

# Going Back to Confession

after years or decades

**Bud Macfarlane**



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### ***NIHIL OBSTAT***

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### ***IMPRIMATUR***

✠ Most Reverend Richard G. Lennon, MTh, MA  
Bishop of Cleveland, Ohio • Granted August 28, 2013

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*Y*ou are holding this booklet in your hands because someone cared enough to make it available. As for me, I believe Jesus arranged specific events in your life to make it happen.

Perhaps you have sensed for a while now that you need to make a serious change or have been frustrated by an inability to make significant progress in your life. You are as close to real change as opening a door.

Perhaps you are struggling with compulsive or even addictive behaviors that were not major problems earlier in life. Many people have these kinds of problems. Perhaps you have tried every method and avenue except God's grace to make yourself feel better (or temporarily lessen your misery). A deep, inner "process of elimination" seems to be telling you that only a loving God can supply the solution.

Perhaps you did something or were dragged into something depraved a long time ago, and it keeps gnawing at you while impelling you to indulge in self-destructive behaviors to cover up the wound. This is a good indication that you have not lost your sense of right and wrong.

And do not be surprised if you never considered going back to Confession at all until picking up this booklet—this happens quite frequently, and what we are about to share has led countless people to more stable, happier, and satisfying lives. Great things happen to all of us without any planning (such as first meeting a best friend). God works through free will and the illusion of coincidence—"in mysterious ways," as they say. Perhaps Jesus thinks you're ready, wants you to return to Him, and guided you to this impasse.

Some people live pretty decent lives, keep the Commandments, strive and succeed to be their best at work and to love their families, but are just a little stuck, with nagging selfishness and less-than-optimal relationships. There are a lot good people in this

world. You probably need to return to Confession as much as anyone, for healing, improvement, and to grow closer to God.

Each of us has led a uniquely different life under various circumstances. Remember, feeling guilty about good behavior may be irrational, but feeling guilty over freely-chosen sinful behavior is appropriate. Because we all have free will, we are responsible to some greater or lesser extent for our own behavior. In addition to giving you peace of mind, Confession is also a healing sacrament. It is supernatural event that will surely lead to your figuring out to what extent you are responsible by honestly dealing with your particular issues as a mature adult.

## The Crucial Importance of Absolution

If you have not gone to Confession in years, then going as soon as possible is your surest path to radically changing your life for the better.

Often referred to as the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Confession is widely misunderstood, and in large part because its nature and benefits have been downplayed or inadequately explained in recent decades. Nevertheless, the tide has turned, and Catholics are returning to Confession in droves.

A key to understanding the power and necessity of Confession is the distinction between forgiveness and absolution. Confession is more than forgiveness. In fact, you do not need to go to Confession to be forgiven by God. If you express true sorrow through a simple prayer, God surely forgives you as soon as you ask. Please, do not wait to go to Confession to share your remorse with God. You can even pray this now:

*Dear God, I am truly sorry, so please forgive me this very moment for all my sins, great and small. Jesus, no matter what else happens to me for the rest of my life, make sure I get to Confession immediately, even today if possible. I want to come home. Amen.*

## Restoring the State of Your Soul

During your Confession, Jesus, through the mediation of the priest, will act upon your soul in such a way that your sins will be wiped away completely, as if they never happened. The term for this restorative action of God is *absolution*. Jesus was quite specific after his resurrection when he established the sacrament with his apostles:

*He said therefore to them again: "Peace be to you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them; and he said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive [take away, absolve], they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."*  
(John 20: 21-23, brackets added)

We use "forgive" and "absolve" as synonyms, but in his native tongue, Jesus used the Aramaic word for *absolve*—to "take away." Thus, he used the opposite word for absolving or taking away, "retained," as an antonym later in the sentence. You could say that forgiveness is what happens *between persons*. Absolution is what happens *to a person*.

Here is a way to grasp the difference between forgiveness and absolution. Suppose your best friend stole \$100 from you and asked you to forgive him, and you forgave him. He was forgiven. But what about your \$100 he still has? Absolution, because it changes the state of the soul, is tantamount to your friend returning the \$100 to you, thus erasing the theft. God completely forgets your sins: "For I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sins no more."  
(Hebrews 8:13)

After receiving absolution from the priest, there is a need for penance. As the Church teaches: "Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered,

pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. ...Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1459)

Through absolution and penance, you are returned to a state of being worthy of entry into heaven, including being reconciled with the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

### **Either Sin Wins or Jesus Wins**

Granted, given the effects of Original Sin, you will likely (but not always) still be subject to bad habits and be drawn towards the same sins after going to Confession, but the healing process will have begun, and your inner strength to resist those negative compulsions and replace them with good habits will have increased dramatically. You will indeed be returned to a baptismal state in terms of your soul. If you die in such a state, you will go to heaven.

Our society is strewn with broken relationships, functional atheism (those who live as if God does not exist), exploding pornography addiction, and consumerism (replacing God with worldly pleasures and distractions). Sometimes these dysfunctions are even explicitly or tacitly offered as solutions.

Deep frustration can occur when the superficial remedies our culture promotes fail to solve personal problems precisely because they do not include God acting upon your soul to absolve your sins.

Devout Catholics typically go to Confession once or twice a month. They go because they are sinners; they need absolution and healing just like you do. In fact, we recommend our amazing free talk, "Healing and Holiness," which goes into great detail about the healing nature of Confession. You can stream it on our website.

## The Battle for Your Soul

After you decide to go to Confession, keep in mind that unseen forces of evil will try to discourage you and sway you to procrastinate until you forget all about reading this oddly compelling little booklet. Until today, these evil entities confidently counted you as “in the bag”—blithely striding wide road, so to speak. Interference by dark forces is a common, even normal, dynamic in our fallen world, especially when the eternal fate of any soul (yours, in this case) comes into play.

The evil one and his invisible minions (angels gone bad, basically) clearly will not want you to receive absolution. Unfortunately, we do not have space to explain in more depth about the nature of these evil entities, but none of us is immune to this kind of interference. Expect your car to break down or your cell phone to act glitchy, or for your boss or spouse or friends to inadvertently throw up roadblocks. Be patient and loving as this occurs. But press on, friend. Exercise your free will.

## Friends in Heaven

Spiritual roadblocks require spiritual solutions. Ask your own angel—your Guardian Angel—to help you return to Confession. He is your spiritual bodyguard. Recall that the Catholic Church, as “the Body of Christ,” consists not only of people of earth, but of every Christian in heaven, and you have, without any doubt, blood relatives going back through history actively praying for you and protecting you via their own union with God.

Traditionally, these glorified souls are called the Church Triumphant, and I am quite sure your own relatives in heaven played a part in putting this booklet into your hands right now. Unbeknownst to you, an invisible battle is being waged for your soul. You matter. Real people, in time and in eternity, care about you. Every day I pray for you and every person

who reads this booklet.

Please, too, pray to Saint Michael the Archangel, who tossed the rebellious Lucifer out of heaven (as recounted in the Book of Revelation), using this prayer composed by Pope Leo XIII:

*Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God cast into hell satan and all the evil spirits who prowl throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.*

## Nuts and Bolts of Returning to Confession

To get to Confession, you only need one priest. Find him. Catholic parishes typically offer Confessions every Saturday. Most diocesan cathedrals (where the bishop resides, usually downtown) have Confessions every day. Confession schedules are easy look up on-line. Search “Catholic Church” and your zip code.

***There are over 41,000 priests in over 18,000 parishes and religious houses in the United States alone.***

Do not hesitate to knock on the door of a nearby church, even on this very day, and request to go right away. Let whoever answers know you seek Confession and that it has been a long time. If a priest is unavailable, the parish secretary will gladly schedule an appointment.

Like Jesus, the priest who will hear your Confession gave up marriage, material goods, and made a vow of obedience to be maximally available just for you. He is obliged to accommodate your request unless he has an extremely pressing matter.

Your priest will guide you through the entire process, perhaps by helping you examine your conscience



before the sacrament formally begins.

Once your Confession starts, do not worry about “form.” Speak from your heart. Do not worry if you cannot recall specifics. During Confessions after a long lapse, it is normal to speak in general terms: “I have not gone to Mass in several years, Father.” “I have indulged in pornography regularly for the past decade. I might be addicted.” “Out of resentment, I have treated my mother horribly since high school.” “I slept around before I got married.” “I stole from my employer.” And so on.

If the priest needs more detail, he will ask, but usually only to understand your problem more clearly or help give you better guidance. He has no desire to hear lurid details of particular sins.

Father may give you practical or spiritual advice, followed by a simple penance for you to carry out, usually a few prayers such as the Our Father or Hail Mary, or an act of kindness for an important person in your life (a way of restoring the \$100, so to speak).

Then he will ask you to make an Act of Contrition, which includes a sincere commitment on your part to not commit the same sins and avoid common-sense situations that can lead to them. You can use your own words. Here is a simple, modern example:

*Dear Jesus, I am sorry for all my sins since my last Confession and I firmly resolve to avoid them and their near occasion. Amen.*

Your priest has experienced the Holy Spirit working and speaking through him during Confessions on many occasions. He would gladly be imprisoned or executed rather than break his vow of silence. Furthermore, many priests report the Holy Spirit dulls their memories when Confession ends.

Rest assured, the massively exaggerated era of harsh treatment in the confessional ceased generations ago. During a span of four decades I have never been yelled at or mistreated during a Confession.

Because most of us commit the same kinds of sins, he will not be shocked. On the contrary, he will be filled with happiness over your return, just as Jesus was in the Gospels when repentant souls came to him. He will conclude the sacrament with these beautiful words of absolution:

Through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, ***and I absolve you from your sins*** in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Your sense of extraordinary relief along with an inner serenity of having the burdens you have been carrying lifted away forever will likely be palpable. Now you can return to Mass and receive Holy Communion again. Look forward to returning to your next Confession within a few weeks.

Your new life in Christ is so close now, and as promised, it is no more difficult than opening a door. That door is at your local Catholic rectory or church. Knock and it shall be opened.

## After Confession

If you are like most people this booklet has helped, you will want more information to support your new life of unity with God. The Mary Foundation offers a number of podcasts, more booklets, prayer books, and even bestselling Catholic novels to fill in the gaps with riveting, encouraging, respectful presentations of the timeless Catholic faith for our modern times.

In particular, for those returning to Confession after many years, we recommend *Seven Daily Habits for Faithful Catholics*, a booklet by Fr. John McCloskey.

Millions of people around the world have enjoyed and been deeply moved by these resources. We have outstanding talks on the Mass, marriage, sexuality, conversions, the Eucharist, and much more. Visit us online at [CatholiCity.com](http://CatholiCity.com) to hear them.

# Helpful Prayers

## To Begin Confession

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been *State Amount of Time* since my last Confession.

## Traditional Act of Contrition

O my God, I am heartfully sorry for having offended thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend thee, my God, who is all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

## The Fatima Prayer

O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy. Amen.

## The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

## Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

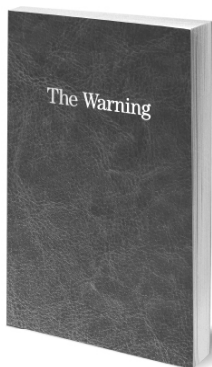
## Morning Offering

Dear Lord, I do not know what will happen to me today—I only know that nothing will happen that was not foreseen by you and directed to my greater good from all eternity. I adore your holy and unfathomable plans and submit to them with all my heart for love of you, the pope, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Amen.



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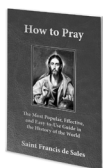


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