

# Sex and Confession: 5 helpful guidelines

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In my training class on hearing confessions, we did case studies that hit all ten commandments, the seven deadly sins and, occasionally, the plotlines of major movies. (When asked to improvise a confession one of my classmates presented himself as Tony Montana from “Scarface.” It was definitely entertaining, but maybe not all that helpful.)

We talked about adultery, family conflicts, murder, work. But you know what we did not talk about much? Sex.

It is no surprise, really. A lot of people clam up when conversation turns even slightly toward intercourse. Celibate men are not exactly natural conversation partners for discussions of the day-to-day realities and struggles of a sexual life. Ask me anything about living with 40 other celibate men, or trying to be obedient, or loneliness. But treating your partner of 20 years like an object for your gratification, or frustration with a partner who can’t have sex, or being with someone for the first time and not being your best self in some way? Can I get back to you?

Recent stories online from women who have been treated badly in the confessional, including when talking about sexual issues, only further highlight that too many priests still lack proper pastoral sense when it comes to conversations around sex and gender, especially within the sacrament of confession.

But sex and intimacy are essential parts of most people’s lives; they are the stuff of some of our most fundamental aspirations and struggles. People should be able to talk sex in the confessional, if they want, without being made to feel embarrassed. And priests should be able to receive their stories without turning into sex-fearing (or sex-fascinated) monsters.

Even when both parties have good intentions, the decision about whether or not to confess something, what to confess and what questions to ask can be confusing or awkward. Here are a few things to keep in mind the next time you are thinking about heading into the confessional.

## **1) You do not have to talk about sex in the confessional.**

To say the church has a checkered history when it comes to how it teaches people about sex is like saying the Titanic went a teensy bit off course. Many, if not most, Catholics have been raised to see sex as pretty much synonymous with sin. And even if one’s own life experience has (hopefully) revealed that that is absolutely not the case, my own observation as a priest is that, for some Catholics, sexual sins (or perceived sexual sins) remain their primary focus when considering what sins to confess. In fact one of the things I was most unprepared for when I was ordained was the number of confessions that consisted entirely of an impure thought or incident of masturbation.

That said—and to my mind this is the most important thing to remember about the sacrament of reconciliation—confession is always for the one confessing, not the confessor. So if an idle fantasy or momentary lapse is something weighing on you, you should absolutely bring it to the Lord in confession, and we priests should take it seriously, because you do. Likewise, if something occurs in the bedroom that you feel bad about or want to bring to the Lord, all the better that you do. But there is no expectation within the context of confession that you need to talk about sex.

## **2) Take time to consider what you want to say before you enter the confessional.**

If you've thought about it and decided you do want to talk in confession about some aspect of your sexual life, take the time to consider what you're going to say.

For instance, ask yourself what is it, specifically, that is on your mind. Is it that you had sex in the first place? Something about the person you were with? Something that happened within the context of sexual activity? Or the nature of the activity that was engaged in?

It is worth asking yourself such questions, in part so that you can go into the actual experience of confession with a clear idea as to what you need to talk about. When it comes to sex, things get complicated. It is certainly O.K. to try and sort through your thoughts with a confessor, but you may get more out of the experience if you do a little bit of that untangling ahead of time.

You may even find that what is really bothering you stems from something else—whether you are treating yourself or others in a good and loving way; how your behavior matches up with the standards you have taken from the church, your family or culture; other stresses in your life.

If, with a little reflection, it is that much clearer that what you have to talk about is about some aspect of your sexual life, then trust in the words of Jesus and be not afraid. Say what it is you have to say. You may find that, in fact, your priest is a better listener than you expect. Whether they were in a relationship before they joined the priesthood or they came to the seminary looking like the Infant of Prague, most priests really have heard just about everything and also made enough mistakes along the way to have learned what people actually need, which is not a scold or a micromanager but a listening ear.

But if you find yourself confessing to a priest who cannot handle the confession, who becomes angry or abusive or too curious, then you absolutely can also choose to leave the confessional. (More on this below.)

## **3) Although a priest may ask you questions in the confessional, you do not have to answer them.**

There are many different pastoral styles of hearing confession. Some (hopefully not many) seem to think confession is a police investigation, which is absolutely wrong. If the priest is asking questions that are inappropriate, you can say so. For instance, if you confess something about your sex life, and the confessor starts asking follow-up questions about it or wants to hear particular details about the experience, you do not have to answer him. Your response can be this simple: "You know, Father, I'd rather not answer that." Or, "That's really all I have to say today, Father. Could you give me my penance and grant me absolution, please."

If the priest hearing your confession cannot handle that or keeps doing the thing that is upsetting you, you can also just walk out. Let's be clear: To leave in the middle of a confession is not a sin. Do not let a priest persuade you otherwise.

You have agency within the context of the sacrament. Resistance to inappropriate comments from a priest does not constitute some further sin or disqualify you from receiving absolution.

If you have a horrible and/or abusive experience in confession, please consider reporting it to your pastor or your bishop and also to someone who is not a priest on your parish council or staff. Whatever the priest has said to you, he has almost certainly said to someone else, and he will say it again. (By the way, you can give more general feedback to staff, about less dramatic or traumatic

circumstances related to a priest, too. We priests almost never get feedback. If we're doing something that's not working, we want to know.)

#### **4) A confessor does not have to fully understand your sins to offer you absolution.**

My own approach in the confessional is to let people say whatever they want to say, then usually to ask a couple very general follow-up questions. For instance, if someone comes in and gives a list of all the things they've done wrong, I might ask, "Of all these things, which seems to be the thing that is weighing on you the most? And why?"

To be clear, this is not about me as the priest trying to get "the dirt" on what someone has done or to assess just how "bad" their deeds are. A confessor is not a cop or a judge. Our job is to help the person say the things they need to say, to share with God the choices or experiences that have made them feel far from him, so that God can help them get past that.

If you do not need to say more than your initial statement of the sin, that is fine. A priest's comprehension is not the goal; God's mercy is. And God can work even through language barriers. I have both received the sacrament and been a confessor in settings where there was no shared language, and it is shocking to me how rich that experience can still be. It is a good reminder that reconciliation is the work of God.

#### **5) Finally, a note to my brother priests: Let's remember our own experiences.**

It is crucial that we priests remember just how vulnerable people are when they come to confession. They've come here to talk to us, a person they may very well not even know, about a burden they are carrying. There is a lot of risk in that in general, and even more if they are here to discuss their sex lives. So we priests really have to be gentle and circumspect in our approach.

And to help us we have our own life experience both as penitents and just as people to draw on. We know for ourselves what it's like when a confessor asks too many questions, or doesn't listen, or comes down hard on us, and how that impacts us. Even as celibates, we priests are still human beings, too, with our own struggles, longings and experiences around intimacy. We are each engaged in the long, slow work of seeing and accepting ourselves for who we are and learning how to love well. And we know what it is to screw up along the way and to see God still looking upon us as his children, with care, kindness and delight.

That is the gift we have been given, and that is the gift we are meant to share.