

the name of the Father...." We should then state when we made our last confession: "It has been (so long) since my last confession."

We then confess our sins. We must be specific. Sometimes people say, "I broke the sixth commandment," which covers everything from a lustful thought to rape and adultery. We do not need to provide the full-blown story, just the basics to enable the priest to help. We need to give some quantification — missing Mass once is different from several times which is different from all the time. When we are finished confessing our sins, we state, "I am sorry for these and all of my sins." With this information, the priest may counsel us. He also assigns a penance for the healing of the hurt caused by sin and the strengthening of our soul against future temptation. He then asks us to say an act of contrition, which is generally the traditional prayer:

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

Finally, the priest imparts absolution. Ponder the beautiful 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." This formula emphasizes our merciful Heavenly Father, the saving mystery of our Lord's passion, death, and resurrection, and the healing ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Church.

The priest then dismisses us, saying, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good," to which we respond, "His mercy endures forever." (Many priests may simply say, "May God bless you.") We then leave the confessional to do the assigned penance.

The sacrament of penance is a beautiful sacrament through which we are reconciled to God, ourselves, and our neighbors. Remember the words of St. Paul, "God is rich in mercy; because of His great love for us, He brought us to life with Christ when we were dead in sin" (Eph 2:4). As we draw closer to Easter, take time for making a good confession.

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## Making a Good Confession

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The Second Vatican Council did decree that "the rite and formulas of penance are to be revised in such a way that they may more clearly express the nature and effects of this sacrament" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 72). Accordingly the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship issued *The Rite of Penance* in 1973. The new rite did add options for prayers, provide for a reading of Sacred Scripture, and introduce "penance services" with private confessions. Nevertheless, the norms stipulated, "It is for priests, and especially parish priests in reconciling individuals or the community, to adapt the rite to the concrete circumstances of the penitents" (no. 40). Therefore, on a Saturday afternoon with a line of penitents waiting for confession, the parish priest may follow a more "streamlined" version of the rite, which would include by custom the traditional format for confession.

With that in mind, a person begins with a good examination of conscience. We need to hold up our life to the pattern of life God has revealed for us to live. For instance, we take time to reflect on the Ten Commandments,

the Beatitudes, the precepts of the Church, the cardinal virtues (prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice), and the seven capital sins (pride, anger, envy, gluttony, sloth, lust and covetousness). (Several clear, simple pamphlets with an examination of conscience may be purchased at the Daughters of St. Paul bookstore in Alexandria.)

The examination of our conscience is like stepping back and looking at the picture of our life in comparison to the masterpiece of life revealed by God. Remember when we were children, we used to trace pictures. Tracing helped us learn to draw. We would take a piece of plain paper, hold it over the original picture, and then put it up to the window. The light would enable us to trace the original picture onto our blank sheet of paper. Periodically, we had to stop and step back to see if our paper had slipped and was out of kilter with the original, or if we had deviated from the lines.

In a similar way, as we live our lives, we are tracing them in accord with God's pattern of life. In examining our consciences, we step back and honestly assess how well we fit God's pattern and have stayed within His boundaries. At this time, we reflect on the progress we have made since our last confession in dealing with weaknesses, faults, temptations and past sins. Hopefully, we see improvement in our spiritual well-being. However, when we have gone out of kilter or gone out of bounds with God's masterpiece, we have sinned — not just by commission, but by omission. We must

recognize the venial sins — those lighter sins which weaken our relationship with the Lord — from the mortal sins — those sins which sever our relationship with the Lord and "kill" the presence of sanctifying grace in our souls. Here we remember the words of Jesus, "Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed. But he who acts in truth comes into the light, to make clear that his deeds are done in God" (Jn 3:20-21).

Given this examination of conscience, we have contrition for our sins. While we are sorry for sin because we do fear the fires of hell and the loss of heaven, and the just punishments of God, we are sorry most of all because our sins offend God whom we should love above all things. The love for God moves us to repent of sin and seek reconciliation. All of the great saints regularly examined their consciences and made frequent use of the sacrament of penance. (Even our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, confesses his sins weekly, as did Mother Teresa.) One must ask, "Why? What sins did these holy people possibly commit?" They loved the Lord so much that even the slightest omission or commission moved them to confession. They did not want even the slightest sin to separate them from the love of God. For love of God, we too are sorry for our sins.

Sorrow for sin moves us to have a firm amendment not to sin again. We probably will sin again, but we try not to do so. We do not plan on leaving the confessional and committing the same sins again.

We then confess our sins. When we enter the confessional in most churches, we have the option of remaining anonymous or facing the priest. Whichever option a person chooses, always remember that whatever is said during the confession is held in secret by the priest.

Remember also that we confess to the priest for three reasons: First, Christ Himself instituted this sacrament, and the priest has the authority of the apostles by virtue of his ordination to absolve sins in the name of the Lord. On the night of the resurrection, Jesus said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound" (Jn 20:22-23). The priest is the minister of the sacrament acting in the person of Christ.

Second, he is the spiritual father. Just as we see a doctor for healing when we are physically sick, we see a priest when our soul is sick and needs healing.

Third, the priest represents the Church and the people we have sinned against. In the early days of the Church, people publicly confessed sin at the beginning of Mass and were absolved. Much to our relief, for centuries now we have had private confession.

We proceed by making the sign of the cross and saying, "Bless me father for I have sinned." One could also simply begin, "In