

Understanding the Healing Power of Confession

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8).

None of us like to admit our faults. It is much easier to make excuses for our failings or to simply deny them. The last thing we want is for other people to find out or tell us about our failings.

It is only natural that we feel bad when we do things that hurt others or hurt our relationship with God. That is because we are intrinsically wired to want to be connected to God, our creator, and to one another because we are linked together in the Father’s family.

Likewise, God never wants to be separated from us and understands our natural human tendencies. That is why God has given his people specific ways to repent from sin and Jesus instituted the sacrament of confession.

While our inclinations of denial and avoidance make going to confession difficult, we must recognize that all the excuses and denials of our failings do not make them go away. Rather, they only distance us further from those we have injured. This not only makes us unhappier here on earth, it can also lead to eternal separation from God after we die. To experience God’s abundant mercy and restore our relationship with him, we need to open up our hearts and receive the many blessings available in the sacrament of Penance.

In *Forgiven*, you will learn:

- how sin entered the world through Adam and Eve
- God has always wanted us to accept responsibility for our mistakes
- the Old and New Testaments show how God has given his people specific rituals to confess and repent from sin
- why Jesus gave Peter the power to bind and loose sin on earth
- the power of confessing our sins
- how to prepare for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation



Throughout the workbook there are references to Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* in the margin. To dig deeper, look up these references during or after the session.

God has always called for confession and repentance.

God wants to restore our relationship with him.

Despite our sinfulness, beginning with the first sin of Adam and Eve, God has always sought to restore our relationship with him. Though “ ‘God created us without us: . . . he did not will to save us without us.’ To receive his mercy, we must admit our faults” (CCC 1847). As in committing sin we exercise our free will, likewise we must exercise our free will to restore our relationship to him. The process of restoration has always involved confessing what we have done and repenting from our sin so that we may grow closer to him.

Confession and Repentance in the Old Testament

Genesis 3:8–13

- **Adam and Eve.** In Genesis, after having eaten from the fruit of the tree, we find Adam and Eve hiding in the trees when they heard the sound of God

walking in the garden. It is interesting that, like us, Adam and Eve immediately tried to hide from the reality of their sin. God’s response is likewise interesting because instead of simply confronting them with what he knows they have done, he asks them, “Where are you?” He was not asking where they were hiding, rather he was asking where they stood in their relationships with him and each other, and how they know they are naked. As an all-knowing God, he certainly did not need them to provide answers to those questions. However, through a series of questions, he led them to “confess” what they had done and to own up to their failings. Disappointingly they tried to deflect their responsibility by blaming someone else.

- **Cain.** Cain’s murder of Abel illustrates the danger of unrepented sin. When Cain’s offering was rejected, God asked: “If you do well will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it”

(Genesis 4:7). Instead of accepting responsibility, Cain’s envy led him to murder his brother. When God asked, “Where is Abel your brother?” Cain replied with a lie: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). So, instead of confessing and repenting, Cain falls further into sin.



Genesis 4:1–15

God gives his people specific rituals and ways to confess their sins.

For many generations, God continues to reveal himself and the ways in which he wants his people to live. In the Law of Moses, he also gave his people very specific rituals for confessing their sins. In Leviticus, the Mosaic Law provided specific instructions on how God's people must repent:

- They must confess their sin.
- They must perform a ceremonial act of sacrifice and penance.
- They must use the intercession of a priest.

In Numbers, the Law not only commanded that they need to confess their sin, but they were required to make full restitution, and give an additional fifth to the person wronged.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit and contrite heart.

In **Psalm 51**, we read King David's moving confession. Through it, God reveals that ultimately what he wants is for us to have sincere sorrow for our sins and an authentic conversion, a "broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" (**Psalm 51:17**). We also learn that a renewed zeal for God can come from confession as David talks about how he is going to help sinners return to God.

Repentance in the Old Law Foreshadowed Sacramental Confession.

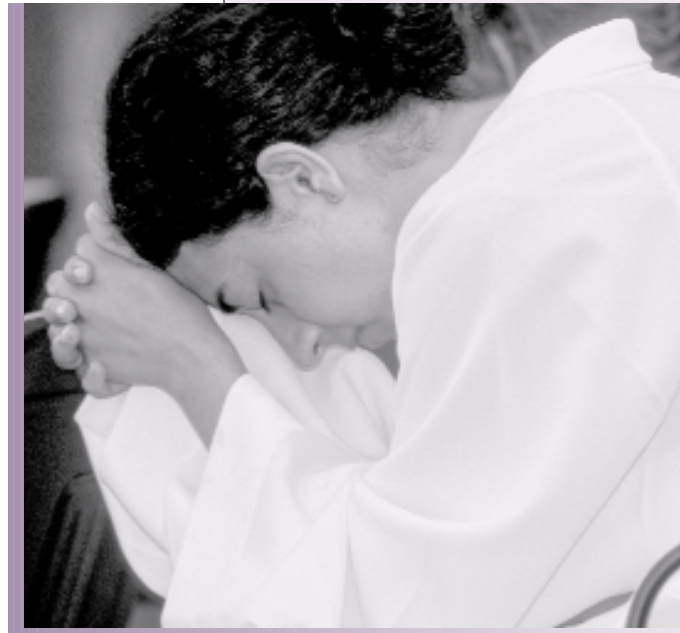
Repentance in the Old Covenant was a humbling and costly process that emphasized the seriousness of sin. In spite of this difficult process of repentance, the sinner only had the hope that his confessed sins were forgiven. There was no guarantee. The Old Testament system of confession merely foreshadowed the sacrament of forgiveness given to the Church by Christ.

The Old Covenant finds its fulfillment in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, God sends his only begotten son to redeem us. In contrast to Adam, through his obedience, Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice to God the Father for the forgiveness of our sins. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (**Romans 5:19**).

Leviticus 5:5-6

Numbers 5:5-7





The Gift of Confession

Jesus formed his Church and gave her the power to bind and loose.

Christ formed the Church with Peter as its visible head, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” He then went on to say to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

The power to bind and loose in the Old Testament.

This power to bind and loose was based on Old Testament typology. God chose Moses to communicate and interpret God’s Law and God mediated to his chosen people through Moses. Likewise, Jesus was conferring upon Peter God’s own authority in ruling God’s family.

As in the time of Moses, others would also be designated judges of what was prohibited (bound) or what was permitted (loosed), or when people were “absolved” or “condemned” for specific violations of the law. So later in Matthew, Jesus also says to all the apostles, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18).

Matthew 9:6

CCC 981, 1461

Jesus empowered the apostles to forgive sins.

Jesus had the authority on earth to forgive sins. Because he knew he was not going to remain visibly with the Church on earth, Jesus gave his Church a wonderful gift so that he would be able to offer forgiveness to future generations. After Jesus rose from the dead, he empowered the apostles to forgive sins.

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’” (John 20:21-23).

Genesis 2:7

John 20:21–23

God breathed on humans twice.

- **At the moment of creation** when God breathed his life into Adam, who was given the vocation to transmit human life.
- **When Jesus breathed his life-giving potency into the apostles**, he entrusted them with his mission to restore their brothers and sisters to supernatural life and spiritual health through the sacrament of forgiveness.

Both times, God’s breath upon man was life-giving.

Understanding the Sacrament of Penance

A sacrament known by many names.

In the Church, this sacrament has been referred to by several different names, each highlighting just one of the powerful elements contained within it.

The *Catechism* (CCC 1423–24) tells us it is called a:

- **Sacrament of Conversion** because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.
- **Sacrament of Penance** since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.
- **Sacrament of Confession** since the disclosure of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. It is also a "confession" acknowledging and praising the holiness of God and his mercy toward a sinful man.
- **Sacrament of Forgiveness** since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace."
- **Sacrament of Reconciliation** because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

One of the sacraments of healing.

Though we receive new life through the sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist—we are still human beings subject to the consequences of original sin. As a result, this "new life can be weakened or even lost by sin." (CCC 1420) Just as Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, so too Jesus wanted the Church, through the Holy Spirit, to continue his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. Therefore we have two sacraments of healing:

- Sacrament of Penance
- Sacrament of Anointing the Sick

CCC 1423–24



Mark 2:1–12
CCC 1421

Overcoming the Fear of Going to Confession

The Joy in Heaven over Repentant Sinners

In the Gospels, Jesus shows us the compassionate heart of the Father, and in the process he reveals his own heart. In every encounter with repentant sinners Jesus was tender, loving, and forgiving. He rejected no one. Through the priest and the sacrament of Penance, Jesus offers us the same tender, loving forgiveness. Never hesitate to repent and flee into your heavenly Father's waiting arms. Jesus told us "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

The Big Fish

Jesus makes his priests fishers of men. Priests live to catch the big ones. In his book, *The Gift of the Church*, Monsignor Bob Guste describes what it means to a priest when he hears the confession of someone burdened with mortal sin. "It's one of the happiest times in my life as a priest. That's why I became a priest! It's like being a doctor. You didn't go through all that training just to put band-aids on people. When someone comes along who is really hurting and you're able to help that person in a significant way—you feel it's worth it all." But, you might ask, what would the priest think of that person? While many priests attest they cannot remember what is confessed in the sacrament, Monsignor Guste answers this question this way, "I would feel so much respect for that person's honesty and courage. I would feel a special reverence in the company of that person and a greater bond of closeness and love. I would feel very humble and have a deep sense of gratitude to God for what happened that day when that burden was laid down and God's grace broke through in such a wonderful way!"

The Little Fish

Let's face it, we are all sinners. Even when there is no mortal sin in our life, we can recognize the need for repentance because we have a heart divided with many attachments. We love Jesus, but not totally because it is hard to give up the attachments that prevent us from surrendering to Jesus. The rich young man who faithfully kept the commandments sought to have a genuinely successful life. He wanted to be perfect. He came to the right person, Jesus. St. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him with love, then offered an exchange. If he would voluntarily give up the material wealth that would not be lasting, he could become Jesus' disciple and receive a heavenly reward that would never be lost. However, the young man went away very sad because he wouldn't surrender his attachment to his riches.

Confession of venial sins helps to heal our divided heart so we can surrender completely to Jesus. It strikes at the root of the selfishness and the attachments that hold us back from truthfully saying with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). The Church in her wisdom recommends that we go to confession once a month. However, this is not an obligation, rather it is an opportunity to help us remove patterns of sin in our life and grow closer to Jesus.

Bible Search

There are many stories in the New Testament showing God's limitless mercy and Jesus' tender, loving forgiveness. Reading them reminds us of the forgiveness and mercy awaiting us.

Matthew 9:10–13	Eating with tax collectors & sinners
Mark 2:3–12	Healing the paralytic
Luke 7:36–50	The sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair
Luke 15:1–7	Parable of the lost sheep
Luke 15:11–32	The prodigal son
Luke 23:32–43	The thief on the cross
John 8:3–11	Woman caught in adultery

Matthew 19:16–22, Mark 10:17–22, and Luke 18:18–23

Preparing for Confession

CCC 1447–48

Confession reconciles us with God and deepens our relationship with Jesus.

In the early centuries, Christians only approached the sacrament of forgiveness when they were weighed down with the guilt of mortal sin. Gradually a keener appreciation developed of how this powerful sacrament contributed to a Christian's spiritual well-being. So, while the necessity of confession for mortal sin continued to be stressed, the Church also encouraged its members to use this sacrament to deepen their loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

CCC 1458, 1493

It's not just for mortal sin.

In his marvelous encyclical on the Mystical Body, Pope Pius XII wrote: "For a constant and faster advancement along the necessary path of virtue, we highly recommend the pious practice of frequent confession, introduced by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

Among the benefits of confessing venial sins Pius XII listed:

- an increase in true self-knowledge,
- uprooting bad habits,
- prevention of spiritual apathy,
- purifying of our conscience,
- strengthening our will, and
- the benefit of spiritual direction.

Great confessors like the Cure d'Ars, St. John Vianney, and St. Padre Pio spent many hours hearing confessions. They not only used the sacrament to restore to supernatural life those steeped in mortal sin, but they also empowered those with venial sins to seek genuine holiness.

To assist you to gain the greatest benefits from this magnificent sacrament, the preparation on the following pages provides guidelines for preparing to receive the sacrament of Penance. It is divided into three parts:

- Prayer
- A general Examination of Conscience
- An examination using the Ten Commandments



Going to Confession: What Do You Say and Do?

For those who are making their first confession or who have been away from the sacrament for a long time, the following guidelines will prove helpful.

1. Entering the Confessional

The choice is yours. You can go to confession face-to-face or behind a screen. Generally if you go behind the screen you will kneel. Usually, when going to confession face-to-face you will sit facing the priest, but kneeling is (sometimes) an option.

2. The Confession

After you are settled in your chosen place, the priest will give a greeting. For example, he may say a brief prayer like:

“May God enlighten your heart to help you know and acknowledge your sins, and trust in his great mercy.”

If you are unsure of what to do next, because you have been away from the sacrament for a long time, you might simply say,

“Father I am nervous because I have not made my confession in _____ years. I am not sure what to do. Please guide me through the sacrament.”

If that is not the case, simply say:

“Bless me, father, for I have sinned. My last confession was [two months, five years, etc.] ago. Since that time the following are my sins.”

Then confess your sins. Depending on the situation, the priest may ask tactful questions to determine the kind of sins you are confessing.

3. The Advice and Penance

Once you have named all your sins, the priest may give you encouragement and advice. This will be followed by giving you a penance. For example, he may ask you to say the Rosary or reflect on Jesus’ passion and death for 20 minutes.

Then he will ask you to make a good act of contrition. You can use the Act of Contrition prayer or come up with a prayer of your own.

An Act of Contrition

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, 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 sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

This will be followed by absolution of your sins. Then thank the priest and leave the confessional.



Purgatory

The person who loves God perfectly at the moment of death goes directly to heaven.

The soul that chooses not to love God at all at the moment of death goes directly to hell. Purgatory is the place souls go who love God at the moment of death, but they do not love him perfectly. Purgatory is not a second chance for those who die

in the state of mortal sin. Rather, it is the final purification of the elect. In the words of the *Catechism*:

“All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (CCC 1030).

There is a radical difference between the punishment of hell and the purification of Purgatory. Hell is a place of despair, hatred, and eternal torment. The fire that burns in hell is the flame of God’s wrath. Purgatory is a place of suffering, sorrow, and hope where souls experience the purifying flame of God’s love.

Nevertheless, the suffering in Purgatory is very real. The Great Doctors of the Church—St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bonaventure—taught that the suffering in Purgatory exceeds any suffering in this life because it is caused by our increased understanding of our sins. The greatest suffering of Purgatory is the longing for God. Therefore the Church urges her children to purify themselves in this life from all attachment to sin, and to pray for the poor souls who are in Purgatory. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recalled his mother’s final request: “Lay this body anywhere. Let not the care of it in any way disturb you. Only this I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you are.” The length of time in Purgatory corresponds to the degree of one’s attachment to sin.

Scriptural Basis for Purgatory

Although the word “Purgatory” is not in the Bible, the idea is clearly taught in Sacred Scripture.

New Testament

- The Book of Revelation teaches that “nothing unclean” shall enter heaven (**Revelation 21:27**).
- St. Paul speaks of our judgment in terms of a cleansing fire: “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (**1 Corinthians 3:15**).
- St. Peter similarly wrote: “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (**1 Peter 1:7**).
- Peter tells us that Christ visited a place for the dead that is not hell and not heaven, and preached to them the good news so that heaven would be open to them (**1 Peter 3:19**).
- Jesus also talks about the sinner who “will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (**Matthew 12:32**).
- The Book of Hebrews commands: “Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (**Hebrews 12:14**).

Old Testament

Further evidence of purification after death is found in the Old Testament:

- Praying for the dead is a practice mentioned in Sacred Scripture. Judas Maccabeus prayed for his fallen comrades “that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. . . . Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin” (**2 Maccabees 12:42, 46**).
- The Book of Sirach teaches, “Give graciously to all the living, and withhold not kindness from the dead” (**Sirach 7:33**).