

RECONCILIATION ARTICLE: PART THREE

In this final reflection on the sacrament of reconciliation, it might be helpful to explore some of those frequently asked questions that many of us have concerning the sacrament and how we should celebrate it. However, before we do this, just a few words about the minister and ministry of reconciliation. Many priests would regard being a confessor or minister of reconciliation as an incredible challenge and awesome responsibility, as well as a tremendous privilege and joy. Imagine being channels of God's abundant love and mercy. In fact, because of this serious responsibility, a priest has to pass a sort of exam before he is given the permission and the authority (or "the faculty") to celebrate the sacrament.

Of course, it is not just the actions of the priest that are key: the actions of the person going to confession have always been regarded as essential too. So, in thinking of these actions, we can tackle a few questions that can often worry people about using the sacrament. What should we do or say when we come to celebrate the sacrament? First, a proper and honest reflection on my life (or *the examination of conscience*) is absolutely vital. This not easy: it is quite something to review my life in a genuine, open and deep way. Fortunately, many parishes have examples of this examination of conscience available and there are also examples online or in prayer books.

A good examination of conscience helps us to ask the all-important "why" question. For example, we might say that I get angry or jealous, or that I gossip. OK, but *why* do we do this...what deeper things are causing this? Until we can recognize these deeper causes, it can be very difficult to overcome these faults and failings. Hopefully, a good confessor will help us to explore these deeper matters of the soul in our examination of conscience during the celebration of the sacrament. When we make our confession, it can be useful to remember the "four Cs": that is to be concise, concrete, clear and complete!

Many spiritual writers also suggest a daily examination of conscience at the end of each day where we can reflect on the events of the day and see what has been good...and what has not been so good. Why should we do this? Well, this spiritual stock-taking can quickly develop into a life-giving habit that helps us to inform our conscience and to sharpen our spiritual senses. It can therefore help us to become a reflective person and not just a reactive person. There is even an app for this called "examen."

Sometimes people worry about forgetting the prayers such as the *act of contrition*. It is worth recalling that there are a number of forms of this prayer and that many reconciliation rooms or confessionals often have the prayer posted for us to read. Remember, the prayer is part of our celebration of the sacrament (rather than a test of memorizing!) and that its purpose is for us to express our sorrow for our sins and our love of God as well as to express our resolution to amend our life.

How often should we use the sacrament? This depends on many factors of course. There is a minimum requirement of celebrating the sacrament once a year for serious sin, but seeing the

sacrament as part of a life-long project of conversion, reconciliation and discipleship is perhaps a more positive way of answering the question about “how often?” Many great saints in the church did just that and used the sacrament frequently as part of their spiritual growth.

Another question or worry that comes up is often expressed along the lines of “I seem to commit the same sins over and over, so why bother going anymore?” Committing the same offences again and again may well point to a lack of real resolve to change. However, it can also show our frailty and our very human need for constant healing and forgiveness. An image may help. Suppose that we get sick with the same illness a number of times, would we stop going to the doctor or taking the necessary meds to get well again? What is so important is not to become discouraged if we seem to fall again and again, but also to have the firm intention to change our lives and not to sin again.

Sometimes we can hear a challenge to the sacrament along the lines of: “well, I can do whatever I want as I can the just go to confession afterwards.” There are so many issues with this. Is such an attitude showing a true sorrow for faults and failings that is a necessary part of our genuine participation in the sacrament? Also, we can recall that the absolution or forgiveness that we receive does not absolve us from the responsibility for what we have done.

During this holy season, perhaps we can take another, deeper look at the sacrament of reconciliation. It can be a great help in developing a positive morality, in growing in integrity (that is integrating all the aspects of our life together), in sharpening our spiritual perception and sight, in experiencing God’s immense love through His mercy and forgiveness and in receiving two essential gifts that are so much needed: “pardon and peace” (as the Prayer of Absolution puts it). Yes, the divine gift is there in the sacrament: all that is needed is our human response...

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