

ORDER FOR THE CONFESSION OF SINS AND ASSURANCE OF GRACE

Prefatory Note

God has shown his love for the world by reconciling it to himself through the blood of Jesus Christ. In his ministry Jesus called people to turn away from sin, put their faith in him and amend their lives to conform with God's will. He entrusted this ministry of reconciliation to his Church.

By baptism through faith in Christ we enter into the Church and share in all the benefits of his death and resurrection. Even so, we repeatedly fall and sin. Sin is an offence against God, against the Church, which it defies, against our neighbour and against ourselves. We therefore constantly need to repent and be cleansed by Christ and renewed by his Spirit.

Turning to God in true repentance means abandoning all self-justification and being cut to the heart by the gravity of our sin (Acts 2:37). 'A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Ps.51:7). It also means wanting to be free of sin and to live the new life in Christ in the power of his Spirit.

We may receive God's forgiveness and be reconciled to him by confessing our sins and accepting his mercy in private prayer and in corporate worship. But for those people whose consciences remain burdened by guilt the Gospel of John tells us that the Risen Lord declared to his disciples:

Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain. (Jn.20:22f.)

Likewise the Letter of James exhorts us:

Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed (Js.5:16).

We can go to any brother or sister in Christ and confess our sins to God with him or her. Anyone who has come to perceive the depths of the sin that sent Jesus to the Cross in his or her own heart is suited to hear others confess. Such a person can also then stand in the place of Christ and assure us of God's grace or forgiveness. But some people prefer to

choose as their confessor a minister whom the Church has ordained to declare the gospel.

This Order is meant to serve as an aid when a person with a burdened conscience seeks to unburden it to a minister or any other member of the Church. The need for it may arise out of a counselling session. It may also be used when an opportunity for a general confession of sin has been requested. The confessor may use part of the Order or adapt it or use it only as a basic model or not use it at all.

Whether minister or lay, every confessor is solemnly bound 'by the seal of the confessional' to observe strict confidentiality with regard to everything confessed before him/her in this way.

No one is required to confess in the presence of another person. Those who do have no right to look down on any who do not, and those who do not have no right to be offended at any who do. God alone is our judge, and we are forbidden to judge one another (Mt.7:1-5).

Preparation

If the penitent applies to make a general rather than a specific confession, he/she should be directed to meditate prayerfully on passages from Scripture before coming to confession, in order to identify the sins that he/she needs to confess. Suitable passages are the Ten Commandments (Ex.20:1-17), a Psalm like Ps.32 or 51 or 139 (especially v.1-4,23f), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7) and/or the statement of Jesus on the two great commandments (Mk.12:28-33).

In the case of specific confessions the confessor will usually first listen to what the penitent has to say and may then follow that with some counselling. On the other hand the penitent may wish to proceed immediately to using the Order. But the confessor should in any case first ensure whether the penitent needs to seek explicit reconciliation with, or make restitution to, anyone against whom he/she has sinned or from whom he/she has been estranged. If the penitent has not yet sought this, the confessor should require the penitent to go and do it before proceeding with the Order and specifically with the assurance of Grace. The confessor may need to remind the penitent of such Scriptures as Mt.5:22-26, 6:12-15, 18:21-35 and Lev.6:1-5. If necessary, the confessor should make clear that none of these things is a basis for earning forgiveness.

It is appropriate, though of course not necessary, for the confession to take place in a church. Whatever the venue, it should be secured against intrusion or any disturbance during the confession.

Cushions to kneel on should be available where the confession will take place.

If the confessor is a minister, wearing a vestment and a (purple) stole to symbolize the authority of his/her office as a minister of the Word is appropriate, but this too is not necessary.

The confessor should briefly outline what the procedure will be:

- they will kneel next to each other (unless the penitent finds it uncomfortable to kneel);*
- the confessor will begin by leading in prayer and saying the Scripture sentences;*
- there will be silences for meditation;*
- the confessor will indicate to the penitent when to make his/her confession with the words, 'Confess your sins now';*
- the penitent should then proceed to do so in the form of an audible prayer, unless he/she finds it too difficult to pray aloud, in which case he/she can make the confession to God by way of declaring it to the confessor and then pray silently;*
- the penitent should remain kneeling when the confessor stands up after this for the assurance of grace; and*
- the Order ends with a commissioning and the benediction.*

Approach

The confessor and the penitent kneel beside each other (in front of the Holy Table may be the best place).

The confessor should avoid giving the impression that the confession is to him/her.

Prelude on Confession

You may confess anything that burdens your conscience.

It may be something that has bothered you for a long time.

It may be something that continues to hinder you today from living a life that is pleasing to God.

You need not be afraid:

everything you say here will be heard under the seal of confession.

I will tell no one about it,

and will not speak to you about it again, unless you so choose.

I am here only to witness what you will say to God in your confession and to witness God's word to you.

In terms of Jesus' declaration to his disciples,

'Receive the Holy Spirit!

If you forgive anyone's sins they are forgiving;

if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.'

Prayer

After a silence the confessor prays aloud in words such as the following:

O God our Father, you have shown your love for us
in that while we were still sinners Jesus Christ died for us.
Because we have faith in Christ,
we dare to draw near to you in all your holiness
and confess our guilt before you.
Therefore be merciful to us sinners
and help us with your Spirit:
open our eyes to see ourselves as we are and enable us
neither to play down our sins nor to excuse our failures.
Lead us through our darkness to the light of your grace,
so that we, being assured of your mercy,
may be made obedient to your will.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Silence

Words of Scripture

Listen to the words of Scripture.

The confessor reads one or at most two of the following texts:

Come, now, let us reason together, says the Lord.
Though your sins are like scarlet
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson
they shall be like wool.

Is. 1:18 NIV

Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked?
declares the sovereign Lord.
Rather am I not pleased when they turn from their ways
and live?

Ezk. 18:23 NIV

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.
Those who believe in him are not condemned.

Jn. 13:17-18N RSV

We do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who has been tempted in every way,
just as we are – yet was without sin.
Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Heb.4:15f. NIV

This is the message we have heard from him
and proclaim to you,
that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.
If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 Jn. 1:5,7 NRSV

If we say that we have no sin,
we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins,
he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 Jn. 1:8f. NRSV

If anybody does sin,
we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence –
Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.
He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Jn.2:1f. NIV

Brief silence

The Lord be in your heart and on your lips,
so that you may confess your sins truly and sincerely,
even if it is difficult for you.

Confession

Confess your sins to God now.

If the penitent has previously confessed his/her sin(s) in pastoral conversation with the confessor, it may suffice for him/her to name the sin without detail in the prayer of confession. Otherwise the confessor

encourages the penitent to specify concretely whatever sin(s) he or she wishes to confess.

The confessor may ask:

Is there anything (else) that accuses you before God
and that you have not (yet) confessed and wish now to confess?

After the confession silence is observed.

The confessor then offers any needed advice that has not been given during counselling beforehand.

In particular if the confessor has not already enquired whether the penitent has sought reconciliation with anyone against whom he/she needs to be reconciled and forgives everyone who has sinned against him/her, this should be done before proceeding to the assurance of grace.

Do you repent with all your heart for what you have confessed?

I do.

Do you seek forgiveness from God without justifying yourself?

I do.

Do you believe that God desires to be merciful to you?

I do.

Do you come seeking forgiveness wholly on the basis
of the sacrifice and atonement that Christ accomplished for you
by dying for you,
and do you believe that that alone is enough
to redeem you from all your sin?

I do.

Then fix your eyes not on your own repentance or sorrow,
as though that were the basis on which you merit pardon,
but on the Lord's mercy alone.

'Look! This is the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world!'

Jn.1:29 GW

Brief silence.

Now say after me,

O God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
How great, how great a sinner I am!
My mind cannot grasp,
and my tongue cannot tell,
how great and how many my sins are.
They are a load heavier than I can bear.
They are a flood in which I drown.
Who can understand how much one has transgressed?
Lord, cleanse me from all my sins,
those known and those unknown:
those I have done in public
and those I have done in secret,
all those I remember
and all those I have forgotten.
Let all the flood of my sins be swallowed up
in the bottomless abyss of your mercy.
I pray this only through Jesus Christ, who died for me.
Amen.

Or

O Father eternal, like the prodigal son
I come home to you now and confess
'I have sinned against you
and am no longer worthy to be called your child.'
Have mercy on me, O God,
in keeping with your faithful love.
In your great mercy wipe away my sins.
Wash me clean from all my sin and guilt.
For I know about my sins,
I cannot forget my terrible guilt.
You are really the one I have sinned against.
I have disobeyed you and have done wrong.
Wash me, until I am whiter than snow.
Turn your eyes from my sin and cover my guilt.
Put a new, pure heart in me, O God,
and make me faithful again.
Don't chase me away from you
or take your Holy Spirit away from me.
Make me as full of joy as you did when you saved me.
Make me want to obey you!
And open my mouth, Lord, that I may praise you.

**Through Jesus Christ,
who shed his blood to deliver me from sin and death.
Amen.**

Alternatively some similar prayer of confession may be said.

Silence.

Assurance of Grace

The confessor then stands, either next to or in front of the penitent. He/she may lay a hand on the shoulder or head of the penitent or trace a cross on the penitent's forehead.

The confessor declares:

In that you sincerely acknowledge that you are a sinner,
humble yourself before God
and look to Jesus Christ for your salvation,
I now declare to you
in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit:
your sins are all forgiven
and you are release from them.
Amen.

Listen to God's Word.

The confessor then declares one, two or three of the following texts from Scripture, pausing between them.

With all my heart I praise the LORD,
and with all that I am I praise his holy name!
I will never forget how kind he has been.
The LORD forgives our sins, heals us when we are sick,
and protects us from death.

Ps.103:2f. CEV

The LORD is merciful!
He is kind and patient, and his love never fails.
How far has the LORD taken our sins from us?
Farther than the distance from east to west!

Ps.103:8,12 CEV

These are the words of the LORD, your Redeemer,
the Holy One of Israel:
'I am the LORD;

for my own sake I wipe out your transgressions,
and remember your sins no more.

Isa.43:14,25 REB

This is what the Lord says –
'I have swept away your offences like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me, for I have redeemed you.'

Isa.44:6,22 NIV

For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish
but have everlasting life.

Jn.3:16 NIV

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jn.8:36 NIV

All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.
But God treats us much better than we deserve,
and because of Christ Jesus he freely accepts us
and sets us free from our sins.

Ro.3:23 CEV

God offered [Christ Jesus],
so that by his death he should become
the means by which people's sins are forgiven
through their faith in him.

Ro.3:25 GNB

Now that we have been put right with God through faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ro.5:1 GNB

We were God's enemies,
but he has made us his friends through the death of his Son.
Now that we are God's friends,
how much more will we be saved through Christ's life!

Ro.5:10 GNB

There is therefore now no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Ro.8:1 NRSV

Who will accuse God's chosen people?
God himself declares them not guilty!
Who then will condemn them?
Not Christ Jesus, who died, or rather was raised to life
and is at the right-hand side of God,
pleading with him for us.

Ro.8:33-34 GNB

Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person.

The past is forgotten, and everything is new.

God has done it all.

He sent Christ to make peace between himself and us. *II Cor.5:17-18 CEV*

Christ himself carried our sins in his body on the cross,

so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.

I Pet.2:24 GNB

Brief silence.

The confessor then says:

As Lazarus was unbound from his grave-clothes

and set free from death,

so God has unbound you from your sins

and set you free from them and the punishment due for them.

Jesus said: 'Take heart, son: your sins are forgiven.'

Mt.9:2 NIV

Or

The pardon promised by Jesus to sincere repentance and true faith
is already ratified in heaven according to his word.

For his righteousness covers all our sin.

Therefore rejoice and be thankful.

And if your heart still condemns you

know that 'God is greater than our hearts.'

I Jn.3:20 NIV

Silence.

It is by God's grace that you have been saved, through faith.

It is not of your own doing, but God's gift.

Eph.2:8

Silence.

Thanksgiving

The confessor and the penitent or the penitent alone may say:

Bless the Lord, my soul,

and all that in within me bless his holy name!

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and forget not all his benefits,

who forgives all your iniquity,

who heals all your diseases,

who redeems your life from the pit,

**who crowns you with faithful love and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good,
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

The Lord's Prayer may be said together.

**Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy Name,
 thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom,
 the power and the glory,
 for ever and ever.
 Amen.**

Matt.6:9-13

Summons to Love and Obey

The confessor admonishes the penitent to hold fast to the fact that God has set him/her free from the bondage of his/her sin to live in the power of that grace and so live out that freedom.

If necessary, the confessor also encourages the penitent to take his/her place more regularly among God's people, as they worship God, submit themselves to the Word and partake of the sacrament in seeking God's help to live in that grace and live out that freedom.

The confessor may use such words as:

Do you trust that God has set you free from the past
 and given you a new life?
I do.

'From now on sin no longer,'
 for Christ has saved you and sets you free from the power of evil.
 Instead, let thankfulness for God's kindness and mercy
 fill you with love for him.
 As the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears
 and wiped them with her hair
 loved much, because she had been forgiven much,
 so, because you have been forgiven much, love much.

Jn.8:11

Love, forgive and serve others
as Christ has loved, forgiven and served you.

Take your place with the company of forgiven sinners
who praise God for his grace,
faithfully listen and submit to his Word,
and share in his sacrament together,
so that you may find the guidance and help you need
to live according to his will and serve him in the world.

Silence.

Commission and Blessing

The penitent stands.

The confessor may lay a hand on the penitent's shoulder and say:

Go in peace and bear witness to the Lord's mercy.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you.

II Cor.13:13 GNB

If necessary the confessor directs the penitent to further counselling.

The penitent or the confessor may light a candle on the Holy Table.