

FR. CLIFF'S NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

Going to Confession

Jesus said to his apostles, "*Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven and whose sins you shall retain are retained*" (John 20:23).

An essential part of the **Sacrament of Reconciliation** (also called *Penance and Confession*) is the telling of our sins to the priest, the minister of the Sacrament.

All mortal sins, even the most secret and embarrassing offenses, must be confessed. The priest doesn't need all the details, but he needs to know what is being confessed. The confession of venial sins, although not necessary, is encouraged by the Church. Any person, aware of being in the state of mortal sin, must not receive the Sacrament of Eucharist before going to confession.

Telling our sins to the priest (**confession**) makes up only part of the sacrament. True sorrow for our failures (**contrition**) and a change of heart (**conversion**) are absolutely necessary as well; faith in God's loving mercy, words of advice, absolution by the priest and the healing of relationships form equally vital portions of the process.

The celebration of the Sacrament should always begin with a careful **examination of conscience**, which should include not only sins committed, but also **omissions** ... our failures to do the right things. A good examination of conscience looks for those things that separate us from love of God and love of neighbor. This generally includes all selfishness and laziness in one form or another. This process does not depend on us alone, but in fact is God's grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in us even when we are in a state of grave/mortal sin.

We express contrition or sorrow for our sins and the resolution not to sin again. After confessing our sins to the priest, we receive **absolution**. Only God forgives sins, but the priest sits *in persona Christi* and offers the forgiveness of God together with human forgiveness with respect to the harm done on the both the personal and communal level.

After giving **absolution**, the priest may give **penance** (also know as *satisfaction or restitution*.) The penance imposed by the priest in confession should correspond with the gravity of the sin. It is meant to repair the harm caused by sin. The penance may include restitution/compensation, prayer, acts of charity, works of mercy, or service. It should not be too onerous or difficult to fulfill.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation exists to restore us to God's grace and to reconnect us to Him as his adopted children in Christ. Seen in this light, the sacrament becomes not something to be feared, but rather an opportunity to be healed of those things that separate us from God and from our neighbors. As a sacrament, Reconciliation becomes a grace-filled occasion that not only frees us from our sin, but restores or increases existing grace, the life of the risen Christ within us. To the extent that we express our sorrow out of love of God, rather than fear of Hell, and that we have been as honest and thorough as possible, we can leave the Sacrament of Reconciliation in very close to the same state of grace we had at the moment of Baptism.

"So I tell you, her many sins are forgiven because she has shown great love..." He then said to her, "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace"
(Luke 7:36-50)