

What to say in confession/ Reverence needed in church

Q. I have not been to confession in at least 10 years. I want to go, but I have no idea what to say. How am I to remember all of my sins and the number of times that I have committed them? (Columbus, Ohio)

A. Don't worry; the priest is there to help you, and he will try to make things easy. (He will also have heard the confessions of a number of others in your same situation.)

Tell the priest that you haven't been to the sacrament of penance in many years and worry that you cannot remember the exact number of times you have committed each specific sin. (The priest has the right to lift the penitent's obligation to do so.)

Tell him that you would like to make this a "general confession," that you are sorry for any and all sins — including those you don't remember. He may ask you whether there are any particular serious sins that you do recall, and you will mention those, if any.

The absolution to follow will cover all sins — whether mortal or venial — committed in the past. I am pleased that you are considering this, and I believe that the experience will leave you with a feeling of relief, a new spiritual energy and a sense of the closeness of a loving God.

Q. Can we please begin to restore reverence at Mass? I see young women wearing short shorts, men in flip-flops and other inappropriate clothing. Shouldn't we dress nicely while visiting God in his house?

Also, parishioners socialize — laughing and talking loudly — while others are trying to pray prior to Mass. I do not consider myself old-fashioned, but I go to Mass to interact with God. These distractions may seem small, but to me they take away from the dignity that should prevail at the Eucharist.

Though I try to rise above these things and look for the goodness of the celebration, I still leave church feeling disappointed. There must be some churches somewhere that have established guidelines for the conduct they expect. (Fishers, Indiana)

A. The Catholic Church has no universal dress code for attendance at Mass — perhaps necessarily so, given the diverse cultural standards in a worldwide church. The church does say in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that “bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest” (No. 1387).

Over the last half-century of my priesthood, I have observed a pattern of more casual dress at Mass — no longer the “Sunday best” — with the result that a number of parishes, even dioceses, have chosen to publish more specific guidelines.

Some of the Roman basilicas require that women should not wear sleeveless blouses, men should not wear shorts and women’s skirts should reach below the knees. In 2007, the Archdiocese of Manila in the Philippines asked men to wear collared shirts with sleeves at Mass and provided examples of “improper” attire for women, including miniskirts or skimpy shorts.

As to socializing in church before Mass, some parishes encourage parishioners to greet each other and converse in the vestibule or gathering area, but note that once inside the church proper, a respectful silence should prevail to allow for quiet prayer in preparation for the Eucharist.

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