

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- No sin is hidden from God, and all sins affect the community.
- Jesus forgave sins and gave his apostles the authority to forgive.
- Penance leads us from sorrow for sin to reconciliation with God and Church.



The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

We often wish for chances to receive forgiveness, to redeem past hurts. Recall something you did recently that you regret. Shouting at a driver who cut you off on in traffic. Promoting yourself in a way that discounts the efforts of others. *How would you feel about asking for forgiveness?*

Or maybe you were the one who was hurt. Maybe you'd like to offer forgiveness.

Feeling the need to seek and extend forgiveness is common among people of good will. When thoughts, words, or actions have been intentionally unloving, relationships—between people and with God—are affected. Reconciliation is needed.

- *How difficult is it for you to ask for forgiveness? To offer forgiveness?*



Sin Is a Refusal to Love

Sin isn't merely breaking the rules. Sin is understood in relation to love. God loves us so much, yet we often fail to return that love. **Sin** is the failure to respond to the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

Sin is first a matter of a selfish heart—a refusal to care—before it shows itself in actions. Because loving God and loving our neighbor are tied together, sin will always be expressed in and through our relationships. Sin can take the form of words, actions, thoughts, attitudes, and failure to speak or act with love.

In one option of the penitential act at Mass, we confess to sinning "in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do."

The Effects of Sin

In the creation story found in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve experienced harmony with self, God, each other, and creation until the serpent entered the Garden and they committed sin. In Genesis 3 (see verses below), we see the effects of disobeying God.

Alienation From Self

After Adam and Eve sinned, their eyes "were opened, and they knew that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths" (7). Shame and uneasiness replaced openness and confidence.

When we sin, the nakedness of trust is replaced by a cloak of defensiveness. No matter how attractive and pleasurable sin may seem, it has a diminishing and disintegrating effect on our inner selves.

Alienation From God

They “hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (8). Fear and distance replaced the trust and intimacy they previously had with God. Uncomfortable in God’s presence, they hid.

When we sin, we distance ourselves from God, thinking we’re unworthy of God’s love.

Alienation From Others

“The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it” (12). Adam blamed Eve for leading him into disobedience just as Eve blamed the serpent. As a result, Adam and Eve became alienated from each other. Our self-centeredness alienates us from others. Sin introduces division.

How Did Jesus Minister to Sinners?

Jesus came to reconcile and save us. He communicated healing and mercy in a human way. He also gave his apostles the power to forgive sins: “he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’” (John 20:22–23). The Church continues Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation today in the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

Forgiving sins was central to Jesus’ ministry. Read the following Gospel passages and consider how Jesus ministered to the sinner in each:

Mark 2:1–12

Luke 7:36–50

Luke 19:1–10

John 8:1–11

- How do you feel about God forgiving your sins?



Types of Sin

Every sin falls into one of two categories:

- **Venial sin** occurs when we fail to show care for others. We may speak sharply, revel in gossip, or exercise inappropriate power over another. Venial sins don’t radically turn us away from God, but the habit of unloving acts can corrode our relationship to God. We must take venial sins seriously because they can weigh us down with bad habits.
- **Mortal sin** seriously breaks the relationship with God, neighbor, world, and self. Three conditions are needed for a sin to be considered mortal (see CCC 1857):
 - The act is wrong (grave matter).
 - The person knows it’s wrong (full knowledge).
 - The person chooses to do it anyway (deliberate consent).

The Steps of the Rite

The sacrament of penance and reconciliation can be celebrated individually or in a communal service. Both rites include individual confession and absolution.

Contrition

We prepare for the sacrament through an **examination of conscience**, reflecting on our lives and the choices we’ve made. We may use the Ten Commandments and teachings of Jesus to guide our examination. We reflect on how generous—or selfish—our responses to God and others have been.

To be forgiven, we must show contrition, sorrow for our sins, and be resolved to follow Jesus’ command to the woman caught in adultery, “from now on do not sin any more” (John 8:11).

Confessing Sins, Accepting a Penance

We admit our sinfulness and confess our sins.

Perhaps a Scripture passage made us aware of an area in which we haven't loved enough. "Father, I'm like the older son in the gospel you read, and I'm not ready to forgive others." Or, "I'm often impatient with my family." Or, "I have sinned and I desire absolution."

The priest will assign a **penance**. The act of penance—often a prayer, Scripture reading, or action—helps heal us of the sin and, in some way, makes up for the damage our sin caused.

Why Confess to a Priest?

We don't live in our minds alone; we need to express—with words, signs, and gestures—what's in our minds and hearts. We need to see, hear, and feel forgiveness—not just think about it.

While sin may be secret, it's never private. The Church has always believed that every sin affects the entire community. Since our sins wound and diminish the community, reconciliation must include the community, not just God. In the sacrament, the priest represents Christ (the head) and the Church (the members).

As Jesus' stand-in, the priest isn't learning anything new; God sees all our actions. And like God, he wants only to offer mercy. He is also bound by the seal of the confessional: "He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives" (CCC 1467). So in this sense only, all our sins remain private.

Act of Contrition, Absolution

We express sorrow for our sins in an **act of contrition**. We may express sorrow in our own words, the priest may lead us in prayer, or we may use a memorized prayer like this one:

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. Amen.

The priest extends his right hand over us and makes the prayer of **absolution**. Hearing God's forgiveness with our ears meets a basic human need. This prayer completes, seals, our change of heart. It signifies God's forgiveness of us and our reconciliation with the Church:

"...May God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Rite of Penance, 46

When we leave the reconciliation chapel, we've been forgiven of the sins we confessed and the sins we unintentionally omitted. We perform our penance and make a new beginning.



How Often Should I Celebrate This Sacrament?

We're encouraged to do so often enough that when we really need the sacrament, it doesn't feel like an alien or strange experience. It should feel like coming home. Many people find more frequent, even monthly, celebration of this sacrament to be helpful. Catholics are obligated to confess serious sins at least once a year. Mortal sins must be named explicitly, number and type, in the sacrament of penance and reconciliation (Canon 988, CCC 1456).

Advent and Lent are traditional times when the Church beckons her children to know and celebrate God's mercy in this sacrament. Most parishes provide communal penance services or schedule extra times for reception of the sacrament. Parishes also offer regular times throughout the year, such as Saturday afternoons, and anyone can request an appointment with a priest.

Ambassadors of Reconciliation

We're called to be God's instruments in removing barriers that keep individuals and groups from communicating with and caring for one another. Participation in this sacrament implies that as God freely forgives our transgressions, we also are willing to freely give and receive forgiveness. As we pray in the Our Father: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The sacrament of penance is a sacrament of both human and divine dimensions. All of us sin and all of us stand in need of forgiveness. Ours is a God who heals, a physician who binds up our wounded hearts, a loving parent who forgives and embraces the child who has wandered off. In this sacrament, God offers the same mercy and care to us.

- Name a way you can answer the call to forgive.



Begin to document a regular examination of conscience in your journal. Record the highs and lows of your ongoing journey toward right living and right relationship with God, others, and yourself.

- What are the stumbling blocks that lead me to sin?
- What sins weigh heavy on my heart?



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