

General Confession - a First Sunday Explanation

Because of Saint Paul's admonition to 'not receive the Body and Blood unworthily', the faithful (and the priests on their behalf) have long been concerned that everyone confess their sins and be absolved prior to receiving Communion. One way to address this concern is for the faithful to come to a priest for private confession before coming to share in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This led to the common practice of Saturday night confessions for everyone, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition. As each person had been individually absolved of sin (and presumably had refrained from further sins during the evening and night), each one was able to come to the Table worthily.

In the early, formative years of Anglican liturgy, general confession (that is confession said by everyone together) became characteristic of both our Eucharists and the Daily Office. In this practice, the specifics of an individual's sinfulness are incorporated in the general categories acknowledged by everyone together. The priest then pronounces God's forgiveness to everyone - so that all are absolved, and in the case of a Communion service, made worthy to receive.

The Daily Office begins with a General Confession and ends with a General Thanksgiving, summing up our unworthiness to receive any gift from God and our immense gratitude to have received such bounty. We begin with self-deprecation and end with elation.

In the Eucharistic Service, the general confession comes most commonly just before the Peace. We confess our sins aloud, together, and receive God's forgiveness - and then immediately share the Peace with one another, thus fulfilling Saint Paul's requirement that we set ourselves right with God and with our fellow humans before receiving the Body and Blood.

There are variations. The confession is often omitted from Morning or Evening Prayer, especially if both are said in the course of a day. It is almost never omitted from Compline, of which it has always been an integral part.

In the Eucharist, the confession usually moves to the beginning of the service (in the Penitential Order) for Lent, when we are concentrating on repentance and amendment of life. Then during Eastertide, the general confession typically disappears altogether from the Eucharist, as we revel in the glory of reconciliation with God secured for us once for all in Christ's sacrifice. These two seasons are like the bookends of the Daily Office: concentrated humility, followed by exultant gratitude. Then we return to ordinary time and common practice, with the confession leading to the Peace.

None of this denigrates the value of Private Confession (the Sacrament of Reconciliation), which is available to everyone, but is never a requirement for communion in our tradition.