

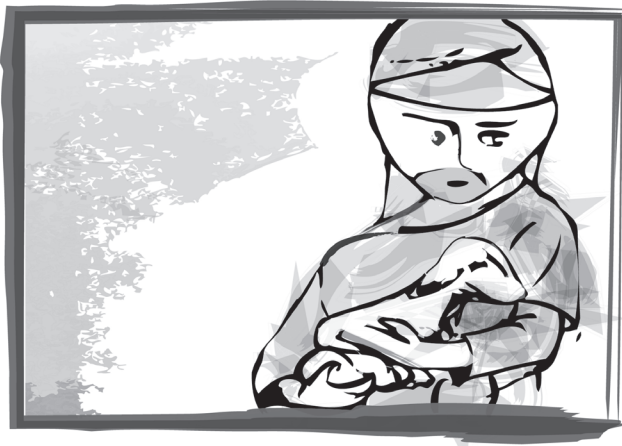
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In Saint Mark's Gospel the first words that Jesus says call for repentance: 'the kingdom of God is come near; repent, and believe in the good news' (Mark 1: 15).

Repentance, turning away from sin and towards God, is the foundation of Christian life. When we repent God is able to change us to be more like his Son Jesus. Why then, if we can confess directly to God, does the Church have a Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession?

This sacrament impresses on us that sin really exists in our lives, but that we can be rid of it. Sacraments are a way of knowing that God is at work in us.

Sin is anything that rejects the love of God; we sin when we ignore God; we sin when we hurt any person or creature whom God loves; we sin when we think we are more important than God.



## What are the parts of the sacrament?

**Contrition** Contrition is to be sorry for what we have done. It's not the same as feeling guilty, because while guilt is self-centred, contrition turns us to God. Contrition means we want to restore our relationship with God which has been damaged by sin. It leads to the repentance Jesus called us to at the beginning of his ministry, and if we have a living faith in him we will want to answer his call and repent. Contrition (which may be as much a matter of our wills as of our feelings) brings us to Confession, in which we express our longing to be changed by the grace of God.

**Confession** This is when we tell God, in the presence of a priest, those sins we can remember. We should not make excuses, for that would not be true contrition. Nor should we deliberately leave anything out, because that would mean we were not sorry enough to say it or turn away from it.

**Advice** After we have made our confession the priest will offer a few words of advice in the light of what has been confessed. We should take this advice seriously and reflect upon it.

**Penance** In offering us penance, the priest reminds us

- that God's forgiveness, while given freely, is not cheap. It is given through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus.

- that we may have to do something to set right what we have done wrong.
- that we need to thank God for our forgiveness.

**Absolution** Jesus gave his apostles, and through them his Church, power to forgive sins (John 20: 23), and with his authority the priest declares the forgiveness and absolution of our sins. This includes any sins we have genuinely forgotten to mention.

**Secrecy** The priest may never tell anybody what has been confessed. He or she must not mention it to you, and should try not even to remember it. This is a very important rule which must never be broken.

## This all seems rather serious.

Well, yes, sin is serious and God is not to be taken lightly. But now think of the prodigal son returning home to his father (Luke 15: 20). The father does not wait till the boy struggles up to the house. He rushes out, embraces him, and forgives him before he is even asked. That is how God welcomes us to Confession. What starts as an alarming exercise turns out to be joyful.

'Repentance, turning away from sin and towards God, is the foundation of Christian life.'

## How do I go about it?

Find a priest you trust who has experience hearing confessions and speak to him or her about it. If you don't think your own priest is the right person, contact your diocesan office which can advise you. Preparing for Confession should be quite simple: Scripture like the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-10), 1 Corinthians 13, and the Ten Commandments will help you. So may some aids to self-examination (see further reading below).

Don't worry about producing the 'perfect confession'. Just go ahead and confess what is most on your mind, and God will supply the rest.

### FURTHER READING

Martin Smith, *Reconciliation* (1985)  
Nicolas Stebbing CR, *Confessing our Sins* (2002)  
Gospel Imprint, *Spiritual Direction*

**It is right that we  
celebrate ...  
for this brother of  
yours was dead,  
and is alive again**

Luke 15: 32

# Confession and Absolution

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