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The Four Requirements for a Valid Confession

In the words of the *Baltimore Catechism*: “To receive the sacrament of Penance worthily, we must: examine our conscience; be sorry for our sins; have the firm purpose of not sinning again; confess our sins to the priest; be willing to perform the penance the priest gives us.”

The act of simply going to Confession and mentioning sins without having sorrow or the intention to avoid the sins in the future makes the confession invalid!

The matter for Sacramental Confession requires four elements which all must be present

1. Contrition (i.e., real sorrow for sin).

2. A desire to amend one’s life.

3. Confession of sins.

a) With regard to each and every *mortal sin*, the penitent must confess number and kind (i.e., what you did and how many times you did it). The priest does not need to hear details (e.g., the family history of why you struggle with hatred toward a brother) but he does need to hear factors that change the severity of the sin (e.g., stealing from a church adds the sin of sacrilege to the sin of theft and changes the severity of the sin). You *must* confess at least all mortal sins since your last good (i.e., not invalid) Confession.

b) It is also of great benefit to confess venial sins since your last Confession – especially those venial sins which are habitual or which trouble you most. However, there is no requirement to confess *all venial sins* (as that can be a practical impossibility).

c) If you have no mortal sins, you must confess venial sins as they would then be part of the necessary matter.

d) You should never intentionally hide *any* sin from your confessor.

4, The intention of performing the penance that the priest assigns as penance.

- a) One should perform the penance as soon as possible. After exiting the confessional, it is advisable to remain in the Church until the penance has been completed (if that is possible).
- b) If a penitent thinks he cannot complete the penance, he should bring that to the attention of the priest before leaving the confessional. If he leaves and simply decides not to do the penance, then the confession will be invalid.
- c) If for some reason a penitent *unintentionally* forgets to complete his penance, he should confess that in his next confession.

The Confession of All Mortal Sins

Mortal sins must be confessed in kind, number, and any circumstances that change the gravity or nature of the sin. As the Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983 states:

“A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.”

Deliberately concealing a known mortal sin in Confession is a sacrilege, as is downplaying the number of times a particular mortal sin was committed when the penitent knows he committed the sin more often. It is acceptable to say you committed a certain sin approximately a certain number of times or even say phrases like “a handful of times” – but not if you know for certain that you actually committed it, for example, exactly five times.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent warns: “It is a grievous offense willfully to conceal a mortal sin in Confession, because we thereby tell a lie to the Holy Ghost and make our Confession worthless. He who has willfully concealed a mortal sin in Confession must not only confess it but must also repeat all the sins he has committed since his last worthy Confession.”

Contrition for Sin

The Catechism of the Council of Trent explains the importance of contrition:

“By the Fathers of the Council of Trent, contrition is defined: A sorrow and detestation for sin committed, with a purpose of sinning no more and a little further on the Council, speaking of the motion of the will to contrition, adds: If joined with a confidence in the mercy of God and

an earnest desire of performing whatever is necessary to the proper reception of the Sacrament, it thus prepares us for the remission of sin.”

Contrition is the most difficult of the conditions required because true contrition is impossible without grace. It is highly advisable that prior to confession one pray to the Holy Ghost for the grace of contrition. In fact, a Catholic does well to pray for contrition *every single day!* It can be as simple as begging, “*O Most Holy Ghost, please grant me the grace of contrition, that I may truly hate my sins.*”

When preparing for confession, most Catholics spend the greatest amount of time on their examination of conscience. In reality, we should spend more of our preparatory time in praying for the grace of contrition than in examining our individual sins. And yet, so few Catholics do this. Perhaps that is why confession often does not have the impact it should in the lives of so many penitents. You see, the *actual graces* a penitent receives from the sacrament – e.g., to conquer vice and to grow in virtue – are in proportion to the contrition one has.

A good lesson can be learned by looking at the saintly example of St. Teresa of Avila. She wrote that it took her *years* of praying for the grace of perfect contrition, before she received it and began to advance along the stages of the interior life towards union with God.

It is very important to know that the verbal confession of all sins *without contrition* renders a confession invalid. God does not force Himself upon us. The sacraments do not work like mechanistic automatons. If a penitent does not have contrition, then there is no valid confession because the person himself rejects the grace God offers in the Sacrament.

There is also a difference between natural contrition and supernatural contrition. Natural contrition could stem from human respect, embarrassment, or anger at the consequences that arise from one’s sin. Natural contrition is not enough for a valid confession. Supernatural contrition, however, finds its origins in supernatural realities, such as fear of hell, desire for Heaven, hatred of sin and the devil, Catholic faith, love of God, etc. The Catechism further explains that contrition must be supreme, universal, and intense. Above all, contrition is a detestation (hatred) of sin as an offense against the Almighty and all-loving God Who made us, redeemed us, and never ceases watching us.

To be clear, though, the Sacrament of Confession does not require the actual shedding of tears or perfect contrition. Imperfect contrition (fear of punishment or desire for reward) is valid matter for the sacrament: “But although contrition is defined as sorrow, the faithful are not thence to conclude that this sorrow consists in sensible feeling; for contrition is an act of the will...”

The Intention to Avoid Sin in the Future

Lastly, the Roman Catechism addresses the importance of the firm purpose of amendment, which is also required for validity of the sacrament:

“That a sorrow for sin and a firm purpose of avoiding sin for the future are two conditions indispensable to contrition nature and reason clearly show. He who would be reconciled to a friend whom he has wronged must regret to have injured and offended him, and his future conduct must be such as to avoid offending in anything against friendship.

“... Likewise if, by word or deed he has injured his neighbor’s honor or reputation, he is under an obligation of repairing the injury by procuring him some advantage or rendering him some service. Well known to all is the maxim of St. Augustine: *The sin is not forgiven unless what has been taken away is restored.*”

A priest once explained that if a penitent confessed that the following week he was going to miss Mass on Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation (perhaps on account of vacation or some entertainment event), in such a situation there could be no absolution of sins. Since the penitent was planning to commit this sin *in the future*, then by his own admission, the purpose of amendment was obviously lacking.

This is also why if, after several repeated confessions, a penitent continues to confess the *same mortal sin*, the priest may be required to deny – or postpone – absolution. When a penitent returns week after week, month after month, with the same mortal sin, it begins to be clear to a confessor that the firm purpose of amendment is lacking. A good confessor would address this issue and help the penitent develop a spiritual plan of action to truly amend his life.

Conclusion

In sum, true sorrow for sin along with a desire to amend one’s life, confession of number and kind (for all mortal sins – not necessary for venial), and the intention to perform the penance imposed by the priest are all required for valid matter. These are required, along with a validly ordained priest pronouncing the words of absolution, for sin to be forgiven and sanctifying grace restored in our souls. And we know that in God’s wisdom, He has ordered the Sacrament of Confession as the ordinary means of forgiveness on this earth.^[2]

[1] The “matter” for Confession is not absolutely unique, in that it is similar to Matrimony. According to St. Thomas: “The sacrament of Matrimony, like that of Penance, is perfected by the act of the recipient. Wherefore just as Penance has no other matter than the sensible acts themselves, which take the place of the material element, so it is in Matrimony.” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., Q. 42, A. 1, ad 2.)

[2] While God could have chosen any means for us to receive sanctifying grace and have it restored in our souls, He ultimately chose the Sacraments to do so. Dom Gueranger writes in *The Liturgical Year* on the Fourth Sunday of Easter: “Now it is by means of the sacraments that Jesus is to produce in us this wondrous work of our justification; he applies to us the merits of his Incarnation and Sacrifice, but he applies them by certain means, which he himself, in his power and wisdom, has instituted. Being the sovereign master of his own gifts, he can select what means he pleases whereby to convey grace to us; all we have to do is to conform to his wishes. Thus, each of the sacraments is a law; so that it is in vain that we hope for a sacrament to produce its effects, unless we fulfil the conditions specified by our Redeemer. And here, at once, we cannot but admire that infinite goodness which has so mercifully blended two such widely distinct operations in one and the same act – namely, on the one side the humble submission of man, and on the other the munificent generosity of God.

As with all the sacraments, proper matter and form are required for the validity of Confession. The “matter” for Confession is unique, however, in that it is supplied by the penitent,^[1] while the matter for the other Sacraments usually consists of physical material supplied by the priest (e.g., water, chrism, bread and wine). *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* explains:

“There is nothing that should be better known to the faithful than the matter of this Sacrament; hence they should be taught that Penance differs from the other Sacraments in this that while the matter of the other Sacraments is something, whether natural or artificial, the matter, as it were, of the Sacrament of Penance is the acts of the penitent – namely, contrition, confession and satisfaction – as has been declared by the Council of Trent.”

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