

INTRODUCTION



Here is what you need to know: Confession is an experience of Jesus Christ loving us and expressing his love in human words of forgiveness and acceptance. It is the sacrament of forgiveness *enfleshed*.

I was forty years a priest before I realized that priests don't hear just about sins in Confession. We hear *ideals*. In fact, we are listening to people's mystical experiences, even though they may be conscious only of confessing their sins.

Strange as it sounds, one of the principal reasons for confessing our sins is to realize how good we are! When you become aware that you personally are judging an action the way God does, you are experiencing both the action of God in your heart and your response to God's action—God's gift of light and your acceptance of God's gift. That is a mystical experience.

The goal of this booklet is to help you use and experience Confession as an encounter that draws you closer to God.

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1 | Confession of Sin— Profession of Faith

The real focus of confession is not on our “works” but on our *faith*. We only confess the failure of our works in order to reaffirm—and in the process to experience—the presence within us of a live faith by which we judge them. In confession we recognize the light in our hearts when we see it revealing to us the darkness of our behavior. Therefore we should prepare for confession by looking at our lives in the light of the word of God and of God’s Spirit abiding in our hearts.

In the early Church proof of faith took the form of a long and rigorous public penance imposed by the bishop—like standing outside the door of the church in sackcloth and ashes for years, or being required to live only on alms. The penance had to be completed before the bishop would grant absolution and readmit the penitent to full participation in Eucharist. The breach was healed, unity was restored, and the morale of the community—weakened by doubts—was strengthened.

2 | Our Sins No Longer Exist

In baptism and confession, our sins are not just “forgiven” but taken away. The difference is crucial. With no pun intended, the “crux” of our redemption is the cross.

Forgiveness doesn’t change us. The one who forgives becomes more loving, more godlike by that act. But the one forgiven is just as guilty as before.

If Jesus only “paid the price of our sins,” our sins would still be part of us. God would just be “overlooking” them. But the truth is, we are not delivered from sin by Jesus dying for us, but by the mystery of our dying in him. We may not have been clear about this mystery of redemption.

By this mystery, Jesus does not just forgive; he “takes away” the sins of the world. And he does it as the Lamb of God, by dying and incorporating us into his death. Because we have died in Christ, there is no record of our sin, either in heaven or (in God’s eyes) on earth! The one who committed those sins died. We live now as the risen body of Jesus. We are a new creation.

3 | Connected to the Cross

It clarifies things to picture Jesus hanging on the cross at the center of the circle of time. Jesus died in time and space on the hill of Calvary outside Jerusalem, around the year 33 AD. But in reality (God's reality), his death was and is at the center of time.

When we were baptized, we were baptized "into" that body hanging on the cross at the center of time. We, with all of our sins, were incorporated into his body. He "became sin" for us.

When Jesus died, we died in him. We, with all of our sins, went down into the grave with him, and our sins were annihilated. Then we rose in him and returned to earth to take our place again on the circumference of the circle as a "new creation."

What happened on Calvary, what happened at our baptism, and what happens in the sacrament of reconciliation are all the same mystery: the mystery of being taken, incorporated, or reintegrated into the body of Jesus on the cross, dying with and in him, and rising with and in him as free of all guilt—as if we had never sinned in our lives.

4 | Personal but Communal

There is always a communal dimension, both to sin and to reconciliation. We cannot sin against God without sinning against other human beings. And we cannot seek reconciliation with God without involving other human beings. We might not like the idea of confessing our sins to the Church. But if we do not—in some form or another—we are leaving things unfinished when we confess them to God.

When we acknowledge our sins to the Church, we are reaffirming—and in that act reexperiencing, deepening, and reinforcing—our identity as co-responsible members of the community of faith. We are in the Church. We truly belong, and accept our belonging, as members committed to give as well as to receive. In the maturity of our relationship with other believers we recognize that we owe it to the community, as well as to God, to live in a way that makes our profession of faith credible. This is an experience of grace. Whether we consciously think of it that way or not, it is an experience of sharing in the divine life of God.

5 | The Sacrament of Encounter

Sharing in the divine life of God—this is why baptism and reconciliation are called sacraments. A sacrament is an invisible interaction with God embodied in a visible interaction with human beings. God can give grace through direct, spiritual interaction with anyone, without using any created intermediaries, means, words, or gestures at all. But in Jesus, God healed, enlightened, and saved people, not only through human words and touches, but by using bread, wine, water, blood, even mud and saliva (see John 9:6)! What we call a “sacramental grace” is a grace (a life-giving “favor” from God) that comes to us through particular physical signs and visible interaction with human beings. So, in sacramental reconciliation, union with God is restored through the visible sign of restored union with the human community of believers.

Like the disciples who met Jesus on the road after his resurrection but only recognized him “in the breaking of the bread,” we look back after the “breaking open” of our hearts and say, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road...?” (Luke 24:32).

6 | The Sacrament of the Examined Life

Confession is something built into our lifestyle that calls us to examine our lives periodically, because it is a standing invitation to give an account of them. Someone is provided by our church or otherwise made available who is ready and willing to listen: a confessor. This might be an ordained minister or simply a wise, experienced friend. Our confession might be sacramental or not. But its special healing and life-enhancing power requires that it be confession to another human being.

A more authentic understanding of confession will of necessity lead us to prepare for it, to “examine our consciences,” by reflecting on Scripture. We will judge our conduct, not by the minimal standards codified in laws, but by the New Law of Christ as proclaimed in the gospels and probed by Paul. Our basic guide for the “examined life” to which confession invites us will be the Sermon on the Mount, so that we may become more enlightened as our model, the Light of the World, directs us.