

Update Your Faith

American
CATHOLIC
.org

Catholic

UPDATE

ABOUT • SUBSCRIBE • ARCHIVE

Ten Tips for Better Confessions The Gift of Reconciliation

by Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., S.T.D.

"I'm a Catholic who still believes strongly in the value of confession but I feel unsure nowadays about the best way to celebrate this sacrament. What can I do to make confession a richer and more peaceful experience?"

If these words express your own sentiments and anxieties about the Sacrament of Reconciliation, this *Update* will give you helpful insights and even a bit of comfort.

I know, however, that there are many Catholics who, on seeing an article billed as "Ten Tips for Better Confessions," may be tempted to quip: "Why would I want ten tips for doing something *better* that I might not do *at all*?!!"

I believe I understand their position. I run into it a lot. After all, recent studies show that the majority of Catholics have either stopped going to confession altogether or they go only rarely. No one denies that the long lines of Catholics waiting to go to confession on Saturdays have disappeared.

As someone who celebrates this sacrament from both viewpoints—that is, both as a penitent and as an officiating priest—I'm convinced that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a gift for today's Church. In this *Update*, therefore, I want to persuade Catholics of all kinds to approach this sacrament more confidently.

The "Ten Tips" that follow are based upon my own experience as pastor and as seminary professor and upon various studies I have made or read. Most recently is that published by the U.S. bishops (1990), *Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today*, a study they commissioned to find out why Catholics have stopped going to confession. I have found these "Ten Tips" useful for myself and for many who have come to me for spiritual direction.

1. Focus on what's most important

I have found that many Catholics have less than pleasant experiences with the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they miss the real point of the sacrament. I think the "real point" can be found in the story I once heard from a saintly and learned German pastor, Father Bernard H—ring:

One Sunday afternoon in the 1930's in a little parish in Germany where he was pastor, Father H—ring was leading the customary Sunday afternoon parish Vesper service with religious instruction and Benediction. This particular Sunday he was talking about confession.

"What is the most important thing about confession?" he asked. A woman in the front pew responded: "Telling your sins to the priest. That's why we call it *confession*." Father H—ring said, "Confessing the sins is important, but it's not the *most* important thing." A man towards the back called out: "Contrition! Being sorry for your sins! The whole thing doesn't work without contrition." Father H—ring said, "True, it doesn't 'work' without contrition; but I don't think contrition is *the most important* thing." A man over on St. Joseph's side spoke up: "It's the examination of conscience. Unless you examine your conscience, you don't know what you have to be sorry for and what to confess." Father H—ring still wasn't satisfied.

An uneasy silence fell over the church. Then a little girl in the second pew said: "Father, I know what is most important. It's what Jesus does!"

It's what Jesus does! That's the most important thing, the thing we should focus upon. The examination of conscience, sorrow for sin, telling the sins to the priest—these are all important. But you will have a more positive experience of the sacrament if your focus is on *what Jesus does*.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus announces to us, through the Church and its ministers, that our sins are forgiven and that we are loved by God. We hear the voice of Christ: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven." This is what Jesus does. This is his gift of reconciliation.

2. Name it "Reconciliation"

Names are important. The Sacrament of Reconciliation has had several different names. In the recent past, bishops, theologians and Church documents have consistently called this sacrament the "Sacrament of Penance" and called those going to the sacrament "penitents." This language has never been popular with the Catholic laity who used the names "confession," "confessor" and "confessional." Your experience of the sacrament will be enriched if you name the sacrament—and think about it as—"Reconciliation." "Confession" only names one part of the sacrament, and not the most important part at that. Reconciliation names what is most important, what Jesus does. "Sacrament of Reconciliation" is the name used in

the rite itself and was the name preferred by Pope Paul VI who issued the new ritual.

The word *reconciliation* is rich in meaning. It suggests the gift of God's forgiveness and the removal of the barriers we place between ourselves, our community and our God. Reconciliation means the rebridging of the gap between God and us and between ourselves and others. It also suggests the deep peace that comes from being brought back into harmony with God, with sisters and brothers and with the whole of creation.

3. See the advantages of communal celebration

The revised rite of the Sacrament of Reconciliation was given to the Church by Pope Paul VI on December 2, 1973. The new rite presents the sacrament in three different ritual forms, three different shapes: (1) *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*, (2) *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*, (3) *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution*.

The first form—*The Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*—is similar to the way most Roman Catholics remember "confession"; however, provision is made for the reading of sacred Scripture, and the penitent is given the option of speaking to the priest face-to-face or remaining anonymous. The prayer for absolution is revised and enriched.

The second form—*The Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*—is described below.

The third form—*The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution*—is similar to the preceding form except that the penitent need not mention each serious sin individually and the prayer of absolution is given collectively or "generally" to all those gathered to celebrate the sacrament (general absolution). This rite (the third form) with general absolution is not widely used in the United States.

While "Tip Three" (recommending a *communal* celebration) might refer to either form two or three, it is the second form—*The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*—which, I believe, deserves the greatest attention here, especially for those who find that the practice of individual "confession" as we knew it in the past does not fit their needs.

For some Catholics the very idea of a *communal* celebration of the sacrament may seem strange, for there are very few things that we would consider more *personal* and *private* than our sins and our sinfulness. But this is only partly true. Our sins are personal but they are never private. Pope John Paul II clearly affirmed that "there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it....Every sin has repercussions on

the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family" (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 16). As sin affects the community so Reconciliation affects the community. And a communal celebration of the sacrament says this most clearly.

As our sin is both personal and communal, a celebration of Reconciliation which is both personal and communal will, in many cases, be the form of the sacrament which will be most helpful. The Second Vatican Council instructs us that "whenever rites...make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful...this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, as far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and, so to speak, private" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 27).

The Holy Father Pope Paul VI, after promulgating the revision of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, said to a general audience on April 3, 1974, that he hoped this communal rite, that is, the second form, would "become the normal way of celebration." And indeed this is the rite which is becoming more and more popular in Catholic parishes.

4. Know what you want

There are many reasons why you might want to talk to a priest: You might want advice, counseling, moral guidance, help with your marriage, spiritual direction, or you might just want to talk to someone. It is important to know what you want. While you might want counseling or help with your marriage at a certain time in your life, for example, none of these really requires a priest—and a priest may not be the best person to meet these needs for you. More importantly, none of these things is the principal focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The sacrament is the proclamation of reconciliation with God and with the Church. If that is what you want, choose the sacrament, but it's important to know what you want.

It is the growing conviction of many priests and liturgists that the other reasons for "talking to a priest" mentioned above (counseling, spiritual direction and so on) are separate and distinct things. And they often work best *outside* the sacrament.

A good silver table knife doesn't work as well as a screwdriver. But when a screw comes loose on the refrigerator door and the knives are right there while the screwdriver hasn't been seen since last Christmas, we often reach for the handiest thing. Sometimes it will get the job done, but it isn't good for the knife. Many Catholics have become dissatisfied with "confession" because they wanted it to do something it was not intended to do.

5. Don't use the sacrament as a substitute

The Sacrament of Reconciliation works best when you have already achieved some degree of reconciliation *before* celebrating the sacrament. Confessing "I am an alcoholic" is no substitute for going to AA. Or to confess "My spouse and I have

started to yell and hit one another" is no substitute for seeking marriage counseling. Or telling your confessor "I get so angry when the neighbor's children play outside my bedroom window when I am trying to sleep" is no substitute for speaking to your neighbor and explaining your needs.

6. Talk about sin—not just "guilt"

Many of us first received our "technical" knowledge about sin when we were children being prepared for our First Confession. We often learned that sin was "not keeping the rules" set down by the adults. For example, we might confess, "I disobeyed my mommy and daddy three times." As we grow and mature our internal "list of rules" (what some call the "superego") grows also and we gather more and more "should's" and "ought's." Whenever we break one of these rules, intentionally or not, we feel guilty. Guilt is not the same as sin.

Sin, in a Christian perspective, is not merely "breaking the rules." For the mature Christian, sin is understood in relation to love. God has loved us so much, and we have so often failed to return that love. When we examine our lives in the light of the message of Jesus we find that Jesus calls us to wholeness, to maturity; he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. For an adult Christian, sin is more than just breaking the rules; sin is the failure to grow. Sin is being today like you were yesterday. Sin is the failure to respond to the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus. This is why the proclamation of the Word of God now has such a prominent place in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the Word of God which convicts us of sin and which invites us to conversion.

One of the "strange" things about the Christian understanding of sin is that Christians become more aware of sin in proportion to their growth in holiness. The more we love, the more we know how much the lover is offended. The great saints really knew about sin. St. Francis of Assisi, as he lay dying, claimed he was the greatest of sinners. At one time I thought this was just the pious rambling of an unearthly man; but now I see that this was the honest realization of a great lover. My experience has often been that people's desire for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is in proportion to their holiness, not their sinfulness.

7. Examine your life in the light of the word of God

Formerly we came to church for confession knowing ahead of time what our sins were and what we were going to say. This might not always be such a good idea. It's important to come with an open mind. Don't decide finally on your sins until you participate in the celebration. Let the readings and the liturgical season, and the rite itself, help you to come to see what your sins are. During Advent, confess Advent sins (for example, how have I blocked the coming of God's reign?); during Lent confess Lent sins (for example, how have I failed to live my baptismal promises?).

During proclamation of the Scriptures, concentrate on God's love for you. The laws can give us a list of what we did wrong but the laws have no power to help us convert. The love of God has that power. As we hear the proclamation of God's love for us, we are confronted with our own response to that love. Does our love measure up to that of Jesus who said: "This is my commandment: Love one another as I love you" (John 15:12)? It is our common experience that we have fallen short; we have not loved enough.

The Ten Commandments are but one small part of the Bible. Some Catholics have found that restricting their examination to the Ten Commandments led them to routine confessions, boredom and eventually dissatisfaction with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The *whole* of sacred Scripture is for our instruction.

For example, if you are meditating on the story in John's Gospel about the cure of the man born blind, you might confess: "Father, I am sorry for the times I have been blinded by my desire to win the approval of others." Or: "I am sorry for the times I blame others for my problems." Or: "I wish to confess the times I have not seen the need to rest and go slow."

8. Pick the right time

My experience has been that people celebrate the sacrament most fruitfully when the celebration is occasioned by some important event in their lives. This event might be the yearly recurring cycle of the great solemnities of Easter and Christmas. It might be a milestone or turning point in their life's journey, for example, preparing for marriage or at the time of a spiritual retreat. Families often celebrate Reconciliation together when one of their children celebrates the sacrament for the first time. Lent has always been an especially appropriate time for the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

If you prefer to celebrate the sacrament with the communal rite, *The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*, you are most likely to find it offered in your parish during Lent and Advent, and at the time when families celebrate First Reconciliation with their children.

9. Experience reconciliation in a variety of ways

The reconciliation found in the sacrament is improved when you experience reconciliation in various ways. Catholics report that the most common ways in which they experience reconciliation apart from the Sacrament of Reconciliation are: by receiving the Eucharist (84%), by personal prayer (78%), by making an act of contrition (64%), by talking with a friend (52%), by helping someone in need (45%) and by reading the Bible (45%) (*Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today*).

Outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Eucharist is the most common way in which Catholics experience the forgiveness of sins. (For more on this point, see Leo Hay's *Eucharist: A Thanksgiving Celebration*, Glazer, The Liturgical Press, 1989, pp. 84-91.)

Perhaps the connection between the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins was hidden when the Mass was in Latin, but now Catholics hear plainly Sunday after Sunday many expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation: "May almighty God...forgive us our sins" (Penitential Rite). "You take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us" (Glory to God). "Though we are sinners, we trust in your mercy and love. Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness" (Eucharistic Prayer I). "Our Father...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Lord's Prayer). "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world...Lord, I am not worthy...but only say the word and I shall be healed" (Invitation to Communion). And at the heart of each and every Eucharistic Prayer in the institution narrative we hear Christ's command to "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all *so that sins may be forgiven.*" These are only a few of many references to the forgiveness of sins at Eucharist.

10. Be open to receiving a gift

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Peace is the Easter gift of the risen Lord. Christ commissioned his followers to continue his mission of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation—his mission of bringing peace. Peace is the "gift" of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is why we can speak of *celebrating* the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

There is joy in heaven when a sinner repents. What is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven and what is celebrated in heaven is celebrated on earth. My parish holds a celebration with cookies and punch for the children and their families following their first celebration of the sacrament. How things have changed! I never thought of a party when I made my first confession. But then, my focus was on what *I had done* and not on *what Jesus does*.

For several years when I first started my ministry of reconciliation as a priest I worried about when I could "give absolution" and when I had to refuse it. Slowly I began to realize that the real problem is not the *giving* absolution but in helping people *hear* it. Too few people really hear *what Jesus is doing for them*. Too few people actually hear and experience "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven." But those who do hear (and the new way of celebrating the sacrament helps us to hear these words of peace much more clearly than our former rite) receive a gift. And they know they have received a gift.

Why do I "go to confession"? To receive the gift of Reconciliation. The gift is offered

to you also. It's there for the asking.

Thomas Richstatter, O.F.M., has a doctorate in liturgy and sacramental theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris. A popular writer and lecturer, Father Richstatter teaches courses on the sacraments at St. Meinrad (Indiana) School of Theology. He is the author of The Reconciliation of Penitents published by the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, Box 29039, Washington, D.C. 20017 (202-635-6990).