

FROM CATHOLIC CHAPLAINCY (LONDON'S UNIVERSITIES)

HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION: THE BASICS

There are variations in the way different priests celebrate the sacrament of confession, and they will sometimes introduce different prayers and scripture readings. Here is the traditional way of making a confession, which has the very basics of what we need to know and say. If you want to know more about the kind of life we should be living as Christians, and what sins we should be avoiding, see the 'Examination of Conscience' below.

GENERAL ADVICE

Sometimes we get nervous about going to confession. But don't let nerves or fear hold you back. However long it has been, however bad the sin, however embarrassed you feel – don't let anything stop you from going to confession.

Remember that it is the Lord we meet in confession. Priests are all different; and some we like more than others. But what matters is the presence of Jesus in our life through the ministry of the priest, and not the personality of the priest. Christ touches our life through each priest, whoever he is; and every priest will keep your confession absolutely secret for the rest of his life.

Your local parish should have confessions at least once a week. It is also useful to know the times of confession at other churches nearby, or at churches near where you work or study. The diocesan Cathedral is often a good place to go to confession, with plenty of different times.

You have the right as a Catholic to go to confession 'anonymously', in a confessional where the priest cannot identify you. If your local parish does not have this, then if you prefer you can try and find confession at another parish that does.

Try to go regularly, perhaps every month.

Briefly examine your conscience at the end of each day, and make an act of contrition. In this way you will become more sensitive to what is really happening in your own life, and you will be more prepared and more honest as you come to confession.

BEFORE CONFESSION

Spend a few minutes before your confession: Pray for God's help and guidance; examine your conscience; remember any sins you have committed (write them down if it helps); pray for God's forgiveness.

But don't spend forever trying to remember every little sin (this can become an obsession that is called 'scruples') – ten minutes is probably a good amount of time; an hour is too long.

It is our duty to mention in confession all our serious (or 'mortal') sins; and we are encouraged to mention some of our other smaller (or 'venial') sins and everyday faults, but we don't need to list every minor failure.

Remember that all our venial sins are forgiven and forgotten whenever we pray for God's forgiveness, and whenever we receive Holy Communion.

If you are not sure what to say or do, don't worry – tell the priest, and ask him to help you as you begin.

IN CONFESSION

Begin by saying: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Then add: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is [state the length of time] since my last confession". Then tell him very briefly what your 'state of life' is, to help him understand your situation; e.g. "I am at school studying for A-levels" or "I am a wife and mother".

Now confess your sins. Be simple and straightforward. Just put into words what you have done wrong since you last went to confession. Don't make excuses; but if it helps, say a little bit about what happened and why.

When you have finished, say: "I am sorry for all these sins and the sins of my past life".

The priest might then talk to you and give you some advice. He will give you a penance to do (a prayer or action that expresses your sorrow and your desire to put things right and live a new life).

The priest will then ask you to make an Act of Contrition. Say one you know, or use the following one: "O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you; and I promise that with the help of your grace, I will not sin again. Amen."

The priest then says the prayer of absolution, which is the moment when God forgives your sins. He may add some other prayers as well.

AFTER CONFESSION

If it is possible now, do your penance in the church before you leave; e.g. if you have been asked to say a certain prayer, kneel down and say it now.

Pray for a moment in thanksgiving for the forgiveness you have received in this sacrament; and pray for God's help to live a new life.

You might feel relieved and peaceful and full of joy. Or you might feel dry and empty. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that we have been forgiven and been given new life. The Lord has touched us – even if we do not feel it. That knowledge should give us a kind of inner peace and joy, even if we don't feel it.

If you forgot to mention something small, don't get all worried. As long as we make an honest examination of conscience and do not deliberately conceal anything from the priest, we can trust in God's forgiveness. If we remember, later on, any mortal sins from earlier in our life, we can bring them to our next confession.

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

An Examination of Conscience is simply a list of some of the ways that we can love God and our neighbour, and some of the ways we can fail to love through sin. Reflecting on an Examination of Conscience helps us to be honest with ourselves and honest with God. It is not meant to be a burden. It helps us to examine our lives, and to make a good confession, so that we can be at peace with Christ and with one another. The important thing, of course, is to love, and to live our Catholic faith with our whole heart. But now and then it is useful to spell out what this really means, and to make sure that we are not kidding ourselves.

This Examination of Conscience is not to be used every day, or even at every confession – we do not need to go through a checklist every time. It is here for us to look at every now and then. It is based around the Ten Commandments. As we reflect on it, we can ask the Lord to shine his light into our hearts. Some things will not apply to us; but if something in particular touches our conscience, then we can bring it to confession.

Above all, let us remember God's mercy and his love for us. His love never fails or changes. He loves us passionately, with infinite kindness and tenderness. The only reason we remember our sins is so that we can turn to him and receive his forgiveness, and learn to love him in a new and deeper way.

[1ST COMMANDMENT] I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD. YOU SHALL NOT HAVE STRANGE GODS BEFORE ME.

[2ND COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD YOUR GOD IN VAIN.

- Do I seek to love God with all my heart?
- Do I stay faithful to Jesus, even when I have difficulties or doubts?
- Do I make at least some time for prayer every day?
- Do I hold on to the practice of my Catholic faith, or have I turned away from it, or spoken against the teachings of the Church?
- Have I been involved with the occult, e.g., with ouija boards, séances, tarot cards, fortune telling, or the like? Have I put faith in horoscopes?
- Have I received Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin?
- Have I lied to the priest in confession or deliberately not confessed a mortal sin
- Have I used God's holy name irreverently?
- When things are difficult, do I hope in God, or do I give in to self-pity and despair? Do I get angry and resentful with him?

[3RD COMMANDMENT] REMEMBER TO KEEP HOLY THE LORD'S DAY.

- Have I deliberately missed Mass on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation?
- Do I make a sincere effort to come to Mass on time, and to listen and pray during the Mass? Do I fast for an hour before receiving Holy Communion (apart from water and medicine)? Am I reverent in church?
- Do I try to keep Sunday as a day of prayer, rest and relaxation, avoiding unnecessary work?

[4TH COMMANDMENT] HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER.

- Do I honour and respect my parents? Do I show kindness to my brothers and sisters?
- Do I treat my children with love and respect? Do I carry out my family duties
- Do I support and care for the well-being of all family members, especially the elderly and the sick?
- Do I honour and obey my lawful superiors, and follow the just laws of my country?

[5TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT KILL.

- Do I love my neighbour as myself? Do I try to be kind and generous with everyone I meet? Do I help those in need?
- Do I harbour hatred or anger against anyone?
- Do I try to forgive those who have hurt me? Do I pray for my enemies?
- Have I deliberately tried to hurt anyone – physically or emotionally?
- Have I had an abortion or encouraged another to have an abortion?
- Have I attempted suicide?
- Have I abused alcohol or used illegal drugs?
- Have I led anyone to sin through bad example or through direct encouragement?
- Do I care for my own physical, emotional, and spiritual health?

[6TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

[9TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT DESIRE YOUR NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE.

- Am I faithful to my husband or wife, in my actions, my words, and my thoughts?
- As a Catholic, was I married outside the Church?
- Has our marriage been open to new life, or have I used contraception, or been sterilized?
- Have I engaged in sexual activity before marriage or outside of marriage?
- Do I view pornography on the TV or internet, or through videos or magazines?
- Have I masturbated?
- Have I used impure language or told impure jokes?
- Do I dress and behave modestly? Am I respectful and chaste in my relationships?
- Do I try to turn away from impure thoughts and temptations?

[7TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT STEAL.

- Have I stolen or accepted stolen goods?
- Have I cheated anyone of what I owe them?
- Am I lazy? Do I waste time at work or at school or college?
- Do I gamble excessively?
- Do I share what I have with the poor and with the Church according to my means?
- Have I copied or used pirated material: videos, music, software?

[8TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOUR.

- Do I tell the truth, even if it is inconvenient? Or do I lie or mislead people?
- Am I a trustworthy and sincere person? Do I keep my word and my promises, and keep confidential things confidential?
- Have I cheated in exams or been dishonest in any way in my studies?
- Have I gossiped or spread rumours or spoken badly about people in any way?
- Have I ridiculed or humiliated anyone?

[10TH COMMANDMENT] YOU SHALL NOT DESIRE YOUR NEIGHBOUR'S GOODS.

- Am I grateful for the things I have and for the blessings God has given me? Or am I always complaining?
- Am I jealous of other people: jealous of their possessions, talents, beauty, success or relationships?
- Am I greedy or selfish? Am I too caught up with material things?

(Text by Fr Stephen Wang, adapted from the booklet "A Way of Life for Young Catholics", published by the Catholic Truth Society)

[HTTPS://WWW.UNIVERSITYCATHOLIC.NET/RESOURCES/HOW-TO-GO-TO-CONFESSION/](https://www.universitycatholic.net/resources/how-to-go-to-confession/)