

Catholic Questions ... and Answers ...

Forms of Confession



I've heard that there are different forms of Confession. What are they and when do I use each one?



There are a number of pieces to this question. First off, the Sacrament of Penance is also called Confession or Reconciliation. And, just to confuse matters, confession and penance are parts of the sacrament.

The sacrament has a number of parts to it.

- Examine your conscience (review the sins you have committed)
- Confess: Tell God, through the priest, your sins.
- Accept a Penance (something to show God we are sorry)
- Say we are sorry (pray an Act of Contrition)
- Be forgiven (be absolved) of our sins
- Leave and do our penance

Back to the original question. There are three ways to celebrate confession:

#1 Private Confession: This is the most common form. We go to a Catholic church at a time when confessions are scheduled. We enter a Reconciliation Room or confessional, and have a conversation with the priest, following the above steps, and confess our sins.

#2 Parish Penance (Reconciliation) Service: At certain times during the year, often in Advent or Lent, we invite priests from the area to join our parish priests as confessors (those who hear confessions). The parishioners gather as a group and we have a prayer service which includes a hymn, a Scripture reading, a brief homily, and often we recite the Act of Contrition together.

Then, people individually go to the priest of their choice and confess at least their mortal (most serious) sins, get a penance and receive absolution.

This form helps when there are a lot of people who want to receive the sacrament.

#3 General Confession and Absolution: Using this form, the priest gives a general absolution; that is, he absolves the sins of those present without hearing individual confessions. This form is meant to be used very rarely and under special circumstances, “grave circumstances.” It is used when the number of people desiring Confession is very large, there is limited time, and there are not enough priests. It can be used in time of war, or natural disaster or when lives are in danger.

In the not too distant past, it was used in the diocese for a number of years (some of you probably remember). In reviewing the sacrament, it was determined that its use didn't fulfill the criteria of “grave circumstances,” so we no longer are able to offer form #3.

The bishop is required to give permission for the use of form #3, and, again, would only do so under “grave circumstances”. And even then, the expectation is that anyone with serious sin (mortal) would make a private confession as soon as possible.

If you have a question you would like answered, you may send it to Sister Sue via email (susan.ssnd@dor.org) or send it to the parish office with Sister Sue's name on it. Please include your name and contact info in case we need clarification about your question.