

## A GUIDE TO CONFESSION

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession), we encounter Jesus Christ, who after rising from the dead breathed the Holy Spirit on his Apostles — the first priests — and gave them the power to forgive sins in his name (Jn 20:23). The Heart of Christ burns with love for us and he wants us to experience his immense and unfathomable mercy by confessing our sins and receiving his forgiveness. This Sacrament gives us the consolation of God's pardon and strengthens our relationship with Christ and his Church.

As followers of Jesus, we need to examine our lives and recognize our sinful thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions so that we can bring them to God for forgiveness. Such an examination of conscience should be done regularly, always with trust in God's mercy and love and in the power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We all sin, but we do not all acknowledge our sins. It takes honesty and courage to reflect upon our refusals of God's grace and our rejections of his law of love. Contemporary society is often blind to the reality of sin and sometimes even presents sinful behaviors or lifestyles as positive goods to be sought and desired. In his encyclical *Reconciliation and Penance* (1984), Pope John Paul II suggests that the defining sin of modern times is the "loss of the sense of sin" and reminds us of St. John's warning: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Sin is the deliberate violation of God's law. Although sin promises illusory goods or happiness, it results in harm to the sinner, who is always the primary victim of sin. The Church teaches that there are two kinds of sin: mortal and venial. Mortal sin is a deliberate and free choice of something known to be seriously wrong that destroys our friendship with God and separates us from him (cf. 1 Jn 5:16-17). All of the following three conditions must be met for a sin to be mortal: (1) it must be something serious; (2) it must be done with sufficient knowledge of its gravity; and (3) it must be done with sufficient freedom of the will. Venial sin is a minor offense against God's law that hurts our relationship with God but does not destroy it. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the ordinary way to have our sins forgiven. It is an encounter with the mercy of the living God, who meets us where we are in our weakness and our sins, and it powerfully deepens our psychological and spiritual growth. The source of many graces, it should be celebrated regularly and whenever the need is felt. Monthly confession is a healthy and effective means of growing closer to God and leading a balanced, Christ-centered lifestyle.

We need contrition, or sorrow for our sins, to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation and contrition must include a firm purpose to amend our life and avoid the near occasions of sin — that is, the situations, persons, places, and things that lead us to sin. Sorrow for sin is very different from sadness or self-hatred. As we draw closer to God, our sense of sin and sorrow for sin become deeper, just as do our joy, peace of heart, and purity of conscience.

## HOW TO GO TO CONFESSION

- Pray to the Holy Spirit for self-knowledge and trust in the mercy of God. Examine your conscience, be truly sorry for your sins, and resolve to change your life.
- Go to the priest and begin with the Sign of the Cross. Welcoming you, the priest will say: "May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy," or similar words taken from Scripture. You answer: "Amen." Then say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been \_\_\_\_ weeks/months/years since my last confession."
- Confess your sins openly and candidly. Tell the priest of all mortal sins and the number of times each was committed, and then you may confess some of your venial sins. (Although it is not strictly necessary to confess venial sins, the Church recommends that you do.) If you do not know whether a sin is mortal or venial, ask the priest. If you have no mortal sins, confess venial sins you have committed since your last confession; you may also mention some mortal sin from your past life for which you are particularly sorry, indicating that it has already been confessed.
- Then listen to the priest for whatever counsel he may judge appropriate. If you have any question about the faith, how to grow in holiness, or whether something is a sin, feel free to ask him. Then the priest will assign you a penance.
- Pray the Act of Contrition when the priest tells you.
- Listen as the priest absolves you of your sins and enjoy the fact that God has truly freed you from all your sins. If you forget to confess a mortal sin, you are still forgiven, but must mention it the next time you go to confession.
- Do the penance the priest assigns you. If you are anxious or unsure of what to do, take this guide with you or tell the priest and he will make it easier for you.

### ACT OF CONTRITION

***"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."***