

## *“The Light Is On For You”*

### **Walking Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

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“Walking” through this sacrament is a misleading term. The only walking needed, for this quietly spoken yet profound rite, is to the church door and then into the Reconciliation Room or the Confessional. The penitent approaches. The priest is waiting, ready to welcome anyone who asks for forgiveness and Christ’s healing presence. The simple rite consists of a dialog between the priest and the individual. It is the same profound simplicity with which Jesus encountered people in his ministry of announcing the Kingdom of God.

#### **Preparation for the Sacrament**

Catholics are led to the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as Confession or Penance) by feelings of remorse and the awareness of actions that caused hurt to others and by the desire to live a more holy life. This state of mind and soul is called *contrition*. It is the contrite heart that is longing for a right relationship with God. This movement of the soul includes a desire to start over, to move away from sin and be forgiven. Contrition leads to an honest self-assessment of sins, omissions of the good that could have been done, and habits and attitudes that are harmful to us and the community. The church has called this internal assessment an *examination of conscience*. We are guided in this process by reviewing our lives in the light of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1- 17), the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12), the judgment scene of Matthew (Matthew 25:31-46) and the works of mercy and tenets of the Catholic Church. **The general guideline to identify grave sin is that it is a serious matter, it was done with understanding of its serious nature, and it was done with sufficient freedom of will.** This preparation might be concluded with a prayer to God asking for the courage and strength needed for this spiritual step. During this review of past behavior and attitudes, we may have a question about sin. Ask the priest! He is there to assist us in our spiritual journeys.

#### **Going to Confession**

After the examination of conscience, we are ready to begin the sacramental rite. Many churches offer a choice of spaces: either a Reconciliation Room where a person sits in a comfortable space facing the priest or a confessional which allows for anonymity. All are welcome to choose the setting that feels most comfortable for them. As Jesus did, the priest is there to provide God’s love, healing, and forgiveness.

Whether meeting face to face or using a confessional, the rite begins with the **Sign of the Cross**: “*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*” The priest will offer words of welcome and possibly read a short **Scripture passage**. The individual then tells their sins, failings, omissions and attitudes that signify a broken relationship with God. Speaking aloud the painful words of personal sinfulness is a crucial element of the dialog and unburdening of the heart. In either setting, the priest may occasionally ask a question for clarification. The sacrament is not a counseling session and a lengthy discussion is not expected. The priest then assigns a **Penance** which may take the form of prayers, an act of charity, or restitution. The act of penance is an outward sign to us of our willingness to receive God’s grace and live a holy life. The person then prays an **Act of Contrition** expressing sorrow for their sins. Some options for this prayer are your own words, the Jesus Prayer: “*Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner;*” or the following prayer: “*O 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 the help of your grace, 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, O Lord, have mercy.*”

The rite comes to a climax with the words of **Absolution** prayed by the priest. Through the priest, it is Jesus speaking and forgiving us. During the absolution, the words of forgiveness, the priest raises his hand as in blessing (confessional) or he may hold both hands over the penitent’s head as in a sign of calling down of the Holy Spirit (face-to-face). The penitent is thus forgiven and unburdened from the guilt, anxiety, and remorse that sin brings to the human experience. The sacrament concludes with the priest inviting the person to go in peace. The response, “Thanks be to God” expresses the gratitude of the person, now forgiven.

A final note: anything told to a priest during the Sacrament of Reconciliation can never be revealed to another, with no exceptions. This is called the “seal of the confessional.” This Sacrament of Reconciliation is God’s gift of a graced moment, spiritual healing, emotional unburdening, and the total freedom of forgiveness. The gift is waiting for all of us. We are invited to step up and accept it – it’s free!

A simple, printable guide to the celebration of the sacrament, what to say and do and when can be found at:

[www.bustedhalo.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/.../how-to-confess.pdf](http://www.bustedhalo.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/.../how-to-confess.pdf)