



GET CLEAN FEEL PEACE RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY

Lent is the perfect time to go to confession

“BLESS ME FATHER, FOR I HAVE SINNED, IT HAS BEEN” How long has it been since your last confession? For most Catholics, their frequency to this sacrament is anything but frequent. Some go often, some go every year, while some have not been in decades. Are you one of them? Do you think, “What is the point?” “Why can’t I just confess my sins directly to God?” Are you fearful of going? Are you afraid you do not know what to do?

In the following pages, thanks to several of our priests, *Catholic Times* has you covered to inspire you and prepare you to lift you up so you can take advantage of this

incredible sacrament our Catholic faith offers, a treasure of forgiveness from God.

God loves you beyond our understanding. He stands ready to forgive — no matter how long it has been since your last confession and no matter how bad your sins are. Pouring out the dregs of your soul, even just stepping into the confessional, can be an intimidating and scary experience, but remember what lies on the other side: complete forgiveness, healing, a fresh start of renewal, and your relationship with God restored.

This Lent, get clean, get peace, and receive God’s mercy in confession. ✠



WHY DO I HAVE TO GO TO A PRIEST FOR GOD TO FORGIVE MY SINS?

Why can't I just **TELL GOD DIRECTLY?**

By **FATHER JOE RING**
Special to *Catholic Times*

One of Jesus' key ministries was the forgiveness of sins, something He often associated with simultaneous miracles of physical healing. See Lk 5:17-26, where Jesus forgives the paralytic his sins, and then heals his paralysis. Every time He forgave, Jesus personally, intimately, and life-changingly encountered the person suffering from their sins, and this is something He wants to do for us as well! By His death and resurrection, Christ has redeemed us, conquering sin and death, and He wanted this healing and forgiving ministry to continue, so He entrusted it to the Apostles and consequently, to the Church.

One Scripture basis for the sacrament of penance is John 20:19-23, when on Easter night, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on the Disciples and told them, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." The words of absolution said by the priest in the sacrament are rooted in this Scripture. The priest will say, "God, the Father of mercies, through the Death and Resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God grant 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."

The priest in the confessional, in the sacrament of penance, is *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, as in all sacraments. It is Christ who absolves. It is Christ who baptizes. It is Christ who offers Himself on the altar at Mass. So, when penitents come to the sacrament, they are

in fact confessing to God, Christ Jesus, in and through the person of the priest. This is going directly to God, as you say in your question.

Why is this manner of confessing helpful? Here we return to the bedrock truth of the Christian faith. God became one with us in the flesh, in His incarnation. God did not just will our redemption and accomplish it by thinking it. He sent His Son, in the flesh, to personally encounter us, to save us by His death and resurrection.

So, think of it in terms of your marriage. You did not become married just by thinking about it. You said your intentions publicly, out loud to your spouse. Your words, your consent, your two-become-one, make the sacrament. It is incarnational; you are husband and wife in the flesh. When there is a rift in your marriage, when you wronged your spouse, you need to say, "I am sorry." Sure, you can think of how sorrowful or remorseful you are, and you can presume your spouse's forgiveness, but the rift is not really healed until words of sorrow are expressed and you hear the words, "I accept your apology and forgive you." It is a personal, direct encounter. It is sorrow incarnated.

The way that God created our humanity — body, soul, mind, and strength — means that we need to outwardly, verbally express both our love and our sorrow. I encourage you to go to confession so you can name your sins and express sorrow to Jesus in the person of the priest and hear his healing words of mercy. ✠

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WHAT SHOULD I DO FIRST BEFORE — going to — CONFESSION?

By **FATHER BRIAN ALFORD**
Special to *Catholic Times*

From my experience as a confessor and one who also goes to confession regularly, a good preparation before confession is the key to making a good confession. Think about any time you have had to have a serious conversation with somebody, especially one that might be difficult. There is no way you would go into that conversation unprepared. The anxiety of the situation could seriously compromise your ability to get your points across. But, if you prepare ahead of time, even though the nerves are there, you will be in a much better position to communicate your message. We all know how nervous we get when we go to confession, so preparing ahead of time will enable us to better confess our sins despite our anxiety. Furthermore, the Church asks us to make an integral confession, which means making as complete of a confession as possible. Just trying to think of some sins a minute or two before confession is not sufficient.

So how does one prepare? The first thing to do is to say a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to shed light on those areas of your life where you need forgiveness. Then, it can be helpful to use an *Examination of Conscience* guide. These are readily available online or in your favorite Catholic bookstore or on this page of this magazine. These guides generally ask questions related to the Ten Commandments and the Precepts of the Church, though some use the Seven Deadly Sins for their guide. With more experience, you will be able to prepare without a guide, but this is a good place for many to start, especially if it has been a while since your last confession.

**MAKE A GOOD PREPARATION AND COME
RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY IN YOUR NEAREST
CONFESSIONAL!** ✠

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Do an examination of conscience based on the Ten Commandments to help you prepare for confession so you can identify your sins to confess

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD: YOU SHALL NOT HAVE STRANGE GODS BEFORE ME.

Have I treated people, events, or things as more important than God?

YOU SHALL NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD YOUR GOD IN VAIN.

Have my words, actively or passively, put down God, the Church, or people made in His image and likeness?

REMEMBER TO KEEP HOLY THE LORD'S DAY.

Do I go to Mass every Sunday (or Saturday Vigil) and on Holy Days of Obligation? Do I avoid, when possible, work that impedes worship of God, joy for the Lord's Day, and proper relaxation of mind and body? Do I look for ways to spend time with family or in service on Sunday?

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER.

Do I show my parents due respect? Do I seek to maintain good communication with my parents where possible? Or do I criticize them needlessly, perhaps for lacking skills I think they should have?

YOU SHALL NOT KILL.

Have I harmed anyone through physical, verbal, or emotional means, including gossip or manipulation of any kind?

YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

Have I respected the physical and sexual dignity of others, and of myself?

YOU SHALL NOT STEAL.

Have I taken or wasted time or resources that belonged to another?

YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR.

Have I gossiped, told lies, or embellished stories at the expense of another?

YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR'S SPOUSE.

Have I honored my spouse with my full affection and exclusive love?

YOU SHALL NOT COVET YOUR NEIGHBOR'S GOODS.

Am I content with my own means and needs, or do I compare myself to others unnecessarily?

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

— on HOW to GO to —

CONFESSION

1. PREPARATION:

1. Before going to confession, take some time to prepare. Begin with prayer asking the Holy Spirit to shine His light into your heart. Ask that you can see yourself, and your life, since your last confession as He sees you. Then ask yourself whether you have — in your thoughts, words, and actions — neglected to live Christ’s commands to “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37, 39)? As a help with this examination of conscience, you might review the Ten Commandments or the *Beatitudes* (Ex 20:2-17; Dt 5:6-21; Mt 5:3-10; or Lk 6:20-26). Or review an *Examination of Conscience* guide you can find online or on page 13 of this *Catholic Times*. If you need to, you can jot down some notes to keep from forgetting anything that has surfaced during your examination but finish your examination either way with a prayer of gratitude to God and be at peace as you head to the confessional. When you enter the confessional, you can choose to say your confession behind the screen or face-to-face with the priest depending on whichever way will best allow you to encounter God’s mercy in the sacrament.

2. GREETING:

2. The priest may say words of welcome to you; he may say a short blessing or read a Scripture passage. More often than not, however, he will go right to step #3.

3. THE SIGN OF THE CROSS:

3. Together, you and the priest will make the *Sign of the Cross*. You may then begin your confession with these or similar words: “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [give days, months, or years] since my last confession.” Note, some priests may not say anything at all at the beginning. If that is the case, do not hesitate to begin with that *Sign of the Cross* and say “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [give days, months, or years] since my last confession.”

4. CONFESSION:

4. Confess all your sins to the priest. Try to be as specific as possible. If you are unsure what to say, ask the priest for help and know that if he would like more clar-

ity on something, he will gently ask you for more details. When you are finished, conclude with these or similar words: “I am sorry for these and all my sins.” Note, you can write down your sins on paper and read them if that helps you. However, after confession, destroy the paper as soon as possible as these sins have been forgiven and are no longer part of your life.

5. PENANCE:

5. The priest may first counsel you on how to better live a Christian life and may ask you some questions. Then, he will offer you some act of penance. It might be prayer, a work of mercy, or an act of charity. You will know this step because the priest will say, “For your penance” Just remember to do your act of penance!

6. ACT OF CONTRITION:

6. After the priest has given you your penance, he will ask you to pray an *Act of Contrition* out loud. A suggested *Act of Contrition* you can pray is below, but know that you can also simply pray from your heart a prayer expressing sorrow for your sins and resolving to sin no more.

“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.”

(*Rite of Penance*, no. 45)

7. ABSOLUTION:

7. The priest will extend his hands over your head and pronounce the words of absolution. He will say:

“God, the Father of mercies, through the Death and Resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God grant 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.”

You respond, “Amen.”



8. PRAISE: The priest may then praise the mercy of God and will invite you to do the same. For example, the priest may say, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.” And your response would be, “His mercy endures forever” (*Rite of Penance*, no. 47). Note, some priests omit this, or may use another phrase to offer God thanks for His mercy.

9. DISMISSAL: The priest will conclude the sacrament, often saying, “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.” You can thank the priest.

10. PENANCE: After confession, spend time in quiet prayer in the church, especially if given a penance of prayer. Thank God for His unconditional love and forgiveness! ✠

This list is reprinted with permission from the USCCB. See more information and resources about confession at uscgb.org/confession.



'BURDEN LIFTED'

HOW CONFESSION CHANGED *the* DIRECTION — of MY LIFE —

By FATHER ROB JOHNSON
Special to *Catholic Times*

My sophomore year of college, a fraternity buddy invited me to a retreat, and I begrudgingly agreed to go. I'm really glad I went, because I went to confession for the first time in a long time. After confessing all my sins and by the Grace of God holding nothing back, I remember a brief silence — was the priest mad? Was he going to tell me I should leave the retreat? I still remember looking up and him smiling, then he said, "Burden lifted," and offered me penance and absolution. That encounter with God's mercy changed the whole direction of my life. I wanted to get to know Jesus after that, and I wanted others to know Him and His Mercy.

In today's world, if you want a guide on how to go to confession, you can Google it and find lots of great resources or check out pages the previous pages in this magazine. I'd recommend doing that because it will help you know what to say and how to reflect on your life in a way that will prepare you. Next, find the website for a Catholic church near you. It will list confession times available.

When you come into the confessional, especially if has been years or decades and you have forgotten the process, have no fear! Ask the priest to help you, and he will.

Here are a few things other things we all need to be reminded of when going to confession:

1. Be direct and totally honest. You will not scandalize or startle a priest, no matter what you bring to the confessional. My favorite description of a priest is "God's garbage man." Name your sins specifically and tell the priest how many times they happened. You are good and created in God's image, let the garbage man take care of the sins.
2. The priest will never reveal your sins. Ever. Every Catholic priest is bound by what is called the "seal of confession." He would go to jail or even give his life before he revealed anything said in confession. Under no circumstances is the seal permitted to be broken.

3. Think of confession like a car wash: If you ever take your car through the mud, you get it to the wash right away. Or if it's just been a while, it's still good to take it to the wash. If you believe yourself to be in a state of serious sin, be brave and go to confession right away. Or, if it's just been several months (or years or decades), it's still good to go and totally appropriate to bring smaller things as well — these are called venial sins. Just be sure to confess anything you know to be seriously sinful.

God wants to offer us His mercy. He literally died to do so. Go to confession and don't worry about doing it perfectly or how long it has been. I try to go every couple weeks, and honestly, I still get nervous most the time, so I just take a deep breath and remember the words of the priest when he told me, "**BURDEN LIFTED.**" ✠

Father Rob Johnson is pastor of Mother of Perpetual Help Parish in Maryville, chaplain at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and associate vocations director for the Alton Deanery.

Watch an easy step-by-step instruction video with Father Rob Johnson on how to go to confession!

The most watched video on the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois' YouTube Channel is a video of Father Rob Johnson and Andrew Hansen (editor of *Catholic Times*) explaining how to go to confession in an easy-to-understand and step-by-step presentation. Go to [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and type in the search bar, "How to go to Confession Diocese of Springfield" and there, you will see the video to click on. Make sure to subscribe to the diocese's YouTube page while you are there at [YouTube.com/diospringfield](https://www.youtube.com/diospringfield).

GOD WILL FORGIVE YOU

“Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions. Thoroughly wash away my guilt; and from my sin cleanse me. For I know my transgressions; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your eyes”

(Ps 51:3–6).

By **PHILLIP HADDEN**
Special to *Catholic Times*

This Psalm (above) has been traditionally attributed to King David for his transgressions against God by committing adultery with Bathsheba and sending her husband to die at the frontlines of battle. Could these iniquities be forgiven?

Our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ shares in the Gospel, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Even though our sins are always before us, the good news is that God does not abandon us to the fate in which we deserve. You might be estranged somehow from the Church — from our Lord Jesus Christ. And your sins, like the Psalmist exclaims, are always before you.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that through baptism we become the branches of The Vine that produces a new vintage. It is an abundance of blessings, a new wine for new wine skins.

Jesus is telling us to live a life of holiness. It might

seem too daunting but be not afraid! Our Blessed Lord has given us the seven sacraments to help us be sanctified by God’s grace. We have been given the sacrament of confession in which we can let go of the darkness of our past which has made us slaves. Confession is a great gift to our soul like pruning is to the vine. The branches of the vine need pruning so we, when we confess our sins, flourish all the more following the command of our Lord, **“SO BE PERFECT.”**

There is nothing that you have done that God will not forgive if only you stretch out your hand to grasp the Lord’s! The Lord will forgive everything; you only have to ask for His forgiveness. ✠

This article appeared in www.missioideicatholic.org by Phillip Hadden, a founder of the website and parishioner of St. Alexius Parish in Beardstown. Reprinted with permission.

