

# Tips to help you go to confession

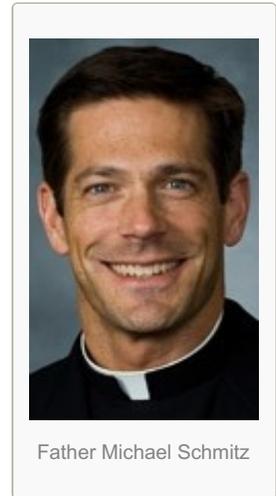
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**Q. This Advent, I think that I need to go to confession, but it has been a really long time for me. I'm afraid I'll get in there and do something wrong. How do I start?**

**A.** First, praise God for moving in your heart in this way. One thing you can be absolutely certain of: Whenever you have the invitation or impulse to go to confession, this is God himself inviting you. And God is inviting you to the sacrament of reconciliation for one reason: because he loves you and wants you to know real joy and the fullness of his love.

I understand being nervous though. Here are a few tips to get you started.

Get a good examination of conscience: Sometimes I find that adults don't know what to say in reconciliation because the last time they went was when "I sassed back to my parents" was the biggest thing they had to confess. Because they haven't actually examined their conscience as an adult, they are often completely oblivious to the "grown up" sins in their life. A good examination of conscience can be a helpful tool to prepare for a good confession.



Father Michael Schmitz

It's OK to bring in a list: After you've made an examination of conscience, it can sometimes help people if they write down all of the sins they want to confess. There are even great apps on smartphones that help with this.

People have told me that they have had priests tell them not to bring in a list to assist them in making a good confession. The reasoning is, apparently, "You wouldn't bring in a list if you were talking with your mother, would you?" I get that. But we make lists when it is important that we remember things. We make a list when going to the grocery store because it is important that we get everything for supper.

The same is true for confession. If it helps you to bring in a list, go ahead and bring in a list. If the priest tells you to stop reading from your list, you can tell him that you will once he stops reading his homilies from the pulpit (or the announcements, whichever applies). Just be warned, if you do that, you may have to confess being snarky (but that's a venial sin at worst).

## **No need to rush**

It's OK to interrupt the priest: I've had many people tell me that they weren't done with their confession when the priest started talking and gave them absolution, or that they remembered something after they had already started making their act of contrition.

The question races through one's mind: "Can I interrupt him? I'm not done!"

Be assured, it is no problem. The priest is there to be a vehicle of God's love for you, and if he mistakenly thought that you were done, it is OK to let him know that there is more you need to say. He would much rather you be at peace and say everything you have to say than to be able to offer his own advice. Just say, "Father, I'm sorry, but I forgot to mention. . . ." Boom. Simple. And it's done.

You don't have to tell "the story of the sin." At the same time, keep in mind that we are only required to confess each mortal sin in number and kind. That means I simply have to "name the sin" and any relevant

details.

For example, there is a difference between saying, “I took something home from work that wasn’t mine” and “I’ve been stealing things from work most every week for the past six months.”

There are things that affect the weight of the sin, as well. I have a priest friend from Kenya who likes to say, “Don’t say, ‘Father, I stole a rope,’ and neglect to mention that there was a cow attached to the rope!” It might feel like you are rushing if you simply name the sin.

I understand that, and you don’t need to rush. But there is something beautifully humble about simply confessing the sin without “dressing it up” with a story.

You don’t have to confess anyone else’s sins: While few people come to confession in order to talk about someone else’s sins, it happens.

In most cases, this is because there is some hurt involved, a spouse is cruel or one’s children have been hurtful.

In those cases, I understand needing to give Jesus the pain you have experienced during confession. But the main purpose of confession is to reveal one’s own sins, not someone else’s.

If a priest tells you that something isn’t a sin (that you know is a sin), confess it anyway: It is very frustrating and confusing when you know that something is a sin (it was on the reliable examination of conscience, for crying out loud!), and the priest tells you that, in his opinion, that isn’t a sin.

You don’t need to panic or give in to confusion, and you don’t need to argue with the priest.

Just know that you confessed it the best as you could and let Jesus take care of it.

### **God’s invitation**

Don’t worry if you “forget your lines”: “I can’t go to confession! I don’t know how to start! I don’t know my act of contrition!”

If you blank on how to go to confession, just let the priest know. He is there as a representative of God’s love and patience. Plus, he went to school for this. Even if you don’t know how it’s supposed to go, he can walk you through it.

You can tell the priest how many people are behind you in line: That’s just a nice thing to do if you think of it. He might be going slowly because he isn’t aware that there are 20 more people in line and only 15 minutes to go.

All of this is simply meant to help with some of the human issues that many people have with confession. I know that there are more that I haven’t mentioned.

Just remember, the fact that you are even thinking about going to confession this Advent is a sign that God is inviting you there, and who would want to turn down a personal invitation from God?

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