



WHY GO TO
CONFESSION?



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Have you ever thought of the sacrament of penance as a second language? Let me explain what I mean by starting with an old story.

Mamma Mouse knew that sooner or later she'd have to introduce her little mice to the real world, so when the day came, she said, "Children, come with me, we're venturing outside."

So they all gathered around Mamma Mouse, poking their heads through the mouse hole and walking out into the living room. Right there, a big, black cat was sleeping.

Mamma Mouse's heart was pounding, but she decided these kids had to learn about life. She tiptoed with her babies around the sleeping cat, who suddenly opened one eye and raised its paw. Mama Mouse arched her back and let out two loud barks, and the cat went running out of the room.

She turned to her children and said, "Kids, when you get into a tight spot, it always helps to know a second language."

To me, that story says a lot about our spiritual lives and what the sacrament of penance can do for us. So often we carry things around in our mind and heart and soul that pose a terrible danger to us—like that big, black cat did to those frightened, little mice. Most of us have something eating at us—whether it be unresolved conflicts with family and friends, betrayals and lies piling up, unpleasant behaviors continuing to damage our lives, addictions squeezing the life out of us, bad habits pushing people away, or secret shame or regrets we don't know how to let go of.

All of these have the power to wear us down. We rewind, replay, rewind, replay, and think about the hurts over and over. The price we often pay is having resentment, anger, and bitterness seep into our lives and relationships. And pretty soon, the only language we can speak is one filled with resentment, anger, and bitterness.

That's why confession is such an important "second language" to know—a language that's available to us all, a language that can save us and set us free.

In confession, Jesus invites us to have a heart-to-heart with him. Jesus never intended for us to carry our mental and emotional anguish and pain for so long. He knows we need to come face-to-face with it, to bring it out in the open, to talk about it, to receive advice, to make the necessary changes, and then to dump it and move on with life. Until we do, the pain will stay with us. It won't disappear but persist in making us feel frustrated, edgy, upset, angry, and unhappy.

In the sacrament of penance, Jesus eagerly waits for us so that he can help us repair and restore our broken lives and relationships. When we open up our wounded souls and

listen to the soothing words of Jesus spoken through the priest—“*I absolve you from all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*”—we receive healing and hope.

A sacramental meeting

This wonderful, healing sacrament goes by different names—penance, reconciliation, confession—each of which tells us something important about it. *Penance* speaks of our desire to change our hearts, turn our lives in the right direction, and live wholesome lives connected in loving relationships within our family, community, and church. *Reconciliation* speaks of the healing and mending process to restore damaged and broken relationships caused by our careless words and actions. *Confession* speaks of our need to bring our pain and sin to Jesus and tell him everything.

Regardless of what name you attach to it, this sacramental meeting with Jesus beautifully and simply celebrates a comforting message all wounded souls need to hear: *You’re forgiven. The slate is wiped clean. You have a fresh start. Leave the past behind!*

And there’s even more! Each time we celebrate this sacrament, God, through the ministry of the Church, gives us a deeper share in divine life and more of the strength we need to dedicate ourselves to living a good and meaningful life in harmony with each other.

What a marvelous gift and precious opportunity we have in this sacrament! In confession we can experience the compassionate and understanding love and forgiveness of Jesus, who anxiously waits to repair our lives and relationships.

The sacrament of penance provides us with an opportunity to regularly heal our wounded souls by sorting through the rubbish in our lives and identifying what is useless and unhealthy. We need Jesus in the sacrament of penance because there is so much that needs to be taken away, and we can't carry it to the curb by ourselves; thankfully, Jesus has the strength that we do not. With Jesus' help, we can begin looking inside ourselves at what we need to change or give up in order to be free and to find room to grow.

Coming to grips with sin

Let's be honest. The sacrament of penance doesn't seem very popular these days. Many Catholics have taken a sabbatical from celebrating it. There are many reasons for this, but woven into most of them is a church-wide confusion about sin and a tendency to ignore the impact sin has in our lives. So before we proceed further, we need to think about what sin is and how it affects us.

In recent years, I've noticed that people tend to admit to mistakes more than to sins. Big difference. Simply put, a mistake is something done unintentionally, such as turning down a one-way street the wrong way. It's easy to get distracted, and then mistakes happen.

Sin isn't the same. Sin is deliberately choosing to do something or to say something we know is wrong, hurtful, and damaging. Every sin, not just the big ones, disrupts and wounds our relationships with ourselves, others, the Christian community, and God. We have a responsibility to love those around us. Others can be harmed when we betray, deceive, abandon, ridicule, cheat, or make fools of them.

Sin is involved when we choose to take that extra glass of wine that breaks down our capacity to sustain our morality, or in the moment when we say, “It might be wrong at this hour of night to be writing to my old girlfriend on Facebook...but she’s just a friend”—and then the friend becomes more than a friend, and an emotional memory becomes an emotional affair, and more. One of the best ways to show love is to clean up the sinful and hurtful parts of our relationships. But when we choose instead to hold on to our painful past, when we bury it deep within our souls, we damage our self-identity and block Jesus’ love from setting us free.

God is grieved by our sins. He is grieved not because we hurt him, but because he knows what we could have had and experienced if we had made the right choice and had followed his teachings rather than choosing otherwise. God grieves for the joy, strength, fulfillment, and direction we would have known if we had followed his way.

Some people obsess about sin—almost to the point of making their sin an idol. But then there are those who don’t give it a second thought. What’s needed is a healthy balance between these extremes. Jesus invites us to share our sins in confession not because he wants us to dwell on them, but because he wants to remove any barriers hurting our relationship with ourselves, each other, and God. Confession reverses the harming effects of sin. It is a healthy way to prevent sin from controlling our lives. Confession helps us to stop tripping over our sin. When we are absolved and forgiven, harmony and peace are restored in our lives.

A second point about sin is just as important: I’ve noticed that when people talk about why they don’t come

to confession more often, they often hem and haw and then say something like, “Well, I’m basically a good person.” And that’s true—they are good persons. But confessing sins doesn’t mean you’re not a good person.

Consider for a moment a scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, one of my all-time favorite movies. After Dorothy and her three companions return to the Emerald City with the witch’s broomstick, they exchange bantering with the wizard. The wizard can’t believe his eyes; they’ve accomplished their task and returned, and now they’re waiting for him to keep the promises he made. The wizard stalls, explaining he needs to give the matter some thought. “Go and come back tomorrow!” he says.

As the four start getting belligerent with the wizard, Toto wanders off and pulls back a curtain. Dorothy asks the man behind the curtain, “Who are you?” Flustered, he replies, “I am the great and powerful Wizard of Oz.” Trying to erase Dorothy’s doubts, he says it again. Dorothy’s companions start spewing names at him as Dorothy exclaims, “Oh, you’re a very bad man!” The wizard responds, “Oh, no, my dear—I’m a very good man. I’m just a very bad wizard.”

The dialogue between Dorothy and the wizard is a reminder for all of us to praise the performer, but critique the performance. There is a sharp distinction between who we are and what we do. Or, as Saint Augustine said, “Love the sinner but hate the sin.” Doing something bad doesn’t make us bad. We fail; we’re not failures. We make mistakes; we’re not mistakes. Our actions don’t define us—each of us is a unique child of God. When we make bad judgment calls, act hastily, or say unpleasant things amidst emotional upset, we

have two choices. When we realize we have wronged, sinned, hurt, or failed big time, we can either come up with reasons for “why I’m not going to confession,” or we can check into the wound care center known as confession and be treated by the Divine Physician, Jesus.

Pope Francis says, “The face of God is that of a merciful father who is always patient...He does not tire of forgiving us if we know how to turn to him with a contrite heart...The Lord never tires of forgiving. We are the ones who tire of asking for forgiveness” (Angelus, March 17, 2013). Are you looking for cleansing and healing? Do you long to maintain a healthy life? Perhaps you need regular visits with the Divine Physician.

The healing power of confession

One person observed, “A secret is like an aching tooth. It keeps you uneasy until it comes out.” Yet there is something many of us seek to hide—our faults, mistakes, and sins. Alcoholics Anonymous reminds us all that “you’re as sick as your secret.” There has to come a moment when we tell someone our secrets. We simply need to verbalize them.

If your current living situation is filled with agitation and frustration, it’s time to make a change. It’s unhealthy to live with anger, bitterness, hatred, and resentment. When those emotions start infecting you and affecting the people you care about, send those emotions packing. When you realize enough is enough, evict all that negativity and, like the prodigal son, “come to your senses.” Do something about it: go to confession.

Deep down, you really do want better. And guess what?

You deserve better! Don't you want to come to the end of the day and know your life mattered? You are significant! Your relationships are cherished treasures you want to enrich and grow, not hurt or lose. When each of us thinks honestly about our life, we'll all see times when we've crossed the line and done or said something we wish we could take back. Check in to the wound care center for help and healing. It's in this sacrament of penance that we can all dig deep and discover why we do the things we do. Whatever it is that is hurting us or pushing people out of our life, we need to do something about it...now.

The Divine Physician

Consider, as I mentioned above, the story of the prodigal son. In it, Jesus illustrates how God is waiting for us to "come home." In the story, the father is not only waiting for his son, he's on the road pacing and longing for his return. When he sees him coming, he runs to greet him. The son begins to give his rehearsed speech of repentance, but the father interrupts him and shouts orders to begin the celebration.

This clearly shows us how God feels about our reconciliation. It isn't about our having to beg for forgiveness, or to face reprimand. It's all about opening ourselves up to receive the merciful, healing love and peace only God can provide when we celebrate the sacrament.

Confession can provide the healing we desire. I've heard the joy and excitement in the voices of those who have been away from confession and returned. They share how it brings them comfort and relief. Confession is the place where we go to Jesus, and he comes to us without harsh reprimand.

He invites us to make everything right by opening up our lives and inviting him in. In order to maintain spiritual and emotional health, we must regularly check in with Jesus. There are no secrets with him. He knows all of our sins and struggles, and he looks beyond them while he calls us to conversion and whispers encouragement in our ears.

Jesus associated with ordinary people like Martha and Mary, Peter and his mother-in-law, and Lazarus. He reached out to thieves, beggars, prostitutes, and tax collectors. He preached hope, change, and second chances to broken people, like the woman with many husbands and the woman about to be stoned. He even reached out with his forgiveness to the thief on the cross. People who were morally and spiritually bankrupt and labeled as sinners connected to Jesus through their need for understanding, compassion, and love. He didn't judge them or remind them of their sins. He simply offered forgiveness. When we go to him and pour out our sins, he takes them, dumps them into a lake, and posts a sign that states, "No Fishing Allowed."

Left on its own, our bad behavior will shadow us throughout our lives, sapping the joy and happiness life is waiting to offer. Oh, what a relief to stop carrying around all the pain we have caused!

When we neglect a physical wound, the infection spreads and eventually can become a serious health concern. At the wound care center, doctors properly diagnose and treat wounds. They monitor the size, depth, and appearance of the wounds, which, with ongoing attention and care, are healed.

Confession is the wound care center for our souls, and Jesus the Divine Physician offers us healing. A celebration

awaits us, with no appointment necessary. Just show up. Jesus is waiting for us to come to him and show him our wounds so he can begin to soothe them and walk with us through the healing process.

Preparing for the sacrament

I'm not going to lie to you: making a good confession takes effort and preparation. Before we celebrate the sacrament, we must do a fearless life inventory—what traditionally has been called “an examination of conscience.” This is an opportunity to take a long look inside, admit our brokenness, and identify what is wounded. This is not the time to hold back or to allow fear and embarrassment to control us.

Confession goes against human nature. Even though it is healing for the soul, there's a part of it that we all resist—the admission that we messed up. That creates a problem for most of us. Our stubbornness and pride make it difficult for us to come clean. Many of us are carrying heavy burdens. Past wrongs, mistakes, and sins are hidden in our hearts, tearing us apart and wearing us down.

In order to get right with Jesus and mend the damage we've caused in our relationships and in ourselves, it's essential that we come clean. Proverbs warns us: “Those who conceal their sins don't prosper; but whoever confesses finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).

Being truthful and straight with ourselves and each other breaks the chains that bind us. All of us, at one time or another, have done stupid and foolish things. Those are the things we like to bury in our deep, dark pasts. But when we ask Jesus to help us bring those things into the light, we can

be freed from this bondage. Pray with the psalmist: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts” (Psalm 139:23).

A fearless inventory

Prior to celebrating the sacrament of confession, sit undisturbed and quietly pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you through an examination of conscience. What needs to be removed from your soul? Come clean with yourself by owning what you’ve done or said; avoid pushing the blame on to someone else. Take full responsibility for your words and actions. Looking inside your life gives you an opportunity to ask: “Why did I choose to do that?” “What made me say that?” “Why did I fly off the handle, lose it, and harm others with those nasty words?” Coming clean means “telling it like it is” and “seeing it like it is” so that you can be straight and truthful and admit that “I did it!” or “Yep, I said that!” Once you have done this, then pray for courage to bring it all to Jesus.

As you examine your life, start with the Ten Commandments as a guide, along with these or similar questions:

- Where have I messed up in day-to-day living and relating?
- How have I hurt those around me?
- Have I taken the pressures of work home with me and lost patience with those I love?
- Have I viewed things on the Internet that were unhealthy and unchaste?
- Have I used drugs or imbibed too much alcohol?
- Have I used God’s name in vain?
- Have I been unfaithful to my marriage vows?

- Have I forsaken Church?
- Have I stolen?
- Have I lied or gossiped?
- Am I too busy for my children?
- Am I too preoccupied with outside interests instead of my family?
- What are my deep, dark secrets?
- Where have I refused to forgive?
- What resentments am I holding on to?

The benefits of coming clean

As I mentioned before, it's really important to accept responsibility for our wrongdoings and to stop shifting the blame onto someone else. People often say, "It really wasn't my fault. If only 'so-and-so' had acted differently, I wouldn't have responded as I did." Cop-outs like these are the standard reaction for most of us. When we have a steady diet of finger-pointing or blaming, we're living in bad faith. Many times, we created our own situations by exercising poor judgment or making impulsive decisions. Sometimes we cling to the security blanket of our favorite sin. But coming clean brings relief unlike anything sin can offer. There's significant strength and courage in the words "I was wrong"; "I let you down"; "I'm sorry."

An honest examination of conscience, on the other hand, is also not an excuse to dwell on what happened and view it through the lens of negativity and defeat. Stop beating yourself up and giving in to distorted thinking—you are not what you do! What happened happened. As much as you'd like to reverse

it and have a do-over, you can't. Accept it. Own it. Come clean.

Come clean with it all, not just the bits and pieces. Put it all out there—everything that is holding you back and poisoning your relationships. Coming clean initiates the process of releasing you from captivity. It brings meaning back into your life. Don't isolate yourself from the help Jesus is offering. Confession is the place to begin praying and asking Jesus to change your heart and habits so he can align you with what is right and healthy. Your parish priest can guide you on the journey to free and meaningful living. Speaking in the name of Jesus, he will offer you support and encouragement to stay on course.

King David was no stranger to coming clean. For months, he carried guilt and shame for his unholy affair with Bathsheba. His rap sheet of sins included adultery, conspiring to commit murder, executing a gifted and loyal soldier, and manipulating people like pawns on a chessboard to cover his tracks. David needed a visit to the wound care center.

After a year of denial and cover-up, David waved the white flag. He came clean, asking God to cleanse him of his sins and create a new heart in him (Psalm 51:1–19). These nineteen verses show us how to do this. David wanted better, and he knew it was only possible by asking God to forgive him, to wash away the infection, and to cleanse him from his past. Acknowledging what he did, David vowed to turn his life around and follow God's plan for him. His heart's desire was for a fresh, clean start.

And when you have completed your examination and felt your desire for a fresh, clean start, complete the process by getting in line or calling your parish priest for an

appointment to celebrate the sacrament and do a thorough cleansing. The sooner the wrong done or hurt inflicted is identified and brought out into open dialogue, the sooner healing can begin.

Psychologist and philosopher William James captures our need to come clean with these words: “For those who confess, shams are over, and realities have begun.”

After confession: Living a reconciled life centered in the sacrament

Over the years I’ve encounter many people who could have easily lived their lives carrying a great deal of hurts. Instead, they’ve deliberately chosen to live a life of reconciliation by frequently celebrating the sacrament of penance as an important part of their spiritual life. This has encouraged and enabled them to put their past behind them and overcome their wounds. Healing and wholesome living are possible for all of us. But it requires that we do three things: think “today,” use daily helpers, and commit to coming back to maintain our relationships.

Think “TODAY”

A blade of grass will grow a day’s growth in a day’s time. Now that you’ve come clean, it’s time to move on and start managing your behavior and mending your fences. You can progress in healing a day’s growth in a day’s time. You can reflect on your past and future intellectually, but now is the time to act in order to make the proper changes and commit to doing what is right. You need to identify whatever it is that was infecting you and your relationships and ban it from

your life.

I have good news! Today offers a fresh start. It's a new day filled with multiple opportunities and choices to either head in a healthy direction or return to an unhealthy life. Discharged from the wound care center of confession, you can start by working to regain the trust in your relationships by sitting down and talking and listening, instead of yelling and interrupting. Commit to getting into the habit of going to church for Sunday Mass and holy days.

After coming clean and admitting to the hurt you've caused, it's now time to take steps to steer clear of any situation that could cause further damage. The last thing you want to hear your loved ones say is, "Why is this happening to me again?"

Daily helpers

We all need daily helpers in our aftercare plan in order to keep us from backsliding. At the top of the instructions are "Reflecting" and "Rechecking." Reflecting before we act is necessary so that we don't keep revisiting unhealthy behaviors and habits. And we need to keep rechecking that our life is guided by the teachings of Jesus. In spite of not wanting to react in our usual way, the pattern we create over the years is familiar to us, so we tend to revert to it. We all do and say things we regret because we didn't think them through. We can derail this pattern by paying deliberate attention to our words and actions before they become something regrettable.

For example, when a situation or person gets under our skin, we need to institute a time-out period between the

trigger and our reaction. We need to take a moment to stop and reflect before we overreact, blurt out something, or act out inappropriately. We need to ask ourselves: will our words hurt or heal? Are we pushing people away? What can we do for better results?

Delaying action is essential. It pays big dividends in our emotional and spiritual lives and creates harmony and peace in our relationships. Without it, the chains bind us once again, and we become prisoners to our emotions as we allow them to direct our lives at whim. Stopping to reflect and consider what we are going to do gives us more control over our life. This practice is reinforced in the Book of Proverbs: “Wise people think before they act; fools don’t and even brag about it” (Proverbs 13:16).

Remind yourself every day: “I want better.” The quality of life you have, along with the character that defines you, is a direct result of the choices, decisions, and actions you’ve made. As you journey through your day, deliberately create enough space in your schedule to reflect and plan. Reflecting before you act will minimize any hurt you may inflict on others. Writing to his friend Timothy, Saint Paul instructed: “Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all” (1 Timothy 4:15).

Temptation will not get the best of us when we have an escape plan—for planning can render temptation powerless. We need to keep rechecking that our life is guided by the gospel principles of Jesus, especially expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5–7). Jesus provides a blueprint for our attitudes and motives as we turn to God and show sincere respect and kindness for all people. These

chapters remind us of what our lives should be like but often are not. Among them are the Beatitudes—those positive directives for good and happy lives. We no longer have to look for loopholes or make excuses for our bad behavior if we follow the Golden Rule and other advice there—advice for marriage, prayer, trusting God, worry, being angry, and seeking revenge.

Read Jesus' words slowly and deliberately, and then reflect on them in prayer. Ask Jesus to help you live out these words every day. It's a blessed cycle: reflecting and rechecking, and rechecking and reflecting.

Come back!

Some physical wounds take time and several visits to the doctor to heal completely. The same is true of our spiritual wounds. On top of that, our souls, like our bodies, need periodic checkups. Coming back often to the sacrament of penance makes very good spiritual sense.

Celebrating the sacrament as part of our parish's seasonal penance service is a great start. But it's really not enough to pop in once a year or every five years or so. If we are to have optimal spiritual and emotional health, then periodic soul care, celebrated with Jesus and a priest in the sacrament of penance, needs to be a regular part of our life. By taking frequent stock of our life, we can maintain good quality living.

When you return to confession, you're not limited to sharing only your shortcomings with your priest. You're also welcome to share the progress you've made by affirming the positive changes since your last visit. As a priest, I find joy in celebrating people's progress and hearing about the changes

they've made. My heart rejoices when I hear statements such as "Our family now goes together to Sunday Mass" or "Instead of flying off the handle and wounding others' spirits with my anger, I stopped, counted to ten, whispered a prayer, and responded from a place of peace and patience" or "I had the urge to visit some unwholesome sites on the web, but instead, I shut the computer down and went for a long walk." The outcome is invariably different from what it could have been, and has been in the past. And when that happens, it's certainly OK to give yourself a pat on the back and say, "Well done!"

Come to confession with a spirit of excitement, believing healing is only moments away! Share whatever you need to let go of. And experience the soothing comfort of Jesus as you hear his gentle voice whisper: "You're forgiven."

The invitation has been sent and Jesus is anxiously pacing and desiring for you to return and return often. It's time!

GOING TO CONFESSION

Most parishes have a scheduled time for confessions. Check your bulletin or parish website. If you can't make it during that time or want to have more time to talk things over with the priest, don't hesitate to call the parish office and schedule an appointment. If there are reasons why you'd rather not go to your own parish priest, it's OK to go elsewhere.

If it's been a long time since you last went to confession, don't be embarrassed. Every priest I know would be filled with joy to welcome you back to this sacramental meeting with Jesus. And don't be embarrassed if you think you won't know what to do. The priest will guide you through the simple sacramental rite.

Step by step

Customs vary from place to place, and—with the exception of the actual confession and the prayer of absolution—the priest has some flexibility in how the sacrament is celebrated. But, in general, here is an outline of the celebration:

1. The priest will welcome you.

2. Then you make the sign of the cross, and the priest will invite you to have trust in God.

3. If the priest doesn't know you, he may gently inquire about your state of life (married, single), the time of your last confession, and anything else that he might find helpful in celebrating the sacrament with you.

4. At this point the priest may read a Scripture passage that proclaims God's mercy or a call to conversion.

5. Then you will be invited to confess your sins. The priest may ask questions to help you make a full confession.

6. After your confession, you and the priest may talk a bit about what you have confessed, and he may offer you some spiritual advice.

7. The priest will also propose an act of penance to help you make satisfaction for sin and to help change your life.

8. Before the priest prays the prayer of absolution, he will invite you to express your sorrow. You may use your own words, but most people choose to pray the prayer known as the 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.

9. After this the priest prays the prayer of absolution, ending with “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” to which you respond, “Amen.”

10. The priest then says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,” to which you respond, “His mercy endure forever.”

The priest then prays a prayer of blessing and dismissal, to which, again, you respond, “Amen.”

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