

## Session 27: How to Go to Confession

HYMN: Come, You Sinners



Come, you sinners, poor and needy,  
weak and wounded, sick and sore.  
Jesus, ready, stands to save you,  
full of pity, love, and power.

Come, you thirsty, come, and  
welcome,  
God's free bounty glorify:  
true belief and true repentance —  
every grace that brings you nigh.

Come, you weary, heavy laden,  
lost and ruined by the Fall.  
If you tarry till you're better,  
you will never come at all.

View Him, prostrate in the garden;  
on the ground your Maker lies.  
On the bloody tree behold Him;  
sinner, will not this suffice?

Lo! th'incarnate God ascended  
pleads the merits of His Blood.  
Venture on Him, venture wholly;  
let no other trust intrude.

Let not conscience make you linger,  
nor of fitness fondly dream.  
All the fitness He requireth  
is to feel your need of Him.

PRAYER:

Let us pray:  
O God, Who,  
through Your Word  
reconcile the human race to Yourself  
in a wonderful way,  
grant, we pray,  
that with prompt devotion  
and eager faith,  
the Christian people may hasten  
toward the solemn celebrations  
to come.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Your Son,  
Who lives and reigns with You

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.

— Amen

READING: 2 Cor 5:18-20

A Reading from St. Paul's Second  
Letter to the Corinthians

God has reconciled us  
to Himself through Christ  
and has given us  
the ministry of reconciliation.

I mean that God, in Christ,  
was reconciling  
the world to Himself,  
not counting men's transgressions  
against them,  
and that He has entrusted  
the message of reconciliation  
to us.

This makes us  
ambassadors for Christ:  
God, as it were,  
appealing through us.  
We implore you, in Christ's name:  
be reconciled to God!  
The Word of the Lord  
— *Thanks be to God*

IN BRIEF: WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

Christ willed  
that His whole Church  
should be the sign  
and the instrument  
of the reconciliation  
that He won for us.

However, He entrusted  
the power of absolution  
to His apostles.  
"God has reconciled us to Himself  
through Christ  
and has given us  
the ministry of reconciliation,"  
St. Paul said.

Individual confession  
and absolution by a priest  
are thus the only ordinary way  
for the faithful  
to reconcile themselves  
with God and the Church,  
unless physical  
or moral impossibility  
excuses someone. —

Session 27

There are profound reasons  
for this.

Christ is at work  
in each of the Sacraments.  
He personally addresses  
every sinner:  
"My son, your sins are forgiven."  
He is the Physician  
tending each one of the sick,  
who need Him to cure them.  
He raises them up  
and reintegrates them  
into fraternal communion.

Personal confession  
is thus the form most expressive  
of reconciliation with God  
and with the Church.

Even from a simply human  
point of view,  
the confession (or disclosure)  
of sins frees us  
and facilitates our reconciliation  
with others.  
Through our admission,  
we look squarely  
at the sins we are guilty of,  
take responsibility for them,  
and thereby open ourselves again  
to communion with God  
and with the Church, in order  
to make a new future possible.

As St. Augustine said,  
"The beginning of good works  
is the confession of evil works."

how the Church commemorates  
the culmination of this forgiveness  
by Christ  
during the Liturgy  
of "Holy Week."

**BIBLE READING**

Mk 1-9:1

This week,  
you will start reading Mark's  
Gospel.

You will read how John the Baptist  
prepared the way for Christ  
by "proclaiming  
a baptism of repentance"  
which led to the forgiveness of  
sins.

"All the Judean countryside  
and the people of Jerusalem  
went out to him  
in great numbers.

"They were being baptized by him  
in the Jordan River  
as they confessed their sins."

Next week,  
we will describe

### How to Go to Confession

1. Enter the confessional, kneel or sit down, and wait for the priest to acknowledge you.
2. Say  
*"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."*  
The priest may reply in some way.
3. Say  
*"This is my first confession."*  
or  
*"It is (a number) of weeks (or years, etc.) since my last confession."*
4. You might also wish to give the priest any relevant information about your state in life, e.g.  
*"I am single."*  
or  
*"I am married."*  
or  
*"I am married but separated from my wife."*
5. Mention your sins and how many times you have committed each one since your last confession, to the best of your ability.
6. Say something to indicate you have finished, e.g.  
*"That's all, Father."*  
or  
*"I am sorry for these and for all the sins of my past life."*
7. The priest will now speak to you, assign your penance, and (usually) invite you to make an Act of Contrition.
8. Say an 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 Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the occasions of sin."*
9. The priest will now give you absolution.
10. Say  
*"Thank you, Father."*
11. Leave the confessional, return to a quiet place in the church, and say the penance assigned to you, if possible, before you leave.

### Sample Confessions

- |                         |                          |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 - A young child       | 7 - An 11-year-old       |
| 2 - An old woman        | 8 - A real estate agent  |
| 3 - A 49-year-old woman | 9 - A 60-year-old woman  |
| 4 - A 25-year-old man   | 10 - A 25-year-old woman |
| 5 - A 40-year-old man   | 11 - A 18-year-old girl  |
| 6 - A 16-year-old girl  | 12 - A 36-year-old man   |

## Notes

1. You may confess your sins either with a screen between you and the priest, or face to face with the priest.
2. You are free to go to any priest in confession.
3. If you can, choose a good confessor.<sup>1</sup> But realize that any priest can give you absolution; you can make any difficulties he causes you a part of your penance.
4. Penance is assigned to fit the individual and his confession, where possible. It does not have to be said immediately, but it is wise to say it as soon as you get the chance, as you can easily forget.
5. Father Vince often asks people if there anything else they want to ask or mention. The confessional is a good chance to talk in privacy and confidence, briefly. For a longer discussion, you should make an appointment.
6. The Church uses the word *forum* to describe the sphere within which she exercises her judicial authority. The *external forum* refers to matters that concern her public welfare, while the *internal forum* refers to her jurisdiction in matters of conscience, especially the Sacrament of Penance, where sins are forgiven or retained and questions of morality are decided as to guilt, restitution, or responsibility. Anything said in the confessional remains in the internal forum; it may not even be referred to in the external forum. If you talk to a priest in confession, therefore, and then go to see him outside the confessional, he will not bring up anything you said in the confessional. Only the penitent, not the priest, can re-open the internal forum.<sup>2</sup>
7. If you are waiting in line to go to confession before the priest enters the confessional, he will not even look at you when he arrives. Similarly, if he leaves the confessional soon after you do, he will not look at you as he leaves. If a priest hears your confession outside a confessional, he will draw a sharp distinction, as soon as the confession is over, between the external forum and the internal forum by his tone of voice, topic of conversation, *etc.*
8. As we have already said, a priest who hears a confession is bound under very severe penalties to keep it absolutely secret, with no exceptions, making no use whatever of the knowledge it gives him. This secrecy is called "the seal of the confessional."<sup>3</sup>
9. Never hesitate to ask any priest to hear your confession at any time. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that "priests must encourage the faithful to come to the Sacrament of Penance and must make themselves available to celebrate this Sacrament each time Christians reasonably ask for it. When he celebrates the Sacrament of Penance, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd Who seeks the lost sheep, [of] the Good Samaritan who binds up wounds, of the Father who awaits the prodigal son and welcomes him on his return, and of the just and impartial judge whose judgement is both just and merciful. The priest is the sign and the instrument of God's merciful love for the sinner. The confessor is not the master of God's forgiveness, but its servant. The minister of this Sacrament should unite himself to the intention and charity of Christ. He should have a proven knowledge of Christian behaviour, experience of human affairs, respect and sensitivity toward the one who has fallen; he must love the truth, be faithful to the Magisterium of the Church, and lead the penitent with patience toward healing and full maturity. He must pray and do penance for his penitent, entrusting him to the Lord's mercy" (CCC 1464-1466).

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1 See the Appendix.

2 See the movie *I Confess*.

3 See the movie *I Confess*.



## Appendix: The Priest as Confessor

From Timothy Dolan: *Priests for the Third Millennium*, Chapter 18

Let me approach "the priest as confessor" in three ways, all "c" words: the confessor as Christ, the virtue of compassion, and the necessity of confidentiality.

I can speak only for myself — although I have heard scores of brother priests say the same thing — but I never feel more a priest than when hearing confessions.

We believe, as Pope John Paul II has so eloquently taught, that the essence of priesthood is "configurement" to Christ as the Head and Shepherd of the Church to such an intimate degree that we actually act in His Person.<sup>1</sup> Never do I feel more *in Persona Christi*<sup>2</sup> than in the confessional. Our people know that they are confessing not to a priest but to our Lord. We stand in His place. We are His ears, His words, His forgiveness! Christ is the Minister of the Sacrament, and we act in His Person, and how awesome and humbling that is!...

I often hear seminarians<sup>3</sup> say how the thought of hearing confessions makes them nervous, and that's certainly understandable. But they shouldn't be. Christ does the work; He is the Confessor. The Sacrament works in spite of us! The grace of God's mercy flows through us. The Sacrament works....

The major message we proclaim in this beautiful Sacrament is not a proposition, not advice, but a Person: we proclaim Christ!

As confessors, we are not theologians, although Lord knows a sound knowledge of theology — especially a good grasp of solid moral theology — is called for. As confessors, we are not psychologists, although insights from that helpful discipline are valuable. As confessors, we are not social workers, or friends, or advice columnists, although elements from each of those roles would be beneficial.

As confessors, we are Christ, and so the major thing we say is, "Our Lord loves you very much; Jesus now completely forgives all your sins; your sorrow for sin moves His Sacred Heart; Heaven is rejoicing because you have returned; Jesus is happy because you have accepted His invitation to repent and have made His cross worthwhile; Jesus never loves us more than when we tell Him we're sorry."... It is Christ Who works in the Sacrament; the main task of the confessor is to assure the penitent of Christ's love and mercy.

Now, that having been said, Jesus *does* act through us, so our skill, our part, is necessary, too. The qualities we bring as a confessor can, therefore, make it easier for the penitent to meet Christ in the Sacrament, or make it harder. God forbid we should ever block out Christ. He is there in the Sacrament. If He is not discovered therein, it is the fault of either the penitent or the confessor. God forbid it be ours!

The most important attribute we need as a confessor is compassion,<sup>4</sup> which, of course, means "feeling with" our penitent. A confessor who is brusque, rushed, crabby, impatient, distracted, uninterested, distant, or cold can hardly attract people to the compassionate Christ.

We use the term "hearing confessions" purposely. The "matter" of the Sacrament is the confession of sins by the penitent. We are most helpful in listening. Every muscle of our body is taut, so intently do we listen. It is an active listening. We give the penitent the impression we have all the time in the world; that his or her confession is the most interesting thing we have ever heard; that his or her anxiety, pain, and struggle are ours as well. That's compassion.

If we yawn or doze, if we read *Sports Illustrated* or keep checking our watch, if we seem bored or far away, we are not compassionate. Just to listen intently and lovingly is half the battle. We often say more by how we listen than how we speak....

1 See Pope John Paul II: *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 3, 12, 18-23, 27, 29, 61, 69, 70.

2 Latin for "in the Person of Christ."

3 At the North American College in Rome.

4 From the Latin *cum* ("with") plus *patior*, *passus* ("suffer").

We are compassionate as confessors because, again, we are acting in the Person of Christ. Remember, He never lost His temper with sinners — only with those who felt they were not! Never, ever, get angry with a penitent. You will regret it for the rest of your life. That does not mean you are not firm, that you do not rebuke, challenge, correct, and even admonish. But you can do all of this compassionately. In fact, people want us to take their sins seriously, because *they* do, or they wouldn't be there.

So compassion can mean pointing out the horror and destruction of a sin. "Neither do I condemn you. Now go, and sin no more!" as Jesus said. But He never tried to talk people out of their sins, either. He knew that owning up to sin was the first step toward salvation. Billy Graham says the preacher's job is to convict people, to move people to be so convinced of their sins that they view themselves as convicts waiting for a sentence from the Eternal Judge.

Then it is our job is to give the sentence: You are forgiven! Sometimes, we priests, in an effort to be compassionate, make light of penitents' sins, or explain them away. Let our people have their sins.... Our job is not to explain sin away but to forgive it.

Part of compassion is taking upon ourselves the sins of our people. As you know, that substitution at the heart of the biblical understanding of priesthood: "Lamb of God, You take upon Yourself the sins of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said, "Give Me your sins — many, horrible, ugly, vicious, and embarrassing as they are. Give them to Me. I'll take care of them for you!" So our people look to their priests to be compassionate in taking upon themselves the sins of their people. There is nothing more exhausting than being a compassionate confessor. We take upon ourselves the sins of our people. They love to unburden themselves to us!...

A confessor is compassionate because he is acutely aware of his own sins. A man yelled out to the Curé of Ars<sup>6</sup> as he was leaving the confessional, "You must be a saint because you are such a good confessor." Vianney replied, "If I am a good confessor, it is because I am a great sinner."... The priest is compassionate because he knows his sins to be as many and as grievous as those of the person he is hearing.

The confessor, then represents Christ, is compassionate. Third: would die rather than break the seal of the confessional.... A good confessor doesn't speak, even generically, of what he has heard in the confessional. He does not even acknowledge that a person has been to him for confession. To protect the seal, he must exercise scrupulous discretion and prudence.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Jn 1:29.

<sup>6</sup> St. John Vianney (1786–1859), famous as a confessor.

<sup>7</sup> Watch the movie *I Confess*.