

# A Primer for Confession

JESUS CHRIST came into the world to save all people from the power of Satan, sin, and sin's consequence, death. The purpose of his ministry was our reconciliation with the Father. In a special way, his death on the cross brought the possibility of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation to all.

## **Background and Origin**

On the evening of his resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to his Apostles and gave them the power to forgive all human sins. Breathing upon them, He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained." (John.20:22-23) Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, bishops and priests of the Church receive the ability from Christ himself to forgive sins. It is exercised in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also known as the Sacrament of Penance or simply as "confession." Through this Sacrament, Christ forgives the sins that the members of his Church commit after baptism.

## **Contrition for Sins**

In order to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation worthily, the penitent (the sinner) must be sorry for his or her sins. Sorrow for sins is called contrition. Imperfect contrition is sorrow for sins motivated by fear of the fires of hell or the ugliness of sin itself. Perfect contrition is sorrow for sin motivated by the love of God.

Contrition, perfect or imperfect, must include a firm purpose of amendment, that is, a solid resolution to avoid the sin committed as well as the persons, places and things that prompted you to commit the sin in the first place. Without this repentance, contrition is insincere and your confession is pointless.

Whenever you sin, you should beg God for the gift of perfect contrition. Often God gives this gift when a Christian thinks about Jesus' agony on the cross and realizes that his sins are the cause of that suffering. Throw yourself into the arms of the crucified Savior's mercy and resolve to confess your sins to a priest as soon as possible.

## **Examination of Conscience**

When you come to Church to confess your sins, you should first examine your conscience. Review your life to see how you offended the good God since your last confession. The

Church teaches that all mortal sins committed after Baptism must be confessed to a priest in order to be forgiven. This "precept" or law is of Divine Institution. Simply stated, this means the confession of grave sins to a priest is part of God's plan and therefore is supported and carried out in the life of the Church.

### **Mortal and Venial Sins**

Mortal sin is a direct, conscious and free violation of one or another of the Ten Commandments in a serious matter. Mortal sin, also known as grave or deadly sin, destroys the life of grace in your soul. God's grace begins to draw the sinner back to him through sorrow for sin. He is brought back to life when he confesses his sins to a priest and receives absolution (forgiveness). The Church recommends that Catholics confess their venial sins which are violations of God's law that do not sever the relationship with him or destroy the life of grace in the soul.

### **Examination of Conscience**

The section is an examination of conscience to help you prepare for confession. If you are not sure whether your sins are "mortal" or venial the confessor (the priest to whom you confess your sins) will help you to understand the difference. Don't be shy: seek his assistance. Ask him questions! The Church wants to make it as easy as possible for you to make a frank, honest confession of all your sins. Most parishes schedule confessions every week, often on Saturdays.

You are also free to call your parish priest and make an appointment for confession.

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.

Do I seek to love God with my whole heart and soul? Does He truly hold the first place in my life?

Have I been involved with the occult or superstitious practices, i.e. fortune-telling?

Have I ever received Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin?

Have I told a lie in confession or deliberately withheld confessing a mortal sin?

Do I pray regularly?

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

Have I insulted God's holy name or used it carelessly or irreverently?

Have I lied under oath?

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Have I missed Mass deliberately on Sunday, or on Holy Days of obligation?  
Do I try to keep Sunday as a day of rest, holy to the Lord?

4. Honour your father and your mother.

Do I honour and obey my parents? Do I care for them in their old age?

Did I disrespect my parents or superiors?

Have I neglected my family responsibilities to spouse, children, or parents?

5. You shall not kill.

Have I murdered or physically harmed anyone or attempted to do so?

Have I had an abortion, used abortifacient contraceptives or encouraged anyone to do so?

Have I abused drugs or alcohol?

Have I sterilized myself in any way or encouraged anyone to do so?

Did I participate in or approve of euthanasia or "mercy-killing"?

Have I harboured hatred, anger or resentment in my heart towards anyone?

Have I cursed anyone?

Have I given scandal to anyone by my sins, thereby leading them to sin?

6. You shall not commit adultery.

Have I been unfaithful to my marriage vows in action or thought?

Have I practiced any form of contraception

Have I been engaged in premarital or extramarital sexual activity with a member of the opposite sex or the same sex?

Have I masturbated?

Have I indulged in pornographic material.

Am I pure in my thoughts, words actions? Am I modest in dress?

Am I involved in any inappropriate relationships?

7. You shall not steal.

Have I taken what is not mine or helped others steal

Am I honest with my employer/employee?

Do I gamble excessively thereby robbing my family of their needs?

Do I seek to share what I have with the poor and needy?

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

Have I lied, gossiped or spoken behind anyone's back?

Have I ruined anyone's good name?

Do I reveal information that should be confidential?

Am I sincere in my dealings with others or am I "two-faced"?

9. You shall not desire your neighbour's wife.

Am I envious of another's spouse or family?

Have I consented to impure thoughts? Do I try to control my imagination?

Am I reckless and irresponsible in the literature I read, the movies I watch, the web sites I surf, the places I frequent?

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

Am I envious of the possessions of others?

Am I resentful and bitter over my position in life?

## Preparation for Confession

Upon entering the confessional, the priest will welcome you warmly and greet you with kindness. Together you will make the Sign of the Cross saying "In the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." The priest may then read a short passage from Scripture. Begin your confession by saying, "Bless me Father for I have sinned. It has been..." (state how long it has been since your last confession) "and these are my sins..." Tell your sins simply and honestly to the priest. The simpler and the more honest the better! Don't make excuses! Don't try to disguise or minimize what you have done! Most importantly, think of Christ crucified dying out of love for you. Step on your pride and admit your guilt!

Remember, God wills that you confess all mortal sins by name and number. For instance, "I committed adultery three times and helped a friend procure an abortion." "I missed Mass on Sunday. "I gambled away a whole week's pay check."

This sacrament is not only for the forgiveness of mortal sins. You may also confess your venial sins. The Church encourages devotional confession, that is, the frequent confession of venial sins as a means of growing perfect in the love of God and neighbour.

After you confess your sins, listen to the advice the priest offers you. You may also seek his help and guidance. He will then give you a penance. He will ask you to either pray, fast or perform an act of charity. Through the penance, you begin to make reparation for the harm your sins have caused you, others and the Church. The penance prescribed by the priest reminds you that you need to be one with Christ in his sufferings so as to share in his resurrection.

Finally, the priest will ask you to express your sorrow for the sins confessed in an Act of Contrition, and then, exercising the power of Christ, he will give you absolution. As he prays over you, know with the certainty of faith that God is forgiving all your sins, healing you and preparing you for the Banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven! The priest will dismiss you saying: "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good." You respond: "His mercy endures forever." Or he may say, "The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace," to which your answer, "Thanks be to God." Try to spend some time in prayer, thanking God for his forgiveness. Perform the penance the priest has given you as soon as possible after receiving absolution.

If you make good use and frequent use of this sacrament, you will have peace of heart, purity of conscience and a deep union with Christ. The grace bestowed by this sacrament will give you greater strength to overcome sin and help you to become like Jesus, our Lord. It will make you a stronger and more committed member of his Church!

This text was published for educational purposes from "A Primer for Confession" by Fr. Frederick L. Miller, S.T.D.