

1st Sunday of Lent

The Sunday readings for Lent this year open with the first sin of Adam and Eve, followed by verses from Psalm 51, exactly the responsorial we just sang on Ash Wednesday. It acknowledges personal sin, appeals for God's mercy, and requests a "steadfast spirit" to keep sin far away.

When Catholics go to confession, we put the words of this psalm into action. The sacrament is more fittingly called "reconciliation" because it reconciles the sinner with God and also with the community against whom we have sinned.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics confessed their sins in their own language, but the priest said the words of absolution in Latin. After the council the entire ceremony was revised to clarify its purpose and to permit the priest to speak the penitent's language throughout. As of this week the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops authorizes the use of a new English translation for reconciliation, which invites us all to review how to confess.

Both the priest and the penitent prepare for the sacrament in prayer, the priest asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the penitent admitting personal sins. When you enter a confessional, you choose to stay anonymously behind a screen or sit facing the priest. Almost everyone has learned you start a confession with "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." It is fine to do so, but the new translation expects the priest to initiate the conversation with words of welcome. Confessing sins can be embarrassing and nerve-wracking, so the priest is supposed to ease the moment with the warmth of his greeting. Then your first words are those accompanying the sign of the cross: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The priest is then supposed to invite you to have trust in God. He may even read a passage from the bible, or you may do so. Then you begin to confess your sins. In reality, this opening conversation rarely happens, but it can. After you confess, the priest recommends a penance; if the penance seems difficult, let him know. The penance is not a sentence, not a punishment equal to a crime, but an indication of your desire to change and renew your life.

Then you offer a prayer, which we frequently call the Act of Contrition. There are multiple versions of this, and the new translation gives suggestions, many of them based on passages from scripture. We'll make these available to you, but it is also fine to say a prayer you learned long ago or even one you make up on the spot, telling God you're sorry and will strive to do better.

The priest then gives absolution. The new translation has a couple of minor changes that most people won't notice. You reply, "Amen." Then the priest uses a formula of dismissal. If he says, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good," you answer, "For his mercy endures for ever." If he says something else, you may answer, "Amen", or just leave in silence. Again, we'll provide a guide for you.

The forgiveness of sins is one of the greatest blessings, and the Church aims to make it readily available, relatively easy, and wholly meaningful. We spend these days of Lent turning away from sin and toward Christ. One of the best ways to prepare for Easter is to make a good confession during Lent.