

Detail Examination of Conscience & Guide to Confession

For those returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation after time away

A Word Before You Begin

If it has been a year, five years, or many years since your last confession, welcome back. There is nothing you can say to a priest that he has not heard many times before. The Sacrament exists precisely for this moment — Christ does not tally how long you've been away; He simply waits at the door (Luke 15:20). No confession is required to “make up” for lost time. You simply confess what is on your conscience now, do your best to be complete regarding mortal sins, and receive mercy.

Take your time with this examination. Read it slowly, perhaps over a few sittings, with a pen in hand. You don't need to write a formal list to bring in with you (though many people do, and priests are used to seeing notes) — the goal is simply to know your own heart before you speak it aloud.

Part I — Examination Based on the Ten Commandments

1. “*I am the LORD your God; you shall not have strange gods before me.*”

This commandment concerns the honor, trust, and love owed to God alone.

- ❖ Have I doubted or willfully rejected any truth the Church teaches, treating my own judgment as higher than God's revelation?
- ❖ Have I been indifferent to matters of faith — never really thinking about God, heaven, hell, or the purpose of my life?
- ❖ Have I involved myself in the occult — horoscopes, tarot, Ouija boards, psychics, mediums, palm reading, or other forms of divination?
- ❖ Have I practiced or dabbled in witchcraft, Reiki, or other practices that seek hidden power apart from God?
- ❖ Have I put my trust in luck, superstition, or “the universe” rather than in Divine Providence?
- ❖ Have I made an idol of something — money, career, comfort, a relationship, my own image, physical fitness, my own opinions — placing it before God in my time, attention, or priorities?
- ❖ Have I been ashamed of my faith, hiding it from others, or denied being Catholic to avoid embarrassment or conflict?
- ❖ Have I despaired of God's mercy, believing myself beyond forgiveness?
- ❖ Have I presumed on God's mercy, sinning freely on the assumption that He will forgive regardless of my effort to change?
- ❖ Have I neglected personal prayer altogether for a long period — going days, weeks, or longer without speaking to God at all?
- ❖ Have I hated God, or been angry with Him in a way that closed off my relationship with Him, rather than bringing that anger to Him honestly?
- ❖ Have I given money or support to causes or organizations that work directly against the faith or against human life and dignity?

2. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.”

This concerns the reverence owed to God's name and to sacred things.

- ❖ Have I used God's name, Jesus' name, or the name of the Holy Spirit carelessly, in anger, or as a casual exclamation?
- ❖ Have I blasphemed — spoken with contempt or mockery about God, Jesus, Mary, the saints, or sacred realities?
- ❖ Have I used sacred objects (rosaries, crucifixes, holy water, the Bible) disrespectfully or trivially?
- ❖ Have I made a promise, vow, or oath in God's name and then broken it without grave reason?
- ❖ Have I sworn falsely — invoked God as a witness to a lie?
- ❖ Have I complained bitterly against God during suffering in a way that hardened my heart, rather than bringing my pain honestly to Him in prayer?
- ❖ Have I made light of religious things — turned sacraments, prayers, or Scripture into a joke or mockery, even casually?

3. “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.”

This concerns worship, rest, and the priority God deserves in our week.

- ❖ Have I missed Mass on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation without a serious reason (illness, dangerous travel, care of a sick person, or genuine necessity)?
- ❖ Roughly how often has this happened — nearly every week, occasionally, or only rarely?
- ❖ Have I attended Mass but arrived very late or left immediately after Communion without necessity, missing significant parts of the liturgy?
- ❖ Have I been deliberately distracted at Mass — on my phone, daydreaming by choice, showing open irreverence?
- ❖ Have I received Holy Communion irreverently, or without appropriate attention to what — Who — I was receiving?
- ❖ Have I treated Sunday as an ordinary workday, refusing all rest, family time, and worship?
- ❖ Have I made unnecessary demands of others' labor on Sunday (shopping, business, chores) that could reasonably wait?
- ❖ Have I failed to set aside any time at all — even outside of Mass — for rest and for God during the week?

4. “Honor your father and your mother.”

This concerns our duties within the family and toward legitimate authority.

- ❖ Have I been disrespectful, harsh, contemptuous, or cruel in speech toward my parents?
- ❖ Have I neglected aging, ill, or lonely parents who needed my time, presence, or material help?
- ❖ Have I resented or refused to forgive my parents for past hurts, holding onto bitterness rather than working toward peace?
- ❖ (If a spouse): Have I failed in fidelity, patience, honesty, or self-giving love toward my spouse? Have I failed to work at reconciliation after a fight, letting distance grow instead?
- ❖ (If a parent): Have I failed to care for my children's physical needs, emotional security, or spiritual formation?
- ❖ Have I failed to teach my children the faith, bring them to Mass, or pray with them?

- ❖ Have I set a bad example for my children or others under my care through my own habits or language?
- ❖ Have I been excessively harsh, or on the other hand excessively permissive, in raising or correcting my children?
- ❖ Have I disobeyed or undermined legitimate authority — civil law, just workplace policies, or the lawful teaching authority of the Church — without genuine moral cause?
- ❖ Have I failed in my duties as an employer or employee — toward those who work for me, or toward my own employer?
- ❖ Have I gossiped about or undermined a legitimate authority figure (pastor, teacher, supervisor, elected official) out of spite rather than legitimate concern?

5. “You shall not kill.”

This concerns respect for the life and dignity of every human person, including my own.

- ❖ Have I taken part in, encouraged, paid for, arranged, or supported an abortion, at any point, in any way?
- ❖ Have I been party to euthanasia or assisted suicide, or advocated for it in someone else's case?
- ❖ Have I physically harmed anyone, in anger or otherwise?
- ❖ Have I wished serious harm or death on someone, even briefly, and dwelt on that wish?
- ❖ Have I harbored hatred toward another person?
- ❖ Have I refused to forgive someone, nursing a grudge or resentment that has grown over time?
- ❖ Have I sought revenge, even in small or “justified”-feeling ways?
- ❖ Have I harmed myself — through self-harm, substance abuse, reckless endangerment of my own life, or serious neglect of my health?
- ❖ Have I been cruel in speech — mocking, humiliating, or verbally abusing someone in a way that caused real and lasting hurt?
- ❖ Have I bullied, intimidated, or terrorized anyone, in person or online?
- ❖ Have I driven recklessly or dangerously, endangering others' lives?
- ❖ Have I been indifferent to the suffering of others when I was in a position to help — the poor, the sick, refugees, the unborn, the elderly?
- ❖ Have I supported, excused, or stayed silent about serious injustice or violence when I could reasonably have spoken or acted?
- ❖ Have I held racist, contemptuous, or dehumanizing attitudes toward any group of people?
- ❖ Have I been excessively angry in a way that regularly frightens or hurts those around me?

6. “You shall not commit adultery.”

This concerns the gift of sexuality and its proper place within marriage.

- ❖ Have I been unfaithful to my spouse, in body, in word, or in the deliberate desires of my heart?
- ❖ Have I viewed pornography, or deliberately sought out sexually explicit images, videos, or writing?
- ❖ How often has this occurred, as best I can recall — a habitual struggle, occasional lapses, or isolated incidents?
- ❖ Have I engaged in masturbation?

- ❖ Have I had sexual relations outside of marriage (fornication)?
- ❖ Have I cohabited with a romantic partner outside of marriage?
- ❖ Have I used artificial contraception within marriage, or encouraged another to do so?
- ❖ Have I engaged in sexual acts within marriage that are deliberately closed to the possibility of life, or contrary to the nature of the marital act?
- ❖ Have I engaged in any homosexual activity?
- ❖ Have I engaged in sexual acts involving a minor, or been attracted in that direction — this must be disclosed honestly, however difficult, as it concerns real harm to a vulnerable person?
- ❖ Have I entertained lustful thoughts or fantasies about another person deliberately, rather than dismissing them?
- ❖ Have I dressed, posted online, or acted in a way calculated to provoke lust in others?
- ❖ Have I used another person merely for sexual gratification, without regard for their dignity or our relationship?
- ❖ Have I been a source of scandal — led someone else, especially someone younger or more vulnerable, into sexual sin by my words, example, or encouragement?
- ❖ Have I sought an annulment dishonestly, or entered marriage without real intention of fidelity, permanence, or openness to children?

7. “You shall not steal.”

This concerns justice toward others' property, time, and labor.

- ❖ Have I taken something that wasn't mine — from a store, an employer, a family member, a friend, or a stranger?
- ❖ Have I cheated anyone in a business dealing, a sale, a contract, or an exchange of any kind?
- ❖ Have I cheated on my taxes, or knowingly misrepresented my finances to gain an advantage?
- ❖ Have I failed to pay debts I was genuinely able to pay?
- ❖ Have I failed to pay a fair and just wage to anyone I employed?
- ❖ Have I misused my employer's time, money, or resources — padding hours, expensing personal items, taking supplies?
- ❖ Have I damaged another's property, by accident or on purpose, and failed to repair or repay it when I was able?
- ❖ Have I been guilty of greed or an excessive, disordered attachment to money and possessions?
- ❖ Have I gambled irresponsibly, risking money needed for my family's welfare?
- ❖ Have I failed to give reasonably to those in genuine need, when I had the means to help?
- ❖ Have I engaged in software, music, film, or media piracy, or otherwise taken others' intellectual work without payment or permission?
- ❖ Have I cheated in school or in professional credentialing (plagiarism, falsified work, cheating on exams)?
- ❖ Have I kept something I found without a reasonable effort to return it to its owner?

8. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

This concerns truthfulness — toward others, and toward myself.

- ❖ Have I lied — to others, to myself, or in prayer to God?

- ❖ How often, and about what kinds of things — small conveniences, or matters of real consequence to others?
- ❖ Have I gossiped — spoken about others' faults, mistakes, or private lives without necessity or charity?
- ❖ Have I damaged someone's reputation through slander (saying something false about them) or detraction (revealing something true but unnecessary and harmful)?
- ❖ Have I judged others rashly, assuming the worst about their motives or character without real evidence?
- ❖ Have I broken a confidence, or shared something I was trusted to keep private?
- ❖ Have I flattered someone insincerely, or manipulated someone through deception for my own advantage?
- ❖ Have I failed to correct a false impression I created, when I was able to set the record straight?
- ❖ Have I been dishonest in my work — falsifying records, misrepresenting results, plagiarizing, or deceiving a client, employer, or the public?
- ❖ Have I made a habit of exaggeration that misleads others, even about small things?
- ❖ Have I used social media to spread things I knew or suspected were false, or failed to verify before sharing something damaging about another person?

9. “You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.”

This commandment addresses the interior desires that give rise to sins against chastity.

- ❖ Have I deliberately entertained impure thoughts, desires, or fantasies about someone I am not married to?
- ❖ Have I nurtured an emotional or romantic attachment inappropriate to my state in life — an “emotional affair,” or an unhealthy attachment to someone other than my spouse?
- ❖ Have I consumed media, entertainment, or online content that deliberately cultivates lust, or envy of others' relationships?
- ❖ Have I flirted with or pursued someone I know to be married or otherwise unavailable?
- ❖ Have I failed to guard my eyes, thoughts, and imagination, allowing impure desires to take root rather than resisting them at the first sign?

10. “You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.”

This commandment addresses the interior desires that give rise to sins of greed and envy.

- ❖ Have I been consumed by envy of others' possessions, success, relationships, or way of life?
- ❖ Have I been ungrateful for what God has actually given me, focusing instead on what I lack?
- ❖ Have I let greed, materialism, or an insatiable desire for “more” dominate my decisions and priorities?
- ❖ Have I resented another's good fortune, or secretly wished for them to fail or lose what they have?
- ❖ Have I compared my life to others' (especially on social media) in a way that breeds discontent, bitterness, or resentment toward God for how He has provided for me?
- ❖ Have I allowed ambition for wealth or status to crowd out time for family, prayer, or rest?

Part II — Examination Based on the Seven Deadly Sins

These “capital sins” are the roots from which other sins tend to grow.

1. Pride

- ❖ Do I think myself better than others?
- ❖ Do I refuse correction or advice?
- ❖ Do I take credit for others' work, or refuse to admit fault?
- ❖ Do I seek constant admiration?
- ❖ Have I refused to forgive because “I” was wronged and my pride won't let it go?

2. Greed (Avarice)

- ❖ Am I overly attached to money or possessions?
- ❖ Have I been stingy toward those in need, or toward the Church?
- ❖ Do I let financial concerns override moral ones?

3. Lust

- ❖ Have I sought out sexual gratification outside of what is proper to marriage, in thought, word, or deed?

4. Envy

- ❖ Do I resent the blessings, talents, or success of others?
- ❖ Does another's happiness make me sad rather than glad?

5. Gluttony

- ❖ Have I overindulged in food, drink, or other pleasures to excess?
- ❖ Have I abused alcohol or drugs? Have I let appetite rule reason?

6. Wrath (Anger)

- ❖ Have I lost my temper in a way that hurt others?
- ❖ Do I hold grudges?
- ❖ Have I sought revenge, even in small ways?
- ❖ Have I been habitually irritable, harsh, or cruel to those closest to me?

7. Sloth

- ❖ Have I been spiritually lazy — neglecting prayer, the sacraments, or growth in virtue out of sheer inertia?
- ❖ Have I avoided responsibilities toward my family, work, or faith because they were difficult or inconvenient? Have I let apathy keep me from doing good I was capable of doing?

Part III — Examination Based on the Five Precepts of the Church

The precepts are the minimum floor of Catholic practice, not the ceiling, but a serious and often overlooked area of examination for those who've been away.

1. You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and rest from servile labor.

- ❖ Have I missed Sunday Mass regularly out of laziness, convenience, or indifference rather than genuine necessity?

2. You shall confess your sins at least once a year.

- ❖ Has it, in fact, been more than a year (or many years) since my last confession? (This examination itself is fulfilling that precept — well done in returning.)

3. You shall receive the Eucharist at least during the Easter season.

- ❖ Have I received Holy Communion while in a state of unworthiness or serious unconfessed sin?
- ❖ Have I neglected to receive Communion at all for a long period?

4. You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church

- ❖ Have I ignored the Church's fasting and abstinence requirements?

5. You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.

- ❖ Have I supported my parish or the Church's mission according to my ability — financially, or through time and talent?

Part IV — Step-by-Step Guide to Confession

Step 1: Before entering

- ❖ Pray briefly, asking the Holy Spirit to help you see your sins clearly and to trust in God's mercy. A simple prayer: *“Lord, help me to see myself as You see me, and to trust in Your mercy.”*

Step 2: Greeting and the Sign of the Cross

- ❖ Enter and, after greeting the priest, make the Sign of the Cross together with him: *“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”*

Step 3: The opening words

- ❖ Say: *“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [X years/months] since my last confession.”*
- ❖ It's completely fine, and common, to add: *“I've been away from confession for a while, and I might need some help.”* Priests genuinely welcome hearing this; it tells them to go slowly and gently with you.

Step 4: Confess your sins

- ❖ Simply state your sins as plainly and honestly as you can, using the examination above as your guide. You don't need elaborate language: "I lied to my spouse several times," "I missed Mass most Sundays for the past year," "I've struggled with pornography," and so on. For mortal sins, try to state roughly how often (as best you can recall), but don't worry about perfect precision. When you're finished, you can simply say: *"I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life, especially [any I forgot]."*

Step 5: Listen

- ❖ The priest may ask a clarifying question, offer some brief counsel, and will assign a penance, some prayers or an action to help repair the damage of sin and grow in virtue.

Step 6: The Act of Contrition

- ❖ The priest will ask you to make an Act of Contrition. You may read it from a card if you like — nobody expects it memorized after time away. A traditional version: *"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen."*
- ❖ A shorter, simpler alternative, if you prefer: *"My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against You, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In His name, my God, have mercy. Amen."*

Step 7: Absolution

- ❖ The priest extends his hands (or hand) over you and prays the prayer of absolution, which concludes: *"...I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* You respond: "Amen."

Step 8: Dismissal

- ❖ The priest will usually say something like *"Your sins are forgiven, go in peace,"* and you may respond *"Thanks be to God."*

Step 9: Afterward

- ❖ Find a place to sit for a few minutes and complete your assigned penance as soon as reasonably possible. Take a moment to simply rest in the peace of having your slate wiped completely clean — this is genuinely one of the great graces of the Catholic faith.

A Final Note

- ❖ Confession is not a courtroom; it is a homecoming. The priest is there as Christ's instrument of mercy, not as a judge measuring how long you stayed away. Whatever hesitation or nervousness you feel beforehand almost always dissolves the moment you begin speaking, and gives way to a lightness many people say they hadn't felt in years.