Catholic practice of confessing their sins to a priest. "Why," some will ask, "do Catholics *have* to go to confession?" while others say, "Who needs confession when I can go straight to God?" Some may even ask, with the scribes listening to Jesus, "*Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" (Mk 2:7). These questions pose essentially the same objection: confessing sins to another human being may be therapeutic, as some psychologists tell us, but it cannot bring about the forgiveness that God alone can grant.

The answer to this objection lies in the proper understanding of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the role of the priest. The sacrament is a *real encounter with Jesus*, who healed and forgave the sins of many to the astonishment of the religious leaders surrounding him (see Mt 9:2-7; Lk 7:48-49). Before ascending into Heaven, he breathed the Holy Spirit on his apostles and said, "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (Jn 20:23). This power of Christ given to the apostles expressed his will to institute the sacrament of Reconciliation and to extend the ministry

"When a Catholic walks into a confessional, Christ is there in the priest."

of forgiveness throughout the world and down through the centuries.

When a Catholic walks into a confessional to confess his or her sins, Christ is there

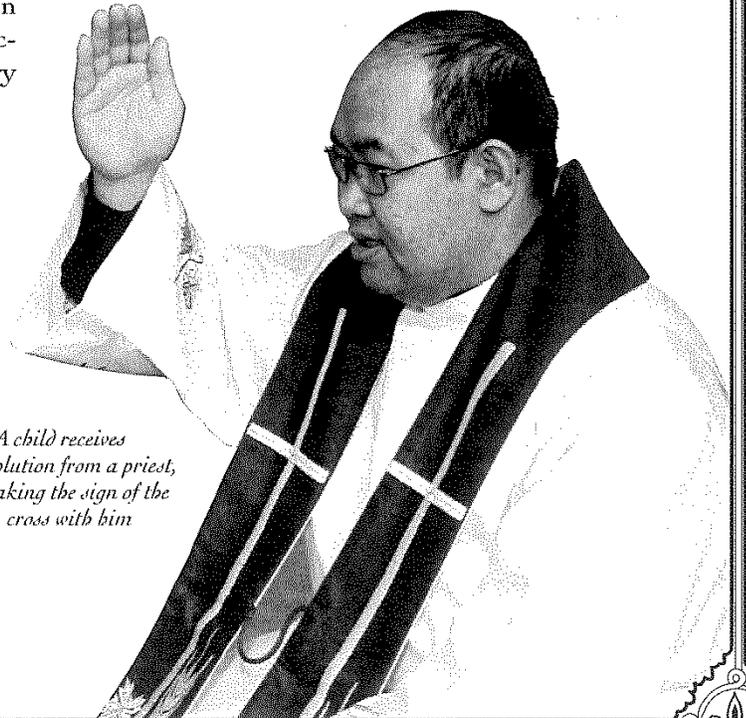
in the priest because the priest acts not in his own name but *in persona Christi* ("in the person of Christ"). Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, Christ has configured the priest to himself in this way specifically so he (the priest) can carry out this sacrament and the other functions given to him by Christ. When the priest absolves the penitent, it is Christ himself who speaks although the voice is that of the priest. Unless this power to forgive sins is real, confession to a priest would be a sham and, worse, an offense against God. No one can forgive sins except God; but likewise no one can decide whether to mediate this power through an earthly priesthood except God. Christ revealed the Father's will in this matter, instituted the sacrament of Reconciliation, and thereby set out God's plan to extend his mercy and forgiveness to the whole world through the ministry of his priests.

(CCC 1455-1456, 1464-1467)

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A child receives absolution from a priest, making the sign of the cross with him



HELPS IN USING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in Heaven. ~ Lamentations 3:40-41

Elements of Making a Good Confession:



THOROUGH examination of conscience since your last confession is necessary.

Inform the priest of the approximate length of time since your last Confession.

Say to the priest: *"Father, forgive me for I have sinned. It has been ___ years (or months) since my last Confession."*

Confess your serious sins, or mortal sins, as completely as possible, naming them as specifically as possible and with some indication of their frequency. Less serious sins should also be mentioned specifically, but can be mentioned more generally.

In order to receive the effects of forgiveness from your sins, there needs to be a sincere desire to reject the sinful behavior confessed and a willingness to respond to God's grace by attempting to avoid all future sin as well as times when sinning might be too easy to fall into.

"Father, forgive me for I have sinned."

Quotes from Scripture that may be helpful in thinking about your sins:

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).

"And if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" (Mt 18:12).

"God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17).

Act of Contrition:

The Act of Contrition is said after you have confessed your sins to the priest and after he has given you a penance to do.

An Example:

Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you.

I detest all of my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are good and deserving of all my love.

I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

Remember: It's completely fine to ask the priest to help you if you don't know what to say.

(CCC 1450-1460)



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A deacon giving counsel to a parishioner

Continual Conversion and Penance

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church. ~ Colossians 1:24

JESUS CALLS EVERY PERSON to turn away from sin and to turn towards him — that is, to convert. This conversion requires not only change in one's actions but also a conversion of heart, a radical change of being. In the conversion of heart, one changes from being "dead to sin" to "alive ... in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11), from a child of wrath (see Eph 2:3) to a child of God (see Gal 4:5-7).

We cannot change (convert) our own hearts, and so conversion is first a work of God, the one who "will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt 30:6). God "circumcises our hearts" in Baptism, when we are cleansed from sin and made children of God, "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:17), and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). God gives to each person the grace for conversion, to choose either to accept or reject. By a response of faith, the person accepts this gift of conversion, and by doing penance, cooperates with this grace.

Penance is any act which assists the Christian to turn away from sin and toward Jesus. Whenever we sincerely do penance, we cooperate with the grace of conversion. We will rejoice in our sufferings for the sake of Christ and experience a willingness to complete in our own bodies "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24; see also Phil 3:8). Our penance thus expresses an interior conversion.

Forms and Examples of Penance

Scripture suggests three forms of penance: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving (see Tb 12:8, Mt 6:1-18). Fasting cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's individual life, prayer cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with God, and almsgiving cooperates with the grace of conversion in one's life with others. Tradi-

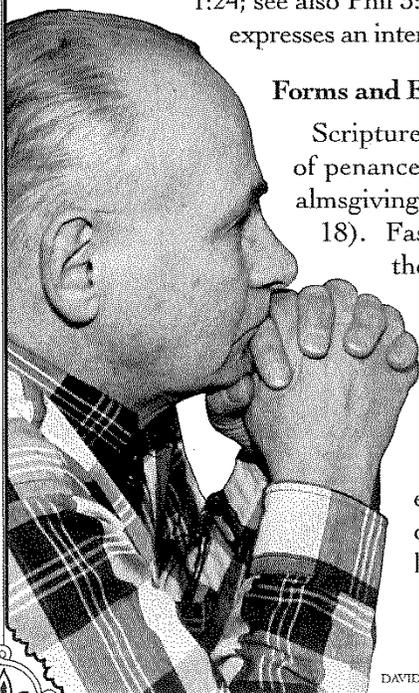
tional fasting means abstaining from food for a given period of time to draw closer to God. Some people fast on bread and water alone as a way of teaching that Christ alone is the soul's only real nourishment. Almsgiving means giving money (or food, clothing, etc.) to the poor. The Church teaches that we must recognize Christ in the poorest of the poor. These are his brothers and sisters; as members of his Body, we must care for them. Furthermore, the practice of penance in one form affects the other two. For example, if we pray with true repentance, we will desire to change our way of life and will change the way we treat others.

Because of ever-present human weakness and sin, continual conversion is necessary. Someone who truly desires to cooperate with God's grace need only utter a prayer like "How can I love you more, Lord Jesus?" and many ideas will surely come to mind. Scripture teaches that crying tears of repentance (see Lk 7:37-48), "love for one another" (1 Pt 4:8), and "bring[ing] back a sinner from the error of his way" (Jas 5:20) each "cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8; see also Jas 5:20). Other ways to accomplish conversion are receiving the Eucharist, reading Scripture, praying the Rosary or any other devotion, worshiping Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, examining one's conscience, caring for the poor, giving money and time to those in need, seeking and following spiritual direction, visiting the lonely, practicing self-denial, and patient acceptance of suffering and persecution.

Requirements to do Penance

The penance assigned by the priest in the sacrament of Reconciliation is how the penitent is asked to make satisfaction for the sins they have just confessed and of which they have been forgiven. The baptized are also obliged to observe the days of abstinence and fasting during Lent. Additional penances should be done during those liturgical seasons and days designated for penitential practices — the forty days of Lent, Holy Week, Advent, and every Friday — since these are times when the Church intensely works together as the family of God in continuing conversion. (CCC 1427-1439)

"Penance expresses an interior conversion."



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DAILY EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter. ~ Matthew 12:36

CONTINUING CONVERSION IS A DAILY NEED in the universal call to holiness. An examination of conscience each day helps us to love God more fully and to live as his child. Recalling personal sins daily helps us to see our weaknesses, areas of temptation, and repetitive sins, and in turn be able to ask God for help:

"For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds" (Mt 7:8). This daily examination also serves to make us more sensitive to sin and so contrition (the sorrow for sins and firm intention to sin no more) grows in the heart. This increase in contrition prepares us for Reconciliation and for worthy reception of Holy Communion. Having spent this time examining his or her conscience, praying, and receiving the sacraments, the baptized person grows spiritually and is more able to battle against human weakness and the inclination to sin. Every daily examination of conscience should begin by asking God for his help in our weaknesses, areas of temptation, and repetitive sins, as if helping us *"render an account"* before the judgment seat (Mt 12:36).

To avoid being scrupulous, we should also ask God to help us keep in mind his *"abundant mercy"* (Ps 51:1) and *"his steadfast love"* (Ps 136).

"Daily examination serves to make us more sensitive to sin and so contrition grows in the heart."

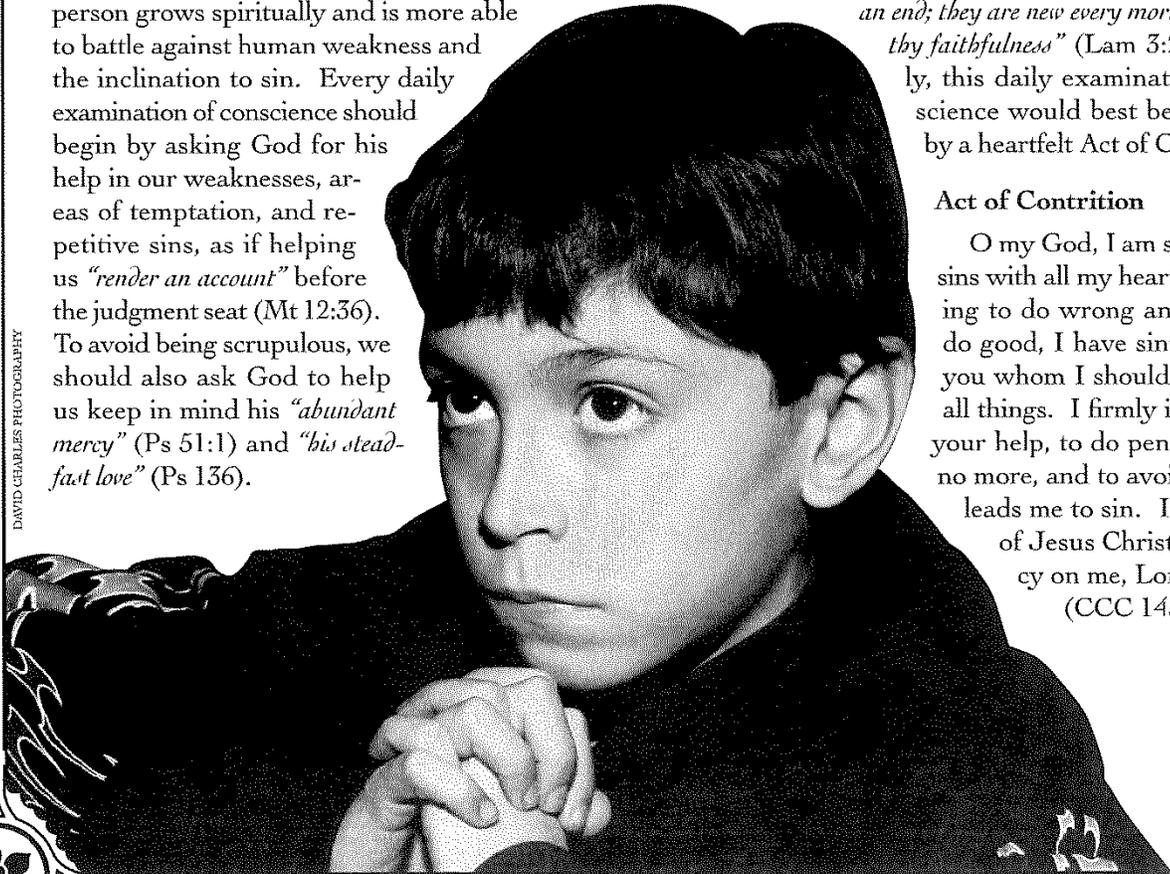
Reading Scripture passages helps in a proper attitude toward sin. The same text can be read every day, or others can be chosen for each new day. Some appropriate passages are the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), the works of mercy (Mt 25:31-46), the teaching on the Body of Christ and love (1 Cor 12-13),

the conduct of Christians (Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6), or the explanation of the fruits of the flesh and fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5). A few minutes spent considering our love of God, charity in relation to others and our responsibilities for this day will help keep us focused on what is most important each day. It will also serve to move us more frequently to God's mercy: *"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness"* (Lam 3:22). Finally, this daily examination of conscience would best be concluded by a heartfelt Act of Contrition.

Act of Contrition

O 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. In the name of Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Lord. Amen.
(CCC 1451-1454)

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EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE BEFORE THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

We have sinned before the Lord, and have disobeyed him, and have not heeded the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in the statutes of the Lord which he set before us. ~ Baruch 1:17-18

BELOW IS A SUGGESTED WAY of examining your conscience in preparation for a fruitful confession of sin. It is based on the Ten Commandments and gives examples of the kinds of sins that tend to be committed against each of those divine precepts.

I. I am the Lord your God, you shall not have false gods before me.

- ❖ Have I put money, popularity, material things or any other good above my relationship with God?
- ❖ Have I rejected God's revelation to me of who he is or what he wants me to do?
- ❖ Have I rejected God's revelation as it comes to me through the Church's teachings?
- ❖ Have I tried to turn away from a vocation to which God might be calling me?
- ❖ Have I despaired of God's help or provision for me in my times of need?
- ❖ Have I presumed upon God's forgiveness when I decided to do something sinful?
- ❖ Have I used things that are superstitious, occult, or related to witchcraft?



Jesus walking on the sea, by James Tissot, 1836-1902

*“Examining your
conscience prepares for
a fruitful confession
of sin.”*

II. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

- ❖ Have I used the name of the Lord in vain, or in any other improper way?
- ❖ Have I made false oaths or failed to keep a promise made in God's sight?
- ❖ Have I disrespected the holiness of God and/or of persons or things that are specially associated with God (like priests, sacred objects, the parish buildings, etc.)?

III. You shall keep holy the Sabbath day.

- ❖ Have I failed through my own fault to not worship God on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation by attending Mass?
- ❖ Have I failed to make an effort to keep Sunday holy by spending time with my family, spending extra time in prayer or in charitable activities, resting from the work of the week?
- ❖ Have I failed to make an effort to pray regularly and attentively throughout the week?

IV. You shall honor your father and your mother.

- ❖ Have I been disrespectful of my parents (and stepparents, grandparents or other family members)?

“Have I rejected God?”



- ❖ Have I been disrespectful of others placed in authority over me?

V. You shall not kill.

- ❖ Have I contributed to or concurred in any way with the taking of human life through abortion, euthanasia, or other means?
- ❖ Have I done damage to another's well-being in any way?
- ❖ Have I jeopardized myself through use of drugs, alcohol or some other self-destructive behavior?
- ❖ Have I hoped that bad things or ill fate would befall another?
- ❖ Have I harbored anger or hatred so intense as to wish to harm another?
- ❖ Have I done anything that gives bad example to others and might lead them to fall into sin?

VI. and IX. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse.

- ❖ Have I engaged in willful sexual intercourse outside of marriage?
- ❖ Within marriage have I engaged in sexual activity without regard for expressing true love for my spouse?
- ❖ Within marriage have I engaged in sexual activity without openness to the possibility of receiving the gift of human life (using contraception)?
- ❖ Have I pursued and entertained lustful thoughts?
- ❖ Have I been careless about the sexual content of

materials I read or view in books, on the Internet, or on TV?

- ❖ Has my marriage been celebrated outside the Catholic Church or without permission of the Catholic Church?

VII. and X. You shall not steal. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

- ❖ Have I failed to respect the property of others, both in my family and outside of it?
- ❖ Have I failed to share my resources with those less fortunate than me?
- ❖ Have I failed to pay a just wage or failed to give my employer a day's work for a day's pay?
- ❖ Have I been unhappy with the blessings that God has given me or envied another? Am I jealous of what others have?
- ❖ Have I tried to get the things, clothes, etc. that I see others having/wearing, just because they have them?

VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

- ❖ Have I told lies? Have I gossiped?
- ❖ Have I tried to destroy someone's reputation by lying?
- ❖ Have I told others someone's faults without serious reason to do so?
- ❖ Have I made assumptions about others' faults?

(CCC 1454)