Preparing for Confession

St. Augustine wrote, “My life shall be a real life, being wholly full of Thee.”

*Examine your lives and conduct by the rule of God’s commandments, that you may perceive wherein you have offended in what you have done or left undone, whether in thought, word, or deed. And acknowledge your sins before Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life, being ready to make restitution for all injuries and wrongs done by you to others; and also being ready to forgive those who have offended you, in order that you yourselves may be forgiven. And then, being reconciled with one another, come to the banquet of that most heavenly Food.*

*And if, in your preparation, you need help and counsel, then go and open your grief to a discreet and understanding priest, and confess your sins, that you may receive the benefit of absolution, and spiritual counsel and advice; to the removal of scruple and doubt, the assurance of pardon, and the strengthening of your faith.*

*To Christ our Lord who loves us, and washed us in his own blood, and made us a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father, to him be glory in the Church evermore. Through him let us offer continually the sacrifice of praise, which is our bounden duty and service, and, with faith in him, come boldly before the throne of grace and humbly confess our sins to Almighty God. –* An Exhortation, *Book of Common Prayer*, p.317

*From the Book of Common Prayer: Concerning the Rite*

The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of Christ and his ministers declaring absolution.

The Reconciliation of a Penitent is available for all who desire it. It is not restricted to times of sickness. Confessions may be heard anytime and anywhere. Two equivalent forms of service are provided to meet the needs of penitents. The absolution in these services may be pronounced only by a bishop or priest. Another Christian may be asked to hear a confession, but it must be made clear to the penitent that absolution will not be pronounced; instead, a declaration of forgiveness is provided.

When a confession is heard in a church building, the confessor may sit inside the altar rails or in a place set aside to give greater privacy, and the penitent kneels nearby. If preferred, the confessor and penitent may sit face to face for a spiritual conference leading to absolution or a declaration of forgiveness.

When the penitent has confessed all serious sins troubling the conscience and has given evidence of due contrition, the priest gives such counsel and encouragement as are needed and pronounces the absolution. Before giving absolution, the priest may assign to the penitent a psalm, prayer, or hymn to be said, or something to be done, as a sign of penitence and act of thanksgiving.

The content of a confession is not normally a matter of subsequent discussion. The secrecy of a confession is morally absolute for the confessor, and must under no circumstances be broken.

*Some thoughts and reflections about confession*

* Remember that our sins can never outweigh God's love towards us. Even if we should seem to have failed with regard to all the points mentioned above and more, we should not lose heart but confess our sins unshamefacedly, we should regret the wrongs we have done, be resolved to make amends, and receive whatever remedy our confessor should be guided to lay upon us. Most of all, one should be assured of the blessing of God which these endeavours will bring upon you.
* A definition of sin offered by Richard Holloway, one-time Presiding Bishop of Scotland, is ‘a wrongly directed effort; a good drive that fails to find the right object; a good thing in itself that is done to excess.’
* “Repentance is the response we are called to make as we meet Christ in the place where we have been brought to a halt, and sense his insistence that we reorient ourselves towards God. … Why are you coming to a halting place in your relationship with God? …
  + Guilt about past is felt as a burden too heavy to go on bearing …
  + Some people have just emerged battered and bruised after a difficult stretch of life …healing has to take place—one aspect of which involves taking responsibility for the sins they have committed during the struggle…
  + Some forthcoming trial makes them see life in a new light and take stock of how they have lived...
  + Those in transition from one stage of life to another … to make the passage from one stage to another, they need to make a closure …
  + To take up a journey again after having abandoned it years before …
  + A dead end which forces them to recognize that the direction they have been following leads away from life and relationship with God…
  + Those who experience a conversion or spiritual awakening …

God can call us to repentance in an endless variety of ways.”

From *Reconciliation: Preparing for Confession in the Episcopal Church* by Martin Smith

* “The Reconciliation of a Penitent is not psychotherapy. We are dealing here with less than emotions and more with objective sins. Reconciliation has its own kind of healing, but it is primarily sacramental, not psychotherapeutic. Basically it is a meeting with the forgiving Lord, not with a therapist. Nor is this spiritual direction. Spiritual direction is related to the counsel that one receives in the course of the rite, but it is also much more wide ranging. Direction is a more relaxed conversation about life in the Spirit, whereas Reconciliation deals with a narrower aspect of the spiritual life.” From *Reconciliation: Confession & Forgiveness* by Nicholas Radelmiller, OHC and Elizabeth Canham, Oblate OHC
* The most important thing to remember in self-examination we do in preparing for confession is that God is present in us and is ready to forgive. We are often temptation to use self-examination as a way to feel guilty and more shameful. Guilt and shame are the very things from which God is seeking to release us. We undertake self-examination not so that God can hurt us, but so that we may discover where we hurt and where we may invite God to work. Be honest with yourself, but also be gentle as God is gentle. Remember, the only thing needed for forgiveness is the desire for it. In the words of St. Clare, “Live without fear: Your creator has made you holy, has always protected you, and loves you as a mother.” Begin and end with prayer.
* You may want to explore these things with a priest before making a confession or it could be part of the confession process.
* The Rite of Reconciliation can be undertaken for specific instances of turning from God ***or*** as a kind of life examination in which one remembers patterns and sins over a span of time. Here are some helpful thoughts on how to discern what God’s Spirit is calling you toward.
  + You may take notes that you can eventually bring with you to the confession. Don’t use a journal, computer, or any kind of electronic device that could preserve these notes. Keep them private in a secure place. The notes will be destroyed at the confession.
  + Divide your life into distinct periods that you can recall in turn. These could be as simple as: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood; or middle school, high school, and college. These could also be divided by particular life experience: marriage, military service, since coming out, or retirement.
  + Use these periods as headings on separate pages. Ask God to keep you company and support you as you bring back to awareness actions that were unloving or wrong, and ways in which, out of fear or mistrust, you failed to act.
  + If you are coming to confession because a particular event is weighing on you, it is fine to start there. It does not matter in what order you examine your life.
  + Think of your life as a whole. Don’t be in a hurry to focus on only the negative things— include the good things as well. As we look back on life we may discover that there were gifts of God we experienced that we took for granted. Sin may be present in our lives simply as ingratitude. But also remember that these gifts show us that God has loved us through our life.
  + Don’t censor your thoughts. If you remember something that seems trivial now, but filled you with guilt as a child, these things too may need to be confessed. Doing so will allow you to experience God’s forgiveness for something that happened when our sense of moral responsibility was still in its earliest days.
  + Some challenges we faced “come with the territory” in distinct phases of our lives. For instance, as adolescents most of us are struggling with issues of independence, identity, and sexuality. Some of our failings from that period were almost unavoidable, yet by putting them in word for confession we can let God’s grace heal some of the wounds we received or inflicted at the time. As we review our lives in these distinct phases, we are likely to find ourselves growing in compassion toward ourselves, a sure sign of God’s loving Spirit at work.
  + After you have revisited each period in your life, you are likely to reach a point where you don’t seem able to add anymore. This is the time to move on to Stage Two.
* Use scripture as a framework for reflection
  + I Corinthians 13: Let Paul’s statements about the way love operates shed light on your own unloving tendencies. For example, “Love is not resentful.” What part has resentment played in your life? Do you nurse grudges? Whom won’t you forgive? Has someone else’s success made you wish they had failed?
  + Exodus 20: The Ten Commandments. Take each commandment in turn, and let it set off a train of thought. For example, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” might set you thinking about times in which you spread rumors or gossip, or deliberately damaged someone’s reputation.
  + Mark 12:28-31: Jesus’ Summary of the Law. What are ways in which you have found difficulty loving God? In what ways have you disqualified people from being your neighbor, or withheld love from another?
  + Matthew 5-6: The Sermon on the Mount. Read a few verses at a time and use your imagination to see patterns in your own behavior that correspond to Jesus’ own analysis. For example, his question “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” might trigger memories of ways in which you have judged others harshly, especially criticizing them for faults that you yourself are prone to.
  + Galatians 5:22-26: The Fruits of the Spirit. Think of the signs of spiritual freedom and generosity that result from trust in the indwelling Spirit of love: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Ponder ways in which you have displayed the opposite characteristics. (Also, think of ways in which you have shown these, because, once again, God’s presence has worked in your life in some ways.)
* The Seven Deadly Sins is the traditional list of sinful traits, and a tool for self-examination that can throw light on patterns of behavior in our lives.
  + Pride. Reflect on how you insist on your own way, with God and with others, expecting them to regard you as superior to them. Notice times you have been reluctant to admit mistakes or things you don’t know. Do you acknowledge your need of others and your indebtedness to them? Sometimes we think of ourselves as unique or special in a negative way, as exceptionally inadequate, weak or unqualified to make any contribution—this too is sin in that it points to a distrust of God’s ability to use our gifts. (On the flip side, have you actively sought the grace of humility?)
  + Greed. Think of ways in which you feel the need to gratify acquisitive impulses. Do you use people or things to satisfy inner cravings? (On the flip side, have you actively sought the grace of contentment?)
  + Envy. Think of ways in which you are caught up in comparing your life with those of others. Have you resented others’ success? Have you nursed disappointment and lack of respect for your own life, your own path and gifts? (On the flip side, have you actively sought to cultivate gratitude?)
  + Anger. Think of the ways in which you have resorted to emotional or physical violence against others. Have you been abusive or bullying? Have you fumed and withdrawn from others and damaged relationships by refusing to deal with conflict in an open and honest way? Have you withheld forgiveness from anyone who has sought it? (On the flip side, have you actively sought God’s help to be someone who seeks peace and reconciliation?)
  + Lust. Think of the ways in which you have used others, especially for sexual gratification, or sought sexual stimulus outside the context of a committed loving relationship. Can you see in your life any tendency to deceive yourself in the ways you have acted sexually, perhaps by making more of a relationship than is really there to justify sexual intimacy?
  + Gluttony. Are you dependent on overeating, drinking heavily, or using drugs to satisfy cravings or cover up difficult emotions? Have you sought help to bring eating and drinking within the bounds of health? Do you hold yourself accountable for cultivating health as a gift of God?
  + Sloth. Think about ways in which you are indolent, avoiding the cost of discipline and effort to meet the demands of life and Christian discipleship. Do you procrastinate? Do you seek the recreative Sabbath rest that God wants us to enjoy? Think of other terms for sloth, such as apathy or indifference. Do they suggest ways in which you avoid acting or taking responsibility in your life? Can you remember using excuses like “There’s no point in even trying”?

*The Role of the Penitent and of the Priest*

*The role of the penitent*

*Engage in self-examination* – Before making your confession use some method for self-examination. Keep it simple! Avoid making a long list; rather focus on the primary sins that concern you. Obviously take note if you are finding yourself wanting to avoid acknowledging something.

*Review the rites available in the Prayer Book* – Look at pages 446 – 451. There are two rites that may be used. The first is the most traditional and commonly used. If you would prefer to use the second rite say so to the priest.

*If you need instruction* – If you are unfamiliar with how to make a confession trust that reading this booklet and the guidance of the priest will get you through. If you feel need for more instruction than that it may be wise to speak with a priest a few weeks before making a confession about the mechanics and any questions you have.

*The role of the priest*

*May instruct* – The priest may offer such instruction as seems needed. For example, the priest may point out the pages of the rite or ask if this is the person’s first time making a confession.

*May explore what the person has said* – This is for the sake of clarity not curiosity. The priest may need more information to understand exactly what is being confessed. The priest will usually not interrupt while the person is in the process of stating the sins but may ask questions after that part of the rite.

*May offer counsel, direction and comfort* – The priest may help the person make a connection between a stated sin and some broader pattern or some virtue or good to which the sin may be related. A segment of scripture or other spiritual passage might be offered.

*May assign an act of penitence or thanksgiving* – The person may be asked to offer a prayer or read scripture or other spiritual reading. A penance is usually a relatively easy and light thing to perform. The “penance” is done after the rite has concluded. It may be done in another space in the church or later at home. In some cases the person may be asked to make restitution for a harm done another (e.g., restoring something that has been stolen, an apology for act of unkindness). An act of penance “must be of such a character that it does not compel the penitent to make his/her offense public.” From Doctrine in the Church of England p. 198.

*Provides absolution* (possibly with none of the above being offered) – The priest pronounces absolution usually including the sign of the cross, occasionally by the laying of hands upon the person’s head.

*Deciding on which priest you want to hear your confession* – This is up to you. For many people it isn’t a question. They go at a time that fits their schedule. For others there might be a preference to not confess to a priest who is the rector or a close friend. Any priest can hear your confession and office the Rite of Reconciliation.