



How to Make a Good Confession

a private guide for penitents at Prince of Peace Church

A Word of Welcome

One of the most wonderful things I get to do as a priest is be involved in the reconciliation of sinners to God. The Sacrament of Penance, popularly called Confession, is one of the greatest gifts that God has given His Church to shed His Mercy on the world. This guide will hopefully be a help to you to understand better the nature of sin and prepare yourself for a fruitful celebration of this wonderful mystery of Love.

Father Christopher Smith, Prince of Peace

Sin

*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.¹ We have all experienced times when we have done something wrong or when we could have done something good, but we failed to do it. Our **conscience** is the voice of God, which convicts us of our sin. The word sin has its origins in the Greek word *hamartia*, which means missing the mark in archery. God has a plan for our lives, and sometimes we miss His plan. Ever since Adam and Eve committed the Original Sin of disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden, man has experienced **concupiscence**, a disordered tendency to evil. The Apostle Paul even writes, *I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.² We experience in ourselves a spiritual war with the world, the flesh and the Devil for our souls, and often we lose certain battles. Some deceive themselves into thinking that they are not sinners. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us.³ We must be aware that *the wages of sin is death⁴ and that all sin has eternal consequences. God is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love⁵ but He also a righteous judge.⁶*****

¹ Romans 3.23

² Romans 7.19

³ I John 1.8-10

⁴ Romans 6.23

⁵ Psalm 103.8

⁶ Psalm 7.11

The Tradition of the Church maintains that there are two kinds of sin. **Mortal sin** separates us from God, kills the soul and merits eternal punishment in Hell. A **venial sin** is a lesser sin, which does not result in separation from God or eternal punishment in Hell and does not kill the soul. Venial sin should always be avoided because it predisposes us to mortal sin. But for a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present:

1. it must be a serious, grave matter
2. there must be sufficient deliberation on how to commit the sin
3. there must be consent of the will; it cannot be an accident

All three conditions are required for a sin to be mortal. We know that a matter is serious and grave if it is contrary to the Law of God and the requirement of love for neighbor. Eternal salvation requires the absence of mortal sin in our soul and growth in the Christian life also has as its prerequisite the absence of even venial sin. Because sin offends God, we should take care to avoid even the **near occasion of sin** out of love for Him.

Contrition

If our conscience is rightly formed according to the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church, we will know when a certain thought, word, deed or omission is a sin. We will often have feelings of **guilt** associated with the knowledge that we have violated moral standards and are responsible for such violation. Guilt often causes us to have sorrow for our sins, or contrition. **Perfect contrition** is when we are sorrowful for our sins because we have offended the love of God. Such sorrow is enough to elicit God's **forgiveness**. But often human beings, their intellect darkened and their will weakened by sin, are incapable of perfect contrition. They still experience, however, **imperfect contrition**, when we are sorry for our sins because of some other motive: embarrassment, fear of Hell, or for the sake of other people. Contrition should cause us to desire never to sin again, which is **repentance**. When we repent of our sins, that should also cause us to turn towards the LORD and away from sin in **conversion**.

Sacrament of Penance

Guilt and contrition in us make us want to be sure that God forgives us. Jesus Christ came to earth to forgive sinners and reconcile them with His Father. He wants to re-create in us

what sin has destroyed by His gift of **grace**, the gift of His own inner life. He dispenses His grace as He wills, but He also instituted seven **sacraments** as outward rites which express inner realities that Christ brings about in the soul. When He rose from the dead, the first person to whom He appeared was Mary Magdalene, identified by the Tradition as the woman caught in adultery. *God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him.*⁷ He then appeared to the Apostles and said, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*⁸ Only God can forgive sin, and He communicates to His Apostles the power to free from sin and re-create the divine life in repentant sinners. Because we still need that liberation from sin, that power is passed down to the successors to the Apostles, the priests and bishops. This freedom from the slavery to sin by perfect contrition or by the **Sacrament of Penance**, the rite by which we confess our sins and receive the gifts of God's Mercy when imperfect contrition is present in the soul. The sacrament of penance consists of several acts: preparation, the confession of sins, direction or exhortation from the priest, the assignment of a **sacramental penance** (an act of prayer to be done or said to express sorrow for sin), absolution from sins and reconciliation to God and the Church, and thanksgiving. Catholics often refer to availing themselves of the sacrament of penance as "going to confession."

Requirements for Confession

The sacrament of **Baptism** forgives Original and any personal sins we have committed, initiates us into the Church, and makes us a child of God and heir to heaven. Baptism cannot be repeated. The sacrament of penance is like a second baptism, when sins committed after baptism are forgiven and grace given to us to live the divine life. We must be baptized before we go to confession, and we must be of the age of reason so that we can show our responsibility for our sins and our desire to actively change our lives. Ordinarily, only those who are in communion with the Catholic Church can come to confession, but other Christians may avail themselves of the opportunity to come to confession if they believe what Catholics do about confession and if there is a grave need. We must also have a **firm purpose of amendment**, a real desire and intent to leave behind sinful ways, in order to come to confession. When one has no intention of conversion, or one intends on continuing in a state of life contrary to the law of God and His Church (such as those who

⁷ John 3.17

⁸ John 20.23

are divorced and remarried outside the Church or those who live with someone to whom they are not married in the Church), one cannot receive absolution for sins, which depends on a firm purpose of amendment. Only in **case of death** can such persons receive absolution, and that is conditional upon at least imperfect contrition on the part of the recipient.

Do I have to go to Confession?

Roman Catholics are required to confess their mortal sins at least once a year and receive Holy Communion at least once between the beginning of Lent and Trinity Sunday once a year. Confession may be seen as a duty, an obligation. But if one sees it as an encounter with the Merciful LORD by which we are restored to friendship with Him, Confession is neither duty nor obligation, but a freely chosen act of love which produces great joy. Monthly or biweekly confession, including confession of venial sins, is a great help to the spiritual life. Frequent Confession also disposes us to receive more from Holy Communion, which we may not receive in the state of mortal sin, but which helps us to overcome venial sin and imperfections. Many stay away from confession because of pride, fear, or anxiety that the priest will think less of them or share information learned in the confessional. Yet there is no excuse valid when compared with the great gift of confession to the soul.

Why must I confess my sins to a priest? Can't I go directly to God?

Whenever we sin, even if no one else knows about it, it is an offense not only against God but also the Body of Christ, the Church. Sin harms the whole Body of Christ into which we are baptized. So as sin hurts the whole Body, it is fitting that the Body through Christ's representative on earth, the priest, be involved in the reconciliation of the sinner to God. God could have chosen any manner of ways to forgive sin and reconcile sinners, but He chooses to do so principally through the sacrament of penance which he established to bring us back to Him. And if He gives us this gift, how can we ignore it? If God wanted us to go directly to Him, He would have not established the Church or the sacrament of penance. Of course, that does not preclude our coming to God in prayer and asking for His Mercy.

Remote Preparation for Confession

Every night before we go to bed, it is a fitting spiritual exercise to do an **examination of conscience**. We look over the events of the day and think about what we may have done wrong and what we could have done right, but failed to do. We should do this examination of conscience as part of a broader program of trying to see ourselves as God sees us by realizing the import of every single action and its consequences. We do not do so merely to obsess over our faults, but to give us a realistic picture of ourselves before God so as to ask for His help in overcoming sin and developing virtue. A help in examining our consciences is seen by comparing them with the standards God and the Church give us for our moral life. Those standards include, but are not limited to, those to be found in the General Checklist below.

A rigorous and regular examination of conscience every day according to God's standards helps engage our conscience in such a way as to become sensitive to the import of our actions and be wary of sin. This remote preparation for Confession is a spiritual discipline which can be hard to develop, but makes our confessions and our spiritual life more fruitful. Such an examination is meant to help us also avoid two extremes: **scrupulosity**, where we see sin where there is no sin and exaggerate the gravity of our sins and **laxity**, where we refuse to admit sin where it exists and dismiss their seriousness. An examination of conscience must be made not according to feelings and vague sentiment, but according to the objective criteria God has established by which we can live a good and holy life. Some of these standards are **negative prohibitions**, commandments of God not to do something (*Thou shalt not kill*), and others are **positive commandments** where God demands that we do something (*Keep the Sabbath Day holy*). All of these standards should be the measure by which we try to ascertain how well we are doing in obeying God.

The **Act of Contrition** is a prayer to be memorized by all Catholics. While it is said from memory in confession, it also should be prayed frequently, especially at the end of our examination of conscience.

Proximate Preparation for Confession

If we have committed a mortal sin, we should try to get to confession at the first available opportunity. But whenever we decide to go to confession, we should spend some time in prayer looking over our life since our last confession to ascertain what sins have been

committed. After prayer and examining our conscience, pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit to help us confess worthily and well as well as for the grace of true contrition. We then prepare a mental list of all of the mortal sins committed since our last confession, as well as any venial sins we wish to confess. We may go to confession at any of the regularly scheduled times in any Catholic church, or set up an appointment with the priest in church or elsewhere. We should arrive early enough to prepare ourselves and to allow for the priest to hear the confessions of all who are waiting in a timely manner. If we feel that our confession may be complicated or unduly long, we should call for an appointment. Sometimes when someone has been away from confession for some time, in preparation for an important event in their lives like marriage or an ordination, or to manifest his seriousness about the spiritual life, he will make a **general confession** of all sins committed and remembered since baptism. For such a confession, it is useful to make an appointment with the priest.

General Checklist

Whenever we are doing our examination of conscience for our remote preparation for confession as a daily part of the spiritual life, we should do so against the backdrops of some of the standards God and the Church has set for our moral life. For your convenience, these are provided here, but they should be memorized by all Catholics.

The Ten Commandments⁹

1. I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

⁹ Exodus 20.2-17; Deuteronomy 5.6-21

The Precepts of the Church¹⁰

1. To attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation and resting from servile works.
2. To observe the days of abstinence and fasting.
3. To confess our sins to a priest, at least once a year.
4. To receive Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist at least once a year during Easter Season.
5. To contribute to the support of the Church.
6. To obey the laws of the Church concerning Matrimony.
7. To participate in the Church's mission of Evangelization of Souls.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

1. Convert the sinner
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Counsel the doubtful
4. Comfort the sorrowful
5. Bear wrongs patiently
6. Forgive injuries
7. Pray for the living and the dead

The Corporal Works of Mercy¹¹

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Shelter the homeless
5. Visit the sick
6. Visit those in prison
7. Bury the dead

¹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church 2041-2043,

¹¹ Matthew 25: 31-46, Tobit

The Beatitudes¹²

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land.
3. Blessed are they who mourn: for they shall be comforted.
4. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill.
5. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
6. Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
8. Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

The Cardinal Virtues¹³

1. prudence
2. temperance
3. justice
4. fortitude

The Theological Virtues¹⁴

1. faith
2. hope
3. charity

The Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Life-Giving Virtues¹⁵

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|-------------|------------|
| 1. lust | chastity |
| 2. gluttony | temperance |
| 3. greed | charity |
| 4. sloth | diligence |
| 5. wrath | patience |

¹² Matthew 5,3-10

¹³ Plato

¹⁴ I Corinthians 13,13

¹⁵ St Gregory the Great

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|----------|----------|
| 6. envy | kindness |
| 7. pride | humility |

*The Sins that Cry out to Heaven for Justice*¹⁶

1. homicide
2. sodomy
3. oppression of peoples
4. oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans
5. cheating the worker of his due

Detailed Checklist

Whenever we are doing our proximate preparation to go to confession, we should examine our actions against the standards outlined in the General Checklist. We also should see as to whether our faults are grave or less serious so as to help determine whether they are mortal or venial. Below is a checklist of some more common grave and less serious matter seen against the backdrop of the Ten Commandments. The less serious matter would be venial sins. The grave matter may also be venial sin, if the action is not accompanied by sufficient deliberation and consent of the will.

GRAVE MATTER

1. *I am the LORD your God; you shall not have strange gods before Me.*
 - occult
 - atheism or agnosticism
 - leaving the Church
 - superstitious practices
 - joining societies condemned by the Church (ex: Masons)

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1867

- desecration of the Eucharist
- receiving Communion in the state of mortal sin
- failure to make the Easter duty (confession once a year and Easter Communion)
- receiving Confirmation or Marriage in the state of mortal sin
- marriage outside the Church
- denial of the truths of the faith
- despair
- presumption of God's Mercy
- buying or selling sacred objects
- hatred of God

2. *You shall not take the Name of the LORD your God in vain.*

- using God's name as a curse
- wishing evil upon another
- slander and willful insult
- blasphemy
- lying under oath
- lying or withholding a sin in confession

3. *Keep the Sabbath Day holy.*

- missing Mass on Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation without serious cause
- unnecessary work on Sunday or Holy Day
- failure to fast or abstain on appointed days
- requiring employees to work on Sunday in non-essential jobs

4. *Honour your father and mother.*

- failure to care for aged parents
- disrespect, disobedience to parents, superiors, authorities
- abuse or neglect of children
- failure to baptize children soon after birth
- failure to carry out the reasonable last wishes of parents
- neglect of one's duties

5. *You shall not kill.*

- murder, homicide, manslaughter

- abortion
- selective reduction of babies in the womb
- encouraging, counseling, paying for abortion
- voting for pro-abortion policies
- intentionally injuring another
- driving recklessly or under influence of drugs or alcohol
- leading another into sin or tempting them
- hatred of another
- taking or selling illegal drugs
- intentional drunkenness
- self-mutilation
- unnecessary tattoos and piercing, especially of intimate parts
- sterilization
- involvement in euthanasia
- intention or attempt of suicide
- bigotry and racial hatred

6. You shall not commit adultery

- willful entertainment of impure thoughts or desires
- use of impure or suggestive words
- telling/listening to impure stories
- deliberately looking at impure TV, videos, plays, pictures or movies
- deliberately reading impure materials
- committing impure acts on self
- committing impure acts with another
- practicing artificial birth control
- marry or advise anyone to marry outside of the Church
- failed to avoid occasions of impurity
- failed to control thoughts
- engaging in homosexual activity
- failure to respect members of the opposite sex
- sterilization of self or spouse
- abused marriage rights
- acting to produce arousal in someone who is not one's spouse
- immodest dress

- prostitution
- rape
- artificial insemination
- surrogate motherhood
- fertility testing that involves immoral acts
- support of human cloning
- willful divorce
- desertion of a spouse
- incest
- having more than one spouse
- cohabitation before marriage
- seduction for purposes of immorality
- lust in the heart
- spouse-swapping
- cross-dressing

7. *You shall not steal*

- stealing a large amount of money or a valuable item
- destroying or defacing another's property
- stealing a sacred object or anything from a sacred place or person
- selling, buying, concealing or receiving items known to be stolen
- failure to make restitution
- unnecessary gambling
- defrauding workers of their wages
- cruelty to animals
- slavery
- pirating software or music
- violating copyright
- excessive waste and expense
- forgery
- tax evasion
- fraud, embezzlement
- failure to fulfill work duties
- untruthfulness in accounts
- failure to help the poor and less fortunate

- blackmail

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

- lying under or not under oath about someone
- premeditated lies
- detraction (revealing faults of another without serious reason)
- calumny (falsely maligning another's character)
- revealing a secret without sufficient reason

9. *You shall not desire your neighbor's wife*

- pornography
- reading sexually explicit materials
- lusting after another
- dwelling on impure thoughts for the purpose of arousal

10. *You shall not desire your neighbor's goods.*

- intentional greed
- intention to steal or destroy another's goods

LESSER MATTER

1. *I am the LORD your God; you shall have no strange gods before Me.*

- failure to pray daily
- not loving or trusting God
- trying to control things rather than seek God's will
- self-pity or self-deprecation
- failure to examine one's conscience
- failure to pray during temptation
- putting off confession when needed
- entertaining doubt about the faith
- failure to study and learn the Church's teaching
- indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness in our relationship with God
- contenting oneself with mediocrity
- putting other people or things before God
- anger at God

- embarrassment for being Catholic
 - failure to defend the Church
 - failure to support the Church with time, talent and treasure
 - willful distraction at prayer and Mass
 - failure to offer up suffering
2. *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.*
- habitual, unthinking use of the LORD's name in surprise and anger
 - thoughtless cursing
 - irreverent use of the names of Mary, a Saint, the Pope, or other sacred persons
 - vulgar language
 - bad jokes about sacred persons, places or things
 - irreverent use of the Bible
3. *Keep the Sabbath Day holy.*
- unnecessary work
 - failure to keep Sunday for family and recreation
 - failure to spend extra time on Sunday for prayer and study of the faith
 - allowing sports or other activities determine Sunday schedule
 - irreverence and needless talking in church
 - refusing to participate in Mass
 - coming late to Mass or leaving early without sufficient reason
 - desecrating Sunday by sinful amusement
4. *Honour your father and mother.*
- fighting siblings
 - treating those under one's authority disrespectfully
 - speaking badly about parents, children, spouse
 - failure to give good example
 - taking spouse or children for granted
 - failure to pray for those entrusted in one's care and those in authority over one
 - failure to teach the faith to children
 - lack of gratitude towards parents
 - nagging
 - treating adult children like minors

- meddling in affairs of adult children
- excessive laxity or strictness on rules, boundaries, discipline
- shame or embarrassment about parents, spouse or children
- breaking just civil laws without reason

5. *You shall not kill.*

- arrogance, pride, vanity
- unreasonable stubbornness
- rudeness
- failure to apologize or forgive
- fighting over little matters
- unreasonable anger
- obscene or vulgar gestures, words
- prejudice
- holding grudges
- seeking revenge
- impatience
- selfishness
- listening to and buying bad music
- excessive use of TV, computer, internet
- TV, movies or games that promote sex or violence
- failure to care for one's health
- unnecessary tobacco use
- abuse of medicine or refusal to take necessary medicine
- laziness, procrastination, failure to arrive on time
- scandalizing another
- unjust treatment of others
- failure to pray for deceased relatives, sinners
- intentionally provoking anger in others

6. *You shall not commit adultery.*

- lack of custody of the eyes
- allowing the heart to stray from spouse
- treating others as objects

- failure to respect those of opposite sex
- seeking wrongful attention from others
- selfishness in marital act
- failure to be open to life without sufficient reason
- bad friendships

7. *You shall not steal*

- disordinate attachment to persons or things
- theft of small or inexpensive items
- failure to return borrowed items
- wasting time
- failure to pay debts promptly
- failure to help the poor
- spending on unnecessary things
- failure to keep promises

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.*

- lying
- gossip
- spreading rumours
- talking behind another's back
- negative, critical thought of others
- rash judgment
- undue suspicion
- failure to restore good name of another
- exaggeration, bragging
- flattery
- complaining, whining

9. *You shall not desire your neighbor's wife.*

- telling or listening to impure, vulgar jokes or stories
- brief entertainment of impure thoughts
- failure to bring imagination under control
- curiosity
- seeking out immodest persons or images

10. You shall not desire your neighbour's goods.

- envy
- jealousy
- materialism
- failure to trust in God for one's material and spiritual needs
- attachment to possessions

How to go to Confession

When we enter the place set apart for the sacrament of penance, usually a **confessional** inside a church, we make the **Sign of the Cross** and say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." We then tell him exactly how long it has been since our last confession and can also tell him our state in life (married, single, widowed, priest, religious). While we need not bring a written list into the confessional with us, we do list our mortal sins in the following way: what the sin is, how many times we committed it, and if there were any circumstances that would change the nature of the sin. We must be succinct and specific, without trying to "set up the scene", excuse ourselves, or give details which do not relate to the sin itself. We are required to list all mortal sins committed since our last confession that we can remember. If we have a question over whether something is a sin or not, we should ask the priest. If we have venial sins or imperfections that we would like to mention so as to obtain graces to overcome them, they can be mentioned here. If there are sins from our past which have already been confessed but we wish to mention them to express our sorrow for them, or something which we forgot to confess in previous confessions, we should tell them and why are confessing them.

While it is important to try to remember all of the mortal sins we have committed, Christ through the sacrament frees us from all our sins, if we have not held anything back on purpose. If we deliberately conceal a sin, do not have a firm purpose of amendment or lie in the confessional, we make a **sacrilegious confession**, which is gravely sinful and a mockery of the LORD's forgiveness. If we are not prepared to try to change our lives, we should pray for the LORD to grant us the grace of conversion rather than risk a sacrilegious confession.

The priest may ask a few questions to ascertain the nature or the gravity of the sin and he may give some counsel. It is important to remember that, as a general rule, confession is not the place to ask advice or spiritual direction, although both can be requested and given in confession. If you are looking for conversation, advice and spiritual direction, it is better to ask for an appointment with the priest. The priest will then assign a penance to be performed outside the confession, and he will invite you to pray the Act of Contrition. You should be prepared to recite this prayer from memory, but some churches have a copy of it posted. You can also request the priest to help you in the prayer or permission to say your own prayer, although the normative formulas of the prayer are preferable.

The priest will then raise his right hand over you in blessing and recite the **Prayer of Absolution**, which ends, “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” After you respond, “Amen,” he may say another brief prayer and dismiss you in pardon and peace.

For your convenience, an act of contrition is printed here:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

What to do after Confession

After confession, it is always appropriate to spend some time in church thanking God for the gift of His Mercy. If the priest has assigned you a penance which requires a prayer to be said, it is fitting that it be said as part of your thanksgiving. If it is an act to be performed elsewhere, it should be done as quickly as possible. Confession is a joyful encounter with Christ and His love for us. It is important that, when we leave church and go back to our daily lives, that we daily commend to God our resolution to live in His love and root out sin. We should also look for those wandering sheep who have not been to confession for a while, share our good experience with them, and encourage them to go to confession. Parents must always set the example for their children, going to confession as a family on a regular basis and whenever needed. We also need to spread the word of the

great grace of confession and never fail to praise Him: *Forever I will sing the mercies of the LORD!*

