**The Sacrament of Penance**

**Penance is a Sacrament of Healing**

***“Neither do I condemn you.  Go and sin no more (John 8: 11).”***

In  this fourth catechesis on the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, I will consider the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation, often simply referred to as sacramental confession.  It is a sacrament that is frequently misunderstood and often misrepresented.  This catechesis will be divided into three separately published parts:

**(I) what is the Sacrament of Penance or confession;**  
**(II) what is sin; and,**  
**(III) how to make a good confession.**

When I was a young boy, my father took us to the Church for confession at least once a month, sometimes more often.  In Catholic school, we were well instructed about confession and well prepared.  Because we knew the parish priests as altar boys, we were not particularly afraid of going into the confessional to confess our sins.  That’s not to say that we enjoyed confession but it was something that we Catholics did.  There were times, however, when I wasn’t sure what to say.  Don’t get me wrong — I was far from perfect or saintly.  Other times, I would get distracted and forget what I had planned to say in my examination of conscience.  The Sisters told us that God would forgive our sins, even if we forgot some of them.

As I grew older, I began to reflect more maturely on the circumstances of my life.  My confessions became more “involved,” and I had a greater sense of my own sinfulness and the need to take advantage of this special sacrament.  There was a real sense of relief when I emerged from the confessional, a feeling of peace with God.

After ordination, when I sat “on the other side of the screen” so to speak, my earlier memories and the theological and pastoral preparation I received in the seminary gave me even greater conviction about the importance of sacramental confession and the need we all have of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

The “way” that the Sacrament of Penance is administered in the Catholic Church has a long and interesting history, far too long for this brief catechesis.  If you are interested, Catholic articles on the development of the Sacrament of Penance are readily available on the internet or in Catholic publications.  My focus here is to consider the basics and to provide a little explanation about this wonderful occasion of God’s grace.

Sacraments are, as we have read in my previous catecheses (prompted by the Baltimore Catechism) “outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace.”  The outward “sign” of the Sacrament of Penance has multiple parts: contrition or sorrow for sins; confession of sins to the priest; absolution of sins by the priest; performing the penance given by the priest to atone for sins confessed.  For the record, priests, bishops and even the Pope have to go to confession, too.

From the point of view of Church law — and, again, the Catholic Church is a community of laws and structures, as well as a community of faith and worship — sacraments are composed of “matter” — the content or essence of the sacraments — and “form” — the way the sacraments are administered or given according to the Church’s rituals for each of them.

In the Sacrament of Penance, the “matter” is sorrow for sin or contrition.  The “form” is how the Church deals with the matter, namely confession to and absolution by the priest.  These are the “outward signs” of this sacrament in search of its grace, God’s mercy and forgiveness.  A few words are in order about this sacrament’s “institution by Christ.”  To understand this “institution,” we need to look first at the Holy Scriptures.

In a famous passage of St. Matthew’s Gospel known as “Peter’s Confession,” Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is.  After several responses, Simon Peter exclaims “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”  Jesus then says in reply:

You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hell will not overpower it.  I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven (Matthew 16-18-19).

Peter is the chief of the apostles and, as such, is the foundation of Jesus’ Church.  In this passage, Jesus identified Peter’s authority which scripture scholars say included many things, among them the forgiveness of sins.  The point here is that “God will ratify and stand behind what Peter (and the others) enact (Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., **‘Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew,’** p. 248).”

In the Gospel of St. John, when Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection, the sacred author recalls, he greeted them saying:

*“As the Father has sent me so I send you.”  And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.  If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained (John 20: 22-24).”*

Jesus again extends a special authority to the apostles who share in his divine mission: to forgive or retain sins.

From the Catholic Church’s perspective, these two passages for the heart of the institution of the Sacrament of Penance insofar as Jesus himself gives Peter and the apostles the power to forgive or retain sins.  This power, the Catholic Church believes and teaches, has been handed down through the ages to those who succeed the apostles and are ordained by them.

The forgiveness of sins is an essential part of the mission of the Catholic Church.  The earliest recorded teachings of the Christian community, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, popes, theologians and the decrees of early Church councils affirm this belief.  Although the “form” of the Sacrament of Penance or “confession” developed over the centuries, it was the Fourth Lateran Council that decreed in 1215:

*Let everyone of the faithful of both sexes, after he has reached the age of discretion, devotedly confess in private all the sins he has committed at least once a year to his own priest and let him strive to fulfill to the best of his ability penance enjoined upon him.*

In the 16th century, the Council of Trent established more specific regulations about the manner in which sacramental confession and the absolution of sins would take place through the ministry of the priest, regulations that formed the core of the Sacrament of Penance as it was known and practiced until the 20th century.  The 1917 Code of Canon Law, the Second Vatican Council (1963-65), the 1983 Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) further presented the Catholic Church’s teaching and practice of the Sacrament of Penance or sacramental confession, also called “The Sacrament of Reconciliation,” in ways with which we have become familiar.

The Second Vatican Council and CCC refer to the Sacrament of Penance as a “sacrament of healing (CCC, 1421)” along with the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (formerly called Extreme Unction).  The 1983 Code of Canon Law states:

*In the sacrament of penance the faithful, confessing their sins to a legitimate minister, being sorry for them, and at the same time proposing to reform, obtain from God forgiveness of sins committed after baptism through the absolution imparted by the same minister; and they likewise are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning (canon 959).*

Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary way by which the faithful person who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God and with the Church … (canon 960).

An “integral confession” means that a baptized Catholic confesses the kind of sin committed (eg., stealing, lying, etc.) and the number of times (best, truthful estimate).

CCC likewise states:

***1446****Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification …*

In his homily of October 25, 2013, Pope Francis preached:

*To have the courage in the presence of the confessor to call sin by its name, without hiding it … to go to confession is to encounter the love of Jesus with sincerity of heart and with the transparency of children, not refusing, but even welcoming the “grace of shame” that makes us perceive God’s forgiveness.*

The confession of sins, done with humility, Pope Francis explained, is something the Church requires of all of us.  He quoted the invitation of Saint James: “Confess your sins to one another.” Not to get noticed by others, the Pope explained, “but to give glory to God,” to recognize that it is God Who saves me. That, the Pope continued, is why one goes to a brother, a “brother priest” to confess. And one must do as Paul did – above all, confessing with the same “concreteness.”

Earlier this year, during his general audience in Rome on February 19, 2014, Pope Francis told those gathered in St. Peter’s Square to receive the Sacrament of Penance.

Everyone say to himself: ‘When was the last time I went to confession?’ And if it has been a long time, don’t lose another day! Go, the priest will be good. And Jesus, (will be) there, and Jesus is better than the priests - Jesus receives you. He will receive you with so much love! Be courageous, and go to confession.  
  
Someone can say, ‘I confess my sins only to God.’ Yes, you can say to God, ‘forgive me,’ and say your sins. But our sins are also against our brothers, against the Church. This is why it is necessary to ask forgiveness of the Church and of our brothers, in the person of the priest.”

Forgiveness is not something we can give ourselves.  One asks forgiveness, one asks it of another person, and in confession, we ask forgiveness from Jesus.  Forgiveness is not a result of our efforts, but is a gift. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit who showers us with mercy and grace that pours forth unceasingly from the open heart of Christ crucified and risen.

From the time we were children, we became familiar with the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our trespasses, as we also have forgiven our trespassers (Matthew 6:12).”  And how often we continue to say those words!  The Holy Scriptures remind us: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The Sacrament of Penance is the “outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace” that accomplishes that.

Any catechesis about a sacrament would be incomplete without explaining the requirements of Church law related to it.  There is ample Church legislation about the Sacrament of Penance or confession but I will confine my study here to those things that the ordinary parishioner needs to know.

**Who can receive the Sacrament of Penance?**

Any baptized Catholic who has “attained the age of discretion” not only can but must receive the Sacrament of Penance and confess serious sins at least once a year (canon 989).  That is one of the “precepts or commandments of the Church.”  I will say more about these precepts in my next catechesis.  The “age of discretion” means that the baptized Catholic penitent is able to distinguish right from wrong and has some understanding of what sin means and the purpose of sacramental confession.

**How often should a baptized Catholic go to confession?**

A baptized Catholic should confess serious sins to a priest as soon as possible after committing them but, minimally, once a year as noted above.  Less serious sins should be confessed frequently and regularly.  Canon law (Church law) does not give a requirement regarding frequency of confession.  Since none of us is perfect, regular confession is recommended.  A good rule of thumb — other than for the confession of serious sins — is once a month.  Remember, the Sacrament of Penance is a sacrament of healing, forgiveness, conversion of heart and God’s mercy.  Who doesn’t need these things?   Parishes hold penance services throughout the year, most often during Advent and Lent.  Certainly, baptized Catholics are advised to take advantage of these times.  Parishes should make confession available every week, “at days and hours established for the convenience of the faithful (canon 986).”  The schedule for confession should be posted and available for baptized Catholics in every parish.  Outside of these “posted” times, a baptized Catholic may approach a priest for confession at any reasonable time.

**Who is able to hear confession?**

Only a validly ordained priest (or bishop) is able to hear a confession as a “minister of the sacrament (canon 965).”  He obtains the power to do so by his ordination but he must obtain the “faculty” or permission from the bishop of the diocese before exercising it.  How does one know if the priest has the “faculty” to hear confession?  If he is a pastor or parish priest assigned to one’s own parish or a priest officially assigned by the bishop to a chaplaincy or other Catholic organization or work within the diocese, this “faculty” can ordinarily be presumed.  As far as other priests are concerned, simply ask “are you able to hear my confession?”  Any priest — even those who have left the priesthood and have been laicized or who do not have the “faculty” from the bishop — may hear the confession of a baptized Catholic in danger of death (canon 976).

**Is it necessary to confess sins to a priest?**

The simple answer is “yes.”  Although it is God who “forgives sins,” Jesus gave this power specifically to the apostles and their successors, bishops and priests, as noted above.  Sin displeases God since it is contrary to his will.  Sin also wounds the Church community for the same reason: it is contrary to God’s will.  The ordained Catholic priest is the minister of this sacrament.  His “physical presence” hearing sins in confession, dispensing advice, assigning penance and giving absolution is not optional or arbitrary; he is necessary for the Sacrament of Penance.  His “physical presence” giving absolution for sins is a visible sign (sacraments are “outward signs” instituted by Christ to give grace) that reconciliation between the penitent, God and his Church has taken place.  In the Sacrament of Penance, the priest represents God, who is displeased by sin and also represents the Catholic Church community, wounded by sin (more on this in my next Catechesis).  The priest may not, under any circumstances, reveal what an individual penitent has told him in confession.  That prohibition is called the “seal of confession” and is inviolable (canon 983).  Those baptized Catholics who are conscious of personal sin — whether serious or less significant — should always make some prayerful act of contrition immediately and form the intention to go to confession as soon as possible.  In confession, the priest should be kind and merciful, as Christ was.

**What is meant by “general confession and absolution?”**

There are actually three sacramental rites of penance.  Two of these rites, whether individual or in a group, require the individual confession of sins by the individual penitent confessing sins to a priest.  The third rite involves general confession by a group and absolution by a priest.  The only time “general confession and absolution” are permitted and valid are: (1) if there is a danger of death for the entire group and there is no time for individual confession; (2) if baptized Catholics do not have access to a priest for individual confession for such a long time that they would be forced to go without sacramental grace or Holy Communion; they must, however, intend to confess sins individually as soon as they can (canon 961.1).  In the Diocese of Trenton, general confession or absolution is never permitted except in these two cases.  A large number of penitents and only a few priests available to hear individual confessions (for example, in a parish penance service during Advent or Lent) do not constitute a valid reason for “general confession and absolution.”  Priests and parishes who do so are acting contrary to the law of the Catholic Church.  In any case or question of doubt, the priest must consult the bishop of the diocese before acting.

**Where should confession be made?**

Confession can be made any time.  The proper place to hear sacramental confession is a designated confessional or reconciliation room in a Catholic Church, a Catholic chapel or oratory (canon 964.1).  Confessions may be heard elsewhere but not without a “just cause” or reason (canon 964.3).  A hospital or some other place of confinement or a rectory during a meeting with a priest are possible places where confessions may be heard.  Confessions may be heard at times when it would be otherwise impossible, very difficult or significantly burdensome for a person to go to confession in a Catholic Church confessional.   The priest should always use good judgment about this since we are dealing with a sacrament.  It is always better for a person to go to confession when needed rather than not.

**What should the baptized Catholic confess?**

Any and all sins — serious or less serious — that a Catholic person commits after baptism.  The penitent should mention the kind of sin and number of times committed.  Prior to going to confession, the penitent should examine his/her conscience to discern what sins have been committed or what obligations he/she might have omitted.  The Ten Commandments, the Precepts of the Church, the obligations of charity are good indicators of things that should be considered in an examination of conscience (more on this in my next Catechesis).  In any case of doubt, simply ask the priest.

**How are sins forgiven or absolved?**

The penitent confesses to the priest the kind and number of sins committed since his/her last confession, expresses sorrow or contrition for those sins, is assigned a penance and receives absolution from the priest.

**What is meant by “contrition” and firm purpose or intention of amendment?**

When one does something wrong, he/she should feel some remorse or regret for his/her actions.  The proof of that remorse is that the person decides or intends not to repeat the particular action.  In polite society, a person apologizes to the one offended by his/her actions.  Contrition is that feeling and expression of remorse or regret for sins committed.  That contrition means little if the person does not make or intend to avoid such sins again — a firm purpose or intention of amendment.

**The Sacrament of Penance**

**"Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more (John 8: 11)." (part 2)**

The Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins.  Christians believe that firmly and deeply.  But what does that mean?  There is still evil in the world.  People continue to sin and commit “sins.”  During Mass, Catholics pray “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”  The priest lifts up the Body of Christ at Mass and says, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world.”  To what are we referring?

As I continue my catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation / Confession, I would like to give some attention to “sin” since that is what we confess in the sacrament.

Students of the scriptures tell us that the notion of “sin” appears in the Bible about 450 times although there are many different Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words for it.  I am not a lexicographer nor am I particularly well versed in ancient languages so I have to accept in faith what scholars tell us.  Such study is their life’s work.  It is my responsibility to learn from them and share what I learn with the faithful.  Let me summarize briefly.

The notion of sin, presented in these different expressions, basically describes any deliberate (willful) choice to act contrary to the will of God as it has been manifested to us.  Sin is not simply considered an innocent mistake or omission.  Sin involves willfully choosing and doing something evil or wrong.   In the Old Testament, such a deliberate or willful choice expresses rebellion against God.  In the New Testament, sin describes choices and actions that reveal contempt for God and his revealed will and a deliberate refusal to accept and follow his will.

God created us.  We believe that as a starting point.  If we do not believe that, then none of this matters much.  God created us in his image and likeness, again an assertion of our faith born of the Holy Scriptures.  What God created, therefore, is good, as the Book of Genesis states clearly.  God also gave us an intellect and a free will.  At some point in time the human being, gifted with intellect and free will, chose to be “different” from what God created and chose to act “differently” from what God intended.  That moment was the beginning of human evil — the opposite of the good that God created, the “original sin” — and it changed human existence in the world.

But, how did that happen?  If God created us as good, how could we choose otherwise?  The Book of Genesis tells the story of Adam and Eve, the first human beings created by God, in the Garden of Eden.  There are different versions of the story and people will debate them for as long as human beings continue to exist.  Nevertheless, to choose something other than what God created and intended implies that human beings were not the “only beings” that God created, that evil already existed.  The Book of Genesis talks about the presence of a “serpent” in the Garden who had knowledge of “good and evil.”  This serpent was also a creation of God, and is a symbol of another order of being likewise gifted with intellect and free will.  We refer to him as a “fallen angel,” one of another order of beings whose choice to be other than God intended introduced “evil” into the created world.  Somehow that “fallen angel” influenced the human being to seek knowledge of “existence other than God intended,” making a choice for that knowledge and existence possible.  The “fallen angel” tempted the human being to know (intellect), to want (desire) and to choose (act upon) that knowledge and, as a result, “sin” entered the world.  The whole of creation was affected by that choice and human life in this world as God intended it was disturbed, distorted and disrupted permanently.  There was no turning back at that point.  The human being could now know, desire and choose something other than “good.”  Evil and sin became an option for humanity.  And everything in life was affected by it from that moment on.

**It is important to note that God did not create evil and sin.  Likewise, it is important to note that God did not create the effects of sin and evil within the world. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed:**

*It is your crimes that separate you from God, it is your sins that make him hide his face from you … for our offenses before you are many, our sins bear witness against us (Isaiah 59: 2; 12).*

Despite sin, good continued and continues to exist.  Humans beings continued and continue to choose good.  But alongside of good, because of “original sin,” now evil continued and continues to exist.  And human beings, using the gifts of intellect and free will, could now and can choose that option.  The “original sin” of our first parents tainted all humanity to follow with more sins to hold us down.

God, however, did not abandon humanity as a result of human rebellion.  Again, we read in the prophet Isaiah “Though I have struck you in my wrath, yet in my good will I have shown you mercy (Isaiah 60: 10).”  The Holy Scriptures unfold the story of God’s continued outreach or covenant to draw us back to him.  Despite the presence of evil and sin, the scriptures describe the history of human salvation, leading up to the birth, life, mission and ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah and Savior.

Even before he was born, Jesus’ mission was revealed when the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream predicting his birth and saying “you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1: 21).”

The Gospels present Jesus frequently showing mercy through the forgiveness of sin.  The ultimate act of forgiveness was his death on the cross, which the prophets predicted and Jesus himself foretold.  “Behold the wood of the cross,” we chant on Good Friday, “on which has hung our salvation.”  It was necessary that he die, the sinless One for the sinner, in order that humanity could gain access to salvation.  The “gates of paradise” were closed by “original sin” and only God could open them again.  This was the “new covenant” that Christ initiated.

**Again, the expectations of the prophet Isaiah, uttered long before the Gospels were written, come to mind:**

*Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. …But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed. … But the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all. … My servant, the just one, shall justify the many, their iniquity he shall bear.  Therefore I will give him his portion among the many, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, because he surrendered himself to death, was counted among the transgressors, bore the sins of many, and interceded for the transgressors (Isaiah 53: 4-13).*

**Turning to the New Testament, we read in the Letter of Paul to the Romans**:

*… God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.  How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath.   Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life … For if by that one person’s transgression the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many. … For after one sin there was the judgment that brought condemnation; but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal.  For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ.  In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all.  For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous (Romans 5: 8-19).*

**The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians summarizes our salvation from sin by Jesus even more succinctly:**

*“For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.  For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15: 21-22).”*

Hence, we are saved from our sins. Although there is so much more that has been and can be written and taught than I could ever present in so brief an article, hopefully, the preceding commentary has helped to answer the questions posed in the beginning of this catechesis.

But, even after the saving death of Christ, human beings continue to sin.  How does the Catholic Church understand and address sin(s) other than and after “original sin”?  Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation/Confession to continue his saving work of mercy and forgiveness.  I will consider this Sacrament in some detail in the second part of my catechesis.  For now, let’s stay with the idea of sins committed after the “original sin” washed away in the Sacrament of Baptism.

**The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says this about sin:**

**1849** Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”

**1850** Sin is an offense against God: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.”  Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods,” knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.”  In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation.

It is important to remember that sin involves serious matter considered evil, for example a deliberate violation of one or more of the Ten Commandments, a deliberate transgression of the natural moral law (those aspects of being human and good human living present within us as God’s creation, objective right and wrong “written within our hearts,” as we read in the Letter to the Romans 2:15), a deliberate violation of the Church’s own law and moral teaching, and so forth.  If the matter is serious enough or most grave, the sin is called “mortal.”  **CCC states:**

**1855** Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him.

**1856** Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us - that is, charity - necessitates a new initiative of God’s mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation:

When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object . . . whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbor, such as homicide or adultery.

**1857** For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”

**1858** Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother.” The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.

**1859** Mortal sin requires full knowledge and complete consent. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God’s law. It also implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice. Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.

**1860** Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense. But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders. Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.

**1861** Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.

Mortal sins must be mentioned in sacramental confession.

**Sin always involves evil.  When the evil is not so grave as to be considered “mortal,” the Church labels the transgression “venial.”  CCC states:**

**1855** Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.

**1856** But when the sinner’s will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial.

**1862** One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without complete consent.

**1863** Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul’s progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God’s grace it is humanly reparable. “Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness.”

Although not technically required to do so, one should mention venial sins in sacramental confession as well.  We should repent and seek forgiveness of all sins. It does not make much sense to do otherwise.

**Again, CCC provides guidance in discerning the different kinds of sins:**

**1852** There are a great many kinds of sins. Scripture provides several lists of them. The Letter to the Galatians contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit: “Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5: 19-21).”

**1853** Sins can be distinguished according to their objects, as can every human act; or according to the virtues they oppose, by excess or defect; or according to the commandments they violate. They can also be classed according to whether they concern God, neighbor, or oneself; they can be divided into spiritual and carnal sins, or again as sins in thought, word, deed, or omission. The root of sin is in the heart of man, in his free will, according to the teaching of the Lord: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man (Matthew 15: 19-20).”  But in the heart also resides charity, the source of the good and pure works, which sin wounds.

The above citations are by no means exhaustive. When examining one’s conscience in preparation for sacramental confession, any questions or doubts that might arise regarding sins should be mentioned to the priest for his advice and counsel.

**The Sacrament of Penance**

***"What I Have Done and What I Have Failed to Do"***

**How to Go to Confession (Part III)**

Throughout these catechetical presentations, I have spoken of the Catholic Church as a community of faith, prayer and law.  In my most recent instruction on the sacraments, I have highlighted how these seven “outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace” bring these elements together in the lives of the faithful.  The Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation is no exception.  Parts I and II have focused upon the sacrament itself and sin as it is the occasion that makes it necessary.  This catechesis will simply present the methodology for “going to confession.”

Every sacrament is an occasion for prayer, a deep conversation with the Lord Jesus Christ.  In the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation, that conversation focuses upon our need for God’s mercy.  We are all sinners and we all seek the Lord’s forgiveness and reconciliation.  How does one make a good, “integral” confession?

First, we must admit and acknowledge our sinfulness.  In our quiet moments, we need to identify how we have turned away from God in the things that we have said and done or failed to do since our last confession.  When we, as human beings gifted by God with an intellect and free will, experience occasions in which we have used these gifts in a way contrary to God’s designs and purposes for us, we sin.  Those occasions are the “matter” for confession.

Next, we should pray and ask God to enlighten our conscience so that our confession is honest and true.  Our prayer should lead us to an “examination of conscience.” Using the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 2 - 17; Deuteronomy 5: 6 - 21) as a guide, we should consider our experience of living or failing to live those commandments.  It is worth reading over those commandments and reflecting upon our lives and our conformity with what God has asked of us.  Another good source for our self-examination are “the Beatitudes,” Jesus’ own Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3 - 10).  The Ten Commandments present the “thou shall nots” of human living.  The Beatitudes offer a more positive expression of Christian living.

There are also “Precepts of the Church” that should be considered, rules that oblige baptized Catholics and pertain to membership in the Catholic Church (CCC, 2041-2043):

**I.** To attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation (check your parish bulletin), and resting from servile works.  
  
**II.** To observe the days of abstinence and fasting.  
  
**III.** To confess our sins to a priest, at least once a year.  
  
**IV.** To receive Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist at least once a year during Easter Season.  
  
**V.** To contribute to the support of the Church.

As Catholics, we are or should be acquainted with the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, especially as they relate to our obligations of charity, justice and our particular age and state in life (married, single, religious, clergy).

This examination of conscience should yield a healthy sense of the state of our souls before God.  Our sins, then, should become apparent to us.  Mortal or serious sins must be confessed.  Venial or lesser sins should be confessed since they weaken our determination to live the Christian life fully.  After our examination of conscience, we should express sorrow or contrition for our sins and pray for God’s mercy and forgiveness, asking God to help us to amend our lives and “sin no more (John 8: 11).”

People are naturally embarrassed by sin, especially when we find ourselves repeating sinful behaviors again and again.  We feel guilt and embarrassment by the fact that “I did it again.”  But, that is the purpose of confession: to free ourselves from sin, no matter what we do or how often.  It is human to wonder “what will Father think of me?” But it is only important, rather, to reflect on “what God thinks of me?” And you know what?  God only thinks of us with unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness, just for the asking.  Forget about the priest.  He sees his role only as reconciling you with God, no matter what you tell him or how often. “Neither do I condemn you  (again, John 8: 11).”  God rejoices in your return to him.  “There is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent (Luke 15: 7).”  And the result of your confession?  Forgiveness, mercy, love and peace of mind and heart.

And, next, the “moment of truth:” make your confession to the priest!  If you need or want to write your sins down, feel free to do so and bring your note with you.  If you have doubts about anything, simply mention your doubts to the priest.  He will advise you.  Tell him when you made your last confession.  If it has been a long, long time since your last confession, do not be afraid or embarrassed.

Simply tell that to the priest.  He will help you make a good confession.  He is not there to judge or condemn you.  He is there to be a minister of God’s forgiveness, mercy and your reconciliation with God.

The Church asks that you make an “integral” confession: that is, mention your specific sins and, to the extent possible, the frequency of these sins.  If your sins are “occasional,” say that.  If they are habits or frequent, say that.  The purpose of confession is to free you from sins, any sins, all sins.

Following your confession, the priest may give you some advice or suggestions to help you.  He will ask you to make a good “act of contrition (see below)” after giving you a penance — prayer or good works — to perform as a sign of that contrition after you finish your confession.  If you don’t remember the “act of contrition,” tell the priest and, again, he will help you.  Feel free to bring a copy of the “act of contrition” into confession with you. The priest will then give you absolution from your sins.

Next step, “go in peace and sin no more.”

**Most Reverend David M. O'Connell, C.M.**  
**Bishop of Trenton**