

Why Do I Have to Go to Confession?

1. Misunderstandings about Sin

What Is “Sin”?

The most common term for “sin” in the OT is *hata'*, which means “to miss the mark.” (Scott Hahn, *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 851)

Mortal versus Venial Sin in the New Testament (1 John 5)

¹⁶ If any one sees his brother committing *what is not a mortal sin*, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. *There is sin which is mortal* (Greek *pros thanaton*) I do not say that one is to pray for that. ¹⁷ *All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal* (Greek *ou pros thanaton*) (1 John 5:16-17)

The Catechism on Mortal Sin

Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us—that is, charity—necessitates a new initiative of God’s mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation. *For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met*: “Mortal sin is sin whose object is (1) *grave matter* and which is also committed with (2) *full knowledge* and (3) *deliberate consent*.” Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: “Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your fathers and your mother...” (Mark 10:19)... Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back. *However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.* (CCC 1854, 1856-57, 1861).

The Catechism on Venial Sin

One commits *venial sin* when, in a *less serious matter*, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, *or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without complete consent*. Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul’s progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. *However venial sin does not break the covenant with God*. With God’s grace it is humanly reparable. “Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness.” (CCC 1863)

Saint Augustine: What Can a Sinner Do?

While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call “light”: if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. *What then is our hope? Above all, confession....* (Saint Augustine, *1 John* 1.6; cited in CCC 1863)

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2. Why Go to Confession?

Confession in the Old Testament (Leviticus 5)

¹“If any one sins... he shall bear his iniquity... ⁵ *he shall confess the sin he has committed...* and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin. ¹⁰ ...and he shall be forgiven. (Leviticus 5:1-10)

Jesus, the Paralytic, and the Forgiveness of Sins (Mark 2)

³ And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. ⁴ And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. ⁵ And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “*My son, your sins are forgiven.*” ⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ “Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! *Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (Mark 2:3-7)

Jesus Gives the Apostles the Power to Forgive Sins (John 20)

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” (John 20:21-23)

“Confess Your Sins to One Another” (James 5)

¹⁴ Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church (Greek *tous presbyterous*), and let them pray over him... and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; *and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* ¹⁶ *Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.* (James 5:14-16)

Pope Francis: Why Can't I Just Confess to God?

“Someone can say, ‘I confess my sins only to God.’ Yes, you can say to God, ‘forgive me,’ and say your sins. But our sins are also against our brothers, against the Church. This is why it is necessary to ask forgiveness of the Church and of our brothers, in the person of the priest.” (Pope Francis, General Audience, February 19, 2014)

The Catechism: When Do I Have to Go to Confession?

According to the Church's command, “after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins *at least once a year.*” *Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.* (CCC 1457)

The Catechism: Do I Have To Go to Confession?

“*Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.*” There are profound reasons for this. Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. *He personally addresses every sinner: “My son, your sins are forgiven.”* (Mark 2:5) He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. He raises them up and reintegrates them into fraternal communion. (CCC 1484)

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3. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist

Jesus on His Real Presence in the Eucharist (John 6)

⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven... the bread which I shall give for the life of the world *is my flesh.*" ⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; ⁵⁴ he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.* ⁵⁶ *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* (John 6:48-56)

Saint Paul on "Examining" Oneself Before the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11)

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ *Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.* ²⁹ For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.. (1 Corinthians 11:27-30)

The Catechism on Preparing to Receive Jesus in the Eucharist

To respond to this invitation we must *prepare ourselves* for so great and so holy a moment. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself..." *Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.* (CCC 1385)

The Catechism on the Peace and Joy of Reconciliation

"The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship." Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. *For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation."* Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God. (CCC 1469).

Pope Francis: Be Courageous, Go to Confession!

"Everyone says to himself: 'When was the last time I went to confession?' And if it has been a long time, don't lose another day! Go, the priest will be good. And Jesus, (will be) there, and Jesus is better than the priests - Jesus receives you. He will receive you with so much love! Be courageous, and go to confession!" (Pope Francis, February 19, 2014)