

A Source of Reconciliation and Joy

The Sacrament of Penance

There's an old joke about a carpenter who went to confession after he had been stealing lumber from his job site. He confessed his sins, and the priest said, "For your penance, make a novena." The carpenter replied, "I'm not quite sure what a novena is, Father, but if you have the blueprints, I have the lumber!"

The story is good for a laugh, but it makes a good point. It raises the question of whether in the Sacrament of Penance anything good can come from our guilt and our sins. Notice the use of the term *penance* rather than *confession*. Confession is just one moment in the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. Confession probably gets the most attention because it's the scariest part—no one likes to have his or her sins brought into the light—even if it's in the darkness of a confessional. Perhaps in the past the Church focused too much on the telling of the sins and too little on the joy to be gained through the healing that comes through an encounter with the mercy and forgiveness of God. Confession is an important step on the way to forgiveness, but it's shortsighted to let this one aspect stand for the whole gift.

Here's what the Sacrament of Penance actually offers:

- restoration to honesty—no more need to rationalize
- restoration to integrity—no more need to have secret or unacknowledged parts of your life
- relief from unproductive guilt—transformation of remorse into living a new life. The purpose of this sacrament is not punishment but true reconciliation with God and the community.
- an encounter with God—meeting God in humility (not humiliation!) and weakness
- spiritual guidance—no need to struggle with your moral issues alone
- inner peace—no longer having to live a life at war with yourself
- strength in meeting future challenges and temptations
- grace—rediscovering, as did the prodigal son, your Father's unconditional love.

Why should you not be afraid of this sacrament? The best reason is that God longs to forgive you. Remember, God knows that you are much more than the worst thing you've ever done.

An Examination of Conscience

An examination of conscience is the act of looking prayerfully into our hearts to ask how we have hurt our relationships with God and other people through our thoughts, words, and actions. We reflect

on the [Ten Commandments](#) and the teachings of the Church. The questions below help us in our examination of conscience.

My Relationship With God

What steps am I taking to help me grow closer to God and to others? Do I turn to God often during the day, especially when I am tempted?

Do I participate at Mass with attention and devotion on Sundays and holy days? Do I pray often and read the Bible?

Do I use God's name and the names of Jesus, Mary, and the saints with love and reverence?

My Relationships With Family, Friends, and Neighbors

Have I set a bad example through my words or actions? Do I treat others fairly? Do I spread stories that hurt other people?

Am I loving of those in my family? Am I respectful of my neighbors, my friends, and those in authority?

Do I show respect for my body and for the bodies of others? Do I keep away from forms of entertainment that do not respect God's gift of sexuality?

Have I taken or damaged anything that did not belong to me? Have I cheated, copied homework, or lied?

Do I quarrel with others just so I can get my own way? Do I insult others to try to

make them think they are less than I am? Do I hold grudges and try to hurt people who I think have hurt me?

How to Make a Good Confession

Before celebrating the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, be sure to prepare with an [examination of conscience](#).

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation includes the following steps:

1. The priest greets us, and we pray the Sign of the Cross. He invites us to trust in God. He may read God's Word with us.
2. We confess our sins. The priest may help and counsel us.
3. The priest gives us a penance to perform. Penance is an act of kindness or prayers to pray, or both.
4. The priest asks us to express our sorrow, usually by reciting the Act of Contrition.
5. We receive absolution. The priest says, "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." We respond, "Amen."
6. The priest dismisses us by saying, "Go in peace." We go forth to perform the act of penance he has given us.