

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

Crux Pamphlets 6

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION (Confession)



This is an amended version of material found in:
The Mystery of Faith, Exploring Christian Belief

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Have you noticed that, in some churches and cathedrals, there's a small prayer desk, sometimes draped in a purple stole, and wondered why, or noticed what looks like a broom cupboard except a priest sometimes sits in it? These, in fact, are places where the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) is offered. For some it will be strange to think such arrangements exist: "Isn't that Roman Catholic? Surely only God can forgive sin?!" Yet Jesus *did* give the Church authority to do so (John 20:23f) and it is always to him we confess, the priest is only there to receive what is penitentially offered and pronounce the absolution Christ committed to them. Nor were Anglicans prohibited from 'making their Confession' at the Reformation, *The Visitation of the Sick* (Book of Common Prayer 1662) containing the following note:

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

However, the practice fell out of general use and only returned with the 19th century Catholic Revival until, gradually, it became more common and today is widely available. Yet in saying that only 'weighty matters' (mortal sin) have a damaging effect on our relationship with God the Reformers obscured the fact that the primary purpose of the sacrament is to heal and reconcile us with God consequent to the damage done by *all* sin: 'Blessed are the pure in heart – *for it is they who will see God*' (cf. Matthew 5:8).

The sacrament as an aspect of the healing ministry

Many of us carry the burdens of unresolved concerns – hatred, anger, mis-behaviours etc. – which obstruct our communion with God and others, and research has shown how important it is to be able to deal with these matters.

Unloading such burdens within the confidentiality of the sacrament (the purpose of which is to fix a relationship broken by our sinfulness) would be of great help. Although it's commonly said that the Anglican attitude to Confession is: 'All may, none must, some should', use of it can seem to have become understood as 'why bother?'

To think that confession only concerns 'grave' sin is to overlook how any who are seeking to grow closer to Christ (which ought to be all of us) need to make use of this sacrament on the path to at-one-ness *with* God. It needs to be part of our Rule of Life because it enables the dust to be wiped from our souls, enabling us to be more united with him and reflect God's loving brightness.

The 'seal' of the Confessional

Unlike other forms of confidential ministry '*what's said in the confessional stays in the confessional*' because, by law, priests are forbidden to reveal to anyone what has been confessed. This requirement of absolute confidentiality applies even after the death of the penitent (the 'seal of the confessional') even if matters of grave concern are admitted (unless 'they be such crimes as by the laws of this realm his own life may be called into question for concealing the same.' *Church of England Canons of 1603, Canon 113*). It's a burden the confessor must carry.

Preparing for your (first) Confession

Sometimes people turn to the confessional when they realise they might get 'relief' from something – an incident from their past or sense of guilt for example – that has long troubled them and so come to the sacrament to confess this one matter. But if it's the first (or any) time it's important to understand that *all* sin, all that has obstructed our communion with God *as far as it's reasonably possible to recall*, needs to be admitted.

In preparing ourselves we need to avoid scrupulosity (being overly and compulsively concerned with something we thought or did) so it's important to ask the help of the Holy Spirit in words such as:

'Come Holy Spirit into my soul. Enlighten my mind that I may know the sins I ought to confess, and grant me your grace to confess them fully, humbly and with contrite heart. Help me to firmly resolve not to commit them again.'

Then, set aside time to gently review the period since your last confession (*Examination of Conscience*) and notice what sins come to your attention.

If it's your *first confession* then you will need to look back over your whole life. Reflecting on the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) or Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10) and noticing where you have failed in observing them can help as can recalling things that weigh on your conscience and keep you from fully revelling in God's love. But make sure you mention what happened and how often rather than generalisations such as "I've been unkind" or "I haven't always prayed". Neither of those expressions is of a particular sin, whereas "I've nurtured a hatred for Mary/John over the past four months" would be.

What happens?

There are many ways in which confessions are heard and many places where they occur. Sometimes formal, sometimes not; kneeling or sitting, whatever necessity dictates. Making your confession, being open and honest, is a blessing in disguise – but a costly blessing: after all, sin has a price. After an initial greeting the penitent begins with words such as: *"I confess to almighty God ..."* and, after admitting their sins, ends with something like: *"For these and all the other sins that I cannot remember I am heartily sorry, firmly mean to do better, most humbly ask pardon of God and of you penance (advice) and absolution. Amen."* The priest will then offer encouraging observations and set a simple penance, which is often to pray a psalm, before pronouncing words of Absolution:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you your offences; and by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Afterwards they end by saying:

"Go in peace, the Lord has put away your sin, and pray for me, a sinner too."

Amendment of life

Contrition for what we have done and a real desire to amend one's life must be part of the process because the Sacrament of Reconciliation isn't just about finding forgiveness but about desiring to change the

way we live. To grow into greater Christlikeness. The set penance should be enacted as soon as possible and time taken to give thanks for the grace of the sacrament.

“Dearest Jesus, I have confessed all my sins to the best of my ability. I have sincerely tried to make a good confession, and I know that you have forgiven me. Thank you! Your Sacred Heart is full of love and mercy for poor sinners and I will seek to love you. Thank you for loving me.”

“Merciful Lord, with a pure heart I thank you for taking away my sins. Let your Holy Spirit guide my life so that my soul may bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

“O Lord! I abandon my past to your mercy, my present to your Love, and my future to your Providence!” (Padre Pio)

Your priest should be able to answer any further questions you may have concerning this sacrament or further information can be found in my books, *Enfolded in Christ*, Canterbury Press, 2018, p.14f., or *Heart of My Own Heart*, *ibid*, p.84f.

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