

Reflections on the Sacrament of Confession

A wise bishop once said, "Sin is the shipwreck of the soul. If the sin is serious, it is a fatal shipwreck. Confession is the only plank to which we can safely cling, if we want to be brought back to the harbor of God's grace. If, on the other hand, we receive the Sacrament of Penance with the proper dispositions, not only will it give us grace but confidence and peace of mind as well. This sacrament has very appropriately been called 'the masterpiece of God's mercy.' We should be very grateful to God for this great gift."

Desiring that all receive this grace-filled sacrament through its proper practice here at St. Anthony's, we would like to offer a few points for guidance:

1. First, in preparing to go to Confession, awareness of what constitutes a mortal sin versus a venial sin is very important. To commit a mortal sin, one must do something that is gravely and objectively evil, do it with full knowledge that it is evil, and give full consent to it with the will. Venial sin, on the other hand, is a deviation but not a total turning away from God, akin to a sickness in the soul, which may reflect lukewarmness in a person's soul. Venial sins "bruise" our state of grace with God, but they do not break it, like mortal sins do.

2. Second, when one is aware of a mortal sin, one should go to Confession as soon as possible. It is necessary to do so before receiving Holy Communion. However, one does not have to go to Confession every time before receiving Holy Communion or for every venial sin. The Church teaches that if one has only committed venial sins and makes a sincere Act of Contrition, reception of Holy Communion remits those sins.

It sometimes happens, however, that a person falls into mortal sin and then returns to the confessional only a couple days after one's last Confession. Knowing that Confession is regularly available at St. Anthony's may cultivate a mentality that one really does not have to try to refrain from falling into habitual sins. Overly frequent confession could be an indicator of presumption of God's mercy and perhaps a weakened resolve to not sin again (i.e., "I can always go to confession again soon at St. Anthony's.") Thus, going to Confession too frequently may indicate an abuse of the sacrament.

A good standard practice is to go once every two to three weeks, although, again, one should go to Confession as soon as possible for mortal sins.

3. Third, you should only confess those sins committed since your last confession, so that the priest has a better sense of whether he needs to give you any specific spiritual guidance. Confession of your sins should be concise, specific, to the point, and well-prepared. An exception to this guideline is that if you remember a mortal sin from the past which you have not confessed, then do confess this sin.

4. Fourth, the Sacrament of Confession is for the confession and absolution of your sins. Although the priest may give some advice regarding your sins, it is not the time or place for in-depth spiritual direction. Unduly extending your confession by asking questions and discussing your spiritual life may indicate a lack of charity to those behind you, who will have to unnecessarily wait longer.