

Basic Helps to Confession

By Father Bill Murphy

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“Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you.”

(Mt 11:28)

If you have picked up this pamphlet you have a reason to be interested in the sacrament of Reconciliation of the Catholic Church. What is this mysterious ritual about? What does it accomplish? What goes on within the private exchange between a priest and a member of the Church?

Perhaps you are exploring the possibility of becoming a Catholic. Perhaps you were baptized a Catholic but not instructed in the faith when you were younger. It may be that you are preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation, Marriage, or the Baptism of your child and wish to learn more about forgiveness and reconciliation. Whatever the reason, any time is a good time to explore the gift God has given to the Church in the sacrament of Reconciliation. With some

reading and personal reflection, you may witness a new horizon of freedom opening before you. The sacrament of Reconciliation is meant to offer just that: richer relationships, a greater appreciation of God, and a more complete experience of life through forgiveness of sin. Let's get started.

What Exactly Is This Sacrament Called?

This sacrament seems to have more names than any other sacrament of the Church. Even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the official summary of Church teaching, offers several: conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation (cf. CCC, nn. 1423–1424). Don't worry about using the "right" name for it. The people with whom you worship probably use one or another of the most common terms: sacrament of Reconciliation or the sacrament of Penance. Many Catholics, by habit, refer to "going to Confession." Each of the available names says something important about the sacrament.

Conversion, which means, "to turn completely," describes a movement that takes place inside us. When a Christian becomes aware of damage done to a relationship, whether with God or another person, the first sign of hope is a desire to turn away from that behavior and toward a deeper life in Christ. A conversion is a complete turning, where a failed behavior or outlook is put aside and a new way is sought.

The sacrament proclaims and celebrates this inner spiritual movement.

Penance is an action undertaken to repair or show sorrow for wrongdoing. It is a demonstration to God, to oneself, and to those who may have been hurt that real change is beginning to take place. Sometimes a person who apologizes much but changes little is told, "I'll believe it when I see it." Penance is action that helps to turn a desire to change into a reality.

Confession is the telling of sins. In the case of the sacrament, sins are told to a priest. The priest has no personal interest in the sins of others, but listens because it is good for the soul to say out loud to someone what we have done. To use images, confession cleanses the soul and lifts the burden of guilt. Confession gets the burden "off our chest."

Forgiveness is what we seek. Jesus Christ's death on the cross has brought the reality of forgiveness of sins to every created soul; through Christ, we have been "set right" with God. But our sins damage that harmonious relationship. To restore it, we must seek from God a renewal of forgiveness. God freely forgives our sins. We prove our sincerity by the actions we take: apology and reparation.

Reconciliation is the action of unity once more being experienced among separated persons. Friends, spouses, relatives, co-workers or acquaintances who have been divided by misunderstanding, fear, or offense, find relief and even deep joy in drawing close once more. Because God is the source of all healing love, God is always present when reconciliation occurs. Our relationship with God and the Church, as well as with those we may have hurt, is renewed and strengthened through reconciliation.

Each of the terms used in the *Catechism* sheds light on a different value given to us by God in this sacrament. As becomes obvious, using this sacrament is much more than a routine religious practice. It is a useful, practical way of keeping our relationship with God and others strong. It is an essential tool for keeping relationships centered in Christian faith.