

March 26, 2020

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

Safety precautions concerning the coronavirus pandemic are restricting or preventing many Catholics around the globe from participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (a.k.a., going to confession). Note that the sacrament requires the penitent and the priest to meet in person. In other words, going to confession over the phone or through the internet is not permissible; those involved have to be in the same place at the same time. With this in mind, the question arises as to how Catholics receive forgiveness for their sins when the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not available. In this letter, I will answer that question, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church with the abbreviation “CCC” (the catechism may be read online via <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc.htm> ; note that cited paragraph numbers can be put into this webpage’s search engine). As a side note, the information in this letter presumes that a person has already been baptized (after all, the initial way God provides absolution of sin is through baptism; this letter addresses the issue of post-baptismal sins).

First of all, in order for a person to be guilty of sin in the eyes of God, three conditions must be met.

- 1) The action must, indeed, involve something of a sinful nature. This is also called the “matter” of the sin.
- 2) The person must know it is a sin.
- 3) The person must freely choose to commit the sin.

So those are the three conditions: matter, knowledge & consent.

Next, let us recall the two types of sin which people commit: venial and mortal. The word “venial” means “little” so a venial sin is a moral infraction which is not serious in nature. It also applies to the commission of a mortal sin but in a such a way that the person lacked sufficient knowledge of how morally grave the situation was, and/or did not fully consent to commit the sinful act (CCC #1859, 1862). Incidentally, the bible notes the distinction between sins that are deadly and sins that are not in 1John 5:16-17.

Venial sins do not kill the life of grace in the soul but they still limit the flow of God’s grace into our lives. Therefore, even though they are minor infractions, they are still problematic because they weaken the soul and make us more susceptible to committing future sins, including serious ones. Although venial sins are absolved in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we can receive forgiveness from God in other ways. Prayer, fasting, and works of charity are channels through which God provides forgiveness for these minor infractions of morality (CCC #1434; 1Peter 4:8). For other ways in which venial sins are forgiven, see CCC #1434 – 1439. With all this in mind, the lack of availability of a priest is not problematic for someone seeking the forgiveness of venial sins.

Mortal sins are also called serious sins or grave sins. Just as a mortal wound is deadly to the body, a mortal sin is deadly to the soul. Such a sin has what is called “grave matter”, meaning that it is truly serious in nature, such as murder, adultery, fornication, rape, theft of large sums of money, etc.

To commit a serious moral infraction with full knowledge and full consent results in a person being guilty of mortal sin (CCC #1855 – 1859). The action kills the life of grace in the soul and completely blocks any further grace from entering. Those who die who are guilty of mortal sin (and who have not received God’s forgiveness) end up in hell because their actions amounted to a full rejection of God’s mercy. Keep in mind that God respects our freedom and will not *force* his mercy on anyone; it is up to us to seek it and embrace it. For more information on this, see CCC #1033 – 1037. People who believe or suspect that they have committed mortal sin have an obligation to go to a priest and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible. This is the ordinary means by which God provides absolution for post-baptismal mortal sins.

But what if going to confession is not a possibility? The catechism teaches that grace for the forgiveness of mortal sin is available to a person under the following conditions:

- 1) You have contrition, which means you are sorry for your sins and detest them. You ask God, with all your heart, to forgive you. You must also resolve, with the help of God’s grace, to avoid sinning in the future. (CCC #1451)
- 2) The contrition you have arises from being sorry that your sins are an affront against the love of God and have damaged your loving relationship with him. This is also called “perfect contrition” (CCC #1452) which is distinguished from “imperfect contrition.” Imperfect contrition involves a different motive for being sorry for ones sins, such as being repulsed by the ugliness of the sins, being afraid of hell or other penalties, etc. (see CCC #1453).
- 3) You must be resolved to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a priest as soon as possible. (CCC #1452).

In light of all this, Pope Francis, in a homily during a recent Mass, stated that if you need to go to confession but the Sacrament of Reconciliation is not available, “Do what the catechism says (CCC #1452); it is very clear: if you don’t find a priest to hear your confession, talk with God, he is your Father, and tell him the truth. ‘Lord, I’ve done this, and that... I’m sorry,’ and ask him for forgiveness with all your heart, with the Act of Contrition and promise him: ‘Afterwards I will go to confession but forgive me now’ and you will return to God’s grace immediately. As the catechism teaches, you, yourself, can approach God’s forgiveness without having a priest at hand.”

(Source: <https://zenit.org/articles/cant-go-to-confession-pope-says-talk-to-god-your-father-ask-forgiveness-full-text-of-morning-homily/>)

As a final side note, if someone is facing death but is unable to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation because of being comatose, or being unable to maintain mental focus, etc., the Last Rites provides the grace of having been to confession. A priest is required to minister the Last Rites so, in this case, the presence of a priest is necessary.

Let us continue to pray for one another, as well as for an end to the coronavirus pandemic.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Fr. Eric

Fr. Eric Filmer
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THE ACT OF CONTRITION

My God,
I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.