

Ask Fr. James

Why Should I go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

As humans, we are not without blemish. So God granted us the opportunity to receive grace to be able to live freely in conscience. The Bible says; "the conscience of a person is the lamp of the Lord, searching the innermost chambers of the being" (Proverbs 20:27). Thus the church's doctrine on the sacrament of reconciliation teaches that all the baptized should confess to a priest all and every grave sin which they can recall after an examination of their conscience. This doctrine is based on what Jesus said to the first priests in John 20:23.

It is required by church law that in every Catholic Church, there is to be a place for the confessional or confessional seat. The sacrament is composed of three parts: contrition, confession and satisfaction. The most healing aspect of the sacrament of penance is the penitent's verbalization of his/her sins and receiving absolution. The confession expresses both the penitents' contrition and their "true knowledge of self before God. By the words and ritual of absolution God uses visible signs to give salvation and to renew the broken covenant" manifested by the penitent's contrite confession. Frequent and reverent recourse to this Sacrament is of great value.

The ritual of this sacrament offers the single penitent the opportunity of a face-to-face in a confessional or with an optional fixed screen for penitents who wish to remain anonymous. What is required for a worthy celebration of this sacrament is contrition. Contrition is sorrow motivated by love and completed by sanctifying grace. It is heartfelt sorrow and detestation of sin, with a firm purpose not to sin again.

The priest is trained to counsel penitents who are wallowing in attrition, scrupulosity and erroneous conscience. Attrition is sorrow for sin not motivated by love and not completed by sanctifying grace and the term scrupulous (scrupulous -meaning "small sharp stone" which causes discomfort while walking) is used to describe those persons who give unwholesome or obsessive attention to trivial matters of conscience. A scruple may be described as "an unreasonable fear of sin where no sin exists." The erroneous conscience is based on a lack of knowledge.

Priests are trained in the art of private soul guidance within the Church and they also acquired knowledge through seminary study under the guidance of the Church's magisterium and in prayer to God to assume a 'fatherly' role and to at all times be aware of the obligation to maintain the sacramental seal of secrecy. It is the reason they are called pastor or physician-of-souls. As physician of the soul they recognize the difficulty of diagnosing and curing patients' habits, passions, lives and wills. The physician of the soul is trained to have medicine "to meet moral diseases using various curative methods like discipline, admonition, consolation, counsel, prayer and penance.