

Catholics and Sin

"To those who have been far away from the sacrament of Reconciliation and forgiving love, I make this appeal: come back to this source of grace, do not be afraid! Christ himself is waiting for you. He will heal you, and you will be at peace with God!"
(Pope John Paul II)

From the Simple Catechism:

What is sin?

The Greek word hamartia (ἁμαρτία) is usually translated as sin in the New Testament; it means "to miss the mark" or "to miss the target".

Sin is an offence against God by thought, word, deed or omission.

Sin is an offence against reason, truth and right conscience.

Sin is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbour.

God gave us the gift of free will and with it the potential to commit sin, that is to turn away from Him.

How did Jesus describe sin?

Jesus taught that the root of sin is in the heart of man, in his free will: *'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man.'* (Matthew 15:19-20)

How did St Paul describe sin?

St Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the Fruits of the Spirit: *'Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.'* (Galatians 5:19-21)

These are as a result of Original sin...

Original Sin

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says:

By his sin Adam, as the first man, lost the original holiness and justice he had received from God, not only for himself but for all human beings.

Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called "original sin".

As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called "concupiscence").

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 416-418

Though Adam's sinful act is not the responsibility of his descendants, the state of human nature that has resulted from that sinful act has consequences that plague them: "Human nature, without being entirely corrupted, has been harmed in its natural powers, is subject to ignorance, suffering and the power of death, and has a tendency to sin. This tendency is called concupiscence" (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 77*), but is distinct from original sin itself.

The Church has always held baptism to be "for the remission of sins", and, as mentioned in *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 403*, infants too have traditionally been baptized, though not guilty of any actual personal sin. The sin that through baptism was remitted for them could only be original sin, with which they were connected by the very fact of being human beings.

The Church teaches that original sin comes to the soul simply from the new person taking his nature from one whose nature itself had original sin. In this way, the Church argues that original sin is not imputing the sin of the father to the son; rather, it is simply the inheritance of a wounded nature from the father, which is an unavoidable part of reproduction.

There is a close link between the notion of original sin and the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, namely the Church's teaching that, in view of the saving power of the future death and resurrection of her son Jesus, she was preserved from this "stain" (i.e. lack of holiness), which affects others, that is to say, that she was conceived without original sin.

Mortal and Venial Sin

The Gravity of Sin: Mortal and Venial Sin

Sins differ in their seriousness and are evaluated according to their gravity.

The Church, supported by Scripture and human experience, makes the distinction between mortal and venial sin.

What is required for a sin to be mortal?

For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be met together:

- the object must be 'grave matter'
- it must be committed with full knowledge
- and with deliberate and complete consent

Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: *"Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother."* Mk 10:17-22

Ten Commandments:

1. I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the LORD'S Day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Some sins and type of sins are graver than others - murder is graver than theft.

One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.

What is the effect of mortal sin?

Mortal sin kills the life of God's grace in our soul. It turns us away from God, who is our ultimate happiness.

How is mortal sin overcome?

Mortal sin is overcome by a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of our hearts; this is normally accomplished in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

What is venial sin?

Venial sin is a failure to love God or our neighbour as we should, by an act which is not grave or serious.

What is the effect of venial sin?

Venial sin does not deprive us of sanctifying grace or our friendship with God, or the promise of eternal happiness with God. However, venial sin does wound our relationship with God and with our neighbour.

Can all sins be forgiven?

All sins can be forgiven as there are no limits to the mercy of God.

When can a sin not be forgiven?

However, a sin cannot be forgiven when a person refuses to accept the mercy of God. Such hardness of heart leads one to reject the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:29)

Sin can lead to other sins, and to vices by the repetition of the same sins.

What are vices?

Vices are bad habits and can be classified according to the virtues they oppose or by linking them to the capital sins.

What are the Capital sins?

- Pride
- Avarice
- Envy
- Wrath (Anger)
- Lust
- Gluttony (Greed)
- Sloth

How can these capital sins be overcome?

They can be overcome through the practice of the seven contrary Virtues:

- Humility
- Generosity
- Brotherly Love
- Meekness
- Chastity
- Temperance
- Diligence

We can have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when we co-operate in them by:

- participating directly and voluntarily in them
- ordering, advising, praising, or approving them
- causing scandal or setting a bad example
- not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so
- protecting evil-doers

Story of the Prodigal Son – Luke 15:11-32

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

The Forgiveness of Sins

From the Code of Canon Law:

THE MINISTER OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Can. 965 A priest alone is the minister of the sacrament of penance.

Can. 978 §1. In hearing confessions the priest is to remember that he is equally a judge and a physician and has been established by God as a minister of divine justice and mercy, so that he has regard for the divine honor and the salvation of souls.

§2. In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority.

Can. 983 §1. The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.

§2. The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession are also obliged to observe secrecy.

Can. 981 The confessor is to impose salutary and suitable penances in accord with the quality and number of sins, taking into account the condition of the penitent. The penitent is obliged to fulfill these personally.

Can. 984 §1. A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded.

§2. A person who has been placed in authority cannot use in any manner for external governance the knowledge about sins which he has received in confession at any time.

Can. 986 §1. All to whom the care of souls has been entrusted in virtue of some function are obliged to make provision so that the confessions of the faithful entrusted to them are heard when they reasonably seek to be heard and that they have the opportunity to approach individual confession on days and at times established for their convenience.

§2. In urgent necessity, any confessor is obliged to hear the confessions of the Christian faithful, and in danger of death, any priest is so obliged.

THE PENITENT

Can. 988 §1. A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

§2. It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.

Can. 989 After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.

Reconciliation Opportunities

- ❖ Penitential Rite at Mass – venial sins
- ❖ Individual Confession – venial and mortal sins
- ❖ Penitential Services –
 - These tend to be held prior to the two major feasts of the Church – Christmas and Easter.
 - The ideal is that they include an opportunity for Individual Confession; otherwise Individual Confession needs to be undertaken separately if mortal / grave sins have been committed.
 - The so-called Rite 2.5 {confessing just one sin prior to receiving Absolution} is not permitted and is not approved as a formal Rite anywhere in the Church.
 - General Absolution (also called the 3rd Rite) {not confessing any sins prior to receiving Absolution} is not permitted unless there is:
 - Danger of death
 - Grave necessity

However, if General Absolution is imparted in these exceptional circumstances, Canon Law says:

Can. 962 §1. For a member of the Christian faithful validly to receive sacramental absolution given to many at one time, it is required not only that the person is properly disposed but also at the same time intends to confess within a suitable period of time each grave sin which at the present time cannot be so confessed.

§2. Insofar as it can be done even on the occasion of the reception of general absolution, the Christian faithful are to be instructed about the requirements of the norm of §1. An exhortation that each person take care to make an act of contrition is to precede general absolution even in the case of danger of death, if there is time.

Can. 963 Without prejudice to the obligation mentioned in Can. 989, a person whose grave sins are remitted by general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as possible, given the opportunity, before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes.

Further guidance can be found from the following document published in 1998:

Descriptive Title:
Australian Bishops Statement of Conclusions

Author:
Australian Bishops and the Prefects and Secretaries of six Dicasteries of the Roman Curia

Description:
This document sets down the conclusions reached in the course of the meeting held in Rome, November 17-20, 1998, at the wishes of the Holy Father, between the Australian Bishops and the Prefects and Secretaries of six Dicasteries of the Roman Curia.

45. The Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. Individual confession and absolution remains the "sole ordinary means by which one of the faithful who is conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and with the Church" (canon 960; cf. *Rituale Romanum, Ordo Paenitentiae*, n. 31; canon 960; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1484). Energetic efforts are to be made to avoid any risk that this traditional practice of the sacrament of Penance fall into disuse.

The communal celebration of Penance with individual confessions and absolution should be encouraged especially in Advent and Lent, but it cannot be allowed to prevent regular, ready access to the traditional form for all who desire it. Unfortunately, communal celebrations have not infrequently occasioned an illegitimate use of general absolution. This illegitimate use, like other abuses in the administration of the sacrament of Penance, is to be eliminated. The teaching of the Church is reflected in precise terms in the requirements of the Code of Canon Law (cf. esp. canons 959-964). In particular it is clear that "A sufficient necessity is not ... considered to exist when confessors cannot be available merely because of a great gathering of penitents, such as can occur on some major feastday or pilgrimage" (canon 961 § 1).

The bishops will exercise renewed vigilance on these matters for the future, aware that departures from the authentic tradition do great wrong to the Church and to individual Catholics.

A Guide For the Sacrament of Confession / Reconciliation

The basic requirement for a good confession is to have the intention of returning to God like the "prodigal son" and to acknowledge our sins with true sorrow before the priest.

Examination of Conscience

In answering the question of the young man in the Gospel, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Our Lord replies, "If you would enter life, keep the Commandments."

The Ten Commandments state what is required in the love of God and love of neighbor.

Celebration of the Sacrament

Remember, if you need help, especially if you have been away for some time, simply ask the priest and he will help you by walking you through the steps necessary.

You begin your confession by making the sign of the cross and greeting the priest:

"Bless me father, for I have sinned."

You may continue with the time since your last confession:

"My last good confession was... (how many weeks, months, or years approximately)."

Say the sins that you remember. Start with the one that is the most difficult to say, after this it will be easier to mention the rest.

Conclude with:

"I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life."

The priest will assign you some penance and give you some advice to help you be a better Christian.

The priest will invite the penitent to say an Act of Contrition:

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, but most of all because I have offended you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen."

Listen to the words of absolution attentively:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of His Son has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; 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.

At the end answer: Amen.

Be willing to do the penance as soon as possible.

The penance will diminish the temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven.

Closing Prayer

“Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.”



The Roman Catholic
RCIA Resource Site:
<http://www.rcia.co.nr>
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