

# GOING TO CONFESSION: Get Ready and Go!

## I. The Big Picture

Confession, aka “The Sacrament of Penance” or “The Sacrament of Reconciliation” is one of the two gifts that we call the Church’s “Sacraments of Healing.” The other Sacrament of Healing is the Anointing of the Sick.

But what healing does the gift of Confession offer? Our catechism names several. “The effects of the sacrament of Penance are... reconciliation with God... forgiveness of sins... reconciliation with the Church... recovery of grace... remission of punishment.” That is a lot of healing.

The idea of getting to those gifts can be a little intimidating since getting there requires us to cross the potentially scary terrain of candid self-assessment. Who wants to revisit their faults and failings? Who wants to admit the wrong they have done and the trouble they have caused? Who wants to acknowledge their needs for help from God and help from other people?

Dread of these daunting tasks (like dread of harsh priests) can easily morph into what Saint Ignatius calls “wild and fallacious reasonings that deprives us of peace and prevent our progress in the ways of the Lord.” These “wild and fallacious reasonings” – e.g., fears that candid self-assessment will yield uninspired self-loathing or despair – are almost always inaccurate and almost always launched by the dark spirits who want us to focus so much on the sacrament’s challenges that we skip the sacrament and forego its graces.

How best to combat excessive, uninspired self-flagellation? Look at the big picture. Notice where you are getting it right *and* where you are getting it wrong. Notice the moments when you choose to walk in the light *and* when you choose to walk in the dark. Get a realistic view of yourself. Be glad for the light then confess your sins.

## II. Get Ready: A Big-picture Examination of Conscience

The Ten Commandments provide one of the most helpful guidelines for making an Examination of Conscience. We can use the Ten Commandments to make a more traditional and highly effective Examination of Conscience that focuses on our sins. We can also use the Ten Commandments to make a Big Picture Examination of Conscience that looks at my inspired choices as well as my uninspired choices. Either way, before we make our Examination, we need to ask for God’s help.

### A) Invite God's Help

It can be very helpful to start with a few minutes of a Jesus prayer. It can also be helpful to close the eyes and imagine Jesus standing right in front of you, in His public ministry, rather than in His Passion or Glory. Imagine Him walking up to you and asking you, as He asked so many during his public ministry, “What do you want me to do for you?” And you answer:

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
Living Son of the Living God  
Help me to see where  
I walk in the light and I walk in the dark.*

Give it a few moments of quiet repetition. Notice that He is looking at you as He looked at the rich young man – “with love.” Notice that He is the one who loves you more than anyone else ever could. Notice that He is the one whose heart we call “Sacred,” knowing He loves you infinitely. Trust that He will help you to know what you need to know about your choices, both your sinful choices and your inspired choices.

### B) Consider the Commandments

After a few minutes of engaging Jesus, it is good to consider the Ten Commandments and the ways in which I am honoring them with my inspired choices and dishonoring them with my sins

### The First Commandment:

**“You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”**

#### *Inspired Choices*

- In what moments have I demonstrated that God is my organizing principle, my true North Star, the one I treat as the reference point for all my choices? When have I considered a definition of success that did not consider God and then discarded that definition? In what moments have I shown myself that, with God’s help, I strive to love God completely? When have my prayer and sacramental commitments outweighed other duties?

#### *Sinful Choices*

- In what moments have I demonstrated that something in my life matters more than connection to Christ. When have I made choices based on my disordered affections? When have my actions show that Love of God is not the organizing principle in my life? When have I ignored prayer and sacramental commitments in pursuit of other duties?

### The Second Commandment

**You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.**

#### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I deliberately curbed my inclination to misuse Jesus’ name? When have I felt an inclination to mix Jesus’ name with hurtful language?

#### *Sinful Choices*

- In what circumstances have I mixed Jesus’ name with vulgarity or mean-spirited talk?

### The Third Commandment

**Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.**

#### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I changed my schedule so that I be at Mass? When have I encouraged myself and others to honor the invitation to practice a Sabbath Rest every week?

#### *Sinful Choices*

- When have I let Mass become a secondary or even a tertiary consideration when planning a weekend? When have I acted like getting the family to Mass is on a par with other activities? When have I missed Mass?

## **The Fourth Commandment** **Honor your father and your mother.**

### *Inspired Choices*

- (For those with elderly or infirm parents) How have I gone out of my way to make them feel loved and connected? (For those whose parents are in their primes) How have I gone above and beyond to abide by their requests, even when they seem dopey? How have I tried to lighten their burdens?

### *Sinful Choices*

- (For those with elderly or infirm parents) When have I ignored their needs for very unimportant reasons? When have I let them feel alone? (For those whose parents are in their primes) when have I decreased their quality of life?

## **The Fifth Commandment** **You shall not kill.**

### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I acted on or spoken the truly Pro-Life belief that every human life is sacred – regardless of what some say? How have I respected those whose lives are considered trivial or useless? When have I helped people in life-threatening circumstances?

### *Sinful Choice*

- When have my conversations or my actions expressed an opinion that some lives are “more sacred” than others? When have I foregone a chance to support a fragile life?

## **The Sixth Commandment** **You shall not commit adultery.**

### *Inspired Choices*

- (For married persons) When have my choices shown that our marriage matters more than my convenience? (For married or unmarried persons) When have I encouraged others to honor their vows more fully?

### *Sinful Choices*

- (For married persons) When have my choices suggested that I care little about the quality of my marriage? (For married or unmarried persons) When have I encouraged others to trivialize their vows?

## **The Seventh Commandment** **You shall not steal.**

### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I resisted the urge to take something (material, electronic, financial, relational) that was not mine? When have I given away something when I was not obliged to do so?

### *Sinful Choices*

- When have I taken what is not mine (material, electronic, financial, relational) or destroyed something that another values? When have I trivialized theft or crime?

## **The Eighth Commandment** **You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**

### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I redirected a conversation that was harming someone’s reputation? When have I explained someone’s innocence?

### *Sinful Choices*

- When have I piled on when someone was being besmirched or insulted? Have I shared secrets or statements, in person or online, that have hurt others?

## **The Ninth Commandment** **You shall not desire your neighbor’s spouse**

### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I done the work of seeing what is truly beautiful about the people in my life, even those who bug me, so that I do not trip off into coveting other relationships?

### *Sinful Choices*

- When have I deliberately and consciously indulged unholy thoughts about unholy relationships? Have I disrupted another’s inspired relationships?

## **The Tenth Commandment** **You shall not desire your neighbor’s goods**

### *Inspired Choices*

- When have I stopped to count my blessings so that I am less inclined to covet another’s?

### *Sinful Choices*

- When have I let envy of another’s circumstances blind me to the beauty of mine? When have I become preoccupied by what another has earned or been given?

# **III. Go!: Reminders about the Process**

Having been reminded that Jesus loves you like mad, and having taken that long, loving look at your inspired choices and your sinful choices, it is time to go to confession.

Stay focused on the purpose of the sacrament – to give you a chance to acknowledge your sinful choices before God and another person. Stay focused too on the two potential risks of making a big picture examination of conscience.

First, the Big Picture approach has a way of making us want to confess how good we are. That is very helpful information, but it is not the point of Confession. By staying aware of how inspired choices, we gain an ability to acknowledge our sinful choices – but that does not mean we are there to discuss our virtues! We are there to confess sins.

Second, a Big Picture examination can also tempt us to confess someone else’s sins. The awareness of our inspired choices can sometimes make us more aware of others’ uninspired choices. Again, that misses the point. We come to confess our sins so as to reconnect with Jesus and others.

If you stumble over the procedure, relax. The priests are there to help you. Also, if you stumble over the words of the Act of Contrition, relax again. You can use the cheat sheet below, or ask the priest to guide you, or just tell God, in your own words, that you are sorry and that, with God’s help, you hope to do better.

Enjoy the Sacrament. It is a beautiful, healing gift from God that helps restore all of us to peace and connection. Trust that God wants to forgive you and reboot you, and that God is indeed grateful for all the inspired choices that God’s grace regularly enables you to make.

The Act of Contrition: "My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin