

Preparing for the Sacrament of Penance

Ask the Holy Spirit's help to examine your conscience well by prayerfully reviewing your conduct in light of the commandments and the example of Christ. The questions below should assist you in making a thorough review.

Tell the priest the specific kind of sins you have committed and, to the best of your ability, how many times you have committed them since your last good confession. Avoid generalizations and inform the priest of any relevant circumstances in which your sins were committed.

You are obliged to confess only mortal sins, since you can obtain forgiveness for your venial sins by sacrifices, acts of charity, prayer and other pious actions. Confession of venial sins, however, is very helpful for avoiding sin and advancing in holiness toward heaven.

If you are in doubt about whether a sin is mortal or venial, mention your doubt to the priest. For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent." (CCC 1857)

Always tell the priest your state of life: married or single, cleric or religious, under religious vows or promises.

Examination of Conscience

Catholics for centuries have found it profitable to examine their consciences in light of the Ten Commandments. Penitents are encouraged to expand on them in their prayerful review of their conduct.

I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.

Have I treated people, events, or things as more important than God?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have my words, actively or passively, put down God, the Church, or people?

Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Do I go to Mass every Sunday (or Saturday Vigil) and on Holy Days of Obligation (Jan. 1; the Ascension; Aug. 15; Nov. 1; Dec. 8; Dec. 25)? Do I avoid, when possible, work that impedes worship to God, joy for the Lord's Day, and proper relaxation of mind and body? Do I look for ways to spend time with family or in service on Sunday?

Honor your father and your mother.

Do I show my parents due respect? Do I seek to maintain good communication with my parents where possible? Do I criticize them for lacking skills I think they should have?

You shall not kill.

Have I harmed another through physical, verbal, or emotional means, including gossip or manipulation of any kind?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I respected the physical and sexual dignity of others and of myself?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken or wasted time or resources that belonged to another?

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Have I gossiped, told lies, or embellished stories at the expense of another?

You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse.

Have I honored my spouse with my full affection and exclusive love?

You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Am I content with my own means and needs, or do I compare myself to others unnecessarily?

Going to Confession

The penitent and the priest begin with the sign of the Cross, saying:

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The priest urges the penitent to have confidence in God with these or similar words:

May the Lord be in your heart and help you to confess your sins with true sorrow.

The priest may read or say a passage from Sacred Scripture after which the penitent then states:

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (however many days, weeks, months or years) since my last confession.

The penitent then states his or her sins. The priest will help you make a good confession. If you are unsure about how to confess or you feel uneasy, just ask him to help you. Answer his question without hiding anything out of fear or shame. Place your trust in God, a merciful Father, who wants to forgive you.

For the confession to be valid, the penitent must confess all of the mortal sins he or she is aware of having committed since the last confession, be sorry for them, and have a firm purpose of amendment to try not to commit the same sins in the future. Following your confession of sins, say: "I am sorry for these and all of my sins." After this, the priest will generally give some advice to the penitent and assign a penance. Then he will ask the penitent to make an act of contrition. The penitent may do so in his or her own words, or may say one of many memorized acts of contrition like the following:

Act of Contrition

O My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with the help of your grace, to do penance, to sin no more and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, suffered and died for us. In His Name, O Lord, have mercy.

After this the priest will absolve the penitent in the following words:

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 makes the sign of the Cross and answers: **Amen***

The priest will then dismiss the penitent with a short prayer and encouragement. The penitent should then immediately try to fulfill the penance imposed if it is something that can be done quickly.

After Confession

Rejoice! You have received the forgiveness of Christ! What should you do when you leave? Remember the words you recited in the Act of Contrition: **I firmly intend, with the help of your grace, to do penance, to sin no more and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.** The goal of our life's journey is to grow closer to God. We can do this through prayer, spiritual reading, fasting and the reception of the sacrament.



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