

# GUIDE TO RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

*"To those who have been far away from the sacrament, of Reconciliation and forgiving love, I make this appeal: Come back to this source of grace; do not be afraid! Christ himself is waiting for you. He will heal you, and you will be at peace with God!"*

- Pope John Paul II, Sept 13 1987.

The basic requirement for receiving the sacrament of Penance is to have the intention of returning to God like the Prodigal Son and of acknowledging our sins with true sorrow before his representative, the priest.

## EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Examine your conscience. Recall your sins. Calmly ask yourself what you have done with full knowledge and full consent against God's Commandments.

**THE FIRST COMMANDMENT:** *I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me.*

- Did I perform my duties towards God reluctantly or grudgingly?
- Did I neglect my prayer life? Did I recite my usual prayers?
- Did I receive Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin or without the necessary preparation?
- Did I violate the one-hour Eucharistic fast?
- Did I fail to mention some grave sin in my previous confessions?
- Did I seriously believe in something superstitious or engage in a superstitious practice (palm-reading or fortune telling for instance)?
- Did I seriously doubt a matter of Faith?
- Did I put my faith in danger by deliberately exposing myself to material contrary to the Catholic faith or morals, whether on the internet, or by reading a *book*, pamphlet, *or* magazine, or by watching a film or television programs?
- Did I *endanger* my faith by joining or attending meetings of organizations *opposed* to the Catholic Faith?
- Have I committed the sin of sacrilege (profanation of a sacred person, place, or *thing*)?

**THE SECOND COMMANDMENT:** *You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*

- Did I fail to try my best to fulfil the promises and resolutions that I made to God?
- Did I take the name of God in vain? Did I make use of God's name mockingly, jokingly, angrily, or in any other irreverent manner?

- Did I make use of the Blessed Virgin Mary's name or another saint's name mockingly, jokingly, angrily, or in any other irreverent manner?
- Did I tell a lie under oath?
- Did I break (private or public) vows?

**THE THIRD COMMANDMENT** *Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.*

- Did I miss Mass on a Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation (August 15, December 25)?
- Did I fail to dress appropriately for Mass?
- Have I, without sufficient reason, arrived at Mass late?
- Did I allow myself to be distracted during Mass, by not paying attention, looking around out of curiosity, etc.?
- Did I cause another to be distracted?
- Have I performed any work or business activity that would inhibit the worship due to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the appropriate relaxation of mind and body, on a Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation?
- Did I fail to generously help the Church in her necessities to the extent that I am able?
- Did I fail to fast or abstain on a day prescribed by the Church?

**THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT** *Honour your father and your mother.*

**(FOR PARENTS)**

- Have I neglected to teach my children their prayers, send them to church, or give them a Christian education?
- Have I given them bad example?
- Have I neglected to watch over my children, to monitor their companions, the books they read, the movies and TV shows they watch, or their use of The Internet?
- Have I failed to see to it that my children made their First Confession and First Communion?
- Have I failed to see that my children have received the Sacrament of Confirmation?

**(FOR CHILDREN)**

- Was I disobedient toward my parents or others in authority?
- Did I neglect to help my parents when my help was needed?
- Did I treat my parents with little affection or respect?
- Did I react proudly when I was corrected by my parents?
- Did I have a disordered desire for independence?
- Did I do my chores?

**THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT:** *You shall not kill.*

- Did I easily get angry or lose my temper?
- Was I envious or jealous of others?
- Did I injure or take the life of anyone? Was I ever reckless in driving?
- Was I an occasion of sin for others by way of conversation: the telling of jokes religiously, racially or sexually offensive; my way of dressing; inviting somebody to attend certain shows; recommending inappropriate or immoral websites on the internet; lending harmful books or magazines; helping someone to steal, etc.? Did I give scandal to others? Did I try to repair the damage done by the scandal I gave?
- Did I lead others to sin? What sin or sins were involved?
- Did I fail to maintain a healthy lifestyle to the detriment or the neglect of my physical health? Did I attempt to take my life?
- Have I mutilated myself or another?
- Did I get drunk or use prohibited drugs?
- Did I eat or drink more than a sufficient amount, allowing myself to get carried away by gluttony?
- Did I participate in any form of physical violence?
- Did I consent to or actively take part in direct sterilization (tubal ligation, vasectomy, etc.)? Do I realize that this will have a permanent effect on my married life and that I will have to answer to God for its consequences?
- Did I consent to, advice, or actively take part in an abortion? Was I aware that the Church punishes with automatic excommunication (*latae sententiae*) those who *procure and achieve* abortion? Do I realize that this is a very grave crime?
- Did I cause harm to anyone with my words or actions?
- Did I desire revenge or harbor enmity, hatred, or ill-feelings when someone offended me?
- Did I ask pardon whenever I offended anyone?
- Did I insult or offensively tease anyone?
- Did I quarrel with one of my brothers or sisters?

**THE SIXTH AND NINTH COMMANDMENTS:** You shall not commit adultery. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

- Did I wilfully entertain impure thoughts?
- Did I consent to evil desires against the virtue of purity, even though I may not have carried them out? Were there any circumstances that aggravated the sin: affinity (relationship by marriage), consanguinity (blood relationship), either the married state or the consecration to God of a person involved?
- Did I engage in impure conversations? Did I start them?
- Did I look for fun in forms of entertainment that placed me in proximate occasions of sin, such as certain dances, movies, shows, books, or websites with immoral contents? Did I frequent houses of ill repute or keep bad company?

- Did I realize that I might already have been committing a sin by placing myself in a proximate occasion of sin, such as sharing a room with a person I find sexually attractive, or being alone with such a person in circumstances that could lead to sin?
- Did I fail to take care of those details of modesty and decency that are the safeguards of purity?
- Did I fail, before going to a show or reading a book, to find out its moral implications, so as not to put myself in immediate danger of sinning and in order to avoid distorting my conscience?
- Did I wilfully look at an indecent picture or look immodestly at myself or another? Did I wilfully desire to commit such a sin?
- Did I lead others to sins of impurity or immodesty? What sins?
- Did I commit an impure act? By myself, through masturbation? With someone else? How many times? With someone of the same or opposite sex? Was there any circumstance of relationship (such as affinity) that could have the sin special gravity?
- Do I have friendships that are habitual occasions of sexual sins? Am I prepared to end them?
- In courtship, is true love my fundamental reason for wanting to be with the other person? Do I live the constant and cheerful sacrifice of not putting the person I love in danger of sinning? Do I degrade human love by confusing it with selfishness or mere pleasure?

#### (FOR MARRIED PEOPLE)

- Did I, without good reason, deprive my spouse of the marital right? Did I claim my own rights in a way which showed no concern for my spouse's state of mind or health? Did I betray conjugal fidelity in desire or in deed?
- Did I take 'the pill' or use any other artificial birth control device before or after new life had already been conceived?
- Did I, without good reason, with the intention of avoiding conception, make use of marriage on only those days when offspring would not likely be engendered?
- Did I suggest to another person the use of birth control pills or another artificial method of preventing pregnancy (like condoms)?
- Did I have a hand in contributing to the contraceptive mentality by my advice, jokes, or attitudes?

#### THE SEVENTH AND TENTH COMMANDMENTS

*You shall not steal. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.*

- Did I steal? What object did I steal? How much money, or how much was the object worth? Did I give it back, or at least have the intention of doing so? Did I knowingly accept stolen goods or services (such as cable television, internet access) without payment?
- Have I done or caused damage to another person's property? To what extent?

- Did I harm anyone by deception, fraud, or coercion in business contracts or transactions?
- Did I unnecessarily spend beyond my means? Do I spend too much money because of vanity or caprice?
- Do I give alms according to my capacity?
- Was I envious of my neighbour's goods?
- Did I neglect to pay my debts?
- Did I knowingly accept stolen goods?
- Did I desire to steal?
- Did I give in to laziness or love of comfort rather than diligently work or study?
- Was I greedy? Do I have an excessively materialistic view of life?

### THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.*

- Did I tell lies? Did I repair any damage that may have faulted as a consequence of this?
- Have I unjustly or rashly accused others?
- Did I sin by detraction, that is, by telling the faults of another person without necessity?
- Did I sin by calumny, that is, by telling derogatory lies about another person?
- Did I engage in gossip, backbiting, or tale bearing?
- Did I reveal a secret without due cause?

### BEFORE RECEIVING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

*Be truly sorry for your sins*

The essential act of Penance, on the part of the penitent, is *contrition* a clear and decisive rejection of the sin committed, together with a resolution not to commit it again, out of the love one has for God (which is reborn with repentance). Understood in this way, *contrition* is, therefore, the beginning and the heart of *conversion*, of that evangelical *metanoia* which brings the person back to God like the Prodigal Son returning to his father, and which has in the Sacrament of Penance its visible sign, and which perfects attrition (imperfect contrition - born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and other penalties threatening the sinner) The *resolution to avoid committing these sins in the future* (amendment) is a sure sign that your sorrow is genuine and authentic.

This does not mean that one has to promise never to fall into sin again A resolution to try to avoid the near occasions of sin suffices for true repentance. God's grace in

cooperation with the intention to rectify your life will give you the strength to resist and overcome temptation in the future.

Act of Contrition

**O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell; but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.**

Or

**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 Saviour Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.  
In his name, my God, have mercy.**

DURING THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

The celebration begins by making the Sign of the Cross and greeting the priest, maybe using the words: "**Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.**"

The priest gives you a blessing. One response you might give is these words Saint Peter said to Christ: "**Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.**"

(Jn 21:17). One then continues with the time since one's last confession: "My last confession was ...[approximately how many weeks, months or year]."

- *Say the sins that you remember.* Start with the one that is most difficult to say; after this it will be easier to mention the rest. If you received general absolution, tell this to the priest and mention the sins forgiven then.
- If you do not know how to confess, or you feel uneasy or ashamed, simply ask the priest to assist you. Be assured that he will help you to make a good confession. Simply answer his questions without hiding anything out of shame or fear. Place your trust in God: he is your merciful Father and wants to forgive you.
- If you do not remember any serious sins, be sure to confess at least some of your

venial sins, adding at the end: **"That is all I can remember, Father, and I am very sorry for my sins."**

- The priest will assign you some penance and give you some advice to help you to be a better Christian.
- Listen to the words of absolution attentively. At the end answer **"Amen."**
- Be willing to do the penance as soon as possible. This penance will diminish the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven.

#### AFTER THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

- *Give thanks* to God for having forgiven you once again.
- Promptly and devoutly *fulfil the penance* given by the priest. Although you may receive Holy Communion even before performing your penance, it is advisable to do it as soon as possible.
- If you *recall some serious sin* that you forgot to tell, rest assured that it has been forgiven with the others, but be sure to include it in your next confession.