

# The Sacrament of Reconciliation

## A Guide for Preparing to Make a Confession

*The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul?"*  
1 Samuel 16:1

*The Church (it was early decided) was not an organization of  
sinless men but of sinful, not a union of adepts but of less than  
neophytes, not illuminati but of those that sat in darkness.  
Nevertheless, it carried within it an energy not its own, and it knew  
what it believed about that energy.*  
Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven*

The Rev'd Robert A. Gallagher  
Associate Priest for Ascetical and Practical Theology, Trinity Church, Seattle  
ShapingtheParish.com  
Lent 2011

# Removing what stands in the way of “real life”

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

In his sermon on the Forth Sunday in Lent 2011 Fr. Paul explored the Lord’s question to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul?” Fr. Collins noted how we find ourselves blocked from our own real life by things we hold onto that bind us to the past. These may be sins, human limitation, confusion, or grief. He suggested that Lent was a time to remove the things in our life that have become barriers to real life.

Confession is a sacramental method that may be useful in that holy work.

## This booklet is a resource for you in preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation

It contains three sections

One                      Background: Spirituality and Pastoral Theology

Two                      Self examination resource

Three                     On making a confession

## One: Background: Spirituality and Pastoral Theology

“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.’ (*Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, 1986). This fits Newman’s understanding that, ‘Evil has no substance of its own, but is only the defect, excess, perversion, or corruption of that which has substance.’ Martin Smith, in his book on reconciliation, urges, ‘Fix your mind on the positive virtues, of which sins are the shadow.’ In a related understanding, Martin Thornton viewed the purpose of self-examination as aiming at ‘*tranquillitas*; not the suppression of desire, not *apatheia*, but harmony between the elements of personality.’ So, in all this we are dealing with health and wholeness rather than simply avoidance and self- protection.”

-From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert A. Gallagher, published by Ascension Press, 2008

### Sorting things out

Making your confession may help you sort things out a bit. Is it a sin or simply human limitation? Is your need for confession, spiritual direction or pastoral counseling? Or you inclined to be unaware of the impact you have on others or are you over-scrupulous?

## Are you seeking pastoral care, pastoral counseling or spiritual direction?

“For both therapist and director, insofar as each is participating in a double process of healing and of growth, love is the supreme requirement.” (Alan Jones, 1982)

Pastoral Care	Pastoral Counseling	Spiritual Direction
<p>The more routine support provided in the parish by the clergy and lay associates.</p> <p>This is usually very short term and in relationship to some crisis in life.</p>	<p>Help in coping with the challenges life presents. Health, financial, relationship, family, and vocational crises come with life.</p> <p>Someone can meet with you to help you assess what’s happening and provide support, prayer, and guidance. There may also be a referral to other professionals.</p>	<p>Spiritual direction is about your relationship with God as a baptized person within the Body of Christ.</p> <p>It isn’t crisis counseling, marital therapy, pastoral counseling or psychotherapy.</p> <p>In long-term spiritual direction you form a spiritual friendship with the director. in which director and directee/client journey together in their relationship with God.</p>

“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*, Nicholas Rademiller, OHC and Elizabeth Canham, Oblate OHC.

“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.”

*Reconciliation: Preparing for Confession in the Episcopal Church*, Martin Smith, SSJE, Cowley Publications, 1985

You may want to explore these things with a priest before making a confession or it could be part of the confession process.

## Two: Self examination resource

You may find it useful to use some part of this section in a process of self-examination.

From *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, Robert A. Gallagher, published by Ascension Press, 2008

The material below on sin and gifts draws on Richard Holloway's *Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, 1986.

- **Pride.** Self esteem raised to an inordinate level, so that all sense of proportion is lost
- **Envy (jealousy).** “Sorrow for another's good,” “Satisfaction at the misfortunes of our friends.” A characteristic of envy is that it offers no real pleasure, it is without fun; other sins offer some gratification. Symptoms include malice, being good at noticing the defects in others, hypocrisy, dejection. Envy may lead into the third sin.
- **Covetousness (avarice).** “Itching hunger for the good things of life” (success, possessions, popularity). It shows itself in conspicuous consumption of things or people, fear of aging. [Note: pride and envy are rooted in a sense of inadequacy. There is in us a "deep longing to be accepted and appreciated; the need is to know that we are loved as we are.”]
- **Anger.** A disproportionate response to danger; phases that are destructive—impatience, retaliation, lack of control, resentment. The antidotes are to give ourselves to systematically willing another person's good and to act quickly as anger breaks out to minimize the damage.
- **Lust.** A distorted instinct that is good in itself. It is rooted in a pursuit of pleasure that gives permission for exploitation, even if mutually agreed upon. There is a danger of moving into an addictive cycle and diminishing ones capacity for committed, joyful relationships. C.S. Lewis saw this as the least significant of the sins.
- **Gluttony.** Much the same as the above in its dynamics. The person is driven to a pursuit of satisfying appetites—too much drink, food, smoking, talk; compulsive behavior. They are natural instincts that are allowed to play a disproportionate role and can end up dominating the personality. An approach to lust and gluttony is learning self discipline and redirect the instincts toward “the good.”
- **Sloth.** “The instinct for rest and creative idling taken and distorted into an unattractive passivity,” “everything is too much trouble.” It is a disease of the will, it numbs the will. Instead of taking our life in our own hand we drift along, not really being bad people (we don't have the energy for it). Sloth does create the conditions under which evil takes hold in society. It may be related to why people seem to resist “giving themselves” to another, to their work, and to civic life.

## *Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*

- **Fear (awe).** I'd understand it as fear that you will not have the life you could have; the life God wants for you. It is as opposed to a life that is not for "the good" or that is trivial. This is the "fear that establishes proportions and recognizes consequences" and may lead "to a realistic, rueful ... almost humorous awareness of our true state."
- **Piety (affection).** "A kind of fondness or love, a recognition of what you owe the land that bred you," gratitude for the love, forgiveness and understanding one receives
- **Knowledge.** A capacity to accept paradox, to hold things in balance, to see more completely. It is the knowledge of God and the dynamics of awe and affection.
- **Courage (fortitude).** Closing the gap between belief and action "by reaching beyond themselves to Christ," rather than "by pulling Christ towards them and adapting him to their own uses." Standing fast even though you want to run. Especially needed in moral life, the world of ideas, and in personal relations.
- **Counsel (guidance).** An openness to the Holy Spirit; openness to an energy for good that comes from beyond ourselves. It is related to developing a capacity for listening and an inner silence.
- **Understanding.** The gift of balance, an awareness of the situation. It is "knowing when to celebrate and when to lament." This is self-knowledge. It is seeing the world rightly -- that the creation is good, that God is encountered through it.
- **Wisdom.** The coming together of the other six gifts; wholeness. Most contemporary books on the spiritual life speak of spiritual maturity.

## *Four Cardinal Virtues*

The four are interdependent; if you don't adequately possess one of them, the others are distorted in some fashion.

- **Prudence.** In the most down-to-earth meaning we are speaking of having good sense; the capacity for practical judgment. The virtue of it is in being grounded in reality and directed toward what is good. It assumes openness to reality. This is not the same thing as excess caution and a withholding spirit.
- **Justice.** The virtue is rooted in the assumption that we live with one another. That then presents us with several issues to address, including -- what we as individuals owe society; what we own other individuals; what society owns individuals.

- **Fortitude.** This is about removing barriers to justice. A central element is perseverance. Justice is only possible when we stay with the work before us. It is not the same as stubbornness.
- **Temperance.** Self-awareness and self-control are needed if we are to enjoy life and at the same time be good people. The work that has been done in recent decades on emotional and social intelligence is a resource.

### Sin and Rule of Life

Martin Thornton was one of Anglicism's great guides on the spiritual life. Fr. Thornton notes that when we break our spiritual discipline that is what might be called a "fault" or a breach. In itself it isn't a sin. There may however be sin underlying the breaking of our spiritual discipline or Rule of Life (e.g., indifference to self care or being caught up in some sin such as anger or sloth and drawn away from your Rule). It's also possible that breaking your Rule would be an act of virtue (e.g., missing the Eucharist in order to rescue a person in danger)

### Obstacles to prayer

In *Soul Friend* Kenneth Leech notes ways in which sin become an obstacle to prayer and our relationship with God.

- Refusal to forgive
- Anger and quarrelsome thoughts
- Refusal to be reconciled
- Distorted sexuality and lust
- Involvement in occult and in magical rites

He notes that at the "heart of all spiritual discipline is the search for self knowledge. 'The first step to sanctity', wrote Thomas Merton, 'is self knowledge.' Merton even defined prayer as an awareness of one's inner self.' To go deep into ones' own being is an essential step in learning to pray."

Other sources you may want to use that may challenge or stretch you.

St. Paul on love – I Corinthians 13

St. Paul on being a member of Christ's Body, the Church – I Corinthians 12: 4 – 31

Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5, 6, 7

St. Paul on walking in the spirit – Galatians 5: 16 – 26

On Justice – Isaiah 58: 6 – 9 and Luke 4: 16 -21

Decalogue – p. 350 Book of Common Prayer (BCP)

Litany of Penitence – pp. 267 – 269 (BCP)

## Three: On making a confession

There are times set each year when a priest will be available in the church or the rector's office. This will certainly be the case in Lent. Confessions may also be made at any time by appointment through the rector.

The rite begins on page 446 in the Book of Common Prayer.

*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 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.*

## In the Church

**Making a confession:** The priest will be seated on the other side of the altar rail either at the high altar or a side chapel. You may kneel at the rail or take the seat by the rail. A Prayer Book marked at the appropriate page will be available for your use. A confession might take between 10 - 30 minutes. The longer ones are usually related to how long it has been since the last confession or the complexity of something the person has shared.

**If you enter the church when a confession is being made:** Please move away from that area of the church. Allow enough distance so there's no chance you will overhear what's being shared. Please wait patiently for the other person to finish. Allow a minute or two before going forward to the priest.

## 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, such as those above in Two, 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. Others may want a priest with some experience hearing confessions.