

The Sacrament of Confession & Absolution

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

-1 John 1:8,9

The Problem of Sin

The Sacrament of Confession & Absolution deals with a problem all of us battle: sin. Sin is something of which we are all guilty. As Paul writes in Romans 3, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Sin occurs when we choose our own will over God's will for our lives.

Sin has many negative consequences on our lives: 1) it limits our intimacy with God, 2) it inhibits open, transparent relationships with others, and 3) it makes our life less abundant than God designed it to be.

Now, in Christ, we have forgiveness for our sins: past, present, and future. But scripture commands us: "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16).

Some Background

Over time, the discipline of public confession for believers in the Church has been lost. In its place, the Anglican tradition observes the Sacrament of Confession & Absolution, where the priest receives confessions as a representative of the Church.

Seal of the Confessional

Anything said in the Confession is under the seal of the Confessional. This means the priest cannot and will not discuss with *anyone* what you confess. Moreover, the priest will never initiate discussion with you about what you confessed. Confessed sin is under the blood of Christ; it is no more.

Preparing for Confession

- 1) Take some time and find a place where you can be alone.
- 2) Limit this time for reflection (thirty minutes at the most).
- 3) Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the sin separating you from God.
 - 3a) Sins of Commission are sins you have committed by thought, word, or deed. These are usually easiest to remember.
 - 3b) Sins of Omission can be more difficult to recall. These are things left undone that should have been done. Examples of this could include the withholding of love (like giving someone the silent treatment) or failing to do something that God has directed you to do or that you know you should do.
- 4) Jot down a few notes of what the Holy Spirit shows you. Should you find yourself forgetting what God showed you, you can refer to this as you give your Confession. (Plan to destroy these notes after you give your Confession.)
- 5) Use just a few words to describe your sin. This avoids the tendency we may have to explain our sins away.
- 6) Be accurate and honest.
- 7) Confession can be made at particular times appointed by the priest or anytime by appointment.
- 8) Frequency - intervals between confessions should be long enough to notice sinful tendencies and short enough to be specific. If you are new to the Sacrament of Confession, four times a year is a recommended interval between confessions.

Confession

When the priest appoints a time for Confession & Absolution, it occurs in the Church. If the priest is with someone else, please wait in the Narthex until that person exits. When it is your turn, go into the church and kneel at the altar rail (or sit if you are unable to kneel). The priest will be seated on the other side of the altar rail, facing away from you. If you prefer the priest face you, simply ask him.

You will be asked to open to the short liturgy for the Sacrament, titled “Reconciliation of the Penitents”, found on page 223 of the 2019 Book of Common Prayer (available digitally [here](#) or [here](#)).

The Penitent begins

Bless me, for I have sinned.

The priest will then speak the following blessing of encouragement.

The Priest says

The Lord be in your heart and upon your lips that you may truly and humbly confess your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

You will then continue by speaking the following...

Penitent

I confess to Almighty God, to his Church, and to you, that I have sinned by my own fault in thought, word, and deed, in things done and left undone; especially _____. For these and all other sins that I cannot now remember, I am truly sorry. I pray God to have mercy on me. I firmly intend amendment of life, and I humbly beg forgiveness of God and his Church, and ask you for counsel, direction, and absolution.

After the “especially” is where you would mention the specific sins God has made you aware of (consulting notes if necessary).

The “all other sins which I cannot now remember” is especially important, because it covers any sin we commit but that God has not brought to mind or that you have forgotten. This prevents you from needing to come back if you get out the door and realize you forgot something, because it’s already been confessed when you said “all other sins which I cannot now remember”.

When you say all this, you have confessed. At this point, some people expect to feel strong emotion, but this often does not occur. Emotion has no bearing on the truth that you have confessed.

A note on “I firmly intend amendment of life.” It is a phrase that keeps many from coming to give their confession, because they believe they are likely to commit the same sin again. But the truth is we can never *know* for sure what we will do beyond confession. Just as it is possible for you to commit a particular sin again, it is also possible that in confessing this sin God might impart you with the special grace not to commit it again. Furthermore, if you come to your second or third confession and find yourself confessing the same sins as before, this is entirely normal. We are human, and we tend to be tempted in the same ways, time and again.

Here the Priest may offer counsel, direction, and comfort.

This is confession, not counseling. The priest may or may not offer you any “counsel” and whether he does or not is not indicative of anything in particular. Should the priest offer you some brief counsel, it should be taken seriously (God may use his words to speak to you), but you are not required to adhere to it. If you desire more extensive counseling with the priest, book an appointment and bring it up then.

“Direction” is another word for *penance*. Penance is not making up for your sins. Your sins are forgiven by the free gift of God’s grace through Jesus Christ. Penance is an action that puts us back in step with the

life of following Christ. So, the priest if the priest offers direction he will likely direct you to do something simple and short, such as reading a passage of scripture or a hymn, an action that characterizes a life of fellowship with Christ. You can also think of penance as an act of thanksgiving - a 'thank you note' of sorts - to God for His free gift of forgiveness. If the priest asks you to do an act of penance you do not understand, ask the priest to clarify what he means or to show you how.

The Priest then declares

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you all your offenses; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

or this

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who in his great mercy has promised forgiveness of sins to all those who sincerely repent and with true faith turn to him, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(The Priest adds)

The Lord has put away all your sins.

Penitent **Thanks be to God.**

When the priest declares absolution (above), he is declaring the forgiveness that is freely given to you in Jesus Christ. By the power of Christ's blood you are cut off from sin and free to live as a new creation in Him, no longer a slave to sin. Whether you feel it or not, a spiritual reality has taken place.

The following prayer may also be said

Let us pray.

O most loving Father, by your mercy you put away the sins of those who truly repent, and remember their sins no more. Restore and renew in your servant whatever has been corrupted by the fraud and malice of the devil, or by *his* own selfish will and weakness. Preserve and protect *him* within the fellowship of the Church; hear *his* prayers and relieve *his* pain; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Priest concludes

Go (*or* abide) in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.

Go in the peace and the abundant life God has given to you in Christ. And remember, your brother priest is a sinner, too.

It Is Finished

It is recommended that you do your penance before leaving the Church grounds. But that's it! You have confessed your sins in obedience to God's command and received God's forgiveness.

If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.

-1 John 2:1-2

****This instruction is an adaptation of teaching from The Rt. Reverend John-David Schofield**