

Why should I go to confession? Doesn't God already know that I'm sorry for my sins?

Fr. Joe Answers:

Certainly God knows when we are sorry for our sins. And since God's only relationship with us is one of unconditional love, whenever we turn to God with a sincere sorrow for sin and a desire to make a new beginning, God is there to meet us with forgiveness.

As human beings, however, we may need a more concrete way of experiencing God's love for us. A person who loves us might show his or her love by making time for us, writing us a note, treating us to a special meal, or buying us a gift. We may already know that our friend cares for us, but the concrete attention is a confirmation and reassurance that human love requires. We Catholics believe that God has given us the sacraments as a way of showing that we are receiving the gift of his love in very real and down-to-earth ways.

One of these sacraments is the sacrament of Reconciliation, more popularly known as "confession." Reconciliation is a more accurate name, since the purpose of the Sacrament is to provide those of us who celebrate it with a tangible experience of God's forgiveness and our reconciliation with the church.

There are other ways that we celebrate God's forgiving power at work in our lives. Each Mass begins with a "Rite of Penance" where we pray for God's mercy and then are assured that God's mercy and forgiveness are present to us. The Mass itself is a Sacrament which conveys God's forgiveness. Many parishes offer "Communal" celebrations of Reconciliation which may or may not include an opportunity for individual confession. When we have sinned, one of these forms of experiencing God's forgiveness may well serve to heal us and restore us to our union with the church and to an awareness of God's grace at work in our lives.

There are times in our lives, however, when we may freely and deliberately chose to separate ourselves from God's love by committing an act that is seriously evil. In such a case, when we have definitely cut ourselves off from God and the church, a more definite reconciliation with the church is appropriate. The church asks that we make an individual confession of our sins to a priest (representing the Holy Spirit present in the community of the church) in case of serious sin. More importantly, whenever we commit such a sin we will likely feel the need to confess it and won't feel completely comfortable until we do. And when we do confess, we often feel a tremendous sense of relief and joy.

Individual confession and celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation can be of great value even when we have not committed a serious sin. It is a way of taking an honest look at our own lives and "taking inventory" of our relationship with God. "Naming" the tendencies or habits that cause us to drift from that relationship may be the beginning of a process of our re-centering our thoughts and actions on God.

The priest is present in the confessional NOT to punish or get angry at the person confessing but ONLY to be a concrete, tangible sign of God's forgiveness. Anyone who has a bad experience with a priest in confession is well within his or her rights to get up and walk out, because that priest is misusing his role. The sacrament of Reconciliation should be first and beyond all else a joyful celebration of God's forgiving and merciful love for us.