

HOW TO CONFESS TO A PRIEST IN THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

There are two rites for the Sacrament of Reconciliation currently in use. In the old rite of Confession, or Penance, the penitent begins by saying, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been [however long], since my last confession." In the new Rite of Penance, promulgated in 1973, when we first enter the reconciliation room, the priest greets us in the name of Christ and we return the greeting however we wish. Sometimes the priest's greeting will be formal, by saying for example, "Peace be with you," but sometimes it will be a simple hello, or have a seat." Either beginning is acceptable, as both rites are being used today.

In the new rite, a passage from Scripture is then read. We can bring a favorite passage with us to read, or the priest might have a selection here. He might read the passage himself, or he might ask us to read it. In the old rite, the Scripture reading does not occur. Then we confess our sins. In particular, we are encouraged to discuss sinful or selfish patterns in our lives out of which our sin emerges. Together we discuss ways to overcome our sins and our sinful behavior patterns. This current practice is a departure from the old rite in which we listed sins and the numbers of times we committed them. This revised rite invites us to reflect about why we do the things we do, and how we might change. It invites the celebrant to make specific suggestions and comments rather than general admonitory ones.

As in the old rite, the telling of sins ends when the priest gives us our penance, and the blessing of absolution. The priest will give us a penance to help us pay for the temporal effects of our sins. He might ask us to say certain prayers ("Say three Hail Marys"), for instance, or ask us to read certain parts of Scripture. If there is restitution to be made (such as giving back something that was taken), he might ask us to do so. Whatever he asks us to do, we should accomplish it as soon as possible after leaving the Confessional. If we unintentionally forgot to mention a sin, we will be forgiven for it, but should mention it in our next Confession. The priest may then ask us to say an Act of Contrition, either from memory or spontaneously. The traditional way of doing this is to recite aloud the prayer called the "Act of Contrition":

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

Some parishes provide an Act of Contrition on a card or in a booklet. We can also spontaneously speak loud our sorrow for our sins and our desire to change – or we can bring any other favorite prayer with us to the reconciliation room that expresses a similar sentiment. "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner," is a good, acceptable prayer for an Act of Contrition.

Finally the priest extends his hands over us and says the prayers of absolution to grant us forgiveness for our sins in the name of God and our church community. The ritual ends with sharing a sign of peace: a handshake, a hug, or simply the words, "Go in peace."

We're in a time of transition, so now it's okay to celebrate either the old rite or the new. In both rites, we have the option of celebrating face to face, or behind a screen. A priest may speak in general about sins mentioned to him, but under the seal of Confession, he can never bring up your sins with you or mention your sins to anyone else – ever.