

A 7 Step Survival Guide for Returning to Confession

Learn to pray /

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If you're thinking of going to Confession, but it has been a while, this post is for you. Going to Confession is never pleasant or enjoyable, but it is always worth it.

However, it can feel so much worse if you've not been in years. Maybe it has been so long ago since you've been, and you simply feel overwhelmed and don't know where to begin. If you have questions or concerns on why you should go back to Confession in the first place, then why not check out this 15 Excuses to Not to Go to Confession (Answered!) post which will hopefully answer some of your queries.

We know it is scary.

If Confession wasn't so important, it wouldn't feel like such a big deal. Maybe you have been thinking of going to Confession soon but you don't know where to start. If so, welcome back! The following is especially for you.

1. Know Your Options

Doing a little bit of preparation beforehand can really help you feel more at ease. You could find a parish with a regular time for Confession, turn up at the time and join the queue. Many parishes have a Service of Reconciliation during Lent and Holy Week. These can attract a crowd. Maybe company, even anonymous company, makes you more comfortable. Or, you could contact a local priest or a priest you know and request a particular appointment time. Either way can be more reassuring if you are returning to Confession after a long time. Going to a larger, regular Confession time allows you to feel part of a community of people all there for the same reason, while making an appointment with a priest for another time may help you feel relaxed time-wise, if you want to discuss a few things. Either way is fine and either way you will still experience the miracle of the Sacrament.

In an ideal scenario, you should have the choice of whether to see a priest face-to-face, or behind a screen (so you can remain anonymous).

2. Before You Go

So hopefully you've done a bit of preparation and have found somewhere to go to Confession. Now is the time to make an 'Examination of Conscience'. This is the process of prayerfully reflecting on what sins we need to confess in Confession itself. If we have any mortal sins- very grave sins- they must always be confessed. You may be aware of something in particular, or behaviours or patterns that you know are wrong and are holding you back from God. This link can help take you through the process of examining your conscience. Always pray to the Holy Spirit to show you clearly what it is your need to say and how to say it. Sometimes things may not always be obvious to us, or might be forgotten in the depths of time. Finally, remember here that God is always calling to us, waiting for us, making the first move to bring us back to Him. He doesn't stop gently nudging us!

3. What to Say: 'The Script'

At some point you will probably have learnt, or been aware of the fact that there is a certain 'script' to what to say in Confession. Don't panic if you can't remember it- particularly if you decide at the last minute to go to Confession. The main thing in this scenario is to tell the priest you are not sure of the wording and he will guide you through it. If you have the time however, it is great if you can go prepared with what to say. This excellent sheet from Busted Halo walks you through the process step by step and gives you the lowdown on what to say. Print it off and take it with you if that helps.

4. What to Say: Your Sins

Be clear when stating your sins. Don't be vague, but neither do you need to go in-depth with the detail. If you're anything like me and your mind tends to go blank in critical moments, it is fine to take a list in with you. You could jot down one word reminders on a small piece of paper. You might want to remember to destroy it afterwards! If there is one particular sin that is causing you a lot of shame, it can be helpful to say it first, so then it is out of the way.

5. The Priest

Worries and fears about confessing to a priest can be a very real block to going to confession. 'What if I know him? What if I work with him?! Will he remember my sins? What if I have something terrible to say? What if I don't have anything bad enough to say?...' Firstly, as reassurance, nothing you could say to a priest could shock him- no matter who you are or your age or state in life. Priests have honestly

heard it all before. Likewise, if you feel you don't have anything very interesting or major to say, don't let that stop you going! Sin is like dust- it builds up over time. Even if we feel we're not doing anything too terrible, all that dust needs a good clean-up. Don't be ashamed to say the little things that you know are stopping you from having a close relationship with God.

Secondly, it is very likely that the priest you are going to see goes to regular confession himself and he therefore knows the very real feelings of nerves you have right now. He understands the courage it has taken you to get there and he will probably be feeling humbled and privileged to be part of your reconciliation with God. From my own experience of regularly confessing to a priest who I also worked with daily, I can say, they really do forget your sins! This particular priest didn't bat an eyelid when he'd hear my Confession and then meet me in the office half an hour later!

You can also check out this excellent article from a priest who shares his experience of hearing confessions.

Thirdly, no matter how well or not you know the priest, whether he gives you fantastic advice or just keeps it basic, remember that it is Christ you are confessing to. The priest is 'in persona Christi' which means he is in the person of Christ. The priest is the human channel of God's mercy and forgiveness. The Sacrament still stands valid no matter the priest's own weaknesses, flaws or lacklustre Confessional advice. There is a line from this year's Year of Mercy prayer, written by Pope Francis, which I love. It says: "You willed that your ministers would also be clothed in weakness in order that they may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error: let everyone who approaches them feel sought after, loved, and forgiven by God." We confess to a human priest, who yes, will be flawed, but through him we experience the endless tenderness and mercy of a heavenly Father who loves us.

6. Think About It; It's Free!

Putting aside the very understandable fears and worries for a moment, let's take a look at the Sacrament itself. It is almost scandalous in its simplicity. To put it in very basic terms, you go into a private space with a priest, tell him the bad stuff you have done, he says a prayer and you come out wiped clean, a total fresh start. The guilt of the most terrible things you have ever done is lifted from you. A relationship with God, which you may have thought was damaged beyond repair, is more than just mended again, it is completely restored. And through that, our own broken human relationships can begin to heal again. And all this is totally free. The fear and the nerves are, in reality, a small price to pay for the peace and beauty and unrestrained mercy of this Sacrament. Don't let fear, or your pride, get in the way of the amazing gift Confession actually is.

"Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool." Isaiah 1:18

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Psalm 103:12

7. Afterwards

When you come out of Confession, you may feel hugely happy or relieved, you may feel at peace, or you may just feel- normal. All of that is fine. Our feelings are not necessarily indications of the reality of what has just taken place- that you have been absolved of your sins and you are at rights with God again.

Spend some time in the church or wherever you are, thanking God. Don't forget to do your penance*, whatever you might have been given.

Think about when you could next go to Confession. It does become a little easier to go when you go more regularly. Making a regular date (like once a month) means that things don't build up so much. You get to experience God's forgiveness and love in a very real way far more often. It is like having a wound and making sure you redress the bandages properly. You need to do that very often and it's the same with Confession. Keep going back for more healing and mercy!

Finally, you can also check out this post and video to help remind you of what to do when you're going to Confession. Fr. Larry Richards also offers a wonderful talk Confession that is available at Lighthouse Catholic Media to download. His thoughts will inspire you and help direct you towards a Holy Confession.

*penance- an assigned act of reparation and love, assigned by the priest upon absolving you of your sins. Sometimes it will be a few prayers. Sometimes it will be more pointed and/or active, as the Holy Spirit and your priest's particular spirituality may influence his choice, "For your penance, say/do/pray/read... etc."