

Going to Confession for Adults

Many people have avoided celebrating the Sacrament of Penance, sometimes for years at a time, because they "don't know what to do." The following brief explanation is intended for a person who has not been to confession in some time. It explains how the first form of the Sacrament of Penance may be celebrated. The person who is going to confession is called a "penitent" because he or she wishes to do penance and to turn away from sin.

Preparation (Examination of Conscience—See Appendix)

Before going to confession, the penitent compares his or her life with the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the example of Christ and then prays to God for forgiveness.

Going to Confession

The priest welcomes the penitent and then both make the sign of the cross, saying, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God.

If the penitent is unknown to the priest, it is proper for the penitent to indicate his or her state of life, the time of the last confession, difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.

The Word of God

Then the priest or the penitent may read a passage from the Bible. Suggested passages include Ezekiel 11:19-20, Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 1:14-15, Romans 5:8-9, Ephesians 5:1-2, 1 John 1:6-7 and 9, or another text from Sacred Scripture.

Confession of Sins and the Act of Penance

The penitent then confesses his or her sins. If necessary, the priest should help the penitent to make a complete confession and to have sincere sorrow for sins against God. The sorrow a penitent feels for his or her sins is known as contrition and must include a resolve to sin no more and to avoid all future occasions of sin.² Through confession of sins, the penitent "looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible."

The priest then offers suitable advice to help the penitent begin a new life and, when appropriate, leads him or her to resolve to make appropriate restitution for the harm he or she has caused others. The priest imposes an act of penance or satisfaction on the penitent. The penance corresponds to the seriousness and nature of the sins and may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service to one's neighbor and works of mercy. Such a "penance" serves not only to make up for the past but also to help the penitent to begin a new life and provides the penitent with an antidote to weakness.

The Prayer of the Penitent (Act of Contrition)

After this, the penitent prays a prayer expressing sorrow for his or her sins and resolving not to sin again. A card with several examples of the prayer may be provided in the confessional. The penitent may recite the prayer by heart or read it.

Here is one example of the Prayer of the Penitent:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for
having offended you, and I detest
all my sins, because of Your just

punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, who are all-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 occasion of sin.

Absolution by the Priest

Following this prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution. As he says the final words he makes the sign of the cross over the head of 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.
The penitent answers, "Amen."

Proclamation of Praise

After receiving pardon for his or her sins, the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives 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).

Dismissal of the Penitent

Then the priest tells the penitent to go in peace. The penitent continues his or her conversion and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8).

Appendix:

Examination of Conscience by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

If there is one part of the spiritual life that St. Ignatius stressed, it was the daily – and even twice daily – examination of conscience.

As we read the *Spiritual Exercises*, we may be overwhelmed by the minute detail of St. Ignatius' treatment of what he calls the particular examination of conscience. At the same time, he is careful to provide, "Some Notes on Scruples."

It is very important, therefore, that we form a clear and correct conscience. This means that we cultivate a sensitive judgment which is alert to the least offense against the Divine will and, at the same time, protect ourselves against the wiles of the evil spirit. "The enemy," says St. Ignatius, "considers carefully whether one has a lax or a delicate conscience. If one has a delicate conscience, the evil one seeks to make it excessively sensitive in order to disturb and upset it more easily. Thus, if he sees that one will not consent to mortal sin or

venial sin, or even to the appearance of deliberate sin, since he cannot cause him to fall in a matter that appears sinful, he strives to make the soul judge that there is a sin, for example in a word or passing thought, where there is no sin" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 349).

It is valuable to reflect on this tactic of the evil spirit before we offer some practical norms for making our daily examination of conscience. Why? Because otherwise, we are liable to overlook the importance of a daily inventory of our moral conduct for fear of becoming scrupulous.

There is such a thing as growing in prudent sensitivity of conscience, without becoming a victim of the "enemy" as St. Ignatius calls him.

We may set this down as a general principle, for those who are sincerely striving to do the will of God:

It is characteristic of God and His angels, when they act upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy and to banish all the sadness and disturbances which are caused by the enemy.

It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasonings, subtleties, and continual deceptions (*Rules for Discernment of Spirits*, II, 1).

What are we to conclude from this? That the more zealous we are in trying to please God, the more He will give us a deep interior peace of soul. We should suspect as a temptation from the evil one, when we find ourselves worried or anxious or disturbed, no matter how pious the source of the worry or anxiety may be.

The key to applying this principle is that, before God, I honestly want to do His will even though through weakness, I may fail to live up to my resolutions.

One basic virtue on which we should daily examine ourselves is peace of soul. We should ask ourselves, "Have I given in to worry or anxiety?" "Have I allowed myself to get discouraged?" A good practice is to pronounce the name, "Jesus," when we find ourselves getting despondent, or say some short aspiration like, "My Jesus, I trust in you," whenever we become dejected over something.

Particular Examen on the Theological Virtues

Before applying the particular examen to my own spiritual life, it is well to first ask myself, "What are the virtues that I know from experience I most need to develop?"

The reason why this question should first be answered is that no two of us are equally prone to commit the same kind of sins. Nor are we personally always tempted in the same direction. There is wisdom in first knowing enough about myself, to be able to get attention in my spiritual life and concentrating on what is not so necessary for me at this time in my service of God.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to suppose that by attending to my moral failings, I am being "negative" in my pursuit of holiness.

On the contrary. In God's providence, He allows us to fail in those areas in which He especially wants us to grow in virtue.

We can fail in the practice of these virtues either by commission, omission, or by tepidity, in not acting as generously as we might in responding to the grace we have received from God.

Faith

1. Do I make an honest effort to grow in the virtue of faith by daily mental prayer on the mysteries of the faith as revealed in the life of Jesus Christ?
2. Do I make at least a short act of faith every day?
3. Do I pray daily for an increase of faith?
4. Do I ever tempt God by relying on my own strength to cope with the trials in my life?
5. Do I unnecessarily read or listen to those who oppose or belittle what I know are truths of my Catholic faith?
6. What have I done today to externally profess my faith?
7. Have I allowed human respect to keep me from giving expression to my faith?
8. Do I make a serious effort to resolve difficulties that may arise about my faith?
9. Do I ever defend my faith, prudently and charitably, when someone says something contrary to what I know is to be believed?
10. Have I helped someone overcome a difficulty against the faith?

Hope

1. Do I immediately say a short prayer when I find myself getting discouraged?
2. Do I daily say a short act of hope?
3. Do I dwell on my worries instead of dismissing them from my mind?
4. Do I fail in the virtue of hope by my attachment to the things of this world?
5. Do I try to see God's providence in everything that "happens" in my life?
6. Do I try to see everything from the viewpoint of eternity?
7. Am I confident that, with God's grace, I will be saved?
8. Do I allow myself to worry about my past life and thus weaken my hope in God's mercy?
9. Do I try to combine every fully deliberate action with at least a momentary prayer for divine help?
10. How often today have I complained, even internally?

Charity

1. Have I told God today that I love Him?
2. Do I tell Jesus that I love Him with my whole heart?
3. Do I take the occasion to tell God that I love Him whenever I experience something I naturally dislike?
4. Have I capitalized on the difficulties today to tell God that I love Him just because He sent me the trial or misunderstanding?
5. Do I see God's love for me in allowing me to prove my love for Him in the crosses He sent me today?
6. Have I seen God's grace to prove my love for Him in every person whom I met today?
7. Have I failed in charity by speaking unkindly about others?
8. Have I dwelt on what I considered someone's unkindness toward me today?
9. Is there someone that I consciously avoid because I dislike the person?
10. Did I try to carry on a conversation today with someone who is difficult to talk to?
11. Have I been stubborn in asserting my own will?
12. How thoughtful have I been today in doing some small favor for someone?
13. Have I allowed my mood to prevent me from being thoughtful of others today?
14. Am I given to dwelling on other people's weaknesses or faults?
15. Have I been cheerful today in my dealings with others?
16. Do I control my uncharitable thoughts as soon as they arise in my mind?
17. Did I pray for others today?
18. Have I written any letters today?
19. Have I controlled my emotions when someone irritated me?
20. Have I performed any sacrifice today for someone?