

# Making a Good Confession

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**BY THE REVEREND CHARLES E. SINGLER, D.MIN.**

*Rector of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Cathedral  
Director of the Office of Worship, Diocese of Toledo*

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As Catholics world-wide are immersed in the devotional practices of Lent this time of year, we are reminded of the theme that resides at the heart of all we do and pray these days: forgiveness. It would be nice to say that each believing member handles that issue on their own, but if we consider the Church's rites of forgiveness (confession), there is much more than personal salvation at stake. There is the matter of our personal sin and its effect on others in the family of humankind. This then affects personal salvation. Every act we perform, whether for good or for ill, has an affect on the tide of events going on around us. Of the multiple efforts to renew the soul of the Catholic faithful as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the *Rite of Penance*, or what many call the Sacrament of Reconciliation, bridges the gap between the personal behaviors of individuals and the affects that behavior does to one who is in communion with the people of God, the Body of Christ.

This personal and communal dimension is well expressed in Form II of the *Rite of Penance*: "The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution". In addition to weekly scheduled times for individual confession, many of our parishes in the diocese schedule communal penance services during the seasons of Advent and Lent as a means to assist the faith community in understanding that personal sin has an effect on others. We do not always think of our shortcomings in terms of who becomes the recipient of our behaviors, whether it is the God who created us or the people with whom God has brought into our lives.

Form II of the *Rite of Penance* follows a general liturgical pattern familiar in Catholic worship. Following the introductory hymn and prayer, the community is invited to be seated for the hearing of God's word. The homily following the sacred Scriptures should, as the Rite indicates, "lead the penitents to examine their consciences and to turn away from sin and toward God. It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one's neighbors, and against the sinner himself" (*Rite of Penance*, art. 25).

Not to be misconstrued as general absolution\*, a suitable period of silence follows before the faithful express a general confession of sins, join in speaking a litany or singing a hymn expressing one's desire to confess. Finally this reflective part of the service concludes with the Lord's Prayer, which is never omitted.

At the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer, the penitents are invited to go to the priest of their choice. After receiving a suitable act of penance, they are absolved by him with

the form for the reconciliation of an individual penitent. When all confessions are over, the priest-celebrant of the service invites everyone to make an act of thanksgiving and to praise God for his mercy. This may be done in a psalm, hymn or litany. Finally, the priest blesses the faithful as is the custom at the conclusion of Mass. All are then dismissed with the customary salutation.

Church law and liturgical norms guiding the proper celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are clear in expressing that confessions are to be heard in churches or oratories (chapels). Confessionals, the Code of Canon Law indicates, are to incorporate a “fixed grille between penitent and confessor and are to be in an open area so that the faithful who wish to make use of them may do so freely” (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 964, # 2). Even for communal penance services in the parish provision is to be made for the anonymity between priest and confessor.

Celebrating a fruitful confession not only requires the proper disposition of the penitent, but the pastoral care extended by those who serve the people of God in this holy and reconciling act. Likewise, just as our worship and praise require an appropriate setting, seeking forgiveness with the Triune God requires no less a location.

*\* The Rite for Reconciliation of Penitents with General Confession and Absolution is only to be used in circumstances of grave necessity. In a January 2004 letter to priests of the diocese, Bishop Blair indicated that “aside from the immediate threat of some natural disaster or other impending life-threatening calamity, none of the conditions of grave necessity are verified in the Diocese of Toledo. General Absolution, therefore, is not to be given in the diocese.”*