

## THE SEAL OF THE CONFESSIONAL, FREQUENCY OF CONFESSION:

*Dear Parishioners,*

You may be aware that the nature of the sacrament of Reconciliation is such that no priest may ever under any circumstances reveal to another person the content of sins placed before him in the confessional for the purpose of absolution. This is called the seal of the confessional, or sacramental seal.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states (C. 1467):

**"Given the delicacy of this ministry and the respect due to persons, the Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the "sacramental seal", because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains "sealed" by the sacrament."**

Canon 1388 of the Code of Canon Law states: **"A confessor who directly violates the seal of the confessional incurs an automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See."**

The obligation of the sacramental seal is a very grave one. The priest cannot violate it even if it entails the sacrifice of his life or honour or great harm to society at large.

In the history of the Church there are not a few examples of priests who have suffered death or imprisonment as a result of their resolve to preserve the seal of the confessional.

Those persons apart from the priest who by chance or even purposely heard what a penitent said in confession are also bound by the secrecy.

A penitent could give permission to the priest to speak of things which he or she said in confession. The permission ought to be express and fully free.

The confessor can make use of the sacramental knowledge for the penitent's own good; for example, he prays for his penitents, receives them kindly, speaks with them as a friend, guides them in the way of perfection etc.

### FREQUENCY OF CONFESSION:

"How often should I go to confession?"

"How often would it be good for me to go to confession?"

These are two different questions.

We have previously mentioned that the sacrament is only necessary for mortal sin. The Church commands at least annual confession for members in the state of mortal sin. That command, a Church rule, is motivated by the love which seeks to save.

Regular confession is strongly encouraged in the Church also for less serious sin, where use of the sacrament is not strictly necessary, as has been previously explained.

The previously quoted paragraph 1458 from the Catholic Catechism stated: "... the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful

The encouragement of more regular use of this sacrament has been one of the most consistent themes of the entire pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the chief catechist in the Catholic Church.

What then is *regular*?

We know what regular means: The Macquarie Dictionary defines it as (among other things) "normal", "usual", "customary", "recurring at fixed times, periodic".

"Regular confession" means that confession is a normal part of my life, occurring at relatively fixed intervals.

For a long time, and up until relatively recent times, weekly, fortnightly or monthly confession was an integral part of the life of many Catholics - perhaps most practising Catholics.

St John Bosco resolved as a young man: "I will go to confession every week and I will resolve to put into practice the good resolutions I take each time."

Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) wrote in his "Journal of a Soul": "During my whole life I have kept faithful to my practice of weekly confession."

The Introduction to the New Rite of Penance advises us: "the **frequent** and understanding use of this sacrament is to be highly recommended. For confession is not a mere ritual repetition or just a psychological exercise, but a heartfelt pursuit in order to develop the grace of baptism and bring it to perfection; so that in bearing within our body the suffering and death of Jesus Christ we may ever increasingly show forth his life in our lives." (Emphasis added).



Don Bosco's words on the Sacrament retain their validity today:

"Frequent confession and communion are the two weapons that gain victory over the devil." "Insist that they go to confession frequently. This is the surest means to keep them from sin."

If someone were to ask me: "How often would it be good for me to go to confession?" I would have no hesitation in answering: "At least once a month. Perhaps weekly or fortnightly, but I would encourage you, for your own spiritual good, to frequent the sacrament at least once a month. Choose a particular day and try to stick to it. Perhaps the first Saturday of the month, for example. Find the confession time of morning or afternoon that suits you, and make it a decision to use the sacrament. Pray for the grace to use the sacrament well, then just go. Let Our Lord and the Holy Spirit look after the rest."

*Listen to Pope John Paul II. Note in particular the words in bold print (emphasis added) :*

"The fruit of this sacrament is not only the forgiveness of sins, necessary to those who have sinned. It 'brings about a true 'spiritual resurrection', restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God' (CCC 1468). **It would be an illusion to want to strive for holiness in accordance with the vocation that God has given to each one of us without frequently and fervently receiving this sacrament of conversion and sanctification...**By its nature this sacrament involves a purification...is a sacrament of enlightenment...brings about a unifying encounter with Christ..." (27/3/2004)

*Next, a couple of concluding practical comments on celebrating the Sacrament itself.*

# SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION 9

Here we conclude our consideration of the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation (Confession). We consider some practical aspects of the use of the sacrament.

I don't intend to deal with these matters at length. There are booklets available for those who wish to look at any of these matters at greater length.

## **1. The sacrament: a meeting with Jesus Christ.**

Firstly, let us always remember that to go to confession is to meet Jesus Christ in a personal encounter. The priest acts 'in the person of Christ'. Jesus is truly present. In a very real sense it is to him that we confess. It is he who absolves us from sin, when the priest absolves.

The sacrament is a holy encounter with the God-Man, Jesus Christ, my Saviour and friend.

## **2. Preparing for the sacrament.**

We should always prayerfully prepare to celebrate this sacrament.

First, we ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and hearts, that we might know ourselves more truly.

Secondly, we examine our conscience, reviewing our life since our last confession.

Having reminded ourselves of our sins which we desire to confess, we arouse true sorrow in our hearts. We call to mind God's love for us, Christ's suffering and death for the forgiveness of my sins, His command that we love one another, and our failings in love for God and neighbour.

Let us also before the sacrament express our sorrow to Our Lord for our sins.

Let us remember that we are only obliged to confess mortal sin in type and number. For the rest, our confession need not be exhaustive of every little failing. When we express our sorrow for all our sins in the sacrament, the Lord forgives them all.

We have spoken before about this matter of the confession of venial sins.

## **3. In the sacrament:**

a) The person going to confession chooses in most circumstances whether to sit facing the confessor or kneel (or sit) behind a screen, thus allowing anonymity. That choice is entirely the business of the penitent. There is no 'better' way in this. Anonymity is a right of the penitent, a right to be safeguarded.

b) Most Catholic prayer-books or missals will have a section on 'going to confession', explaining the format. The normal procedure in confession is the following:

- the confessor greets the penitent.
- a brief reading from the Word of God is read by the confessor or penitent.
- the penitent makes his or her confession.
- the confessor offers a word of guidance, imposes the penance, grants absolution and dismisses the penitent with a brief proclamation of praise of God and His mercy.

A person who has a difficulty in expressing something in confession could simply tell the priest that he or she finds it difficult to express something, and allow him to help. The priest will ask no more questions than are necessary to assist in making a good confession.

## **3. After the Sacrament.**

The penitent should normally spend some time in prayer after the sacrament;

We thank God for his loving forgiveness.

We resolve in some practical way to avoid future sin. We could choose one confessed sin, and think how we can avoid sinning again in this. We resolve to do something to help us in this. We fulfil our penance as soon as we can, before we forget.

