

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of God's Divine Mercy. In this beautiful Sacrament we encounter the risen Christ who said to his disciples: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven" (John 20:23). In this verse of scripture spoken on Easter Sunday evening, Jesus is giving his new church the power to forgive sins. In this sacrament, when the priest raises his hand and prays the words of absolution, he is representing both Christ and his Body the church.

The words of absolution are a tangible, audible expression of Christ reaching out to us in every time and space to lift from us the burden of guilt that comes to us when we sin. If we approach this sacrament with a sincere heart and even if our sorrow is imperfect, we can leave the confessional knowing that all sin, even the sins we forgot to confess are lifted from our souls. We may continue to be sorry for our sins, especially the more serious ones, but Jesus wishes us to be no longer burdened by these sins. Only the devil, our accuser, wants us to continue to feel guilty about our past sins. So we as Catholics have a wonderful and precious gift available to us in this sacrament.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you to make a good confession.

Characteristics of a Good Confession

You may wonder what is a 'good confession'? You may wonder: How do I know I have made a good confession? The following are characteristics of a good confession.

- We have taken time to sincerely examine our conscience to see where we have sinned since our last confession. We shouldn't rush into the confessional without taking some time to prayerfully prepare to meet Christ.
- We confess all the serious sins we are aware of and some of the less serious sins. Of course, in a way we can say all sin is serious in that it diminishes the light of Christ in our hearts.
- We pray for the grace to be truly sorry for our sins. At times we may not feel particularly sorry for a particular sin. In such times we need to be honest with God and say something like: "God, you know my heart. You know I am not very sorry for this particular sin. Please Lord, change my heart and grant me the grace of true repentance." Our sins are forgiven even if our sorrow is imperfect. When the prodigal son returned home he probably returned primarily because he was destitute. Yet, the Father was delighted to accept his half-hearted sorrow. Even our faltering, halfhearted steps back to God are pleasing to him. But of course, we should always seek the ideal, namely, perfect and sincere contrition for sin.
- A good confession involves doing our penance. A penance should not be seen as 'paying for our sins' or as 'punishment for sins'. God's mercy is always totally free and without strings. Penance is spiritual medicine intended to heal our souls of the wounds of sin. Ideally, the

penance given should be connected in some way to the sins committed. For example, if our sins have to do with neglect of family, our penance might be to pay more attention to this area of our life.

- Finally, a good confession involves what is called a ‘firm purpose of amendment’, which is our sincere desire and intention to turn away from sin. This piece can be tricky or confusing since all of us know we will fall into sin again. While this is true, hopefully, all of us can sincerely say that we will try hard to cooperate with the grace of God and turn from all sin.

Preparing to Receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation

As you prepare to meet Christ in this Sacrament, keep in mind that you are meeting Someone who loves you with an unconditional love, Someone who was criticized for ‘welcoming sinners’ and ‘eating with them’ (Luke 15:1-3). Jesus wants us to relax in his presence and to freely speak to him about the concerns of our heart. When we ask Jesus to forgive us our sins, we are not asking him to start loving us again, because he never stopped loving us. Rather, we are asking Jesus to lift the burden of sin from our hearts and to renew our commitment to following his way of love. Sin wounds our relationship with God, others and self. It diminishes the light of Christ in our lives. The Sacrament of Reconciliation makes us whole again giving us a new opportunity to live our primary vocation, namely to love God, neighbor and self with all our heart and mind (Matt 24:36-40)

Examination of Conscience

While all of us would admit we are sinners, we may sometimes have a difficult time naming the sin in our lives. We may suffer from spiritual blindness. Hence, the importance of asking the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to help us see ways we may not be following the way of love. Read the following slowly and prayerfully.

Relationship with God.

- Do I take time to nurture my relationship with God prayer? The retired person and working person with no children at home will obviously have more time available to him/her than the person with young children. But, all of us have a serious obligation to make time to pray.
- To what extent does my prayer impact the rest of my life, my relationships, work and finances etc. - How important is it for me to seek God’s will when it comes to decisions.
- Do I try to see the “tough stuff” in life (poor health, losses, bad job situation and relationships) in the light of the cross of Christ? Or do I allow my crosses to make me bitter and resentful?
- Do I try to forgive life’s hurts or do I tend to ignore them and allow them to fester within me?

Family Life

(This area is going to be different for the person living with children at home than for the single person or for the adult whose children live elsewhere. Yet many of these questions apply to all who have living relatives.)

- Do I pray for family unity and for God's blessing on my family and relatives?
- Am I a positive presence in my family circle? Do my words and deeds foster unity and peace, or am I a negative and divisive presence?
- Am I affirming of my spouse's and children's successes, or do I tend to live in competition with them? - If married, am I faithful to my marriage promises by making sincere efforts to nurture my relationship with my spouse?
- As a parent, am I present to my children, and do I try to raise them according to the ways of Christ and his Church?
- If single, do I live a chaste life and utilize some of the extra time I have to help make a positive difference in my church and community?

Work/Retirement

- If I am still working, what kind of employer, manager, employee or co-worker am I? Are my attitudes and behaviors such that foster team spirit and cooperation, or is my presence one that is negative, divisive, self-serving? Am I a workaholic or lazy when it comes to work? • If retired, do I volunteer some of my time and talent to making our world a better place, or is my time pretty much utilized 'doing my own thing?'

Church

- Do I attend Mass regularly and actively participate in the prayer of the Mass, or do I miss Mass for poor reasons and tend to be a spectator at mass?
- Do I offer my services to the church? (Some people's ministry may not be within their local church.)
- Do I contribute according to my means to the financial support of my parish, diocese and universal church, or do I tend to let other people pay my fair share?
- If I disagree with Church teachings, do I do so with an informed conscience or with a conscience that hasn't prayed, reflected and sincerely tried to understand the Church's viewpoint?

Other Issues.

- What kind of neighbor am I? Do I tend to mind my own business so much that I am unaware and inattentive to a neighbor in need? Do my words and actions promote a positive atmosphere in my neighborhood, or do they tend to be divisive and unnecessarily critical?
- How attentive and responsive am I to the great global issues of our day such as poverty, abortion, the environment, injustices of any kind against any group of people because of race, color, religion, sex, or economic level? Do I allow such issues to touch my life and try to respond in whatever way I can, or do I tend to ignore these issues?
- Do I love the truth? Am I honest in my dealings with others? Do I speak the truth in love even when it is unpopular? Do I lie to 'save my own skin' or for some other reason?
- Can I love and pray for people whom I dislike and differ from politically and theologically? Or do I tend to be judgmental and condemning of such people?
- Do I have a healthy self-love? Can I, with humility, embrace my strengths and limitations? Do I care for my body by taking time to rest, exercise and eat/drink properly? Or do I tend to overuse and misuse food, drink or drugs?

Three Other Questions

Having pondered the above questions, you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, come to see what are the sinful attitudes and behaviors that are presently operative in your life. You might pray: "Holy Spirit show me where there is sin in my life? Help me to name the attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to the Gospel. Then ponder the following three questions:

- Where do I need healing in my life? (Example, do I tend to over react to fair criticism?)
- Where do I need conversion? What attitude/behavior is not Christ -like and needs to be changed?
- In what area of my life do I especially need the help and strength of Jesus?

Seek the Root Cause of Sin.

Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you about the root cause of a particular sinful attitude or behavior. Why might you be impatient, angry, critical of yourself or others? Why might lust be a big issue? Why is spending time with God in prayer not a priority? Often root causes of many sins are: our need to control others which often leads us to become impatient and angry. A deep-seated perfectionistic attitude is often the reason we tend to be critical of others and ourselves. Loss of trust in God or spiritual dryness or unconscious disappointment or anger with God may be the reason why we do not pray much or pray in a rote kind of way. Fear, insecurity and pride are also root causes of some sins.

Ask the Holy Spirit to also help you to get to the root cause of a particular sin. Also, ask the Holy Spirit to help you to be truly sorry for your sins.

Upon Entering the Reconciliation Room.

You can go to confession face to face, or anonymously, kneeling behind the screen. If you are not sure how to proceed, ask the priest to guide you. If you have a question about something, ask the priest to help you. Try to speak about your sins in a conversational way, rather than a rote, “grocery list” type of way. For example, say “Father, since my last confession, I have neglected prayer, or when I prayed I did it in a rote kind of way. I seem to be reluctant to give God some quality time when I can be fully present to him. Perhaps you can help me with this. I tend to be overly critical and judgmental of people. I’m not sure why, etc.”

Penance, Absolution, Act of Contrition.

After you have finished confessing your sins, the priest will give you a Penance to perform, which will be a sign of your desire to turn away from sin and to turn towards God. Then you will normally pray the Act of Contrition.

Act of Contrition

My God I am sorry for my sins
With all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior, Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.

Then the priest will give you absolution. You will then be forgiven for all your sins, the ones you confessed and the sins you forgot to confess.

After Leaving the Reconciliation Room

When you leave the Reconciliation Room, take time to thank God for his mercy and pray your penance. Also, ask Jesus to heal you of the wounds that sometimes lead us to sin — e.g. our fears, insecurities, poor self-image, our need to be perfect, etc. Pray for a new heart - a heart

that will want to make God and his will the central focus and passion of your life, a heart that will have a new desire to love God, neighbor and self.

A THREE STEP PRAYER PLAN TO HELP YOU OVERCOME A PARTICULAR SIN.

Sometimes we may find ourselves confessing the same sin over and over e.g. impatience, a critical spirit, anger, lust. We may find ourselves helpless when it comes to a particular area of our lives. How do we deal with this? The following three step prayer plan has helped many people to experience victory in an area of weakness.

Step One: At the beginning of the day, pray with confidence to Jesus for help to resist the temptation to commit the sin you are struggling with. Be sure to humbly acknowledge your weakness or powerlessness in this area. You could pray in the following way: Jesus, I humbly acknowledge my weakness in this area of my life, (name it_ _ _ _). Without your help and strength I cannot resist this sin of _ _ _ _ . But I firmly believe that you can give me the grace I need to fight this weakness _ _ _ _ . I only ask for your help just for today.” Then trust that God will be with you this day.

Step Two: As you move through the day be determined, like a good warrior, to resist the sin you have chosen to overcome with God’s help. Very often the reason we fail over and over is because there is no true desire to overcome a particular weakness. The alcoholic or drug addict will not overcome their addiction without a deep desire to quit. Sin is an addiction that we can overcome only if we really want to and with the grace of God. So as you move through the day be determined to say ‘No’ to the particular sin you are fighting. Don’t focus on several sins, just on your chosen one, all the time asking Jesus to help you.

Step Three: At the end of the day, do a review of your successes and failures. For the times you said ‘No’ to temptation say; “Thank you Jesus,” for the failures say; “Sorry, Jesus, forgive me. And now, Jesus as I go into the night protect me and give me the grace to begin anew tomorrow”.

With some very deep-seated sins, you may also need the help of a priest or counselor. But, in the vast majority of cases, the above three step prayer plan will help you, sooner than you may think, to experience spiritual victory in an area of weakness.