

PREPARING FOR CONFESSION IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

by David Allen White

If you have never made a sacramental confession, it's something you might want to consider. But do not go into a confessional booth cold. If you have never made a confession before, you should do is ask a priest to prepare you for a first confession. This priest does not have to be your parish priest, and he or she does not have to be the priest to whom you will eventually make your confession. That is entirely your choice.

If you are making your first confession as an adult, do you have to remember all your sins? No. That would be impossible. But you do need to examine your conscience and remember general trends of your life as far back as you can remember. Were you a bully in school? Did you cheat on tests? Did you shoplift? Were you generally disobedient to parents? Unkind to siblings? Did you mistreat animals? Were you disrespectful to teachers? Did you always give your employers an honest day's work. Did you pirate software or video or audio recordings? Don't try to mitigate what you might have done by blaming others. There's always plenty of blame to go around, but the confession is about you.

The seal of the confessional is absolute. The priest may not reveal what was said in confession. But many people don't know that this works both ways. You also may not reveal what was said in confession. Why is that? Isn't it your secret to tell or not to tell? Yes, it is. You may certainly speak of the facts that led you to the confession. But you may not reveal the actual exchange between you and the priest.

There are some books available to help you prepare for confession. One is *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*, which is an Anglican devotional book. Another one is called *Reconciliation : preparing for confession in the Episcopal Church*, by Martin L. Smith, who is a priest, and formerly a member if the Society of Saint John the Evangelist.

One way to prepare for a confession is to pray about it several days before and then start making a list. The list helps one remember everything. Afterwards, burn the list. This a concrete reminder that those sins are now gone.

The priest will probably give you a penance. This is a devotional act performed by the penitent after receiving absolution from the priest. It can be something simple like reciting a Psalm or a prayer, or it may more specific, such as apologizing to someone you have wronged. It is the outward and visible sign of your repentance.

The forty days of Lent are a good time to be thinking about making a sacramental confession, so as to arrive at Easter with a clean slate.