

TIPS FOR BETTER CONFESSIONS
The Gift of Reconciliation
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Many Catholics have less than pleasant experiences with the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they miss the real point of the sacrament. I think the "real point" can be found in the story I once heard from a saintly and learned German priest, Father Bernard Häring:

One Sunday afternoon in the 1930's in a little parish in Germany where he was pastor, Father Häring was talking about confession.

He asked the congregation: What is the most important thing about confession?

A woman in the front pew responded: Telling your sins to the priest. That's why we call it confession.

Father Häring said: Confessing the sins is important, but it's not the most important thing.

A man towards the back called out: Contrition! Being sorry for your sins! The whole thing doesn't work unless you're truly sorry.

Father Häring said: True, it doesn't 'work' without contrition; but I don't think contrition is the most important thing.

Another man spoke up: It's the examination of conscience. Unless you examine your conscience, you don't know what you have to be sorry for and what to confess.

Father Häring still wasn't satisfied. An uneasy silence fell over the church.

Then a little girl in the second pew said: Father, I know what is most important. It's what Jesus does!

And that's the answer that Father Häring wanted.

It's what Jesus does! That's the most important thing. The examination of conscience, sorrow for sin, telling the sins to the priest—these are all important. But you will have a more positive experience of the sacrament if your focus is on what Jesus does.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation Jesus announces to us, through the Church and its ministers, that our sins are forgiven and that we are loved by God. We hear the voice of Christ: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven." This is what Jesus does. This is his gift of reconciliation.

Many of us first learned about sin when we were children, during preparation for our First Confession. We were often told that sin was "not keeping the rules" which were made by adults. For example, we might confess, "I disobeyed my mommy and daddy three times." As we grow and mature our internal "list of rules" grows also and we gather more and more "should's" and "ought's." Whenever we break one of these rules, intentionally or not, we feel guilty. But guilt is not the same as sin.

Sin, in a Christian perspective, is not merely "breaking the rules." For the mature Christian, sin is understood in relation to love. God has loved us so much, and we have so often failed to return that love. When we examine our lives in the light of the message of Jesus we find that Jesus calls us to wholeness, to maturity; he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. For an adult Christian, sin is more than just breaking the rules; sin is the failure to grow. Sin is being today like you were yesterday. Sin is the failure to respond to the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

The Ten Commandments are but one small part of the Bible. Some Catholics have found that restricting their examination of conscience to the Ten Commandments led them to routine confessions, to boredom and eventually to dissatisfaction with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Laws can give us a list of what we did wrong but laws have no power to help us convert. They can't help us to change and become better people. But the love of God has that power. As we hear the proclamation of God's love for us, we are confronted with our own response to that love. Does our love measure up to that of Jesus who said: "This is my commandment: Love one another as I love you" (*John 15:12*)? It is our common experience that we have fallen short; we have not loved enough.

Your experience of the sacrament will be enriched if you name the sacrament — and think about it as —"Reconciliation." The word "Confession" only names one part of the sacrament, and not even the most important part. Reconciliation names what is most important, what Jesus does.

The word reconciliation is rich in meaning. It suggests the gift of God's forgiveness and the removal of the barriers we place between ourselves, our community and our God. Reconciliation means the rebridging of the gap between God and us and between ourselves and others. It also suggests the deep peace that comes from being brought back into harmony with God, with sisters and brothers and with the whole of creation.

Before receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, think about the love of God which is found in this famous story which Jesus told:

¹¹ Once upon a time a man had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father: Give me my share of the property. So the father divided his property between his two sons. ¹³ Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, a severe famine spread through the entire country. Soon he had nothing to eat. ¹⁵ He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. ¹⁶ He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing.

¹⁷ Finally, he came to his senses and said: My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! ¹⁸ I will go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.

²⁰ The younger son got up and started back to his father.

But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him.

²¹ The son said: Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son.

²² But his father said to the servants: Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. ²⁴ This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found.

And they began to celebrate. (*Luke 15*)

