

An Examination of Conscience

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Why Should I Confess My Sins to a Man?

On the supernatural level, we confess our sins to a priest because Jesus gave to His Apostles the authority to forgive sins (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:21-23). The Apostles passed this authority on to their successors, the Bishops, who in turn extend this authority to the Priests. A priest cannot forgive something of which he is unaware, so the sin must be spoke to the priest. The normal human mode of communication is to speak and to hear, so the ordinary means of our sins and hearing the words of absolution.

We must remember that as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, when we sin we offend not only against whom we sinned, but also Our Lord and His Church (the Mystical Body). For this reason we need to be reconciled with the person against whom we sinned, with God and with the Church. The priest in the confessional is the representative of both God and the Church. Hence, this reconciliation comes through the ministry of the priest.

On the natural level, we have an absolute psychological need to tell someone else what we have done. We also have a need to hear that we are still acceptable and accepted. Our Lord knew this and provided the means for this to occur. What a joy it is for us to know that when we leave the confessional our sins are gone, we are restored to the state of Grace and our relationship with God is reconciled. Lying on one's bed and talking to God brings the hope that our sins are forgiven, but not the knowledge that they are in fact gone. This assurance happens only in the confessional.

Recall also that the priest can say nothing to anyone about what you confess. This is called the "seal of the confessional." Some priests have been put to death because they would not expose the sins of a penitent. Even in a court of law the priest may not speak of what he knows from the confessional. So, you cannot only receive the graces and assurances that come from the Sacrament, but also the guarantee that your sins will not be heard of again from either God or the priest.

The Loss of the Sense of Sin

"It happens not infrequently in history, for more or less lengthy periods and under the influence of many different factors, that the moral conscience of many people becomes seriously clouded. 'Have we the right idea of conscience?' – I asked two years ago in an address to the faithful – 'Is it not true

that modern man is threatened by an eclipse of conscience? By a deformation of conscience? By a numbness or 'deadening' of conscience?' Too many signs indicate that such an eclipse exists in our time. This is all the more disturbing in that conscience, defined by the council as the 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a man,' is 'strictly related to human freedom...For this reason conscience, to a great extent, constitutes the basis of man's interior dignity and, at the same time, of his relationship to God.' It is inevitable therefore that in this situation there is an obscuring also of the sense of sin, which is closely connected with the moral conscience, the search for truth and the desire to make a responsible use of freedom. When the conscience is weakened the sense of God is also obscured, and as a result, with the loss of this decisive inner point of reference, the sense of sin is lost. This explains why my predecessor Pius XII one day declared, in words that have almost become proverbial, 'the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin.'"

Pope John Paul II *Reconciliation and Penance* December 2, 1984

Forgiveness of Sin

In order to understand fully the importance and beauty of the Sacrament of Penance it is necessary to understand what is meant by forgiveness of sins. When God forgives our sins, He removes them from our souls and destroys the sins. This means that the sin no longer exists. After we have received absolution in this Sacrament, God looks down upon us and sees a soul without sin. When you walk out of the confessional, your sins are gone. This also means that on the day of judgment God will not bring up any sins we have confessed and for which we received sacramental absolution. With this in mind, we should be eager to stay very close to the confessional and make the confession of our sins a regular part of the spiritual life.

A distinction must be made between sins and the effects of sin. In this Sacrament the sins are forgiven, but the effects remain. The effects are the weaknesses that results from our sins, e.g., memories, inclinations toward the sin, attachments to some perceived good connected with the sin, etc. In order to overcome the effects of sin we must pray and practice self denial.

Three Forms of the Sacrament of Penance

Form One: "Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.

Form Two: "The Sacrament of Penance can also take place in the framework of a communal celebration in which we prepare ourselves together for confession and give thanks together for the forgiveness received. Here, the personal confession of sins and individual absolution are inserted into a liturgy..."

Form Three: "In the case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation and general absolution. Grave necessity of this sort can arise when there is imminent danger of death without sufficient time for the priest or priests to hear each penitent's confession. Grave necessity can also exist when, given the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors

properly in a reasonable time, so that the penitents, through no fault of their own, would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a longer time. In this case, for the absolution to be valid the faithful must have the intention of individually confessing their sins in the time required.” (This means that if a person lives through the emergency, an individual confession of all mortal sins must be made as soon as is reasonably possible. Ed.)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1482, 1483, 1484

How to go to Confession

1. The Priest will begin with the Sign of the Cross.
2. The Penitent begins by saying “Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been ____ (number of days, weeks, months, etc.) since my last confession. These are my sins”.
3. Confess all mortal sins committed since your last confession by kind and number. You may also confess any venial sins.
4. At the end of your confession say these or similar words: “For these and all the sins of my life I am sorry.”
5. The Priest may ask questions for clarification or give you some counsel on a point from your confession.
6. The Priest will give you a penance.
7. The Penitent makes an act of contrition in these or similar words: O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all of my sins because of Thy just punishments. But most of all because they offend Thee my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more, and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.
8. The Priest will give you absolution. (The words necessary for forgiveness are “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”).

Prayer Before Confession

Dear God, I seek Your mercy. Be not angry with me because of my sins, my transgressions of virtue, my faults. I know I have failed Your graces; accept my sorrow for these offenses. Renew my response to You, my bond with You. Let me be cleansed by the penances of my life. Give me the strength to be firm in my resolve no more to offend You. Give me Your assurance of grace in my life that I may respond to Your will and goodness. Let the mantle of Your justice protect and encourage me all my life. Amen.

Prayer for Light

O my God, Sovereign Judge, who wishes not the death of a sinner, but that one be converted and saved! Enlighten my mind that I may know the sins which I have committed in thought, word or deed, and give me the grace of true contrition.

Prayer Before Confession

Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind that I may clearly see all my sins. Let me not be deceived by self-love, but show me the true state of my conscience. Move my will to sincere sorrow and help me to make a good confession. Holy Mother of God, intercede for me that I may obtain the pardon of my sins. Holy Guardian Angel, pray for me that I may mend my ways.

Examination of Conscience

Mortal Sins*

This examination of conscience may help one to prepare for confession. However, it is not intended merely as a checklist to be used prior to confession. The purpose of this examination is to help souls to know what actions or attitudes are sinful and the gravity of the particular sin. The hope is that this knowledge will serve to keep people from committing these sins.

*** Three things are necessary for a sin to be mortal: 1. Serious matter (things listed in this section); 2. Knowledge or firm belief that the act is seriously wrong *prior to committing the act*; 3. Full consent of the will.**

All three of these conditions must be present simultaneously for a sin to be mortal. This means that if you did not know the act was seriously wrong, then you are not guilty of having committed a mortal sin. If you did not will the act, e.g., if you were forced or if it was in a dream, you are not guilty of having committed a mortal sin.

All mortal sins committed since your last confession must be confessed by both type and number, i.e., the title of the sin and how many times it was done. If there is a mortal sin from the past that was forgotten and has not been confessed, it should be confessed at your next confession. It is not necessary to confess venial sins, but it is a good and pious practice.

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

- Involvement in occult practices, e.g., witchcraft, ouija boards, seances, palm reading, tarot cards, hypnotism, divination, astrology, black magic, sorcery, etc.
- Involvement in or adherence to New Age or Eastern philosophies, atheism or agnosticism
- Apostasy (leaving the Church)
- Adherence to a schismatic group
- Putting faith in superstition, e.g., horoscopes, good luck charms, etc.
- Joining the Masons or other secret society
- Receiving Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin
- Receiving the Sacraments of Confirmation or Matrimony while in the state of mortal sin
- Willful participation in illicit (non-emergency) “General Absolution” services

- Being married by a Justice of the Peace or by a minister of another denomination (without dispensation)
- Involvement in false or pagan worship
- Willfully denying the Faith of the Catholic Church
- Despair of God's grace or mercy
- Presumption (committing a mortal sin with the idea that you can just go to confession)
- Hatred of God
- Simony (buying or selling spiritual things)
- Failure to receive Holy Communion at least once per year (if possible, during the Easter Season)
- Desecration of the Holy Eucharist

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

- Using God's name intentionally as a curse
- Seriously wishing evil upon another
- Serious slander or insult of a sacred person or object
- Making an oath in a secret society
- Telling a lie or withholding a serious sin in confession
- Blasphemy (words of hatred, reproach or defiance toward God; speaking ill of God)
- Perjury (lying under oath)
- Swearing false oaths

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

- Missing Mass on Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation without a serious reason
- Doing unnecessary work on Sunday for a long period of time, i.e., more than several hours
- Intentional failure to fast or abstain on appointed days
- Requiring employees to work on Sunday in non-essential occupations

4. *Honor your father and mother.*

- Serious failure to care for aged parents
- Serious neglect of the duties of one's state in life
- Serious disrespect for or disobedience to parents, superiors or authorities
- Wishing death or evil on parents
- Abuse or serious neglect of children
- Failure to baptize children in a reasonable time (within a few months) after birth
- Serious neglect of the religious education or upbringing of children
- Failure to carry out the last will of deceased parents

5. *You shall not kill.*

- Murder, homicide or manslaughter
- Procurement of an abortion
- Promoting, counseling or paying for an abortion
- Knowingly voting for someone who is pro-abortion
- Willfully injuring or trying to hurt another person
- Willfully leading another into serious sin
- Driving dangerously or recklessly
- Driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Willfully harboring hatred for another

- Taking or selling illegal drugs
- Willful drunkenness
- Self mutilation
- Excessive tattoos
- Excessive body piercing
- Piercing of the nipples or sexual organs
- Sterilization
- Promotion of or involvement in euthanasia
- Serious entertainment of suicidal thoughts
- Attempting or intending suicide
- Willful failure to bury the body or ashes of the dead
- Willful engagement in unjust lawsuits
- Bigotry (hatred for persons of other races)
- Intentionally placing temptation before the weak

6. *You shall not commit adultery.*

- Adultery
- Fornication (intercourse prior to marriage)
- Masturbation or other impure acts with self
- Homosexual acts
- Using a contraceptive
- Dressing or acting in a manner intended to cause arousal in another (spouses excepted)
- Kissing or touching another passionately for the purpose of arousal (spouses excepted)
- Allowing another to kiss or touch you in a sexual manner (spouses excepted)
- Intentionally causing a sexual climax outside of intercourse
- Onanism, i.e. intentional withdrawal and non-vaginal ejaculation
- Flagrant immodesty in dress
- Bestiality (sexual acts with animals)
- Oral Sex (oral stimulation permitted as foreplay in marriage – ejaculation must be vaginal)
- Anal sex or other degrading sex practices
- Prostitution
- Rape
- In-vitro fertilization or artificial insemination
- Surrogate motherhood
- “Selective reduction” of babies in the womb
- Types of fertility testing that involve immoral acts
- Involvement in or support of human cloning
- Willful divorce or desertion
- Incest
- Polygamy or polyandry (many wives/husbands)
- Cohabitation prior to marriage
- Destroying the innocence of another by seducing or introducing them to immorality
- Lust in the heart (“if I could I would”)
- “Swinging” or wife swapping
- Transvestitism or cross-dressing

7. *You shall not steal.*

- Stealing a large amount of money or a valuable item
- Willfully destroying or defacing another’s property
- Stealing something consecrated to God or from a holy place

- Buying, selling, receiving or concealing items known to be stolen
- Willful failure to make restitution
- Excessive gambling
- Defrauding workers of their wages
- Serious failure to fulfill work requirements
- Padding expense or per diem accounts
- Taking advantage of the poor, simple, inexperienced or less fortunate
- Denying help to the poor, needy or destitute when able to help them easily
- Defrauding creditors
- Bribery or taking bribes
- Blackmail
- Fraud or embezzlement
- Price fixing
- Tax evasion
- Forgery
- Excessive waste or expense
- Violating copyrights
- Pirating computer software
- Slavery
- Serious cruelty to animals

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

- False witness (not under oath) or perjury (under oath)
- Telling large or premeditated lies
- Serious gossip, detraction (revealing the faults of another without serious reason), or calumny (harming the reputation of another by falsities)
- Violation of a confidence without good reason
- Being an accomplice to another's grave sin

9. *You shall not desire your neighbor's wife.*

- Viewing pornography in books, magazines, movies, the internet, etc.
- Reading sexually explicit materials
- Dwelling on impure thoughts or fantasies for the purpose of arousal
- Willfully lusting after another

10. *You shall not desire your neighbor's goods.*

- Serious and willful greed or avarice
- Intention to steal or destroy the goods of another

Venial Sins

In confession all mortal sins committed since the last confession are required to be confessed. It is not required to confess venial sins. However, it is a very good practice to confess venial sins because it can help one to grow in humility, it helps keep one's conscience attentive and thus keeps a person from mortal sin, and it helps to root out sin and thereby provide the means for a person to grow in holiness. A sin is considered venial either because the matter is not serious enough to be mortal or because the habitual nature of the sin reduces the gravity.

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

- Failure to pray on a daily basis
- Not trying to love God with my whole mind, heart, soul and strength
- Trying to control things rather than seek God's will
- Entertaining doubts against the Faith
- Failing to seek out or learn the teachings of the Church
- Indifference or ingratitude to God
- Lukewarmness in the relationship with God
- Not trying to grow spiritually; being content with mediocrity
- Acedia (spiritual sloth)
- Putting other things or people before God, e.g., TV, radio, sports, hobbies, etc.
- Attachment to human respect or affection, i.e., caring more about what others think than what God thinks in order to fit in or be liked
- Not trusting God
- Failure to fulfill the duties of one's state in life
- Playing Dungeons and Dragons or similar games
- Tempting God
- Being angry at God
- Failure to support the work of the Church monetarily and/or with time and ability
- Not taking part in the work of evangelization
- Being willfully distracted at Mass or in prayer
- Putting off confession needlessly
- Refusing or denying the mercy of God
- Failure to pray when tempted
- Failure to examine one's conscience daily
- Giving into depression, self pity or self deprecating thoughts

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

- Using the Lord's name lightly, in surprise or in anger (habitual, not thinking)
- Cursing thoughtlessly
- Using the names of Mary, a Saint, the Pope or other sacred persons irreverently
- Using vulgar or inappropriate language
- Telling bad jokes about sacred persons or objects
- Speaking badly of the Church
- Inappropriate or irreverent use of Scripture

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

- Doing unnecessary work on Sunday
- Failing to keep Sunday as a day for family and recreation
- Allowing sports or other schedules to dictate the Sunday schedule
- Being irreverent in church
- Not paying attention or participating at Mass
- Coming late to Mass or leaving early without a serious reason
- Desecrating the day by sinful amusements, bad company, inappropriate entertainment, etc.

4. *Honor your father and mother.*

- Fighting with siblings
- Disobedience to parents or authorities
- Failure to give proper respect to parents or those in authority

- Treating those under one’s authority disrespectfully
- Failure to respect the dignity of children
- Speaking badly about parents
- Speaking badly about children
- Speaking badly about one’s spouse
- Neglecting duties toward spouse or children
- Failing to give good example to one’s family
- Taking one’s spouse for granted
- Making fun of or failing to help the elderly or handicapped
- Failure to teach children adequately about God and the spiritual life
- Lack of gratitude toward parents
- Nagging spouse or children
- Treating adult children like minors
- Meddling in the affairs of married children
- Too lax with rules, boundaries and discipline
- Too strict with rules, boundaries and discipline
- Breaking just civil laws without serious reason
- Being ashamed of or embarrassed about parents

5. *You shall not kill.*

- Pride, arrogance
- Vanity
- Stubbornness without good reason
- Rudeness
- Failure to apologize
- Fighting or arguing over slight matters
- Anger
- Using obscene or vulgar gestures
- Prejudice
- Harboring a grudge
- Seeking revenge or retaliation
- Wishing evil upon another
- Selfishness
- Listening to bad music
- Excessive watching of television
- Excessive playing of computer games
- Excessive use of the internet
- Watching TV or movies that promote sex or violence
- Playing computer games that promote sex or violence
- Refusing to forgive another
- Intemperance (overeating or drinking too much)
- Driving carelessly
- Failing to care for one’s health
- Abusing medications
- Sloth (laziness)
- Procrastination
- Lack of punctuality
- Failure to respect the dignity of self or others
- Giving scandal to another
- Treating another unjustly
- Failure to take medications if such are necessary

- Doing things willfully to anger others
- Violating friendships
- Failure to pray for deceased parents or relatives
- Using the “silent treatment” on others

6. *You shall not commit adultery.*

- Lack of custody of the eyes (looking inappropriately at others)
- Allowing the heart to stray from one’s spouse
- Dressing somewhat immodestly
- Acting or carrying oneself immodestly
- Treating others as objects
- Failure to respect persons of the opposite sex
- Seeking wrongful attention from another
- Selfishness in marital intimacy
- Failure to be open to life without serious reason
- Keeping bad company

7. *You shall not steal.*

- Attachments to persons or things
- Theft of small or inexpensive items
- Willful failure to return borrowed items
- Wasting time
- Failure to pay debts promptly
- Failing to practice charity or to help the poor
- Squandering money on needless things or pursuits
- Not keeping a promise

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

- Lying
- Gossiping
- Spreading rumors or tale bearing
- Talking behind another’s back
- Being negative, critical or uncharitable in thought regarding others
- Making rash judgments
- Being unjustly suspicious
- Failure to seek to restore the good name of another whom you have injured through speech
- Cheating in games, school work, etc.
- Speaking unkindly to or about others
- Exaggerating the truth
- Bragging or boasting
- Flattery
- Complaining, whining or attention seeking

9. *You shall not desire your neighbor’s wife.*

- Telling or listening to impure or vulgar jokes or stories
- Brief entertainment of impure thoughts or fantasies
- Not trying to control the imagination

- Curiosity or playing with temptation
- Seeking out or looking at persons or pictures which are immodest

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

- Envy (sadness or anger at the good fortune of another)
- Jealousy (desire for the goods of another)
- Greed
- Materialism
- Not trusting that God will provide for all material and spiritual needs
- Attachment to riches or material goods

Imperfections

* Imperfections are not sins so they do not need to be confessed. It is not always easy to make the distinction between venial sins and imperfections. Some things are imperfections because they are very small, other things are imperfections because they are dispositions of the soul and not willful actions or failures, still others because they are habitual. It is good to be aware of imperfections because as one grows in the spiritual life, the imperfections, voluntary and involuntary, become areas where attention must be given in prayer. For this reason a few examples of imperfections are included here.

- Trying to control things rather than seek God's will
- Not trying to grow spiritually; being content with mediocrity
- Embarrassment of being Catholic
- Failure to defend the Church when ridiculed
- Failing to accept or offer up suffering
- Not trying to practice recollection or the frequent remembrance of God's presence
- Failing to spend extra time on Sunday in prayer and study of the Faith
- Not trying to cultivate peace in the family
- Taking one's spouse for granted
- Not praying for those entrusted to your care
- Failing to pray for those in authority over you, e.g., parents, teachers, employers, government officials, etc.
- Impatience
- Smoking or chewing tobacco (when it is a habit)
- Lack of punctuality
- Failure to pray for deceased parents or relatives
- Failure to pray for sinners

Prayer After Confession

O God, I feel the kindness of Your forgiveness. I know the blessing of Your mercy, I am aglow with renewed strength. All my days I will bless Your name, profess Your goodness, respond to Your will and graces that Your glory may everywhere be known. Amen.

Prayer After Confession

My dearest Jesus, I have told all my sins to the best of my ability. I have sincerely tried to make a good confession and I know that You have forgiven me. Thank You, dear Jesus! Your divine heart is full of love and mercy for poor sinners. I love You, dear Jesus; You are so good to me. My loving Savior, I shall try to keep from sin and to love You more each day. Dearest Mother Mary, pray for me and help me to keep all of my promises. Protect me and do not let me fall back into sin. Dear God, help me to lead a good life. Without Your grace I can do nothing. Amen.

Prayer After Confession

Merciful Lord, with a pure heart, I thank You for taking away my sins. Let Your Holy Spirit guide my life so that my soul may bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Renew my desire to be Your faithful friend and servant, increase my loving dependence on You, and grant me that joy and peace of heart which comes from doing Your holy will. Amen.