

The Easter Duty?

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings! Have you ever heard of something called the “Easter Duty”? If you have, there is a good chance that you thought it meant that all Catholics “must” go to confession at least once a year, specifically during the Easter season. We do not talk much about it now, and so we should ask whether or not this a law that was and/or remains in effect. I will get to that, but first a tiny bit of history.

For much of our history, the frequent reception of the Eucharist was not something everybody did. There was a keen awareness that one should not receive the Body and Blood of Christ unworthily¹. Since there was, and still is, no obligation to receive the Eucharist at every Mass (one’s obligation to attend Mass is satisfied simply by being there), many people did not in fact receive the Eucharist very often. Some did so out of an arguably over-abundance of piety, and others just figured they’d put off confession as long as they could - years even - and would simply do without.

Well, the Church eventually said that since the Eucharist is so integral to the Christian life, a Catholic must receive the Eucharist at least once a year, ideally at Easter², and it is this command that was and still is the “Easter Duty.” Naturally, since everyone racks up at least some sins throughout the year, it naturally followed that going to confession would normally precede that, hence the confusion that the Easter Duty concerned going to confession.

In fact according to canon law, a person is only strictly required to go to confession for mortal sins³, although it is highly recommended to go to tidy us all those other smaller or venial sins as well. The reason it is highly recommended it that few other things, except for the reception of Christ’s Body and Blood, fill us was such profound grace as the sacrament of confession. Hearing confessions is truly one of the most humbling and awesome things I do as a priest.

Alas, many do not make use of the sacrament. Maybe people don’t commit serious sins anymore (highly dubious). Maybe it is because people don’t realize some of the things they do are serious (closer, I think). Or maybe some just have not been in such a long, that they are nervous about the process and/or think they have nothing to say (more likely still).

If that is the case, fear not! What follows is what I call the 90% confession. It contains 90% of the things that 90% of people can confess 90% of the time. A typical confession need not be any more complicated that what follows. In fact, most things that are often added to a confession, like a list of your virtues (good to know, but not what we are there to discuss), lists of struggles in your life (while worth talking about to a priest, the confessional is generally not the place for that either), lists of other people’s sins against you (this comes up often, but the focus should stay on you), and lengthy explanations or details tend only to distract from the business at hand. The fewer details the better. If the priest has any questions, he will ask.

So, without further ado, here is a sample confession that you can use to guide your own confession (bring it with you if that helps). Recite the sins applicable to you, and of course mention any other serious sins not on the list (I presume you already know what those might be).

¹ 1 Cor 11:27 - Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord.

² Can. 920 §1. After being initiated into the Most Holy Eucharist, each of the faithful is obliged to receive holy communion at least once a year. §2. This precept must be fulfilled during the Easter season unless it is fulfilled for a just cause at another time during the year.

³ In short, “mortal” sins are those that are of serious matter (sexual relations outside of marriage, murder, abortion, missing Mass, viewing pornography, etc.) and freely (not coerced) committed by someone who knows at the time that they are indeed serious.

You begin simply by saying, “Bless me Father for I have sinned. It’s been (*state how long*) since my last confession. Here are my sins...

I have not loved God with all my heart, and all my soul.
I have placed people or things in my life as taking priority over God
I have been disrespectful to my parents or legitimate authorities.
I have used the name of God carelessly.
I have brought scandal upon God or the Church through my bad example as a Christian.
I have missed Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.
I have been prideful.
I have not been kind to everyone in my life.
I have been impatient with people in my life.
I have let anger get the best of me.
I have judged others.
I have dwelled on impure thoughts.
I have been impure with myself or with another person.
I have artificially frustrated God's desire to create life.
I have dwelled on impure images that objectify men or women.
I have overindulged in food or drink.
I have abused drugs.
I have told lies.
I have been envious of what others have.
I have not been thankful for all the gifts I have been given.

I am sorry for these, and all my other sins that I have failed to remember.”

The priest may say a few words of counsel, give you a simple penance to say later, and ask you to make an act of contrition. There are many forms, but the short and simple one is: “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

At this point the priest says the prayer of absolution: “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.”

You answer “amen” and the priest dismisses you.

That’s it! All done. Clean as a whistle, and all in a few minutes.

So if you haven’t been to confession in a while, I sincerely hope you will decide to break that streak at some point before Easter. There are scant few things in life that I can guarantee, but I can guarantee you will not regret going to confession and receiving the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness.

So, what do you have to lose other than your sins? I’ll see you there! ⁴

In Christ

Fr Gabriel

⁴ Actually, the normal mode is for the priest and the penitent is to be separated by a screen, so the priest really won’t be seeing you. In fact, even in the absence of a screen, the priest will try to avoid that. Trust me, he doesn’t want to know!