

# What happens at Confession?

People who are not Catholics often wonder what happens at Confession and even Catholics can lose sight of the true nature of this sacrament. Now that you are helping your child prepare for his or her first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it's good to refresh your memory or get to know exactly what your child will be celebrating.

There's a saying that "a leopard cannot change its spots." If we start off as a failure we will end up as a failure; if we begin life badly we are bound to finish life badly. Jesus Christ came to destroy this idea. He came to prove that we can change and can transform the failures and sinfulness which disfigure us so as to start living again with fresh hope.

With God there are no "hopeless cases." Even after living with Christ, hearing his words and witnessing his actions, the apostles let Jesus down by their betrayals and their failure to understand him and the kind of healing love he offered. Yet Jesus reappeared to them after his resurrection to offer them peace. "Peace be with you," he said. "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus raised them up and encouraged them to start again.

And Jesus continues to encourage and to help us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many people still think of this sacrament as a "put down" – as the occasion when we try to remember our sins (every single one of them!) and receive a penance as a punishment for our past life. This is not at all how Christ himself saw and instituted this sacrament. For him it was an opportunity to give us new hope for the future and to lift us up to God's level.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation there are no set words to be learned although your child may be given some simple prayers as an initial introduction to the sacrament, but there are five key points to the sacrament. If you understand these

points and can explain them to your child in ways which can be easily understood, your child will have a sound foundation in their understanding of this celebration of God's love for them.

## Reflection

The starting point for reconciliation is not thinking about our own life but thinking about the words of Jesus. It is Jesus' life and words which give meaning to our own. So it's a good idea before receiving the sacrament to spend some time thinking about Christ: the kind of person he was, the things he did, and the way he treated people. It's helpful, too, to remind ourselves of his death and resurrection and what those events mean for us today.

## Examination

In the light of Christ's life we can then turn to our own life. It's not very helpful to try to remember everything – some people spend hours before they go to Confession trying to recall every fault and failing. Or sometimes we spend ages trying to think of the best way of expressing our sins so as not to appear worse than we really are. God isn't interested in how good a memory we have or how many failings we can discover in ourselves. God is interested only in restoring us and in being reconciled with us in love and healing, so God wants only our sorrow. When the prodigal son decided to return to his father, he prepared a little speech of apology. But before he could deliver it the father was showering him with kisses of forgiveness and joy at his return. That's how it is with our heavenly Father and us in this sacrament.