



Preparing for Confession

A Guide based on the Book of Common Prayer
and the St. Augustine's Prayer Book

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Penitence and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

We return to God in penitence constantly. Every day we say, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In the Eucharist, we confess our sins, things done and left undone. An honest spiritual life will lead us to know how our actions, thoughts, and dispositions bring us closer to or carry us away from God. Regular self-examination and repentance is an essential part of any healthy spiritual life. We do not have to carry out this work in isolation. The sacrament of reconciliation provides a specific setting for self-examination, the help of another’s insight, and the sure and certain sign of inward and spiritual grace—the words of absolution spoken by a priest.

The point to self-examination and confession is always an awareness of God’s desire that we turn from sin and live—a conviction that sin acknowledged and confessed is done away. The end of this spiritual work is renewed joy in God’s mercy and a clearer sense of the life and work that is ours as disciples of Jesus.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation asks us to take the results of our self-examination to another human being—a priest. There we find absolution—the sure and certain word of forgiveness that restores our relationship with God. Some people find a regular pattern of confession to be helpful; others seek it out at turning points in the year or in their life. There are times when our conscience is so troubled or our awareness so confused that a sacramental confession is all but necessary for spiritual health and growth. While some parish priests post particular hours for confession, a priest will always be ready to respond if you request a time for a confession. The first time you make a confession it might be helpful to arrange a conversation with the priest to explore how one prepares and what sort of things one confesses. You might approach your own parish priest or seek out some other priest as seems most helpful to you. Remember that the seal of the confessional is absolute. The priest cannot disclose what you bring to confession in any way and will not refer to it in conversation with you afterward. In extreme circumstances, the priest may withhold absolution until some necessary action is taken to indicate a sincere repentance and desire for amendment of life.

Repentance: Contrition, Confession, and Amendment

True repentance begins in contrition or sorrow for sin. This is not an emotion but recognition of the real damage sin does to your relationships with God and others and the conviction that both are displeasing to God. This recognition might come with sorrow and grief or might be simply a new and clearer understanding of your life in relationship to God. Emotion is not the point, understanding is. Confession is the second part of repentance. This involves a careful examination of our conscience and a willingness to see our actions and attitudes by the light of God's will and purposes for us. Certainly we need to make a regular practice of honest appraisal of our actions and inactions. The honest sorrow of contrition and a thorough confession leads us to amendment of life. Where we can make amends, we should do so (though not if any overt action on our part might be disturbing or reveal someone else's complicity in our sin. That is, if it is not positively helpful to another, it probably should not be done; the goal is not to salve our conscience but rather to set things right). Often there are clear changes we need to make in our lives to avoid temptation or to make some sin less likely. In confession, the priest may suggest a devotional act or some practical action to offer as a sign of thanksgiving for God's mercy, and that should be quickly and happily discharged. When we make a private act of contrition and confession, we should also make an act of thanksgiving and form a clear resolution of how we will change, grow, or respond to God's grace.

The ultimate basis on which we undertake this work is trust in God's desire for our salvation and our desire to live according to God's will. It is folly to assume we have nothing to confess; it is a perverse pride that will not let God's mercy relieve and brighten our guilt or shame. We still have to work through the effects of sin in our life, but forgiveness removes the sin as a barrier between us and God and dispels the false notion that we are incapable or unworthy of forgiveness and a new beginning.

Prayer Before an Examination of Conscience

HOLY GOD, your knowledge of me exceeds what I grasp or see in any moment; you know me better than I know myself. Now, help me to trust in your mercy, to see myself in the light of your holiness, and grant me the grace that I may have true contrition, make an honest confession, and find in you forgiveness and perfect remission. Amen.

A Form of Self-Examination Based on the Seven Deadly Sins

In preparation for making a sacramental confession, you may use the reflections on the Seven Deadly Sins that follow. Let them help you recognize sin as you think through your life—either through periods of time or in the different relationships that form your life. You might find it helpful to write briefly the ways in which you have failed or turned away from what is good and holy.

Do not be in a hurry, but do not vex yourself. Be as honest and thorough as you can be; this is all God asks of us.

If you come to a situation that you do not altogether understand, or that raises questions, make a note and take the question to someone with the experience and understanding to help clarify it.

As you prepare to name your sins before God or in confession, be careful that your recounting does not name others. While it is right and helpful to understand the influences on our actions, it is not helpful to use our confession to blame someone else. God knows us and all that has shaped our personality. Here, there is no need to explain or blame.

Do not let the weight of our sins or your inability to remember them all accurately trouble you. Remember you are trying to recall and confess them, not to be condemned, but to be forgiven.

PRIDE puts self at the center as is not willing to trust or obey God; it holds oneself above or away from others and refuses to see oneself within the larger human family.

Irreverence: Neglect of public worship and the failure to keep a disciplined life of prayer and devotion. Disregard of things, people, and habits that deserve respect; use of holy things or piety for personal advantage; or any attempt to make religious practice a bribe to God. Being satisfied with religious feeling or sentimentality and not striving to know and do God's will.

Presumption: Dependence on self and neglect of the means of grace, prayer, and the sacraments; assuming that the normal rules and patterns of Christian life do not apply because of our particular situation or attributes. Disdain toward others. Failure to recognize that our work and our relationships are the means by which we serve God and forward the kingdom. Failure to pray, work, or give for the advancement of God's kingdom and for purposes that deserve or command our support.

Distrust: Refusal to recognize God's wisdom, providence, and love. Baseless worry, anxiety, or perfectionism. Attempts to discern or control the future by astrology, fortune telling, magic, or superstition. Oversensitivity, being too quick to take offense, unfounded suspicions, and assuming the worst in others. Timidity or cowardice in facing difficulty, suffering, or responsibility. Surrender to gloom or discouragement instead of striving for confidence, patience, and hope.

Disobedience: Rejection of God's known will in favor of our own interests or pleasures. Disregard or contempt for parents, teachers, employers, or any others in legitimate authority over us. Allowing public opinion or custom to blind us to what is right and good. When in authority, exercising it with cruelty or for selfish ends. Refusal to grow in understanding of the faith and the scriptures. Absorption in the trivial. Violation of confidence, breaking legitimate promises or contracts. Irresponsibility. Treachery,

unnecessary disappointment of another, or causing shame or anxiety to those who love us.

Impenitence: Refusal to know and admit our sins and shortcomings. Assuming that we are better than we are. Self-justification. Comparison of ourselves with others. Refusal to make amends where possible, inability to admit wrong and ask forgiveness, grumbling under the consequences of our misdeeds, or allowing another to bear blame for our faults. Overcompensation or attempts at self-reform that are ostentatious or over-wrought and likely to fail. Self-vengeance and refusal to accept God's mercy in humble penitence.

Vanity: Crediting to ourselves rather than to God our talents, abilities, insights, accomplishments, and good works. Refusal to admit indebtedness to others, hypocrisy, and pretense to virtues we do not possess. Boasting or exaggeration or undue concern or expense on appearance, dress, or surroundings in order to impress others. Use of false humility to engender praise or flattery.

Arrogance: Disregard of others and their concerns. Overbearing, argumentative, or obstinate. Pride of race, family position, education, religious standing, skill, or possessions. Disdain for others for these reasons.

ANGER is open rebellion against God or our fellow creatures, the disregard of the other, and the desire to eliminate any obstacle to our self-seeking. Anger prompts us to retaliate against any perceived threat and creates a desire to avenge anything that seems an insult or injury. Anger finds satisfaction or release in striking out at others.

Resentment: Refusal to discern or accept God's purposes in our life. Dissatisfaction with talents or abilities and refusal to use them to God's purposes. Complaint and objection to reality, with no interest in the work required to improve or change the situation. Transference to others the blame for our own failures or limitations or discounting the reality and the worth of other's feelings and experience.

Pugnacity: Combativeness or nursing grudges. Physical or emotional Injury to another. Quarrelsomeness, bickering, contradiction, nagging, rudeness, or snubbing. Murder, in deed or desire. Any sexual activity that is abusive or controlling of the other person or forced on another person.

Retaliation: Vengeance for wrongs, real or imagined. Harsh or excessive punishments to those for whom we are responsible. Hostility, sullenness, or rash judgments; refusal to forgive or work toward reconciliation when it is genuinely possible. Pleasure in others' remorse or sense of failure.

ENVY is dissatisfaction with our place in God's order of creation, manifested in begrudging the gifts and vocations of others.

Jealousy: Offense at others' talents or success. Desire to control others so they are dependent on us. Belittling others. Inability or refusal to enjoy one's own good fortune because someone else's seems greater. Attacking another's work or personality to foster one's own position. Refusal to offer help and advice in order to see the other fail.

Malice: False accusations, slander, backbiting, or gossip. Arousing, fostering, or organizing hostility toward others. Unnecessary or unhelpful criticism, even when true. Organizing and fostering division and resentment within the parish or other communities rather than *honest*, patient conversation. Deliberate annoyance of others. Teasing. Any acts of bullying.

Contempt: Scorn of another's virtue or ability, or of their shortcomings or failings. Prejudice against those we consider inferior, or who seem to consider us inferior. Ridicule of persons, institutions, or ideals.

GREED is the refusal to respect the integrity of other creatures and the desire or the actual misuse of things or people. It is expressed in the inordinate accumulation of material things, in the use of

other persons for personal advantage, or in the quest for status, power, or security.

Inordinate ambition: Pursuit of status, power, influence, reputation, or possession at the expense of the moral law, of one's other obligations, or in disregard of the rights and well-being of others. Ruthless or unfair competition. Putting self or family or other connections first. Participation in what we know to be dishonest or wrong in order to get ahead. Intrigue or conspiracy for self-advancement.

Domination: Seeking to use or control others for our own ends/needs; overprotection of children or other dependents. Refusal to correct or punish them for fear of losing affection. Insistence that they conform to our ideal or expectations though it be contrary to their own vocation and interests. Imposing our will on others by force, guile, whining, or by withholding affections or support. Putting others in a position of dependence or compliance in an unfair manner. Any habit of using others for our own comfort or well-being or seeing them only in relation to our desires or needs.

Favoritism: Partiality, flattery, or fawning to win support or affection. Dishonest praise and refusal to speak for what is true or right in order to ingratiate oneself. Silence in the face of prejudice, abuse, bullying, or cruelty for fear or for desire of favor or acceptance. Leading or encouraging others toward sin in order to be held in esteem or respect.

Avarice: Inordinate pursuit of wealth or material things. Theft or dishonesty. Failure to pay fair and reasonable wages. Cheating in business, taxes, academic work, or at games. Making worldly success the goal of our life and the standard for judging others. Use of funds or resources we hold in trust for our own benefit.

Prodigality: Waste of resources. Waste of personal possessions or misuse of things held in trust for another. Extravagances and expenditures beyond our income to impress others or satisfy our

own desires. Failing to pay debts or honor obligations. Gambling more than we can afford to lose or in a desperate attempt to gain wealth. Waste of possessions that are needed for the welfare of those dependent on us. Contempt of normal restraints and disregard of those with less than we have. Waste of natural resources.

Miserliness: Undue protection of wealth. Delight in wealth as an end in itself. Stinginess. Accepting others' support when we could provide for our own needs. Refusal to support those who have a rightful claim on us. Refusal to develop the habit of generous giving to church and institutions that serve the common good. Lack of gratitude and joy in the material blessings we have received.

GLUTTONY: Overindulgence of natural appetites for food and drink, and by extension, the inordinate quest for pleasure and comfort.

Intemperance: Overindulgence in food or drink. Keeping an unhealthy diet by choice or neglect. Condemnation of material things or normal pleasures as evil in themselves. Compulsive use of food or drink as a distraction or comfort. Drinking alcohol to the point of intoxication. Using or participating in illegal drugs and drug trafficking.

Lack of Discipline: Neglect of bodily health: insufficient rest, recreation, exercise, or nourishment. Failure to maintain sound habits of work, rest, prayer, family, or social commitments. Attempts to evade reasonable expectations.

LUST is the misuse of sex or any action that debases it from the holy purpose for which God has given it to us.

Unchastity: Sexual activity that is degrading, promiscuous, abusive, or compulsive. Unfaithfulness to a spouse, indulging sexual fantasy and imagination as an escape from building a healthy marriage or in a way that prohibits forming a right attitude toward sex.

Immodesty: Any interactions with others meant to inflame sexual fantasy. Disregard of one's effect on other people or intentional abuse of one's influence over others.

Prudery: Fear or condemnation of sex as if it were evil in itself. Harsh judgment of others. Refusal to seek or to allow others to explore and understand sexuality.

Cruelty: Any pleasure or satisfaction from seeing others suffering. Deliberate infliction of pain, mental or physical. Mistreatment of animals.

SLOTH is the refusal to respond to our opportunities for growth, service, or sacrifice.

Laziness: Indolence in performing spiritual, mental, or physical duties. Neglect of normal responsibilities in household, business, friendship, or community. Procrastination. Use of the inconsequential to avoid more important commitments. Waste of employer's time. Shoddy or careless workmanship.

Indifference: Refusal to see injustice or suffering in the world around us. Failure to develop an understanding of others' perspective, of crucial issues of the day, or of the basic doctrines and teachings of the Church. Failure to treat fairly people in our employ. Failure to provide for children, their nurture in the faith, or their development as human beings. Disinterest in the ways in which patterns of economy and consumption affect other cultures and future generations. Ignoring needy, lonely, or unpopular persons. Failure to grow into one's responsibilities as a baptized person and a member of the Church.

Prayer after Self-Examination

LORD JESUS CHRIST, you bore our condemnation on the cross; give me a heart that is broken for the wrong I have done, the harm I have caused others, the good I have not done, and, most of all, that I have turned away from you. For these, and for any sins I cannot now remember, and for any failure to recognize and acknowledge my sins, I truly and humbly repent and ask mercy. Give me sorrow for all my sins and trust in your forgiveness. Grant that I may honestly admit my sins, listen patiently to the priest's advice or counsel, and receive with full assurance the grace of absolution. Amen.

Prayers and Thanksgivings after Confession

I THANK THEE, MY GOD, for forgiving my sins through the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ my Savior. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his Holy Name. Amen.

O MOST MERCIFUL GOD, who in forgiving our sins, rememberest them no more against us forever, accept my unworthy thanks for thy great goodness in blotting out my transgressions. Let the grace of this absolution strengthen and sustain me, and may thy great mercy defend me evermore from all assaults of the enemy. Amen.

O GRACIOUS GOD, by your Holy Spirit, help me turn more and more toward you and teach me to walk in your paths. I pray that you will increase in me the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, and knowing my own need, I ask (*here ask for the particular virtues that will best answer the confession you have made and lead you toward amendment of life*). Amen.

Psalm 103 [BCP pp. 733-734]

BLESS THE LORD, O my soul, *
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, *
and forget not all his benefits.

He forgives all your sins *
and heals all your infirmities;

He redeems your life from the grave *
and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;

He satisfies you with good things, *
and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.

The Lord executes righteousness *
and judgment for all who are oppressed.

He made his ways known to Moses *
and his works to the children of Israel.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.

He will not always accuse us, *
nor will he keep his anger for ever.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, *
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, *
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.

As far as the east is from the west, *
so far has he removed our sins from us.

As a father cares for his children, *
so does the Lord care for those who fear him.

For he himself knows whereof we are made; *
he remembers that we are but dust.

Our days are like the grass; *
we flourish like a flower of the field;

When the wind goes over it, it is gone, *
and its place shall know it no more.

But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever
on those who fear him, *
and his righteousness on children's children;

On those who keep his covenant *
and remember his commandments and do them.

The Lord has set his throne in heaven, *
and his kingship has dominion over all.

Bless the Lord, you angels of his,
you mighty ones who do his bidding, *
and hearken to the voice of his word.

Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, *
you ministers of his who do his will.

Bless the Lord, all you works of his,
in all places of his dominion; *
bless the Lord, O my soul.

The General Thanksgiving [BCP pp. 71-72]

ALMIGHTY GOD, Father of all mercies,
we thine unworthy servants
do give thee most humble and hearty thanks
for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men.
We bless thee for our creation, preservation,
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for thine inestimable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And, we beseech thee,
give us that due sense of all thy mercies,
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful;
and that we show forth thy praise,
not only with our lips, but in our lives,

by giving up our selves to thy service,
and by walking before thee
in holiness and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost,
be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.



SAINT DAVID
OF WALES

623 Ector Street,
Denton, TX 76201

940-387-2622

www.stdavidsdenton.org