

Frequently Asked Questions about the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Confession

✝ **Is it called Reconciliation or Confession?**

The Book of Common Prayer refers to this sacramental rite as the “Reconciliation of a Penitent,” but it is often called “Confession” because that is easier to say and is equally descriptive of what it is all about. The document will refer to “Confession” to speak of this rite.

✝ **What exactly is it?**

The Prayer Book catechism states that “it is the rite in which those who repent of their sins may confess them to God in the presence of a priest, and receive the assurance of pardon and the grace of absolution.” In other words, Confession is a pastoral liturgy in which you come and name the burdens of sin that you have been carrying to have assurance that Jesus removes the burden of guilt from you, “for his yoke is easy and his burden is light.”

✝ **What sorts of things should I confess? What counts as a sin?**

A sin is anything that separates us from God or others or is an offense against God, our neighbor, or ourselves. Put most simply, a sin is when we fall short of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. You should confess whatever is weighing you down, whatever you are sorry about, whatever is preventing you from moving on or finding healing. You can confess anything, no matter how seemingly big or how small. You can confess sins of commission (things that you have done) or sins of omission (things that you have not done). The priest is not interested in the details of your sin and will not ask questions out of curiosity – but the priest might invite you to go deeper if it seems that your Confession is surface level. As something like surgery – Confession functions best when we go deep enough to address sin at its root. You should confess as much as it takes so that when you leave you do not think “I didn’t tell the whole truth.”

✝ **Is Confession private? Will other people be around?**

The Confession is completely private – no one else will be in the Chapel or in the nearby hallway.

✝ **How long does it last?**

Depending on how much you have to confess and how much detail you need to go into, Confession can last anywhere from 5 minutes to 20 minutes. If more time is needed, it may be best to follow-up and discuss further as a part of spiritual direction.

✝ **When is Confession offered?**

At St. Luke’s, Confession is always available by appointment with our priest. In the season of Lent, Confession is available without appointment in our Chapel on Wednesdays (excluding Ash Wednesday and Holy Wednesday) from 4-5pm. Enter through the door near the Parish Library and use the interior door to enter the Chapel. A sign will be on the door indicating whether or not someone is in Chapel already for Confession. If someone is, please wait in the Library.

✝ **Where does it take place?**

At St. Luke's, Confession is done in our Chapel. This location provides both privacy and a holy space. The Penitent (the person making the Confession) sits in the first pew and the priest sits in a chair at a 90-degree angle. This arrangement means that while you are face-to-face, you are also not looking directly at the priest, making it clear that you are making your Confession to God in the presence of the priest and not directly to the priest. Sometimes, direct eye contact can be difficult in making a Confession and this arrangement takes into account the vulnerability of this rite. There are no "confessional boxes" as you might have seen in movies, nor are there any screens between the priest and the penitent. Here is a photo of the setup:



✝ **What happens during Confession?**

Before you even arrive, the priest has already prayed for you (without always knowing the specifics of who will be coming for Confession) - that God's wisdom, grace, and mercy might be communicated through this rite. Upon entering, if you have never done Confession in the Episcopal Church, the priest will briefly walk you through what the liturgy works. You will be given a Prayer Book and the rite begins with you reading what is written. When you get to the _____, you add, in your own words, the things that you are confessing. After this, the priest will offer brief counsel, direction, and comfort. You then kneel at the altar rail and the priest will go inside the altar rail to pronounce God's absolution and forgiveness. After a concluding sentence in the Prayer Book, you then leave the Chapel.

‡ **Can't I just confess my sins directly to God?**

By all means, you can and should confess your sins to God in prayer. What Confession does is to help you get “it” out of your system. Confessing your sins to another person is a fundamentally different thing than confessing your sins to God alone in prayer. One is not better than the other – they are simply different in a way that has to be experienced to be fully grasped. Furthermore, when making a Confession to priest, you will receive godly counsel and hear the words of Christ given to the Church of forgiveness. Absolution is declared as a fact – not something you have to wonder about. Furthermore, coming to Confession takes resolve and courage, both of which are pleasing signs of contrition and repentance to God. The Creed reminds us that we believe not in “sin” but rather in the “forgiveness of sin,” and hearing this forgiveness pronounced is an incredibly healing and empowering word.

‡ **Don't we say a Confession every week in church already?**

We do. That confession is a general confession and tends to focus more on our communal sins instead of our personal ones. That isn't to say that our personal sins are not covered on Sundays, but in Sunday worship we do not have the opportunity to confess our particular sins individually. Just as your sins are personal, so is God's forgiveness for you not general, but is intimately personal. Confession gives you the opportunity to hear God's forgiveness spoken directly and uniquely to you.

‡ **Isn't Confession something just for Roman Catholics?**

Private Confession actually has Anglican origins, as historians believe that Confession began as a practice among the Celtic Christians of the British Isles. Private Confession has been a part of our tradition for centuries is very much something that Episcopalians do. Confession is a sacrament of grace, and as such it is open to and commended to all Christians. If you grew up in a different tradition that practiced Confession, know that Confession in the Episcopal Church is different and often has a more personal and pastoral element to it.

‡ **Who should come to Confession?**

While not required or mandated of anyone, all Christians should come to Confession as a part of an honest, healthy, and authentic faith. Like reading the Bible, generosity, praying, or serving the poor, Confession is encouraged to all, but in light of God's grace, Confession is not a burden to be added on anyone. Our sense of guilt can make us feel hopeless, and Confession is intended to speak a word of grace into all our lives.

‡ **Can I trust that the priest knows how to hear a Confession?**

Our priest takes Confession very seriously and prayerfully. He regularly makes Confessions himself as a penitent and has read widely on the topic to ensure that he is prepared to convey God's grace through this sacrament.

‡ **Will you think less of me after hearing my sins?**

After you leave the Chapel, the first thing the priest does is to pray a prayer asking for the seeds of forgiveness to grow in you and that God would help the priest to forget what has been said. As the liturgy concludes, the priest says, “Go in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.” As Jesus warns us, “judge not, lest you be judged.” The priest is a sinner as much as the penitent is; likewise, the penitent receives and relies on the grace and mercy of God as much as the priest does. Though the priest is the one hearing the Confession, both participants are on equal footing before God and there is no “thinking less” of anyone as a result of being honest before God and pursuing reconciliation. Confession is not something to be ashamed of, but commended.

‡ **Will you treat me differently or tell anyone what I’ve said after hearing my Confession?**

What is said in Confession is under the “seal of Confession” which is never broken. Under no circumstances will the priest divulge anything that you say in Confession (under the penalty of being suspended from ministry for doing so) or even the fact that you have come to Confession. No legal entity can force a priest to divulge what was said in a Confession, and even if called before the authorities, the priest will remain silent. The seal of Confession is absolute. No matter what you confess, it will never be repeated or shared by the priest. Furthermore, the priest will never bring up the subject of the Confession ever again. Please do not take offense at this – but the priest will never ask you “How is it going with _____.” You are always free to bring it up for pastoral conversation – but as far as anyone, including the priest, is concerned, the content of a Confession is completely sealed off and confidential.

If you confess the intention to do harm to yourself or another, the priest is under a godly admonition and moral duty to report this. In this instance, you are not confessing something in the past that cannot be changed, rather you are stating an intention. Should your Confession include a crime, a part of the penance and reconciliation process may include making a legal confession and restitution for the crime. You should also be aware that clergy in North Carolina are considered “mandated reporters” for child abuse or neglect. True Confession does not allow abuse to be perpetuated or hidden and the clergy will walk with you in the process of pursuing justice and healing for all involved. Confession is not merely about “getting something off of your chest,” it is about repentance which involves a change in course and efforts at restoring what has been broken. God’s mercy is always assured, and reconciliation is a part of our response of faith.

‡ **Will you be giving me advice or a response based on what I say?**

Yes, the priest will offer counsel, direction, and comfort – but Confession is not therapy or counseling. Confession is cathartic but not therapeutic and works best alongside counseling, treatment, and spiritual direction. The response will be brief and assure you of God’s love for you and of God’s desires for healing and wholeness. Depending on the confession, the priest might ask you to go deeper or ask for clarification to make sure a full Confession has been made. The priest will also suggest, as appropriate, ways in which you can pursue healing and peace in the relationships that have been strained by sin. It is also likely that the priest will assign you a “penance” – usually in the form of a prayer to use in the following days to reassure of God’s mercy.

‡ **What if what I have to confess is really bad?**

All sin is bad and it is unlikely that the priest has never heard of the particular sin you have committed. In the event that you have done something uniquely sinful, you will still be assured of God's mercy.

‡ **Is forgiveness ever withheld?**

Forgiveness would only very rarely be withheld and would be in a situation in which notorious sins are being committed on an ongoing basis with a stated intention to continue doing so.

‡ **How often should I come to Confession?**

Within reason, Confession can be used as frequently as one needs or desires. Making a Confession once year in Lent is a good minimum. As humans, we will likely stumble often and so you can confess the same sins more than once.

‡ **How do I prepare for Confession?**

The Episcopal priest, Martin Smith, has written a good book on the topic called "[Reconciliation: Preparing for Confession in the Episcopal Church.](#)" [You can read the chapter on preparing for your first confession here.](#) You might prayerfully consider what things weigh on your conscience, what things you find yourself thinking about often, or what things most trouble you. Reviewing the [Ten Commandments](#), the [Baptismal Covenant](#), or the [Seven Deadly Sins](#) can also be helpful. To ensure that you don't leave anything off, it can be helpful to bring a list to Confession of the things you want to be sure that you include. Searching our hearts and lives is a part of the process of letting God heal us in our places of vulnerability, regret, and shame. [You can also look at the liturgy online ahead of time.](#)

‡ **I still have other questions about Confession?**

Please reach out to our priest at rblack@stlukessalisbury.net and he would be happy to answer your questions so that you can receive the grace of Confession.