

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

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THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

What's in the Name?

The Sacrament is called by three names: **Confession**, because this is the courageous human act at the heart of the Sacrament; **Penance**, because receiving the Sacrament is a sacred taking of responsibility for our words, deeds and attitudes and their consequences on the people and world around us; and **Reconciliation**, because it describes the result of the Sacrament: reconciliation with God, with one another and with the world around us.

What does the Sacrament of Reconciliation do?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation continues the work of Jesus:

The Son of Man has come to search out and save what was lost. Luke 19:10

The Bible shows Jesus at work: he invites sinners to a change of heart, he forgives their sins, and he remains close to repentant sinners in order to help them reform their lives in the New Life of the Kingdom of God. Jesus, himself, says:

The healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have not come to invite the self-righteous to a change of heart, but sinners. Luke 5:30-32

The Church is the “Body of Christ.” The Church celebrates Jesus’ presence “with us always, until the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus personally continues his work through his body, the Church, in every place and time:

You then, are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it. Furthermore, God has set up in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers . . . 1 Corinthians 12:27-28

Jesus carries out his ministry of forgiveness for sins through his body, the Church:

All this has been done by God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:18

Jesus gave his apostles the authority to carry out the ministry of forgiveness for sins:

‘Peace be with you,’ He said again. ‘As the Father has sent me, so do I send you.’ Then he breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound.’ John 20:21-23

Baptism and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is connected to the Sacrament of Baptism. In a certain sense, it is an extension of the grace of Baptism “for the forgiveness of sins”:

Are you not aware that we who are baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death... Through baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life... This we know: our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might be slaves to sin no longer... His death was death to sin, once for all; his life is life for God in the same way, you must consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:3-5, 6, 10-11

When you are baptized and become a Christian, you make a series of promises that can be summed up in these words:

"I will be dead to sin! I will be alive for God!"

Receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the way Jesus gave us to "die to sin" and stay alive for God. Saint Paul also says:

Put to death whatever in your nature is rooted in Earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desires, and that lust which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5

You must lay aside your former way of life and the old self which deteriorates through illusion and desire. Ephesians 4:22

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the way Jesus provided for us to "put to death whatever in our nature is rooted in earth" and "lay aside our old self which deteriorates through illusion and desire."

Where does the Sacrament of Reconciliation Come From In the Bible?

On the day Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to the apostles. The first thing the risen Lord Jesus did was to give his apostles the authority to forgive people's sins in his name:

On the evening of that first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them. "Peace be with you," he said. When he had said this he showed them his hands and side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced. "Peace be with you," he said again. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound." John 20:19-23

This is where the Sacrament of Reconciliation comes from in the Bible. Jesus, himself, created it. He gave his apostles the authority to absolve from sin—to declare sins forgiven in God's name. This spiritual authority is passed on and continues in the Church through the "laying on of hands" (2 Timothy 1:6-14) in the ordination of Bishops, who are successors of the Apostles, and priests, who are living extensions of the Bishop's apostolic ministry.

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE SACRAMENT

*Do not confirm yourselves to this age
but be transformed by the renewal of your minds. Romans 12:2*

Some disciplines and exercises are essential for the human soul to mature. I call them the Essential Exercises of Adulthood. Sadly, many people are afraid of them. The transforming power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation flows from four elements: repentance, self-examination, confession, and absolution.

The Power of Repentance

He wants none to perish but all to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9

Repentance is an act by which you take on a whole new attitude toward the sinful habits and addictions that cling to your life.

Repentance means you **ACKNOWLEDGE CLEARLY** that God is right about you and sin in your life: your sinful habits and addictions control you; and often do, easily pull your life apart.

Repentance means you **DECLARE EMPHATICALLY**, without any reservation or exception: “The sin in my life has to go—all of it!”

Repentance means you **HUMBLY ADMIT** that you are powerless to free yourself from your sinful addictions, that you need God’s help and that you are willing to reach out and take firm hold of it.

Repentance means that you **GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES** and transfer control of your life to God.

You must lay aside your former way of life and the Old Self which deteriorates through illusion and desire, and acquire a fresh, spiritual way of thinking. You must put on that New Man created in God’s image, whose justice and holiness are born of the truth. Ephesians 4:22-24

When your heart is set in the attitude of repentance, God’s grace can take hold of your sinful habits and work powerful changes within you.

Let’s look at how the attitude of repentance actually works with God’s grace in defeating the Old Self. Jesus says:

***You must deny your very self, take up your cross each day
and follow in my steps. Luke 9:23***

“ . . . follow in my steps . . . ”

To “follow in the steps” of Jesus means a commitment and effort to form your entire life in the pattern of Jesus’ life: your attitude, the way you speak and the way you act. To do this you need to speak to the Lord daily in prayer, read the Scriptures, strengthen yourself with the Sacraments and exercise yourself in charity. As you do these things, you will notice more and more clearly

the parts of your “Old Self” that cling to you. These are the sinful habits and addictions that want to control and pull your life apart: bitterness, lust, lewd conduct, quick temper, harsh words, insults, foul language, violence, slander, lying, stealing, drunkenness, etc. (Eph 4:25-3; Col 3:5-10) Each time one of these rises within you, you must ‘deny it’ and ‘take it to the Cross.’

“ . . . *deny your very self* . . . ”

To ‘deny’ a part of your Old Self does not mean to pretend that it does not exist in you. It means to face the sinful habit and decide that you will no longer let it go on living in you. This is done in prayer:

**Lord, I acknowledge clearly that you are right about the sin in my life. It has control of me and wants to destroy my life.
I declare, without any reservation: I want this sin to go—all of it!
I humbly admit that I am powerless to defeat it. I reach out to You.
I need your help to defeat the forces of sin and death in my life.
Lord, I transfer control of my life to You.
I open my heart to Your love and the power of Your grace.**

“ . . . *take up your cross each day* . . . ”

On his cross, Jesus died to break the power of sin over your life. To ‘take up your cross each day’ means to take your sinful habits and addictions to his cross. As often as they rise in you and as soon as they show themselves pray:

**Jesus, this old part of myself rises to take control of me again.
I stand beneath your cross and I claim the power you won for me
by your death and resurrection. Your death, “was death to sin,
once and for all.” I claim the power of your redeeming Love
to defeat this Temptation and to put this sinful addiction to death.
I nail it to the wood of your Cross. Let it die in the blood you shed
out of love for me.**

Taking your sins to the cross is exactly what confession and the Sacrament of Reconciliation is all about. The celebration of the Sacrament carries you out of earthly time and into an eternal moment that lives before God (Revelation 5:1-7 and Hebrews 12:18-24). In the celebration of the Sacrament the Holy Spirit brings you before Jesus, crucified out of love for you. Here, before the Lord, the Church stands with you and joins you in claiming the grace to put your sinful habits and addictions to death. Here the sprinkled blood of Jesus, “the Lamb of God” (John 1:36), cleanses you from sin.

The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin... If we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. 1 John 1:7,9

The Power of Self-examination

*Test yourselves to see whether you are living in faith.
Examine yourselves. 2 Corinthians 13:5a*

It is my conviction that any person's life could be turned around 180 degrees if he would perform a simple spiritual exercise five times a day. Stop what you are doing. Sit quietly or a moment. Answer these questions to yourself:

What did I just finish doing?
How do I feel about what I have done?
What would I have liked to have done differently?
What am I going to do next?
How do I want to do it?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta says, "silence is the friend of God." I agree and would add, "reflection is the friend of our humanity." Every time we fail to stop and think and ask questions about what we are doing, we always end up behaving less-than-human. Even if the activity itself is the most noble in the world, if we do not punctuate it with moments for reflection and self-examination, we will end up beating someone over the head with it or trampling something under foot doing it. On the other hand, every time we do stop and think and ask questions about what we are doing we significantly advance our humanity.

I often ask people: Would you like to marry someone who regularly stops to think about the way he talks to you and treats you? Or would you rather marry someone who never thinks about the way he speaks to you and treats you, and never takes responsibility for the way his words and actions affect you? You want to marry the first one, right? Everyone does, but not every one wants to do what it takes to be the first one. It is not easy to examine your words, actions and attitudes, but Jesus tells us it is necessary:

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32

The Power of Confession

*Declare your sins to one another, and pray for one another,
that you may find healing. James 5:16*

It is not easy to tell the truth about yourself out loud, but the Bible says it is necessary and why:

*As long as I would not speak my bones wasted away with my groaning all the day,
for day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by
the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I covered not.
I said, "I confess my faults to the Lord, and you took away the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:3-5*

It is essential to name your sins out loud to another. First, doing this objectifies the sin and draws it, in a sense, outside of you where it can be identified as what you do and distinguished from who you are. Now you can address the sin and renounce it as not who you choose to be. Second, the power of God is drawn to the truth spoken and change desired. Third, naming your sins also breaks the spell of denial. As long as we refuse to name the truth about ourselves out loud and to another, our life remains hidden in the shadows growing in our Conscience. We live in fear of the truth about our past and present—anxious that it might become known, threatened by those we fear might see and reveal it. We choose "friends" who will enter into what I call an "unholy social contract" with us. They agree to pretend they don't see the truth about us, and we agree to pretend not to see the truth about them. Relationship is built not upon the reality of who we are,

but upon the illusions we wish to preserve about ourselves. This blocks all emotional, spiritual and relational growth.

“I was wrong.” “I am sorry.” “I ask your forgiveness”

Saying these words is essential to healthy human relationship, either relationship with God or relationship with others. Is it so strange that the Bible tells you so, and that the Church teaches you to make the saying of them, an integral part of your personal life and worship?

The Grace of Absolution

If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them. John 20:23

God alone has the power to forgive sins. Jesus possesses this power as “God, the only Son, ever at the Father’s side.” (John 1:18):

Jesus said (to the paralyzed young man): ‘My friend, your sins are forgiven you.’ The scribes and the Pharisees began a discussion saying... ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Jesus...answered them by saying... “to make it clear to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ - then he addressed the paralyzed man: ‘I say to you get up! Take your mat with you, and return to your house.’ At once the man stood erect before them. Luke 5:17-26

Jesus bestows the gift of forgiveness for sins through his body, the Church. The absolution by the priest is the outward expression (sign) of Jesus present and personally doing this. On the day he rose from the dead, Jesus gave his apostles the authority to declare people’s sins forgiven in his name.

On the evening of that first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them “Peace be with you,” he said. When he had said this he showed them his hands and side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced. “Peace be with you,” he said again. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them: if you hold them bound they are held bound.” John 20:19-23

The spiritual authority Jesus gave to his apostles to absolve from sin (i.e. declare sin forgiven in God’s name) continues in the Church through the “laying on of hands” (2 Timothy 1:6-14) in the ordination of Bishops, who are successors of the Apostles, and priests who are living extensions of the Bishop’s apostolic ministry.

The Latin word, *sacramentum*, means “vow.” The Sacraments celebrate Jesus’ vow: “I am with you always, until the end of the world! (Matthew 28:20) The Sacraments are sacred moments that Jesus established in which he vowed to be personally present with his disciples. Jesus vowed that when his apostles declared sin forgiven (absolved), he would be present, in person, declaring the sin forgiven.

He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you, rejects me. Luke 10:16

The same is true when bishops and priests absolve from sin. When a priest declares sin forgiven,

Jesus is present, in person, declaring the sin forgiven. Absolution declares with the absolute assurance of Jesus, the Divine Word of God, that the sin you confess is forgiven. Absolution also bestows grace—Divine power—for the healing of your soul and the defeat of any sin that wants to work in your life.

It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven. Ephesians 1:7

We can cut ourselves off from God by our sins. We can also be defeated by our past, with its sins and errors and the shame which it creates. The answer is not to deny our sins or hide in shame, but to name them and seek forgiveness, healing and regeneration. Jesus made provision for this by offering Himself in ransom for us and shedding his blood to wash our past clean and set us confidently in the present.

If anyone should sin, we have, in the presence of the Father, Jesus Christ, an intercessor who is just. He is an offering for our sins... If we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. 1 John 2:1 and 1:9

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we find not only the experience of this but the absolute guarantee of it. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the “Vow of God” that our sins are forgiven and the innocence of the children of God has been restored to us.

What we can learn from the Word of God about the Forgiveness of Sins and Reconciliation?

- 1) Self-examination is an essential exercise if we are to live and behave as human beings.
- 2) There are words that are absolutely essential to a life-giving relationship with God, with others and with the world around us. Among these words are: “I was wrong.” “I am sorry.” “I ask your forgiveness.”
- 3) If we are going to stop sinning, it is essential to name our sins out loud and to another.
- 4) The ongoing effort to die to sin and live more completely for God is an indispensable part of what it means to be a Christian.
- 5) Jesus has provided a forum for this effort: the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He has vowed to be personally present in it and endowed it with his supernatural power to forgive sin, regenerate souls and reconcile individuals to a right and life-giving relationship with God, with others and with the world around them.

SIN

Sin is an offense against God. The Bible says:

Against you, you alone have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight. Psalm 51:4

“Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Sin is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become a “god-unto-ourselves”. A person in sin determines for himself what is good and what is evil. Sin is love of oneself to the contempt of God. This is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which seeks to know and do the will of God in all things.” (CCC 1850). There are a great many kinds of sin. The Bible provides several lists of them: Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-22; Ephesians 5:3-7; Colossians 3:5-10; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Timothy 3:2-7.

The Difference Between Mortal and Venial Sin

“**Mortal Sin** destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God.” (CCC #1855) The Bible says:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21

“**Mortal Sin** is sin whose object is grave matter and which is committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.” (CCC 1857, 1858, 1859)

Sins of Grave Matter are specified by the Commandments and in other parts of the Bible. (see Galatians 5:19-21 above) Full Knowledge means that you know what you are doing is gravely wrong. Complete Consent means that you choose to do it

Such things as these, if done knowingly and deliberately, are Mortal Sins:

- 1) Renouncing your faith in or commitment to Jesus Christ,
- 2) Intending or actually committing murder,
- 3) Nurturing a vicious attitude toward someone (out of racism, for a past injury, or out of pure spite and meanness),
- 4) Consistently and intentionally attacking another person’s good name or reputation,
- 5) Vindictively seeking to cause another bodily harm or to lose their means of support (job),
- 6) Intentionally defrauding the poor or betraying a public trust,
- 7) Fornication: being single (unmarried) and having a sexual relationship (sexual intercourse) with another person,
- 8) Adultery: being married and having a sexual relationship with someone other than your husband or wife or being single (unmarried) and having a sexual relationship with someone who is married.

These attitudes, words, actions and failures to act *are toxic in an immediate and deadly way* to you as a human person, to a just social order, or to the right order of creation and its elements. Awareness of committing Mortal sin informs you that something has ruptured in your

relationship with Christ; that you have become a witness contrary to Christ (an Anti-Christ); and that your need for repentance is immediate and allows no delay. If you have committed Mortal Sin you are no longer free to receive Holy Communion until you reconcile with Christ and his Church by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

“**Venial Sin** allows charity to subsist (in the soul), even though it offends and wounds it.” (CCC #1855) The Bible says:

(Put) away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor... Do not let the sun set on your anger... The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his [own] hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need. No foul language should come out of your mouths... Bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. Ephesians 4:25-32

“One commits **Venial Sin** when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without knowledge of its gravity or without complete consent.” (CCC 1862)

These attitudes, words, actions and failures to act *compromise* your integrity as a human person, a just social order, or the right order of creation and its elements. Awareness of committing Venial Sin alerts you to the fact that you are becoming a *venial person*. You may think that these are just small shortcomings, but they make for a progressively compromised moral character and a shrinking spiritual stature. They make you complacent and sometimes even cynical about virtue in yourself and in others. You no longer spur yourself or others on to excellence, rather, you hold hands with others while you slide into the mire of human veniality.

FORMS IN WHICH THE SACRAMENT IS ADMINISTERED

Two Regular and One Extraordinary Form

The Sacrament of Reconciliation can be celebrated in three forms:

- 1) Private individual confession of sins to a priest followed by individual absolution from sin by that priest.
- 2) A communal service of song, Scripture reading, preaching and examination of conscience which culminates in each person approaching the priest to confess his sins and receive individual absolution.
- 3) An emergency situation where there is no time or ability for individual confession of sins to a priest and a general absolution is pronounced by a priest.

The Purpose of Communal Reconciliation Services

Does attending a Communal Reconciliation or Penance Service forgive sins?

A Sacramental Service: If the service includes a moment where you confess sin individually to a priest, and receive sacramental absolution from that priest, then all Venial Sins as well as

all Mortal Sins confessed, or not knowingly withheld, are forgiven—provided you have a sincere sorrow for the sins confessed and a clear commitment to resist committing them again.

A Non-Sacramental Service: If the service does not include a moment where you confess sin individually to a priest, then all *Venial Sins* are forgiven—provided you have a sincere sorrow for them and a clear commitment to resist committing them again.

Community Reconciliation or Penance Services are often held which are non-sacramental, as they contain no sacramental absolution of any kind by a priest. These services can contribute powerfully to the moral formation of a parish community. Community Reconciliation or Penance Services develop the conscience of a Christian community and its members. They awaken a fuller awareness of sin and its consequences, especially the way in which sin works in the larger social context. They allow the community to “examine its conscience” through a good look at the attitudes and practices prevalent in the parish. They invite members of the community to accept responsibility for these sins and commit themselves to rectifying them. They petition God to grant the grace of forgiveness and healing to the parish community. (See: Roman Ritual—The Rite of Penance #36-37)

General Absolution is to be offered only when there is an emergency of immediate grave danger in face of death or when the number of people who desire to have their confession heard individually overwhelms the available priests’ ability to hear them. All who receive General Absolution under such circumstances are bound and obligated to confess their *Mortal Sins* individually to a priest as soon as possible. A priest cannot plan a service with the intent that he will be giving General Absolution, nor can a Catholic attend a service with the intent of receiving General Absolution and avoiding individual confession of sin.

USING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

When you would *want* to receive and when you would *need* to receive the Sacrament

You would want to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation if you are looking to bring new ambition to your faith life, and want to grow in holiness and faithful discipleship of Jesus; or if you repeatedly commit the same *Venial Sins* and seek the supernatural grace of Sacrament to break the pattern.

You would need to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation if you have committed Mortal Sin, or if you have abandoned the practice of your Catholic Faith and now wish to return to communion with the Catholic Church.

1. Receiving the Sacrament to grow spiritually:

In order to grow spiritually you must exercise yourself in the spiritual disciplines. Plan to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation once every six months. Do this for a thorough examination of your spiritual and moral life and to bring the fruits of this examination before the Lord for the outpouring of His grace. The Bible says:

Test yourselves to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. 2 Corinthians 13:5

Ask yourself these questions:

Am I fully the disciple Jesus calls me to be?
 Where do I need to change my attitudes, words or actions?
 What should I be doing that am not doing now?
 (Use the *Examination of Conscience* on page 14)

Humbly ask Jesus to renew your ambition to be your best self, to follow Him faithfully and to be a proactive witness to what is true and good.

Bring the fruit of this self-examination to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and name before Jesus the ways you need to grow in your Christian commitment.

2. Receiving the Sacrament to rid your life of sinful attitudes, thoughts, words and actions; and to heal the damage sin has done to your heart and to the lives of others:

You use the Sacrament of Reconciliation any time you are having difficulty ridding yourself of sinful attitudes or controlling sinful thoughts, words or actions. You should also make use of the Sacrament when there is a need to heal a wound that sin has caused in your own heart or that your sin has caused in the life of another. The Bible says:

Put to death whatever in your nature is rooted in earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desires, and that lust which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5-10

Ask yourself this question:

What sinful attitudes, words or actions have control,
 or want to have control of my life?
 (Use the *Examination of Conscience* on page 14)

Humbly admit that these things are out of control and ask Jesus to help you. See section on Repentance (page 5) and follow the prayer directions given there.

Take the sinful attitudes, words or actions in your life to the cross by naming them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

3. Receive the Sacrament when you have committed Mortal Sin.

A Mortal sin is a sin of such serious turning away from the Mind of Christ and the Will of God, that by knowingly and deliberately doing it you rupture your relationship with Christ and your relationship with the Body of Christ, the Church.

If you have committed Mortal Sin you are no longer free to receive Holy Communion until you reconcile with Christ and his Church.

Truly repent of the sin you have committed. This means that you firmly intend not to commit this sin again because you know and believe that it is against the Mind of Christ and the Will of God.

Humbly ask God to forgive the sin you have committed.

Confess your sin in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

You can again receive Holy Communion after you have received the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

4. Receiving the Sacrament when you have left the Catholic Church deliberately and wish to return; or when through laziness or neglect, you have stayed away from regular weekly worship:

This breaks your living with Jesus, as a disciple, and with the Church, as a member of the Body of Christ. You are no longer free to receive Holy Communion until you reconcile with Christ and his Church.

Truly repent of having abandoned the Catholic faith or neglected your commitment to worship regularly at Mass and be supportive of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Humbly ask Jesus to forgive the sin of breaking this commitment you made to the Body of Christ at Baptism and when you were Confirmed in the Catholic Faith.

You can again be admitted to receiving Holy Communion after you have received the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

PREPARING FOR AND RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Some Important Considerations

You should celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a priest that you respect for his spiritual sensitivity and balanced insight. Finding a priest that you think will tell you what you want to hear, or that you hope will not ask you the “hard questions” about your spiritual and moral life, is a mistake that will seriously get in the way of an honest encounter with the Lord, and that will frustrate spiritual healing and true reconciliation. You may celebrate the Sacrament at the regular times it is offered in your local parish church or by special appointment with a priest.

The attitude with which you come to the Sacrament is most important. An attitude of Faith (sincere open-heartedness and open-mindedness to Jesus) will create the needed passageway between your heart and the Heart of Christ, along which his transforming and healing grace will flow into your life. An attitude of humility is also essential. Beware of coming to “make excuses” to God for your sins. Making excuses may make your sins sound better to you, but it is an exercise in refusing to take responsibility for yourself. If you come to “name the truth,” God “will set you free” and help you with all you need. If you come to “make excuses,” there is nothing God can offer you. God will not bless and approve your excuses. Finally, come ambitious to put the “Old Self” to death and see a “New Self” formed within you to the full stature of Jesus Christ.

1. Examine Yourself Before Receiving the Sacrament:

- Make the Sign of the Cross over yourself and place yourself in the presence of Jesus. Ask him to enter into your heart.

- Say a prayer asking Jesus to help you to understand your sins, and for the courage to bring them to the cross in this Sacrament.
- Examine your life by thinking of your sins and the things that need to change within you if you are to follow the Lord more faithfully. (You can use the questions below.)

The Examination of Conscience

I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me. Exodus 20:2-3

Does God come first in my life?

You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. Exodus 20:7

Do I speak of God in such a way that others know that I have a personal relationship with Him?

Do I use the name of God or Jesus to express anger or to appear to fit in with the group?

Therefore never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord. 2 Timothy 1:8

Have I been ashamed or backed away from admitting that I am a Christian in the presence of others?

Have I used any reasonable opportunity to speak of and share my Christian Faith with my friends?

Have I made the effort to reach out in a warm and welcoming way to people interested in my Faith?

Am I a warm, accessible and supporting member of my parish community?

Have I made fun of or ridiculed another's religion, attacked their church or disturbed their Faith in God?

Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, your God. Exodus 20:8-10

Is weekly Mass the top priority of my weekend, every week?

Do I carefully prepare for the celebration of Mass as an act of worship of my whole mind and heart?

Do I leave Sunday as a Day of Rest on which to rejoice in the gifts of life, family and friendship?

Do I contribute a fair share to the support of my parish and the missionary and charitable work of my church?

At every opportunity pray in the Spirit, using prayers and petitions of every sort.

Pray constantly and attentively for all in the holy company. Ephesians 6:18

All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching—for reproof, correction, and training in holiness so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Is daily prayer and daily scripture reading a priority every day?

God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

Do I take proper physical care of my body?
 Do I eat and drink moderately?
 Do I take chances with my life and health or with the life and health of others?
 Have I used alcoholic beverages to excess or caused my family pain
 or anxiety by my excessive use of them?
 Have I used drugs illegally or immorally?

*Put to death whatever in your nature is rooted in earth, fornication,
 uncleanness, passion, evil desires, and that lust which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5*

Do I show respect for the sexual integrity of others in the way I look at them,
 the way I speak to them and in the way I act toward them?
 Is my attitude toward women such that I accept and treat them in equal partnership?
 Have I read or viewed pornographic materials?
 Have I made them available to others?
 Have I allowed my Christian sexual values to grow lax?
 Have I engaged in pre-marital sexual intercourse?
 Have I permitted myself to enter a sexually active relationship outside of marriage?
 Have I committed adultery? (Exodus. 20:14)

Love one another with the affection of brothers.

Anticipate each other in showing respect. Romans 12:10

Do I take the time daily, or often, to tell my loved ones that I love them?
 Do I come across to people as accepting, concerned, and open to life,
 or as closed, moody, overbearing, mean or self-important?
 Am I open to the sincere challenge and advice of my family,
 friends and those who care about me?

*Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life
 in the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you. Exodus 20:12*

Am I respectful to my parents? Do I make time regularly to contact them,
 talk with them and spend quality time with them?

*You shall not go about spreading slander among your kinsman;
 nor shall you stand idly by while your neighbor's life is at stake. Leviticus 19:16*

Have I started, passed on or listened to gossip?
 Have I spoken out in defense of the innocent?
 Am I supportive of my neighbors?
 Do I keep a watchful eye out for the safety of their person and their property?

You shall not kill. Exodus 20:13

Have I mocked, laughed at or humiliated anyone?
 Have I attacked anyone's good name or reputation?
 Am I nurturing a grudge or filled with bitterness toward anyone?
 Have I attempted to set people against each other?
 Have I physically attacked anyone?

*When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him.
You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently
than the natives born among you. Leviticus 19:33-34*

- Have I excluded anyone from the circle of life and love?
- Have I failed to take the initiative to invite anyone standing outside
to take a place inside that circle of life and love?
- Do I see my own wounds in the sins of others?
- Do the poor have the attention of my love?
- Do I recognize the Face of Christ in the poor?
- Am I racist or bigoted toward another nationality, or religious group?

You shall not steal. Exodus 20:15

- Have I taken what does not belong to me from another or from my place of employment?
- Am I honest in my dealings personally, and my business dealings?
- Do I provide my employees a good and fair wage?
- Do I provide my employer a full and active day's work?
- Do I hold a superabundance beyond my ability to use or enjoy
while others live in destitution?

*I give you a new commandment: love one another. Such as my love
has been for you, so must your love be for each other. John 13:34*

- Do I make an effort to lower the barriers of hostility where they exist,
between members of my family, my friends, my neighbors or fellow workers?
- Do I "break the bread of myself" in time, concern, energy or assistance
with others, in the name of Jesus?
- Do I go the "extra mile" with people?

This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me. Matthew 15:8

- Do I practice in word and deed the values I profess?

Be ambitious for the greater gifts. 1 Corinthians 12:31

- Is my real and honest ambition to grow to the full stature of the New Self in Jesus Christ?
- Am I the disciple of Jesus and Christian witness I could be?
- In what ways do I need to improve and grow?

- Identify your sins and your biggest struggles in leading a Christian Life.
- Identify your main goals for further spiritual and moral growth.
- Identify the ways that God has helped you overcome sin and has helped
you in your struggle to lead a Christian life.

These you will take to name aloud before the Lord when you celebrate the Sacrament.

Additional questions of self-examination for those returning to the Church and the practice of the Catholic Faith:

- Are you prepared to live your life by the wisdom of God, and not your own will?
- Are you willing to be taught what is good, life-giving and true?

Do you believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

Will you allow your attitudes, words and actions to be challenged by Jesus and his Church?

Sin is an attitude within you and a way of life in the world around you.

Will you accept responsibility for sin, both within you and around you,
and the way it consumes, manipulates and destroys life?

Will you renounce a self-centered attitude and a self-serving love?

Will you yield your self-will to God's will?

Will you withdraw your heart from wanting whatever you want,
when ever you want, however you want?

Will you withdraw your hand from doing evil with what is good?

Will you commit yourself . . .

to PRAY daily?

to READ THE SCRIPTURES daily?

to WORSHIP AT MASS weekly?

to "break the bread of yourself" every day in acts of charity extended toward others?

to live in integrity according to the Commandments?

to act for justice?

to work for reconciliation and peace between people?

2. Meet with the Priest and Celebrate the Sacrament:

After you have prepared yourself in prayer and in self-examination, enter the Reconciliation Room in the Church. Take your place either sitting and facing the priest or kneeling behind the screen.

1) Make the Sign of the Cross over yourself saying aloud:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

2) Listen carefully as the priest reads from the Bible or prays.

3) The priest will invite you to name aloud the things you wish to set before the Lord:

- If you have committed mortal sin, name it first.
- Name the other sins or moral issues that you might be struggling with in leading a Christian life.
- Name the ways you need to grow as a Christian.
- By way of giving thanks, name the ways in which the Lord has assisted you in your spiritual and moral growth.
- Take note of any advice the priest offers.

4) If the priest feels that there is something you can do that will assist in the healing of the wounds caused by your sin, or if he feels that there is something you can do that will aid your progress toward your spiritual and moral goals, he will assign it to you as your "penance."

5) Pray aloud an Act of Contrition. You can pray one in your own words,

one that you've memorized or wish to read, or this one:

**Oh 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 have offended 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. Amen.**

- 6) Bow your head while the priest pronounces the words of Absolution.
- 7) When he finishes the absolution, the priest will say, "Go in peace,"

Thank him and leave the Reconciliation Room.

3. Perform the "Penance" assigned.

The priest will usually ask a person receiving the Sacrament to perform an act (or acts) of love and mercy to be done in the name of Jesus as a "penance" for his sins. These works of "penance" are not punishments for the sins committed, nor are they something that you do to "make up" for your sins. God is interested in redeeming, not punishing; and there is nothing that you can possibly do to "make up" for the damage your sins in the past have done to you, to others and to your world. You can, however, offer yourself to God as a "beginning point" for God to make a new beginning of goodness in the present.

Something larger unfolds from this. By having a sinner perform healing acts of love and mercy, God schools the human heart, once set in the ways of consuming, manipulating and destroying life, in the "New Way" of giving, nurturing, enriching and rejoicing in life.

The secret to regeneration of the human heart (and the human world) is for the wounded human heart to become an instrument of healing and a channel of grace (divine energy). God heals the wounded heart of a sinner by asking that the sinner become a healer—a "life-giver."

To complete the celebration of the Sacrament by doing the acts of love and mercy requested by the priest in the name of the Lord, is to release the full power of this Sacrament's healing grace into your life and your world. To fail to complete the celebration of the Sacrament in this way is to frustrate the healing and regenerating grace that seeks to enter within you and to pass through you, into the world around you.