

Returning to the Lord through the Sacrament of Confession

By John Kubasak

Twenty thousand people would go to St. John Vianney per year for confession. He'd spend 16-18 hours per day in the confessional ([Catholic Encyclopedia, Article on the Curé of Ars](#)). Myriads also flocked to the confessional of St. Pio of Pietrelcina. Two of the greatest saints of the last two centuries, and they devoted a large part of their lives to the sacrament of confession?. This is no coincidence. In this powerful sacrament, Christ offers a river of mercy to sinners and the chance to restore sanctifying grace in their hearts.

Given the beauty and value of this sacrament, it might seem underwhelming, that Canon Law requires Catholics "to confess serious sins at least once a year" (CCC #1457, quoting Code of Canon Law, canon 989). This is a requirement we should take seriously; in a certain sense, though, we should also look past it. After the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the crowd to exceed the requirements of the Law. It wasn't enough to follow the letter of the Law; the point of the Law was to turn humanity's hearts toward God. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20).

Lent and confession go hand in hand in two ways. The former is the season of conversion, and the latter is one of the greatest means of conversion. The Church exhorts her children to go to Jesus for healing. "'Yet even now,' says the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil" (Joel 2:12-13). Second, Lent is there to build the Church up to celebrating Easter. The Church has crafted the liturgical calendar such that the feast of Easter has an entire 40 days of preparation. Christ suffered and died for our sins in His Passion and then resurrected on Easter Sunday. We go to the cross in the confessional, and rise again renewed after unloading our sins.

Examination of Conscience

The start of a good confession isn't getting in line. First and foremost, there's no better path to a good confession than a good examination of conscience.

I've been to confession to many priests, and sometimes it's a mountaintop experience. Sometimes it's less than ideal. Whatever the case, remember the reason you're going. It's not to feel good, get a spiritual high, or hear the word of wisdom that changes your life. We go to confession to be healed and to restore our bond with Christ and the Church, which we damaged or severed with our sins. The priest has to deal with many external factors, all of which can influence your experience of the sacrament—for example, time constraints and long confession lines. He may offer some advice that hits home and be exactly what you need to hear. He may give you the perfect penance that helps you heal from your sins. Conversely, he may be disengaged and offer no words other than a penance and absolution. He might give you the same penance he gave to every person before and after you. Don't be discouraged; no less than ideal confession experiences can impact the effect of the sacrament.

What to Expect in Confession

Just in case you haven't been to confession in a while, or you're new at it, here's how it will go:

Part 1: The priest starts: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." You begin by saying "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It's been (x amount of time) since my last confession." Rest assured, the purpose of this isn't for taking attendance. The priest would have one approach to the person who went to confession the previous month and a different approach to the person coming to confession for the first time in thirty years. Telling the priest how long it's been since your last confession simply helps him meet you where you are.

Part 2: The priest might prompt you, or he may silently wait for you to list your sins. This is the fruit of the examination of conscience. It's very important that if you have committed any mortal sins, you also confess both the nature of the sin and the frequency. Most priests do not require that you share every detail of your sin, but they may ask questions about the circumstances in order, once again, to better assess where you are coming from and provide more relevant advice. Your list of sins doesn't have to be a notarized list, but you should make sure the priest knows whether a mortal sin is an ongoing issue or a less frequent mistake. Though it is not actually a requirement to confess venial sins, it is

commendable that they be confessed as well; doing so helps us to “form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit” (CCC #1458).

I’ve noticed two personal faults when it comes to confessing my sins. Sometimes I rush through the list, hoping the priest doesn’t notice this or that. Other times, I try to provide as much background detail as I could, to downgrade sin X as much as possible. Sure, details can help inform a priest of a situation—but we need to confess our sins with as much humility as we can muster. If we’re not truly sorry for our sins, how can we be healed?

The Catechism lays out our goal for this stage of the sacrament: “through such an admission man looks squarely at the sins he is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible” (#1455).

Part 3: Let the priest know when you’ve finished your list. Again, he may ask some clarifying questions, either at the end or intermittently in more of a dialogue fashion. These are the same sorts of questions your doctor might ask you at a regular check-up. By knowing the details of the symptoms, the Divine Physician can prescribe the correct medicine.

The priest may counsel, admonish, or encourage you. Or, he may say nothing of the sort. This depends on the priest as well as the situation. If you’re attending a penance service and the priest knows that there are another ten people behind you in line, he may speak less. He will assign you a penance to do. Frequently, the penance consists of praying a specific number of specific common prayers (such as the Our Father or the Hail Mary). However, penances can vary widely too.

If you’re able to have a regular confessor or a spiritual director, jump at the chance! Building a relationship like this really helps make the guidance and growth more personal. One of the best penances I ever received was from a spiritual director. I confessed something along the lines of ingratitude for the strengths and gifts God has given me; the penance I received was to write down fifty gifts I had for which I was thankful. The grace of the sacrament and that penance helped me grow! Another time, I confessed some salty language and anger while driving. My penance was to drive the speed limit exactly for the rest of the weekend. It was the most challenging penance I’ve ever had! Yet it was just what I needed to grow in that area of my life.

Part 4: The priest should prompt you to say your act of contrition. Say it with your whole heart and finally let go of the sins that have weighed you down. It’s ok to cry. Here’s an example: O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You. In doing wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against You, Whom I should love above all things. I firmly resolve with the help of Your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen

Part 5: This is the best part! Receive the forgiveness of the Lord in the words of absolution. The authority to forgive sins was a special gift given by Christ to the Church and her priests (cf. John 20:23). It was passed on from Jesus to the Apostles, to their successors, and to every generation of bishops and priests until the present day. Soak in the peace of Christ as the priest concludes the words of absolution: “I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Part 6: After you leave the confessional, go and do your penance. Resolve to keep fighting! Just like the adulteress, Jesus turns to you to say: “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Whether you make progress in leaps and bounds or trudge along, making progress inch by inch, the key factor is perseverance. There is no neutral gear in the spiritual life; we either move forward or regress.

