

FORM 1 of the SACRAMENT of PENANCE (Individual Confession)

Before you go into the confessional, say a prayer to the Holy Spirit in these or similar words:

Come, O Holy Spirit, help me to think of all my sins, to be sorry for them from my heart, to tell them honestly, and to pray or do the penance the priest gives to me.

Then make your examination of conscience (think of your sins).

When you are ready, go to the confessional. One side is face-to-face the other side is traditional (behind a screen); it is your choice. Kneel or sit down and *greet the priest* (say hello) and then begin with the Sign of the Cross:

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

Father may invite you to have trust in God, in these or similar words:

“May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in His mercy.”

You would respond: **Amen.**

Or Father may also read a short scripture passage for you to listen to from the Bible.

If he does not, you begin by saying:

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

My last confession was _____ (last Saturday, 2 months ago, etc.)

And these are my sins...

When you have finished telling all of your sins which you can easily remember, and about how many times you have committed them, then say:

I am sorry for these and all my sins. I ask pardon of God, penance and absolution of you, Father.

Father may then offer you advice or encouragement. He may talk to you about something you confessed. He will then ask you to pray some prayers or do some good deed for your penance. Remember, the penance is a way we can show Jesus we are sorry and want to make up for our sins. Father will say: “For your penance, pray... (or do...)”

Father will then ask you to pray out loud an Act of Contrition. There are many versions; here is one:

O my God, I am sorry for my sins. In failing to do good and in choosing to do wrong, 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 what leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy. Amen.

Father will then pray the prayer of absolution (freedom from sin) while raising his hand(s) over you. Using the power Jesus has given him, he will free you from your sins and reconcile you with your heavenly Father.

“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 say: **Amen.** (And make the sign of the cross over yourself in silence when he makes the Sign of the Cross over you at the end of the prayer).

Father may then say: “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.”

You respond: **His mercy endures forever.**

Father may dismiss you with these or similar words: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”

You respond: **Thanks be to God.**

Then you leave the confessional. Go back to your pew in the Church, kneel down and pray the penance Father gave you. Be sure to thank Jesus for giving you the gifts of forgiveness and peace.

FORM 2 of the SACRAMENT of PENANCE (Communal Penance Service)

In a communal penance service, most things done in individual confession are done together (Bible readings, Examination of Conscience, Act of Contrition, thanksgiving after absolution, etc.) Participate as at Mass, singing and responding. When it is time for confession, get in line for one of the priests. Make sure to leave plenty of room for other people’s privacy. When it is your turn, go to the priest and say “Bless me Father..., etc.” and confess your sins. He may say something briefly and will give you a penance. Then he raises his hand(s) over you and prays the prayer of absolution.

After your confession, *return to your seat*. Wait patiently for everyone to finish; you can use this time to pray your penance, to thank Jesus for his gifts, and to pray for everyone else going to confession. Participate in the rest of the service until the final blessing.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE (CONFESSION)

1. **WHY?** Jesus often underlined the need to repent. To repent means to reject sin, turn to the mercy of God, and firmly decide not to sin again. Sin leads to death. The reason Jesus came was to give us life by the forgiveness of our sins. His death and resurrection reconciles us with the Father in heaven.

2. **WHY CAN'T I JUST TELL GOD? WHY DO I HAVE TO CONFESS TO A PRIEST?** There are any number of answers to the first question. You CAN tell God and should tell Him you are sorry as soon as you sin and indeed are sorry for it. The fact is, though, many don't even take the time to do that. By nature we would rather just forget our sins. But that is not repentance. Ignoring our sins only lulls us into forgetting what sin is, and how much harm it can do. Our sins offend both God and other humans. Therefore, we need to acknowledge them before both God and His Church...for Catholics, that means the priest. It is important to understand that it was Jesus who set things up this way. Jesus said to Peter (whose successor is the Pope), "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" [Mt 16:19]. He confirmed this power after He rose from the dead when He appeared to the Apostles and said; "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained" [Jn 20:21-23]. So if we Catholics reject the Sacrament of Penance as the usual way to receive forgiveness from grave sins, we will have to explain that to Jesus at the Last Judgement, for He created the sacrament.

3. **WHAT MUST I CONFESS?** Strictly speaking, we are under obligation only to confess mortal sins since only these sins can keep us permanently from God. If a mortal sin is committed, one should sincerely pray an Act of Contrition and receive the Sacrament of Penance as soon as possible. When we are in mortal sin, our very salvation is at stake. Immediate action is necessary. A sincere confession along with the absolution of the priest assures us that the sin is completely forgiven. Although it is not strictly necessary to confess venial (lesser) sins, the Church recommends it as a good spiritual practice. Confession brings relief and forgiveness as well as the Sanctifying Grace we so sorely need to avoid temptation and resist sin in the future.

4. **HOW MUST I CONFESS MY SINS?** We confess our sins according to NUMBER and KIND. It is not enough to say, for example, "I was naughty once," when 'naughty' means "I robbed a bank." KIND simply means that we are honest and state the sin as it is, without going into unnecessary detail. NUMBER means the number of times we committed the sin since our last confession: once, ten times, three times daily. If the number is not known, a reasonable guess is sufficient: a lot, several times, a few times. A good confession is simply a sincere, honest one. Finally, we should not simply be satisfied with occasionally making a good confession and letting it stop there. Unless we really try to love God more and work harder to do what is right and good, we can slip into a mechanical practice of the faith and lose the true repentance of the heart.

One Example of an EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

The Lord says: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart." Is my heart set on God, so that I really love him above all things and am faithful to his commandments, as a son loves his father? Or am I more concerned about the things of this world? Is my faith in God firm and secure? Am I wholehearted in accepting the Church's teaching? Have I been careful to grow in my understanding of the faith, to hear God's word, to listen to instructions on the faith, to avoid dangers to faith? Have I been always strong and fearless in professing my faith in God and the Church? Have I been willing to be known as a Christian in private and public life? Have I prayed morning and evening? When I pray, do I really raise my mind and heart to God or is it a matter of words only? Do I offer God my difficulties, my joys, and my sorrows? Do I turn to God in time of temptation? Have I love and reverence for God's name? Have I offended him in blasphemy, swearing falsely, or taking His name in vain? Have I shown disrespect for the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints? Do I keep Sundays and feast days holy by taking a full part, with attention and devotion, in the liturgy, and especially in the Mass? Have I fulfilled the precept of annual confession and of communion during the Easter season? Are there false gods that I worship by giving them more attention and trust than I give to God: money, superstition, or occult practices?

The Lord says: "Love one another as I have loved you." Have I a genuine love for my neighbors? Or do I use them for my own ends, or do to them what I would not want done to myself? Have I given grave scandal by my words or actions? In my family life, have I contributed to the well-being and happiness of the rest of the family by patience and genuine love? Have I been obedient to parents, showing them proper respect and giving them help in their spiritual and material needs? Have I been careful to give a Christian upbringing to my children, and to help them by good example and exercising authority as a parent? Have I been faithful to my husband or wife in my heart and in my relations with others? Do I share my possessions with the less fortunate? Do I do my best to help the victims of oppression, misfortune, and poverty? Or do I look down on my neighbor, especially the poor, the sick, the elderly, immigrants and people of other races? Do I share in the apostolic and charitable works of the Church and in the life of my parish? Have I helped to meet the needs of the Church and of the world and prayed for them: for unity in the Church, for the spread of the Gospel among the nations, for peace and justice, etc.? Am I concerned with the good and prosperity of the human community in which I live, or do I spend my life caring only for myself? Do I share to the best of my ability in the work of promoting justice, morality, harmony and love in human relations? Have I done my duty as a citizen by obeying just laws and paying my taxes? In my work or profession am I just, hard-working, honest, serving society out of love for others? Have I paid a fair wage to my employees? Have I been faithful to my promises and contracts? Have I obeyed legitimate authority and given it due respect? Have I been truthful and fair, or have I injured others by deceit, slander, detraction, rash judgment, or violation of a secret? Have I done violence to others by damaging life or limb, reputation, honor, or material possessions? Have I been responsible for advising an abortion or procuring one? Have I kept up hatred for others? Am I estranged from others through fights, bitterness, insults, or anger? Have I stolen property of others? Have I been jealous of it? Have I damaged it? If so, have I made restitution? If I have been injured, have I been ready to make peace for the love of Christ and to forgive, or do I harbor hatred and the desire for revenge?

Christ our Lord says: "Be perfect as your Father is perfect." Where is my life really leading me? Is the hope of eternal life my inspiration? Have I tried to grow in the life of the Spirit through prayer, reading the word of God and meditating on it, receiving the sacraments, and self-denial? Have I been anxious to control my vices, my bad inclinations and passions? Have I been proud and boastful, thinking myself better in the sight of God and thinking others as less important than myself? Have I imposed my own will on others, without respecting their freedom and rights? What use have I made of time, of health and strength, of the gifts God has given me to be used like the talents in the Gospel? Do I use them to become more perfect every day? Or have I been lazy and too much given to leisure? Have I been patient in accepting the difficulties of life? Have I kept the precept of fasting and abstinence on the days required? Have I kept my senses and my whole body pure and chaste as a temple of the Holy Spirit consecrated for the resurrection, and as a sign of God's faithful love for men and women, a sign that is seen most perfectly in marriage? Have I dishonored my body by fornication, impurity, unworthy conversation or thoughts or pornography? Have I given in to sensuality? Have I indulged in reading, conversation or entertainment that offend against Christian and human decency? Have I encouraged others to sin by my own failure to maintain these standards? Have I been faithful to the moral law in my married life? Have I gone against my conscience out of fear or hypocrisy?