



THE PARISH OF ST PETER & ST LEONARD, HORBURY,
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Common Questions Concerning Confession



The Society
under the patronage of Saint Wilfrid and Saint Hilda



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Bible tells us that Jesus was born to save us from our sins. During his public ministry, he therefore preached about the forgiveness of sins – remember the parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11ff) or the lost sheep (Luke 15.1ff), or consider his teaching that ‘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). Jesus himself forgave sins when he walked on earth – remember the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8.1ff) or the woman who washed his feet with her tears (Luke 7.36ff) – but he also gave us ways in which sins could be forgiven after he had ascended to heaven.

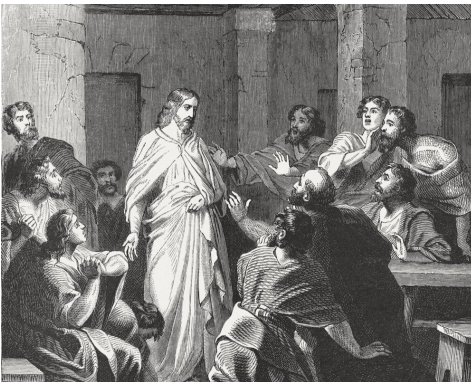
Baptism is the ordinary way in which sins can be forgiven, but what happens when we sin after baptism? St Paul tells us that we cannot be baptized twice, so how can sins be forgiven after baptism? The answer is through the sacrament of confession.

Where does Confession come from?

The sacrament of confession, also called ‘reconciliation’, ‘penance’, or ‘absolution’, is the way in which God forgives our sins. How do we know this? Because Jesus inaugurated it. The Bible (John 20.21-23) tells us that, on the first Easter Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to his apostles, breathed on them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ Here, Jesus was giving his apostles the gift of being able to offer God’s forgiveness to other people. We see that the apostles carried out this work in the rest of the New Testament. Writing to the Corinthians St Paul tells the church there that ‘God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself... gave us the ministry of reconciliation’ (II Corinthians 5.18). In the epistle of St James (5.16), James tells the church to ‘confess your sins to one another, and pray for one

another, that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.’ Writing a little later, St Athanasius echoed Christ’s teaching when he wrote, ‘he who in penance confesses his sins, receives through the priest forgiveness in virtue of the grace of Christ’. St Ambrose similarly taught that ‘Christ granted this power to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests’,



and St Cyprian exhorted his flock to confess sins now before it was too late: 'Let each confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession can be received, while satisfaction and the forgiveness granted by the priests is acceptable to God'. The sacrament of confession therefore comes from Christ and was practiced regularly by the early church.

Is Confession just for Roman Catholics?

Many people these days think the Church of England does not hear confessions, or that this is a 'Roman Catholic practice'. This is untrue. For a start, the Roman Catholic Church does not hold a monopoly on sacraments: sacramental confession is practiced by all churches who share in the historic episcopate, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Anglicans. If the church has bishops and priests who share in the apostolic succession, as the Church of England professes to do, then those bishops and priests have been given in their ordinations the power and authority to forgive sins. This is something the *Book of Common Prayer* Ordinal recognizes. There we read:

When this prayer is done, the Bishop with the Priests present shall lay their hands severally upon the head of every one that receiveth the Order of Priesthood; the receivers humbly kneeling upon their knees, and the Bishop saying,

RECEIVE the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This presupposes that individuals go to priests to receive God's forgiveness for their sins, both in baptism and in confession. We know this because the *Prayer Book* tells us so elsewhere. Hence the liturgy for the Publick Baptism of Infants opens with these words:

DEARLY beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin, and that our Saviour Christ saith, none can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost: I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to this Child that thing which by nature he cannot have; that he may be baptized with Water and the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ's holy Church, and be made a lively member of the same.

Encouragements for sacramental confession to a priest can also be found in the *Prayer Book*. In the Communion service, the priest exhorts those at the mass:

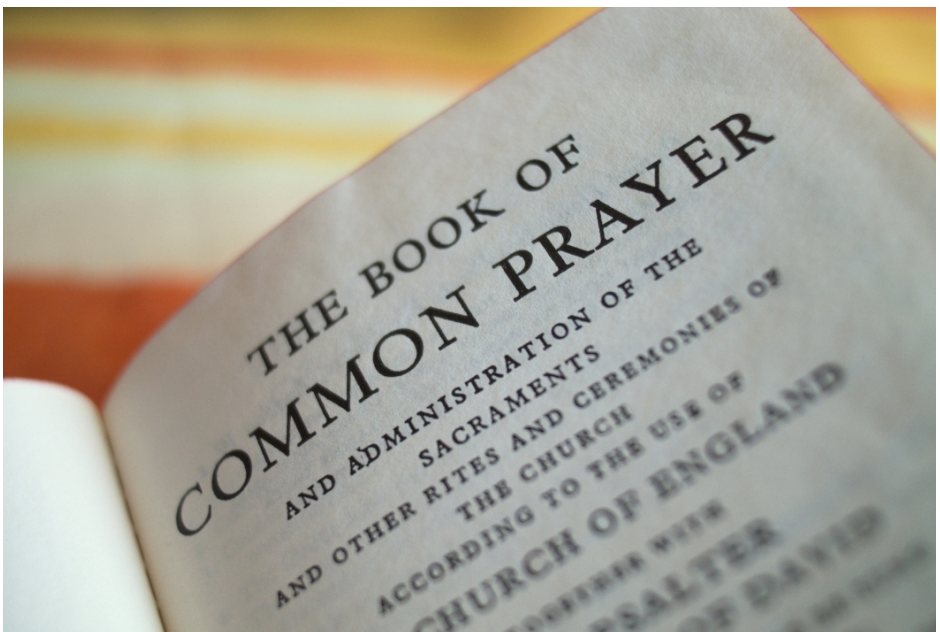
And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.

A similar exhortation is found in the liturgy for the Visitation of the Sick:

Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which confession, the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort.

OUR Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Confession was therefore established by Christ as a means for the forgiveness of sins, and this is part of the 'bread and butter' of what is means to be a Christian within the Church of England.



Can we not confess our sins directly to God?

Many still object: can we not simply confess our sins directly to God? Why do we need a priest? Three answers are important here. Firstly, Jesus has given us the gift and told us how we receive forgiveness, namely through the ministry of the priests on whom he has imparted the ability to forgive sins. So not thinking we need to go to confession is actually rejecting the teaching of Jesus, and thinking we know better than him. Secondly, when we sin, we offend God and cut ourselves off from him, therefore God, as the one who has been offended, gets to decide how we are to say sorry to him, and this is what he has chosen. Finally, because we have to go to the one whom we have offended to be forgiven, we need to hear the words of absolution from someone other than ourselves, and *moreso*, one who represents God to us.

Does the general confession in the mass count?

No. At mass, the absolution is in what is technically called a 'petitionary', 'precatory' or 'optative' form: the priest effectively asks that God *may* have mercy, pardon and deliver from sin, saying 'May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.' He does not say 'I absolve you'. Only by saying 'I absolve you' is forgiveness of sins assured.

Won't the priest treat me differently or gossip about what I've said?

Bound up with the practice of sacramental confession is what is known as the 'seal of the confessional'. This is not just a fuzzy idea, but something in church law. Its legal basis was established at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which decreed:

Let [the priest] exercise the greatest precaution that he does not in any degree by word, sign, or any other manner make known the sinner... He who dares to reveal a sin confided to him in the tribunal of penance, we decree that he be not only deposed from the sacerdotal office but also relegated to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life.

Eventually this made its way into the canons of the Church of England under the following form, which is still part of the law of the land:

Provided always, that if any man confess his secret and hidden sins to the minister, for the unburdening of his conscience, and to receive spiritual consolation and ease of mind from him; we do not in any way bind the said minister by this our Constitution, but do straitly charge and admonish him, that he do not at any time reveal and make known to any person whatsoever any crime or offence so committed to his trust and secrecy (except they be such crimes as by the laws of this realm his own life may be called into question for concealing the same), under pain of irregularity.

This means that if a priest tells someone what he has heard in the confessional, his is subjected to ‘irregularity’, that is, he can no longer exercise the functions of his order. Furthermore, even if this canonical obligation were not in place, the priest would have a moral obligation not to reveal what he was told. As St Thomas Aquinas taught, God instituted the sacrament as a remedy for taking away sin, so it is a violation of the nature of the sacrament to reveal what has been confessed. A priest will therefore not tell anyone – another priest, the spouse of the penitent, someone the penitent has offended, another parishioner, or anyone – about the sin confessed, or treat him or her differently outside the confessional. The sacrament is a gift for healing, and once a penitent has been reconciled to God by the forgiveness of sins, there is nothing more to say – it is over, and the penitent can begin again. As the sometime Bishop of Durham John Cosin wrote, ‘The truth is, that in the Priest’s Absolution there is the true power and virtue of forgiveness, which will most certainly take effect... as in Baptism’.



My sin is embarrassing: how can I tell the priest?

If you are embarrassed about something you have done – and people are most often embarrassed about sexual sins – then thank God, because that is your conscience at work! Shame and embarrassment are therefore not bad feelings. However, if we let these dominate our thoughts and prevent us ever going to confession, then the embarrassment or shame simply stays with us and never goes away. Mercifully, this is not a new problem the church has to deal with. Writing in the 4th century, St John Chrysostom advised:

Be not ashamed to approach [the priest] because you have sinned, nay rather, for this very reason approach! No one says: Because I have an ulcer, I will not go near a physician or take medicine; on the contrary, it is just this that makes it needful to call in physicians and apply remedies. We [priests] know well how to pardon, because we ourselves are liable to sin. This is why God did not give us angels to be our doctors, nor send down Gabriel to rule the flock, but from the fold itself he chooses the shepherds, from among the sheep He appoints the leader, in order that he may be inclined to pardon his followers and, keeping in mind his own fault, may not set himself in hardness against the members of the flock.

And don't forget, God knows our sins anyway, so we're not presenting anything that's new: we're simply someone who is sick going to get his or her medicine.

But I don't think I sin...

It is common in our day and age to think that we simply do not sin. The Bible, however, has some strong words for us if we think this is us: 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (I John 1.8). It is therefore simply a lie to think that we never offend God: even the Pope goes to confession, and he does so about once a fortnight! However, that said, it can be hard to discern where we have sinned, or remember all the times we have sinned, so in order to remedy this, it is useful to prepare for our confession prayerfully through an Examination of Conscience. A suggested method is offered at the end of this booklet to help you.



Is it normal to be scared?

Many people have been terrified to go to Confession; all that can be said is be a brave soldier and just do it. Christ himself wants this of you, so just resolve to do the right thing. Millions of Christians over the course of 2,000 years have braved the confessional, and you can do it too! And if you're worried because you've never done it before, or it's been such a long time, that's okay too: it's okay to be nervous, it's okay to be afraid, and it's okay to tell the priest how you feel. If you do so he will no doubt put you at ease and

help you through it. Remember in the parable of the prodigal son the Father runs out to meet the son with his arms wide open, and the priest will do the same – he will simply be glad you’ve come to receive forgiveness from God.

How often should I go to confession?

By this stage you will have read the above and hopefully decided for yourself to go to confession so that you can be forgiven of your sins. But the question remains: how often should you go to confession? Years ago, Christians had to go to sacramental confession every time they wanted to receive Holy Communion. And the same is true today if we have committed ‘mortal sin’, that is, when we willfully and in full knowledge choose to commit a serious offence against God. Furthermore, if we receive Communion in a state of mortal sin, we risk our own damnation, as St Paul teaches the Corinthians (I Corinthians 11.29), and as the BCP reminds us:

For as the benefit is great, if with a true penitent heart and lively faith we receive that holy Sacrament... so is the danger great, if we receive the same unworthily. For then we are guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ our Saviour; we eat and drink our own damnation, not considering the Lord’s Body; we kindle God’s wrath against us.

If we have not committed mortal sin, then the church asks us to go to Confession at least once a year, on the run up to Easter. However, this is a minimum: it is far better to go more regularly so that we can start to know where we fail God, confess, and begin again more frequently. This helps our growth in holiness, as we are constantly holding ourselves up to a higher standard. It also means we become less nervous of sacramental confession. Three or four times a year is therefore a good number to aim at during the course of a year, though many Christians go even more frequently, perhaps monthly or weekly.

What should I do now?

There are three steps in making your confession:

1. Preparing;
2. Going to confession; and
3. Carrying out your penance.

If you feel confident enough, use the order below to prepare, and then arrange an appointment with Fr Christopher to make your confession. If you are unsure or want to chat about what happens in confession and be guided through preparing, get in touch with him: he will be more than happy to help! And remember, the Lord’s promise is true: ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’

PREPARING TO MAKE YOUR CONFESSION



Before you meet with Jesus in the Sacrament of Confession, spend some time preparing yourself. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to receive the Sacrament well. You could use this prayer:

Give me light, my God, to see what sins I have committed since my last Confession, and the grace to confess them humbly. I ask you to help me to be truly sorry for them. Grant me perfect sorrow so that I may receive your forgiveness, and so be prepared to meet you joyfully in my final Judgement.

Make a thorough Examination of Conscience by thinking carefully about your life and the things for which you need to ask forgiveness. Write them down on a list or make some notes, and bring it to your Confession to remind you as you're going through the liturgy. To help put your list together, you might want to use the following prompts based on the Ten Commandments and Precepts of the Church:

- 1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.**
 - Do I seek to love God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my strength?
 - Do I put anything or anyone above God?
 - Do I pray daily?
 - Have I had any involvement with the occult (witchcraft, wicca, ouija boards, seances, tarot cards, new age crystals, fortune telling, horoscopes or the like)?
 - Have I lied? Have I sworn falsely?
 - Have I received Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin?
 - Have I abused the Sacrament of Confession by lying to the priest or deliberately not confessing a mortal sin?
 - Have I denied a truth of the faith out of concern for the opinion of others?
- 2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.**
 - Have I used God's holy name irreverently?
 - Have I blasphemed God, the Church, Mary, the saints, or sacred places/things?

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

- Do I keep Sunday as a day of prayer, rest, and relaxation, avoiding unnecessary work?
- Have I deliberately come late or left early from mass without a good reason?

4. Honour your father and your mother.

- Do I honour and respect my parents?
- Have I deliberately hurt my parents?
- Do I treat my children with love and respect?
- Have I neglected the religious education of my children, failed to pray with them, or failed to bring them to mass?
- Do I support and care for the well-being of all family members?
- Have I neglected family duties?
- Do I honour and obey my lawful superiors?

5. You shall not kill.

- Have I deliberately harmed anyone?
- Have I had an abortion or encouraged an abortion?
- Have I attempted suicide or seriously considered it?
- Have I abused drugs or alcohol?
- Have I led anyone to sin through bad example or through direct encouragement?

6. You shall not commit adultery.

- Am I faithful to my spouse in thought and action?
- Have I used artificial contraception?
- Have I engaged in sexual activity with anyone outside marriage?
- Have I deliberately viewed pornographic magazines, videos or websites?
- Have I masturbated?
- Have I used impure language or told impure jokes?
- Do I dress modestly?

7. You shall not steal.

- Have I stolen or accepted stolen goods?
- Have I deliberately destroyed the property of others?
- Have I cheated anyone of what I owe?
- Do I gamble excessively?
- Do I share what I have with the poor and the Church according to my means?

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

- Have I lied? Have I sworn falsely?
- Have I judged others rashly?
- Have I plagiarized or been academically dishonest?
- Have I gossiped? Have I revealed secrets without good reason?

- Have I ruined the good name of others by spreading lies or revealing their faults or sins?
- 9. You shall not desire your neighbour's wife.**
- Have I consciously permitted sexual thoughts about anyone besides my spouse?
 - Do I guard my imagination and senses?
 - Have I watched shows, plays, pictures or movies that contain impure scenes with the deliberate intention of being aroused by them? Am I responsible about what I read?
- 10. You shall not desire your neighbour's goods.**
- Am I envious of the possessions, abilities, talents, beauty, or success of others?
 - Do I love my neighbour? Is there anyone whom I do not love or refuse to love?
 - Have I wished harm or misfortune on anyone?
 - Do I forgive from my heart those who have hurt me? Do I harbour hatred or bear grudges?
 - Do I pray for my enemies?
 - Have I ridiculed or humiliated others?
 - Do I seek to help others in need?
 - Do I care for my physical, emotional, and spiritual health?
 - Do I forgive myself for my sins after bringing them to God in the Confessional?
 - Am I lazy at work, study or with domestic duties?

Precepts of the Church

- Have I deliberately missed Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation without a serious reason?
- Do I go to confession at least once a year when I have serious sins to confess?
- Do I receive Holy Communion, at least once a year during Eastertime?
- Do I take part in the major feasts celebrating Our Lord, the Virgin Mary, and the saints?
- Do I abstain from meat on Fridays (for ages 14 and over) and fast from one full meal on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday (for ages 18-59)?
- Do I fast for one hour before Holy Communion (water and medicine allowed)?
- Do I contribute to support the material needs of the Church?

Conclude your Examination of Conscience with an Act of Contrition:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven, and the pains of hell; 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 confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life.