

The Welcoming of the Penitent and the Reading of the Word of God

As mentioned in our first catechesis on confession, there are several steps in the Sacrament before we get to the traditional line “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” First, of course, is to remember that confession is a liturgical act, liturgical acts are prayer, and as Catholics we like to begin prayer by recollecting ourselves in God’s mercy and in his abiding love. The way we often do that is with a simple sign of the cross.

After this comes some words of encouragement from the priest. It can take one of many forms:

- May God, who has shone his light in our hearts grant that you may truly know your sins and his mercy.
- Come with trust to the Lord, who does not wish the sinner to die but to turn back to him and live.
- May the grace of the Holy Spirit illumine your heart, so that with confidence you may confess your sins and come to know the mercy of God.
- May the Lord be in your heart, that you may confess your sins with a contrite spirit.

There is something common to all of these: a reliance on God. The Book of Proverbs says “The just fall seven times a day”, but oftentimes it is hard to remember everything that we’ve done. We rely on the Holy Spirit to enlighten us and remind us of those areas in our lives where we need healing, so that we can present them to the Divine Physician. And, of course, the quote above is not the end of the line from Proverbs. The full line is “Though the just fall seven times, they rise again” (Proverbs 24:16a). We ask God’s help in confession not just to accuse ourselves of sin, but also to rise out of that sin into a new life of grace.

After the encouragement to trust in God and rely on his help for the Sacrament, there is an optional brief reading from Scripture. The rite specifies that either the penitent or the priest may do the reading. The texts are meant to enlighten the penitent to recognize his or her sins and to call him or her to conversion and to trust in God’s mercy. Much of the ritual book is different options for Scriptural texts, but I will again only highlight a few here:

- Isaiah 53:4-6—*It was our infirmities that he bore...*
- Ezekiel 11:19-20—*I will give them a new heart...*
- Matthew 6:14-15—*If you forgive...*
- Romans 5:8-9—*Christ died for us...*

Again, the common theme here is Christ taking away our sins so that we may lead a new life in him. Such hope from a Sacrament that has such a negative connotation!

The Confession of Sins and the Acceptance of an Act of Penance

And now we arrive at the heart of the Sacrament. The English custom has the penitent traditionally begin with “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, it has been *xxxx* [*amount of time*] since my last confession. These are my sins.” This is not a mandatory part of the rite, but it is often a comfort to have a way to get into the heart of the matter, especially because we can often find ourselves unsure what to say first!

The penitent should then confess all the mortal sins he or she can remember, and indicate to the best of their knowledge how many times he or she committed those sins. This is traditionally referred to as ‘number and kind.’ You needn’t give too much detail, just enough for the priest to know what the sin is. Also, it is important to remember that confession shouldn’t be just a cherry-picked list to get in and out, but as we try to improve ourselves on the Christian journey, we should unburden ourselves as much as possible to the Lord, who redeems us.

After the penitent finishes confessing, it would be appropriate to make a statement such as “For these and any sins I may have forgotten, I ask pardon and penance from you, Father.” This is a sign to the priest that it’s his turn. He should offer some counsel on beginning a new life in Christ, including the duties of the Christian life. It is also in the realm of possibility that the priest encourages the penitent to make some suitable reparation, particularly if the sins were harmful or scandalous to another. Fear not, though, it would be exceedingly inappropriate to assign as penance something that would make the situation worse, such as returning the money to a bank one has robbed (the favorite example sin from seminary!).

It is also worth noting that the instructions in the ritual also explicitly state “The priest, if there is need, may help the penitent to make an integral confession and, moreover, encourage him (her) to repent sincerely for offenses committed against God.” In plain English, if the penitent needs help thinking what to do or what to say, the Church expects the priest to help them! So, to repeat again: when you come to confession, don’t be afraid! Ask the priest for help if you need it, and trust that he is there to offer you the mercy of God, who awaits your return to him with open arms.

Finally, after the counsel, the priest will assign a penance. This is both an opportunity to apologize for our past—although forgiveness of sins is not conditional based on its completion, as we’ll see next week—and also to strengthen our resolve on the Christian journey. There are a few different possibilities. Usually, some form of prayer is included, but a form of self-denial or a charitable act are also appropriate. As the penitent, you do have the right to request a different penance, but remember the goal should always be growing in God’s love and to train ourselves to follow him ever more closely. That is, after all, why he sent his Son to die for us: so that we can be with him forever in heaven!