

INTRODUCTION

If you have ever found yourself saying or thinking, “I am a sinner,” you have something in common with Pope Francis and every other person on earth who recognizes the truth about the human condition. But God wants to transform our human condition so that we become like Him, ready to live with Him forever. Please read on...

CAN GOD FORGIVE MY SINS?

Yes! God can do anything, and He wants very much to show you His love and mercy. St. Paul teaches us, “This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). The very reason God sent his only Son to live among us, to suffer and die for us and to rise from the dead was so that He could save us from sin and death. No matter what sins you have committed, and no matter how many times or for how many months or even years you have committed them, God can forgive you, and He wants to do so more than you can possibly imagine.

WHY SHOULD I GO TO CONFESSION?

In His kindness, God has not left us in the dark about how we are to have our sins forgiven. On the evening of the first Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ appeared to His apostles and said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And we read further in the Gospel according to John, “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (John 20:21-23). Jesus entrusted the power of His forgiveness to His first priests, the apostles, and in turn to all of the bishops and priests of the Church who would follow after them. In the Sacrament of Penance (or Reconciliation), known also as “Confession”, priests share the gift of God’s forgiveness with those who are sorry for their sins and who are ready to confess those sins and live a new life.

Approaching a priest for confession can make a person kind of nervous. Priests also go to confession regularly, so they understand how you feel! But the Sacrament of Penance is about God’s love, His mercy, and the freedom that comes with knowing that your sins are forgiven. Many Catholics would undoubtedly agree that the most

consoling words they ever hear in this life are those they hear near the end of their confessions, when the priest says, “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

HOW DO I GO TO CONFESSION?

Whatever you do, please do go! The priest-confessor will be happy to give you any help you need in order to make a good confession and receive God’s forgiveness. Even if you have no idea what to do or say, the priest is there to help you. But here are some steps that will guide you through a typical confession.

- **Prepare:** It is important to prepare for your confession. Pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you, even with a prayer as simple as, “Come, Holy Spirit.” Spend some time examining your conscience, ask God to help you know your sins so that you can make a full confession. Pay special attention to mortal sins, and try your best to remember all of those sins and how often you committed them (even if you need to estimate). You may choose to write down your sins, for the sake of helping your memory, but you do not need to do so. Please see the “examination of conscience” below, to help guide you through this time of preparation.
- **Approach:** This is the first step, actually approaching the priest for confession. Catholic churches advertise their regular times for confession (often on Saturday afternoons), and usually offer confessions “by appointment.” Feel free also to approach a priest in-person to ask for confession. He will often be able to help you right away, or he’ll be happy to set up another time as soon as possible. During regular confession times, you’ll be entering a “confessional” or “reconciliation room” located in the church building and in most cases clearly marked. A green light or an open door are the typical signals that you are free to enter. You may choose to confess anonymously, from behind the screen, or sitting face-to-face with your confessor. The priest may greet you, or you can simply begin by saying, “Forgive me, Father, I have sinned. It has been (amount of time) since

my last confession. These are my sins...”

- **Confess:** The keys here are honesty and completeness. Be sure to confess all of your more serious (“mortal”) sins to the priest, telling him how often you have committed them and any circumstance that would help him understand the seriousness of the sin. To hold one of these sins back from your confessor is to prevent the forgiveness of any of them. It is sort of like how holding back a serious symptom or injury from your doctor would prevent him or her from being able to keep you healthy. If you honestly forget something, however, be certain that all of your sins are still forgiven. Mention your forgotten sins in your next confession. It is also helpful to confess your smaller (“venial”) sins, but you do not need give the number of these sins. There is no need to go into elaborate detail about your sins, and remember that the priest can always ask clarifying questions if needed.
- **Dialogue:** After you confess your sins, your confessor may have some final questions or a word of advice for you. He will then suggest a penance, which you are called to offer to God as a token of reparation for the sins you have committed. If your penance is unclear to you, please ask the priest to clarify before accepting it. The priest will then invite you to make an Act of Contrition, expressing your sorrow to God for having sinned and your commitment to begin again as a disciple of Jesus Christ.
- **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 Your help, 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, my God, have mercy. Amen.
- **Absolution and Penance:** After you say your Act of Contrition, your confessor will then raise his hands and pray the Absolution over you, acting in the Person of Jesus Christ to forgive your sins. As the priest makes