I. What Is This Sacrament Called? (CCC 1423-1424)

"What's it called now? Confession, Reconciliation--what?"

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives this sacrament five names. Each name has something to say about a mystery that is too big for one name or one word. Still, it is most common to speak of it as "going to confession." These are the names.

1.) Sacrament of Conversion. This celebrates a turning, or conversion. This turning is the first requirement and the first step (Zechariah 1:3). This is what we literally do when we enter the confessional or reconciliation room of our parish church. We turn or return to God. He takes it from there, covering us with his love and grace.

2.) Sacrament of Penance. At the end of the conversation with the priest in this sacrament, he gives a penance, which is the first step, even a baby step, in our ongoing conversion to God. This penance usually amounts to a few prayers, maybe to some good work. It is a sign of our good will and also a work of undoing, with God's help, the damage we have done by our sins.

3.) Sacrament of Confession. Confessing is the most dramatic part of the experience of this sacrament. And the most nervous. This is why we are tempted to this excuse, "Why do I have to tell my sins to a priest, to another human being? I can talk to God!" More later about the priest's role. For now just the point that everyone goes to confession! We go to our hairdresser, our bartender, a taxi driver, or someone else who will just listen to us. When arrested for a crime, ordinary people just cannot wait to confess it to the police. Everyone goes to confession.

But bartenders and hairdressers only listen. A hairdresser is never going to announce, as the priest does, "I absolve you from your sins." Which leads to the next name.

4.) Sacrament of Forgiveness. Only God forgives sin, only God. Bartenders know they are not God. The priest knows this, too. As a fellow human being he can only listen and maybe advise. But as one anointed to sit and listen in the person and name of Jesus, the priest imparts the divine gift of forgiveness.

5.) Sacrament of Reconciliation. This name is now usually emphasized more than the others. It includes God's forgiveness, which is the restoring of friendship and peace with him. But in this peace with God we receive peace and reconciliation with everyone and everything. You see, we receive God's forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ, who is God and also a human being. This Jesus lives a human life as God's Son and also as brother and friend to all creation. To be at peace with God is to be a brother or sister to all people and to be a citizen of the whole universe--through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

"You speak of going to confession as the Sacrament of this, and the Sacrament of that, and so forth. I don't think I understand what a "Sacrament" is!"

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1131) defines a sacrament, any sacrament, as "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the
Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us." It is a sign that does what it says, like a clanging and flashing gate at a railway crossing. Sign is the key word. St. Augustine give this wide but helpful definition of what Sacraments are, “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” So, in Baptism we see the water poured and celebrate the invisible reality of God's life coming in that water. Every sacrament has a sign that can be seen, heard, or touched, and carries within it a grace of God that the senses cannot perceive. Only faith perceives it.

The Sacraments are the presence and action of Jesus in our world, in our time. They are Jesus giving us--here and now--a share in his eternal life, calling us out of sin, feeding us with his very self, forgiving us our real and personal sins. Have you ever wished you could be alive for a moment while Jesus walked this earth, that you could fall on him like the Sinful Woman (Luke 7:36-50), cry out to him like the Good Thief, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" and hear him tell you that your sins are forgiven and that you will be with him (Luke 23:42)? The Sacraments make Jesus and his loving power present to us in our own lives and places.
II. Why a Sacrament of Reconciliation after Baptism?  
(CCC 1425-1426)

"Why has confession got to be the same-old, same-old: sin, sorrowing over it it, confessing it, and doing the whole thing again, over and over? Why can't it be once-and-done?"

Because this is not heaven yet, and we are not saints yet. Christian life is not an arrival, it is a journey and pilgrimage. It is a hard slog. It is conversion and the experience of what penance means. That's the bad news, you might say. The good news is what Christian Baptism means, and what it gives us that our sins never destroy. Like the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Baptism is a once-and-done reality. The never-ending life and power of Jesus has already taken hold of us. We live in him. We breathe the breath of his Holy Spirit.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that "Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins" (977). Baptism is never repeated. The reason for this is well expressed in Colossians 3:3: we have died; we are dead to sin, and our real life is hidden with Christ in God. The image of this we can see in river baptism, or baptism by immersion: down into the water to die with Christ, and up again into a new life with him. This new life is a sinless life.

But we do sin again, nearly all of us! To deal with this tragedy, we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is sometimes called second baptism.

"Well, what's my problem then? I'm baptized and I really to want to be good and do good. But I do the opposite! What's the point of the sacraments? How do they help me?"

You well describe the experience of all us sinful human beings: we see and approve the right and the good, and then we go and do the opposite! St. Paul testifies to this experience in the Letter to the Romans, chapter seven. He is speaking of his experience of what we call original sin. Something evil and deathly wells up in us, from the very origins of us, and poisons our existence, like tainted water from our earth. "Who will get me out of this trap? he asks, "Who will deliver me from this mortal body?" His solution, and ours also, is deliverance through Our Lord Jesus Christ. What he is talking about is the kind of dying and rising that we spoke of in the previous question. He is talking about the grace and reality of Christian Baptism.

"Is this the concupiscence that the Catechism mentions at this point (1426)?"

Yes, it is. Concupiscence is an aftershock, like a weakness and confusion that remains awhile after a surgery or a shock. It is something of a weakness that can stay with us, like the result of an old injury. We are inclined to get good and evil mixed up. We are drawn to evil at times, even when we clearly see that it is evil.

And this is not all the fault of Adam and Eve! Our own personal sins, even when
we repent of them, cling to us like punishing aftershocks. Our most common experience of this is bad habits. How hard they are to get rid of!

"I would have thought Baptism would have done a better job!"

Baptism is not magic. Neither is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They are mysteries, which is the word that the Greek Catholic Church uses for them. They are doors into the life and power of Jesus Christ, into the reality of the holiness of children of God. If we are injured and sick or even dying, just getting through the door of the hospital does not fix things. Recovery and healing take time, time.

**What is the basic point of the sacraments, then?** It is first of all the worship and praise of God. This may seem like an unusual answer for us who get used to measuring the worth of doctors and hospitals, priests and churches, for what they do for us. And do right away. But the Mass and the seven sacraments are part of the Liturgy of the Catholic Church. They are worship. And worship is what we are created to do for God. The sacraments lead us to the exercise and enjoyment of the purpose of our existence, which is to love and praise God. In the Glory of the Mass we proclaim, "You alone are the Holy One!" The other side of that precious coin is our confession at the beginning of Mass, "I have sinned." The word *confession* means both those things—praise of God's holiness and admission before him of our sinfulness.

God is faithful. He alone is faithful; we are not. Once he gives himself to us, or takes us to himself, as he does in Baptism, he cannot, just cannot, give up on us. He is like a husband or a wife who cannot get over loving a serially unfaithful spouse. God is Love (1 John 4:8).

So let us forget about how well we seem to be doing, or how poorly, and look as singly as possible to loving and honoring God. The healing we seek will come, and in fact is arriving all the time. All the Gospel miracles proclaim the reality of our hope: we shall walk again, and see, and hear, and live forever.

"It's been such a long time for me! Going to confession, I mean."

You are in good company! Or a lot of company, anyway.

Much more later on going to confession. But for now, two or three first steps. One, find a Catholic Church and a place and time for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Two, go into the confessional or the reconciliation room. Good! The worst is over. Three, if you have no idea what to say or do next, say this: "Father, it's been so long. Can you help me out here?"

The rest will unfold for you and the priest. The Lord is there.
III. The Conversion of the Baptized. (CCC 1427-1429)

"Are you talking here about the conversion of people already baptized? I thought they were already converted."

They are. Sort of. In section II we were talking about the Sacrament of Reconciliation as "second baptism." We noted that baptism is never repeated. The Sacrament of Reconciliation does not do it over, but deals with real and serious sin committed after baptism. It is like a car wash for your gleaming new vehicle, now covered with mud and salt. Very beautifully The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1429) has St. Ambrose speaking of two conversions in the Church, one by the waters of baptism and the other by the tears of repentance.

There is an old Jewish saying about why God created the human race--because he loves stories. The stories of people like King David in the Old Testament and St. Peter in the New Testament tell us a lot about the process and path of conversion. They are honored as saints. But their stories include terrible sins, even after God's choice of them. David committed a ruthless adultery with Bathsheba and tried to cover it up with cold and treacherous murder of her husband, the loyal soldier Uriah. Peter denied even knowing Jesus as he was about to be tried and crucified.

But David made his confession to the prophet Nathan: "I have sinned against the most high Lord." And Peter wept and wept. I was saying before that baptized people are indeed converted, sort of. But even with Baptism Christians have a long, long way to go. God's embrace of us in Baptism is full and final, but our embrace of him is riddled with second thoughts and sins.

God loves stories, and so do we. Can you even imagine David without the stories of his evil, or Peter without his cowardly denial of Jesus? We learn from these stories the heights and depths of God's love and mercy, as well as the terrible reality of sin.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the drama of your story.

"I think David got off too easy. What a mess he left behind him, and all he has to say for it is "I have sinned against God!"

Read the story, the whole thing, about the death of his and Bathsheba's first child, about rape within the family and murder to avenge it, about his beloved son Absalom's seeking to kill and replace him as king. David's adultery and coverup by murder set in motion a series of disasters that fell on him and his family. Sin has its consequences. But God's mercy tempers and directs them to our salvation.

The word "sin" is a religious word, not a mere moral description and not just a figure of speech. We honor King David for writing many of the wonderful prayers or hymns that appear in the Book of Psalms in the Bible. Look at Psalm 51, which the Bible says he wrote in the aftermath of this great sin of his. "Against you, you alone have I sinned" (verse 6). Yes, he had sinned against Uriah by his adultery with her, and had then murdered him to cover it up. But what could he do now to repair that? Where could he start? With the God of live and of marriages: "Against you, you alone have I
"I regret some things I've done. Is that what you're talking about here? I mean, about finding some words and some place to start dealing with all of it?"

Probably, at least in part. The Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speak rather of contrition than of regret. Too often we hear public figures saying something like this; "If I offended someone, I regret it." That is no confession, and no apology! Moreover, regret does not take us anywhere. It turns us within ourselves where we indulge in remorse, which is a kind of feeding on our guilt and self pity.

What the Sacrament of Reconciliation asks of us is contrition, the contrite heart: "Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place." Contrition is personal and soulful sorrow and its hatred of the sin, along with resolve by God's grace not to sin again (#1451). With contrition we move out of ourselves and run to our God and Father. It is a grace that frees us from the trap and prison of sin. But, as with David, it still leaves us with a long way to go and a lot to do.

"It's beginning to sound like there'll be no end of this for me! Where is it all going? I mean, does it ever get anywhere?"

Well, it gets you to join the human race! That is, you and all penitential human beings drop out of any pretense that somehow we are exceptions, better than the rest of folks. The Catholic Church is the Church of sinners. It is very hard to get thrown out! There is no "reformed" Catholic Church, but just the Church, the one big and bumbling reality. So on Ash Wednesday we get together in unusually large numbers to celebrate that we are sinners and that, because of our sinfulness, we come from dust and shall turn to dust again. We are merely mortal; no one is really better than anyone else.

So the *Catechism* says here that the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as a second conversion, "has a communitarian dimension" (1429). The Catholic Church is a people standing before the never-ending preaching of Jesus, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He never stops preaching and we never stop converting.

Proverbs 24:16 consoles us by telling us that even the best people keep falling--the fulsome "seven times" is the number given--but they keep getting up. The penitent is like the little girl who was asked how she learned to ride her bicycle so well: "By falling a lot."
IV. INTERIOR PENANCE. (CCC 1430-1433)

"What's interior penance all about?"

It has to do with the heart in the sense that we say that only God can see and judge the heart. In this sense it is each one's deepest and truest self.

"Can I know my own heart?"

Of course. But as your question implies, this is not as easy and simple a matter as a cardiogram. For this achievement goes hand in hand with knowing God. There is a lovely ancient prayer, "That I may know myself, O Lord, that I may know you." It is the gift of the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God." There is no true knowledge of God without knowledge of oneself. And there is no real knowledge of self without knowing God.

The two come together in the fundamental preaching that began with John the Baptist and was taken on then by Jesus and the Church: "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand." The most basic formula of repentance in the Old Testament is, "Turn to me, and I will turn to you. You know the meaning of these words if you have ever said a prayer like this, "O God, help me!"

"Can the Sacrament of Reconciliation help me here? Can going to confession make a difference?"

Certainly. To begin with, an examination of conscience is a basic element of going to confession. And the speaking out of this conscience is the confessing. Sometimes people going to confession will say to the priest about a sin they are telling, "I can't believe I did this!" Yes, it was you. Good people can do some very bad things. To say it out is to take ownership of one's own sin and evil. Confession is not just a formula. It is a self-description: This is the kind of person I am, at least sometimes. This is me. This is what I think, say, and do, and if it is, this is what I am.

But the Sacrament is so much more than this. It is the blind, the crippled, and the deaf seeking miracles of healing. It is the sinful woman and the sinful Peter finding and embracing Jesus forgiving them.

"The Catechism says in 1432 that my conversion is God's work first of all, that he turns my heart to him."

Yes, everything is the grace and gift of God. Jesus has told us that without him we can do nothing (John 15:5). St. Augustine pointed out that he did not say "only a little bit." He said nothing. Yet our confession and conversion is our labor and work. But without him loving us first--he always loves first (1 John 4:19)--we can do nothing.
V. THE MANY FORMS OF PENANCE IN CHRISTIAN LIFE. (CCC 1434-1439)

"I have to tell you: I sometimes feel pretty silly when the priest tells me, at the end of confession, 'Say five Hail Marys for your penance.' Five Hail Marys! For all I've done, five Hail Marys!"

It can sound trivial, yes. But think of it in terms of a Chinese proverb, that the longest journey begins with the first step. See it as the first step you take in following Jesus as he goes up to Jerusalem to be crucified. Mark's Gospel describes the scene: Jesus walks ahead; all are amazed; those who followed were afraid (10:32). This journey is Christian life as a pilgrimage, the dramatic following of Christ that lasts a lifetime.

In the Church we celebrate some seasons of penance. The most important is Lent, and its beginning on Ash Wednesday commits us to the three traditional works of penance—prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. (Strikingly, St. Peter Chrysologus calls the last one "mercy.") Penance deeply marks us in this season. The ashes only mark the skin—with the sign of the cross.

Penance can be "five Hail Marys," just a beginning or a beginning again. It can be a season. Enter the season and penance will become a lifetime and a lifestyle, a passionate following of Jesus.

"You make me think of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24). It's a long way home for that boy!"

It is a long way home for all of us when finally we realize what sin is, what our own sin is. There is disillusionment and even self hatred. There is a memory of and a yearning for a better place and a better self. There is the meeting with the merciful Father, and the confession to him. And finally the clothing with the garments and ornaments of the mercy of God.

Each confession, each celebration of the Sacrament of Penance follows the path and the experience of the Prodigal.
VI. THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION. (CCC 1440-1449)

"I sin; I admit it. The guilt gets to me sometimes. This is what works for me: I tell God I'm sorry. It calms me down. I don't seem to need to tell anyone else."

You are onto a most important point: sin is basically against God. And therefore only God can forgive it, as you ask it of him in his mercy. Like the sinful man in the back of the synagogue who beats his breast as prays, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner," you can get up from your knees right with God in your heart (Luke 18:9-14).

But there is so much more to this. First, the Son of God has become a human being, Jesus, for the precise purpose of taking away our sins. We have to deal with him, a real person still alive and among us. Second, in his Church we have contact with his Body, which is often called his Mystical Body. Remember the story of St. Paul's being struck down blind on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)? He heard a voice and asked who was speaking to him, and got this answer, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Then Jesus told Paul to get up, go into the city, and wait to be told what to do. Jesus was putting him in touch with--the Church.

So biblical forgiveness involves reconciliation with God, reconciliation with his Son, Jesus, in and through his Body the Church. Because Jesus was and is a member of the human race, he is also a citizen of this world and a member of creation. So reconciliation involves also peace with the whole world around you!

"I was taught, I think, that I should not receive Holy Communion when I have committed a mortal sin. I have to go to confession first. Does that still hold?"

Yes, it does. The reason is not hard to see: grievous offense against God includes offense to Jesus, who is really present in the Eucharist and is one with the Church. Our Catholic faith professes that the Eucharist is Christ's Body, and that the Church is his Body too. The Sacrament of Reconciliation restores the friendship and communion with Jesus in himself and in his Body the Church that makes sense of Holy Communion.

"But I can't go to confession. I'm divorced and remarried outside the Church. I so miss receiving Communion. Sometimes it seems so unfair! But I guess I am living in sin."

The great loss that you feel is a sign of your faith and also of your longing for Jesus, as well as his longing for you. Keep working at fixing the relations of your current marriage with the Catholic Church. Sometimes people think they are barred from Communion and find out that they are not. Ask a priest.

In the meantime, think about this: you are not cut off from the Church. You are welcome to a place in your parish. And welcome to receive your monthly envelopes for contributions to the Sunday collection! The Catholic Church is the Church of sinners. In fact at the beginning of each Mass we stand up and tell the Lord and one another, "I have sinned." Moreover, Jesus has said that he came not to call the people who get it
right, but those who get it wrong, sinful people (Mark 2:17).

As to "living in sin," that is up to God to judge. No human being can make that judgment of you. Keep praying. Keep asking the loving Lord Jesus to show you, in practical terms, what you are to do next. Then pray for the grace to take the next step. Keep telling him that you know that he loves you, no matter what, and that you love him, despite the situation you are in.
VII. THE ACTS OF THE PENITENT (CCC 1450-1460).

"I want to, I think I need to, go to confession. It's been a long time. What does the Catholic Church want of me? What am I supposed to do?"

Three things. The Catechism speaks of three acts: contrition, confession to a priest, and satisfaction or reparation for the harm of your sins.

First, contrition. You almost certainly do not have to worry about having it or at least feeling it deeply. To be contrite means to be ground down, worn out, exhausted like someone shipwrecked and washed up on a beach. There is a famous and consoling line from the 51st Psalm: "My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn." People do not come into the confessional to argue, but to beat their breast. Confession turns out to be the pouring out of what they already feel and suffer as they come in.

The Catechism goes on to speak of two kinds of contrition, perfect and imperfect. Perfect contrition springs from loving God, and imperfect from a mixture of that loving with shame and guilt, and with fear of God's punishment and the loss of one's soul. Funny thing, but the priest often hears weeping and snuffling as he hears a confession, and more often than not, this happens when the penitent is saying the Act of Contrition and comes to the words that say something like, "But I'm sorry most of all because I love you, God." (By the way, whatever Act of Contrition you say or teach your kids, make sure it contains this sentiment of loving God.)

Imperfect contrition is sufficient to make a good confession. Most priests would probably say that they hear in the confessions the change from imperfect to perfect contrition. The love of God may be only an ember in the soul of the penitent, but it is only waiting to flame up to a fire with the help of the grace of God. Without the Sacrament of Reconciliation, imperfect contrition does not gain the forgiveness of God for grave sins.

"I'd like to go to confession, I really would. But I'm afraid I won't mean it, what I say. I'm not sure that I'm sincere, that I really want to be different and better."

It sounds like you have only imperfect contrition, as the previous question dealt with it. If that is the case, then you really, really need the Sacrament. A story may help my point.

Blessed Charles de Foucauld, French soldier and sinful man, entered the confessional of Abbé Henri Huvelin, curé of Saint Augustine Church in Paris. It was October of 1886. When the priest turned to him, he saw that Charles was not kneeling, but standing. "Father, I need your help. I have no faith." The priest answered, "Kneel down, confess your sins, and you will have faith." "But I didn't come for that. I need you to teach me." The priest, more insistently, "Confess!" And so Charles de Foucauld knelt down and confessed his sins. The priest again: "Are you fasting?" Yes, he was fasting--and the fasting required in those days ran from midnight! "Well, go to Mass and
Communion right now!" Charles did, of course. His sincere conversion turned out to be as simple as that.

You see, what matters here is not your weakness and half-heartedness, but the power of God, the grace of God. That is what a Sacrament is for!

"All right. I'm washed up and wiped out. I guess I am contrite. What now?"

You say it. You confess your sins to a priest. This is essential. Reconciliation is a Sacrament, and a sacrament is the setting up of a scene between you and Jesus. It really brings Jesus to you and you to Jesus. In and through an ordinary priest, he sits down with you.

It is important to say things out. This makes feelings and intentions real, both to the speaker and even to the listener. You know what a plea bargain is, I am sure. The guilty one appears in court for what is called an allocution. To get off with a lesser sentence, he must say out—allocute—what he has done, even in some detail. They say that for the guilty person this is a hard, hard thing to do. Yet the need for his doing it is clear to everyone. The victim needs to hear it, and the court too. And maybe more than anyone else the poor guilty one needs to hear himself say it.

"Why a priest?"

We can leave this for the next section of the Catechism, which is all about the place of the priest.

"The priest gives me more or less the same penance, a few prayers. Sometimes I have bigger sins than others. Always the same penance, though. I thought there should be a price to pay. What gives?"

There is a price to pay. This is the satisfaction or penance, the third of the acts of the penitent. It is also called the penance, and penance is one of the names for the Sacrament. So this price or reparation is important.

The priest is supposed to lay on a penance that has some relation to the gravity of the sins confessed. But there are sins and there are sins. If and when you rob a bank, or commit perjury that costs someone else a jail sentence or a lot of money in a civil trial, you can be sure the priest will give you a more severe penance. Strict justice would require this. He might still give you a few prayers. But he will also require that you agree to set things right, whether this would mean clearing someone's good name or restoring money taken from him because of your lying.

But the repair required may be something far less, like an apology for insults or abusive behavior and language.

You can find more on this matter of reparation in the fifth and tenth sections of this treatment of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

"I got drunk once--well, I used to get drunk a lot--but one time I drove and killed somebody. I did jail time, and you know, I feel better for bearing the penalty. But I
can't raise the dead and give him back to his wife."

Keep this in mind, that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This means that he alone saves us from our sins and bears up on his cross a guilt that we cannot carry. He alone--somehow, some day, even after this world has come to an end--he alone can repair all the damage and set things right.

Even the poor little prayers we say for little sins Jesus takes and turns into a force that goes on repairing the sins of the world. We celebrate this when we say that we believe in the resurrection of the body, and in Christ's coming again to judge a world he will claim for his own.

For now, let him carry off your sins. Peace be with you.

"What sins do I have to tell in confession?"

Certainly mortal sins. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that mortal sins kill and destroy the love of God--charity--in our hearts by a serious violation of his law (1855). Such sin cuts us off from God as the source of our life and God as our destiny, like a tree branch is doomed to wither and die if it is cut off from the trunk and roots of the tree.

"I hope I'm not committing mortal sins all the time. Maybe I should tell the priest to put me down for everything!"

A mortal sin is like an elephant in the room: you know it's there. A person can get so used to doing evil as to become unaware of mortal sins. Most people are not like that, dead in conscience.

The *Catechism* says that three elements must go together for a mortal sin: a serious or grave matter; deliberation, awareness and thought about it; full consent of the will. So it is one thing to shoplift a box of soap and another to steal someone else's paycheck. Accidents are not sins at all, since they lack deliberation. Forgetting completely about Mass on Sunday is not a sin, not even venial. Great fear can reduce the consent of the will beyond what would be a mortal sin. A pregnant teenage girl, for instance, may be so terrified by her situation that she goes through an abortion without its being a mortal sin for her. (You might look at CCC 1857-1860.)

"Sometimes I'm not sure if it's a mortal sin."

In full daylight it is easy to tell if something is black or white or grey. But in a fog or in darkness it is much harder. This is your judgment to make, a judgment about yourself and what you have done or failed to do. Sometimes, when it comes to the individual person and the individual experience, it is hard to say whether a committed sin was serious or not.

The rule is, if you are honestly not sure, it is not a mortal sin. To make it easier for yourself, you might just tell the priest that that you are not sure whether what you did amounted to a mortal sin.
"That’s me--the teenage girl and the abortion! At the time of the abortion it seemed like no big deal. But now I keep thinking about it."

You are older and wiser now, seeing good and evil more truly and deeply. And you have done a great wrong, whether or not you felt it at the time. But you do not become guilty of a mortal sin when afterward you see what mortal sin is. Each of us is guilty for what we do or fail to do according to the condition of our heart and conscience at the time.

Still, it will help you to bring to God some good works and prayers to make up for it all. Sin, even at its worst, can lead us to deeper goodness and a better life by the grace of God. This is what contrition, penance, and conversion mean.

"All my mortal sins, all of them?"

Yes, insofar as this is possible. We must confess all mortal sins, telling the priest the different kinds of sins--like adultery, which involves a marriage, and fornication, which does not--along with the number of times.

It sounds like it has been a long time for you. Just tell the priest that and let him help you to do your best. Your peace of conscience is important to him. He does not want you to spend the rest of your days wondering if you confessed this mortal sin or that one. God is merciful. The Church is wise.

"Years ago I was so ashamed I kept a sin back from the priest. I still think of it, the sin and not confessing it. That was a sacrilege, right? And it ruins all my confessions after that?"

This can be worked out simply, both the sacrilegious confession and the others ruined by the sacrilege. But it is a mess, like one of those highway wrecks in which forty or fifty cars pile into one another because of a leading car that stopped suddenly.

Tell the priest. Confess the long concealed sin and the fact of tainted confessions after that. Let him guide you in your effort to mention the sins not yet covered by the absolution of the Church. Again, God is merciful and the Church is wise, and it would be a rare priest who does not know and appreciate this.
VIII. THE MINISTER OF THIS SACRAMENT. (CCC 1461-1467)

"If sin is against God, then my sin is between God and me. Why does the Catholic Church require me to confess to a priest?"

Because the Son of God has become a human being, and his name is Jesus. This is the mystery of the Incarnation, the entering of the Son of God into human flesh, existence, and experience. This changes everything. The Son of God has set up shop here on earth! This was not, and is not, our idea. It is his idea and decision.

And this is what the Catholic Church is, for all her obvious sinfulness and foolishness--the available Body of Jesus Christ. In the Church we receive him in Holy Communion; in the Church we have Jesus forgive our sins.

"It's still true, then, that only God can forgive sin?"

Of course!

Look, you can best cover this issue by reading the charming and childlike account of Jesus curing a paralyzed man in Mark's Gospel 2:1-12. Four friends have got the idea to bring their paralyzed friend before Jesus, but there is too large a crowd and no way for them to get into the house. So they climb to the roof, pluck up some tiles, and dangle their friend down somehow, so that there he is--at the feet of Jesus. You can imagine the poor man's excitement and hope. But Jesus says to him, "Your sins are forgiven." What! The poor fellow surely had something else in mind.

But the crowd is shocked for another reason, that Jesus is claiming to forgive sins and only God can forgive sin. And now Jesus reveals his heart, desire, and purpose on this earth: to forgive sin; to save us from sin. He knew, of course, that the paralytic wanted to be cured. He asks the crowd what would be easier, to work the miracle or forgive the sins. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth..."--he goes on to tell the man to get up and go home, and so he does, before the astonished eyes of everyone.

A few points. One, the meaning of the miracles, not just this one but all the lovely miracle stories of the Gospel. This is to demonstrate and promise what redemption and salvation mean--life, along with liberation from sin above all, and from death and hell as well.

A second point, that there has come a human being who has the authority to forgive sins. There is only one such human being, and his name is Jesus.

"I don't mean to be snippy, but if there is only one such human being, how did he get to be a Catholic priest?"

Another Gospel story, this one also kind of childlike. Indeed children get its point right away! This is John 20:19-24. It takes place on Easter day, with the shaken disciples hiding behind locked door after losing Jesus their leader. He suddenly is there, alive, showing them the marks of the wounds he had suffered on Good Friday. They were ecstatic! Then he tells them that just as God the Father had sent him into the
world, now he was sending them. He breathed on them and said, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Consider Jesus' breathing on them; consider what his living breath is: it is the Holy Spirit. Consider also how we need breath in order to speak or to sing. Children get the point immediately. An ordinary person speaking with ordinary breath can say "Your sins are forgiven," but nothing will happen. But if that person has received from Jesus the breath that is the Holy Spirit--then his words have the power of God's forgiveness.

There is one more step to get us to the Catholic priest hearing confessions in your parish. And that is the handing down of this power, from generation to generation, from the Apostles to the bishops and priests who succeed them through the centuries. This handing down is the work of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. A bishop ordains priests. He lays his hands on them, and he anoints them with a sacred oil called chrism. Anointing in the Scriptures means power, and it means the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This tradition--this handing it down--is what has the priest sitting in your church and hearing confessions.

"I wish a different priest were sitting in the reconciliation room in my parish. You don't know this guy!"

No, don't know him. But I can tell you that the worth of his Mass and the power of his absolution of sins do not depend on his personality, learning, culture, or even his virtue and holiness. Through the centuries the Catholic Church has insisted on this. A priest's doing the job of the sacraments does the job. This is a rendering of a famous expression in Latin, ex opere operato. All he has to do is intend to absolve sins in Christ's person and power, and to use the words that the Church gives him to say. He will have to answer to God for priestly ministry of the sacraments if he is in grave sin. That is his problem and his sacrilege. But because the people who come to him are coming in faith before the person of Jesus Christ, they receive the full power of the sacraments. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that Christ acts even through a priest who is spiritually dead!

"He's not that bad!"

No, I did not think he was.

You probably see him praying sometimes. He may be fingering a rosary while he hears confessions. For he knows that the Church urges him to pray and do penance for those who confess to him. Say one for him, too.

"My sins are safe with a priest, right, with any priest?"

You are talking about what is called the seal of confession. It is hard to imagine how any priest, any priest, would reveal sins confessed to him. He is not to make use of anything, sin or no, that he learns from a confession. Any priest who is a priest at all surely believes about himself that he would rather die than betray a penitent.
From the standpoint of those who might inquire or even subpoena such confessional knowledge, our American law and tradition speaks of *priest-penitent privilege*. The law extends to this all clergy, but the name used is significant, right--"priest- penitent"?
IX. THE EFFECTS OF THIS SACRAMENT. (CCC 1468-1470)

"I'd give anything for peace of mind. Even go to confession! Anything. People say I'm a good enough guy. But they don't know. I can't forgive myself for the evil I've done and brought on other people, especially my family. I can't forgive myself."

Forgive yourself! What can that mean? Well, of course, we all use the term and know what it points to, the burden of guilt, of damage done that is still unrepaired and maybe can never be undone on this earth. Still, what can the words mean, to forgive myself? Who am I, to forgive me, or you to forgive you, as though as individuals we are also two people in one skin?

Forgiveness, like a legal pardon, is only granted, not paid for and not earned in any strict sense. But it must be accepted, and that acceptance amounts to a confession of the wrong.

The Catechism speaks here of reconciliation, which is one of the lovely names for this Sacrament. The word implies the coming together of at least two parties, with a handshake or an embrace, or even only a nod of recognition. The Catechism also mentions here the "peace and serenity of conscience" that confession blesses us with. Even little children sometimes come out of the reconciliation room and skip down the aisle of the church!

"I'm not a child. Please--I'm not arguing here. Sometimes i feel a lot like a child, and I know that Jesus has taught that we should all try to become as little children. But it's like for this child--me--there is no Christmas."

Now, that is a powerful sketch of the lostness of the sinful person. You sound like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), who felt he no longer had a father or a home, no one and no place to turn to. But he did find again his peace and serenity of conscience. All he had to do was go home. He had one and remembered it. It seems that you remember one also.

"I do remember such a place. But my conscience won't let me go back."

There is a piece in the First Letter of John (3:20) that speaks of you. It says that, yes, we have problems with our conscience--everyone does--when we feel it condemning us for what we have done. But then these words: God is greater than our conscience and knows all about us.

What does that mean? I think we know but are joyously afraid to hope that it can be true. In John's Gospel there are words very much like these words of the Letter of John. In John 21 Jesus confronts Peter for the first time after his triple denial of his Lord, and astonishingly asks this question, "Do you love me?" Three times he asks this same question of Peter, who--also astonishingly--says that he does love him. At the third time Peter, now hurt and impatient, insists, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you!"

I would be foolish to try to say more. It is all so mysterious anyway. Just read these pieces of Scripture. No, let them read you! Take your time with them. Or rather,
let Jesus who lives in them have some personal time with you.

One more thing. There is an issue of mercy here. You are seeking the mercy of God. But you are not alone in needing it. There is no salvation for any of us except by the mercy of God. But we have to hand it on, this mercy. Is there someone that you are not forgiving? Pray and work at that task. It is of one piece with what we have been talking about here.

"I sympathize with the fellow you were just talking to. But my problem--they tell me--is that I'm scrupulous. Everything is a sin for me. And every sin is a big one."

Scrupulosity is a great suffering. No one wants to be scrupulous anymore than anyone wants to be anxious or depressed. Jesus enters into all our sufferings, even sin as suffering--and sin is in its waste and disillusionment a great suffering. To confess it is to tell the truth about our sins to God and to ourselves the sinners. Suffering, like the cross, is a sign of the presence of Jesus.

Scrupulosity makes you feel so stupid! From the eyebrows up you know you are making mountains out of molehills, but you cannot help it. And you feel you are driving priest confessors crazy with your worries.

Your conscience is the problem. Like a defective smoke alarm, it keeps going off even though there is no fire. The correct conscience gets it right. The lax conscience never goes off but sleeps through fires.

Well, what can the Sacrament of Reconciliation do for you? It will provide you with a Father, a Teacher, a Physician, and a Judge. These are the four beautiful and traditional roles of the priest confessor. Judge may not sound so comforting, but it goes to the heart of the matter at hand. In God's place the confessor sits as just and merciful Judge. So you tell him to begin with, or he asks you, how long it has been since your last confession. "Twenty years" lets him know he is to listen with ears and heart different from those hearing "two weeks."

It would be an extreme measure, but he might require this obedience of you, that you turn off your conscience and let his judgment serve in its place--in a very limited way. For instance, to someone who feels compelled to go to confession every day if possible, he would say, "You must not go more than once a week. In fact, try to make it two weeks. Trust me: you are not offending God by doing this." This is a Judge speaking. He is also a Physician, prescribing a cure for a tortured conscience.

"What is conscience anyway? Is it just me and what I think?"

For some people it is just oneself and what that self thinks, wants, and decides. The Catechism (1795) very beautifully says that conscience is the very core of you, your deepest sanctuary where you and God communicate. Blessed John Henry says that the experience of conscience argues for the existence of God. For we have a sense that there is Somebody or Something there within us, encouraging and approving or warning and blaming. It is not God, the conscience. It is rather like an instrument directed and tuned to him and to what is good. It needs to be formed. The Church speaks in this
regard of an informed conscience, much as we might speak of an informed audience or electorate.

"I make it my aim to always follow my conscience. Can I be wrong about this?"

At the moment of decision, at the point of pulling the trigger, so to speak, you must follow your conscience. At this point it is literally the last and only word. But it may be misinformed and wrong. There are people—you do not seem to be one of them—who decide for themselves what is right and wrong. They make themselves and their conscience into a god. They will allow for no authority outside what they think and feel. Unfortunately, our world would like us all to be that way, to make up right and wrong as we go, to be imprisoned in a sanctuary where there is only oneself to talk to and worship.

There can be no peace of mind in this, no glow of a clear conscience.
X. Indulgences. (CCC 1471-1479)

"What is an indulgence? I thought indulgences went out with the Latin Mass."

An indulgence is a remission of the temporal punishment still required after the confession and absolution of sins. Let us say a married couple have grievously offended each other by adulteries. Seeking to make peace, they sincerely forgive each other and take up married life again. Such is the power of true forgiveness. But they find that a problem remains, like an aftershock or a wound still healing. It will be hard to trust completely again, hard not to question or fear when the spouse is away for a few days, hard not to dig up the hatchet when an argument gets heated.

This remaining problem touches what is called the temporal punishment due to sin. Our merciful God forgives, completely forgives, our sins against his goodness. If the sin has been deadly or mortal, that is, a killing of our very soul, this soul is renewed in life by the love of God. We no longer face the eternal punishment due to mortal sin; we no longer face hell. But we have injured ourselves, just as the married couple injured themselves and each other and needed to repair the trust that they smashed up. To say the same thing in different words: the personal problem between ourselves and God is dealt with by his forgiveness, but the damage we have done to ourselves and others remains to be fixed.

Sometimes you meet with a wonderful older person, kind, humble, and delightful. Someone who knew him a long time ago, says, "You should have known him way back when!" Well, he had time--"temporal," of course means having to do with time--and he used that time to repair and redo his person. He dealt with the temporal punishment that attaches to sin forgiven by God.

"Are there different kinds of indulgences? Meaning no disrespect, I think I remember they come in different denominations, like United States paper money."

You touch on a raw nerve here. The lovely reality of indulgences was almost crushed to death by abuses that made it seem like you could buy your way out of the weight of temporal punishment--with money. Usually the money was supposed to be for charitable purposes.

There are two kinds or classes of indulgences: plenary and partial. The partial removes part of the temporal punishment. The plenary removes the whole thing.

"You mean there's something like the card in the Monopoly game, "Get out of jail free!"

Something like it, but not much like it. There is something very upsetting about seeing a convicted person get off scot free, so to speak. The upset concerns the "debt to society" that we see in a prison sentence. This "debt" is related to what we are talking about, the temporal punishment due to sin. But an indulgence pays the debt and makes
up for the damage!

We are touching on the massive evil of sin that this world has endured and still endures. We try to forget about it, for instance, the millions and millions of people killed and even murdered in the last century. The best we can do is set up memorials. Only Jesus Christ, by his Death and Resurrection, makes up for it all. Only his coming at the world's end to judge the living and the dead will set it all right.

Jesus Christ, because he is God as well as a human being, has made up for all the evil, and more than made up for it. We have in him a treasury of salvation and healing. The Catholic Church speaks of this wonder and uses the word, "treasury." When we pray and work for an indulgence, we draw on this treasury of the Catholic Church. We join the ongoing work of saving repair that Jesus has basically accomplished by his Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

"Sounds like a bank or a credit union. Sure you want to go down that road?"

No. I want to go down the road of the Communion of Saints. This is the living community of all the baptized, whether in heaven, on earth, or in purgatory. There are no loans here, with repayment to be made. It is much more like a man giving you fifty dollars just because you need it. You ask how you can get the repayment back to him and he replies, "Hand it on. One day it will be your turn to do something like this."

"But aren't indulgences more a matter of repair of damage and restoration of good? They deal with what worries me, the terrible damage of my past sins and stupidities. I cannot undo them, at least not on my own."

Yes, your sins are still there. You are forgiven them by God's mercy. But the havoc of their evil is still thrashing about. And evil makes so much noise and can seem to corrupt everything. Think of all the horrors of the wars of the last century! What do we do with them? How can we deal with them?

Here are some frightening questions at the heart of what the Church's forgiveness and indulgences are all about. Is Evil stronger than Good? Are there more bad people than good? Which has the last word, Good or Evil?

Evil has its storehouse in our memories and our histories. It is there like a recurring nightmare. It seems that we can only try to ignore it. But Good has its storehouse, too; the Church calls it her treasury. In it all the good lived and done through all the centuries and by all the good people who ever lived and live now, all this good is kept for us and for the ongoing absolution and repair of sin and its chaos. Goodness and good people matter! The best of them we call saints, and all of them--and ourselves too--are good only because we are brothers and sisters of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Among human beings, he alone is Good, he alone is the Holy One. [GLORIA]But all of us, drinking his Blood and eating his Body, are good too! And the Church keeps storing all our goodness up in what she terms her treasury.
"I think you’re about to tell me the Church has the key to this treasury!"

As a matter of fact….

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#551-553, 981-983) teaches that Christ conferred on his Apostles—and through them to their successors, the bishops—the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Actually, the Scripture tells us that he gave this power explicitly and directly to Peter (Matthew 16:19). Keys open and shut doors. This power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven unlock the prison made by our sins, or leaves it shut down, with ourselves and our sins still trapped inside.

Think about this the next time, at the end of your confession, when the priest asks you to say some little thing like three Hail Mary’s for your penance. This is a tiny re-payment or repair of the debt of your sinfulness. But it is connected with the treasury of the Church and the good deeds of all the saints.

"Is this the reason--St. Peter and the keys--that we are supposed to pray for the Pope in order to gain a particular indulgence?"

It seems so. As bank manager he appreciates his fee for your business. He needs, really needs, your prayers.

"I've got a lot to make up for! Years ago I got an abortion, two in fact. At the time it didn't seem like such a big deal. But now…. So I contribute to pro-life causes and do some volunteering. Oh, I've confessed it all, but I still feel the weight of it."

You have joined Jesus's great work of repair and reparation.

There is so much evil pressing down on this world, yes—and so much good lifting it up. The evil gets far more attention. There is a Jewish tradition that there are always seventy-two just ones that keep this world from spinning out of control. And goodness is so powerful. We know from the Bible that just the presence of ten good people would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33). Well, the Catholic Church has gathered the power of this goodness over the centuries and keeps it stored for good and penitent people like you. Indulgences mean you do not have to do it all yourself! You are a member of the community called the Communion of Saints. The Church speaks of the *treasury* of this community, which contains the stored goodness of Jesus Christ above all and of the saints in heaven and on earth who have believed in him (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1476).

"I guess you'd have to be a pretty good customer of the Church to get one of these big plenary indulgences."

You can say that again! With a bank the good customer has a good credit rating. With the Church, on the other hand, the issue is not credit rating but charity, that is, one's love of God and love of people. Here is Pope Paul VI on what is required to gain a plenary indulgence: "... it is necessary to perform the work to which the indulgence is attached and to fulfill three conditions: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff. It is further required that all
attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent." He is saying that the gaining of a plenary indulgence involves deep, deep conversion to God. And this, of course, is what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is all about.

So the task comes down to this: do the works and say the prayers as best you can, go to confession and receive Communion, and keep giving yourself as best you can to loving God above all things. No one is perfect and does it perfectly. Rely on the love of God for you and for the one you are praying and working for. [Reference is to Apostolic Constitution of Pope Paul VI, Indulgentiarum Doctrina.]
XI. THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE. (CCC 1480-1484)

"Is it true that to go to confession is to worship God, like going to Mass is worshiping him?"

Yes, it’s true. All the sacraments are contained in the Mass because Jesus is really present there in his own Body and Blood, in his Word, and in the people who are his Mystical Body. So we speak of celebrating the Eucharist and we the same of the Sacrament of Reconciliation--we celebrate these sacraments. To go to confession is to celebrate this before Jesus, as we use the words in the Glory of the Mass: "You alone are the Holy One." Just before that we confess "that I have sinned…through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault." This is about as basic as human worship gets, recognizing that we are sinners kneeling before the Holy, Holy, Holy God!

"But there’s no one with me in the confessional or reconciliation room, only the priest."

Right. You are an individual, no one else like you. You are also a human being and a member of the Catholic Church. When you go to confession, you probably see other people on line to go also. Liturgy, or the worship of God, is always public. I mean, it has a public nature as well as a private and personal one.

Let’s have a quick look at God's foundational work of salvation in the Book of Exodus. He orders Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand the freedom of his people: "Let my people go!" And why is this important to God--and to his people of that age and this age? He wants them, as Moses reports it to Pharaoh, He wants them to march out three days into the desert, in order to worship Him! God is calling a people. Those individuals who join this people become God's people too. This is the point of gathering as a parish for Sunday Mass. The commandment of God calls for a crowd! It is not my personal and individual attention, or yours either, that pleases God and satisfies the commandment. It is making ourselves one with the worshipful parish community.

"Okay. Then why can't the parish get together for one big night of forgiveness. Do they call it general absolution? You said before that if I go to confession I'll probably see other people waiting there too. Well, I do go and I don't see many of them. Why not do it with a crowd?"

It often has been done with a crowd, say, a crowd of soldiers about to go into battle, and no time or number of priest to hear their confessions. But aside from cases like this the Catholic Church requires individual confession. Why?

Because of the nature of God's love for each and every one of us. Through the centuries the saints have told us that he loves each of us as though each one is the only one! How can this be? I have no idea and nothing to say except that God alone is God, that he is Love itself. I am referring here to St. Paul's personal expression of his salvation: "He loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). I am referring to you, and to myself in my own place, as the Good Thief who met him one on one on Calvary.
Luke 23:33-43), to the Sinful Woman who fell on him and covered him with tears and kisses (Luke 7:36-50), to the leper he cured not only by his words but by his touching him (Luke 1:40-45). I am referring your needs and desires, and mine, to the fear and then the joy of the Woman at the Well (John 4:4-29). When his questions of her got a little close, she started an argument. But when Jesus had concluded the interview, she ran to say out her joy like this, "Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did!" She was not afraid or ashamed of anything anymore.

"In our parish we have communal celebrations of this Sacrament. I really like them! I feel part of the great crowd looking to Jesus and then I can go to the confessional and say my own piece to the priest."

You say it well. The Church encourages this form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It celebrates our salvation as a people and as individuals. We pray together and sing our sorrow and our joy forgiveness. Then each of us kneels before or sits down with one of the group of priests available to hear confessions.

"Have I been missing something here? I mean, I like the kind of celebration where there is no private confession. I have gone home moved and feeling cleansed of all my junk. What now? Are my sins forgiven or not?"

Your sins are forgiven. In good faith and good heart you received the Sacrament. Maybe the priest should not have set it up that way; maybe he should have. No matter. The Church honors your good will. (You don't need to, but you can look at Canon 144 of the Church's Canon Law.)

By the way, it is up to the bishop to decide whether there is good reason for general absolution, that is, of absolution of the sins of a crowd.

"I got the same question. And another one too: Is there something else I have to do after a communal Sacrament of Reconciliation? Do I still have to do something one-on-one?"

Yes, in good time, like something that you know is important to do soon, go to confession to a priest.

"Can you give me a little map. Or better, something like a GPS printout of driving directions?"

1.) Go into the confessional or into the reconciliation room. The confessional is sometimes called the confessional box; in the movies it is almost always the place portrayed. The priest is sitting on one side of a panel, and the penitent is usually kneeling on the other side. This gives some sense of anonymity and better privacy. The reconciliation room is just that, a room, with a door to close behind you. It usually offers the penitent a choice of kneeling--or even sitting--without seeing the priest or being seen by him. But there is also the choice of sitting face to face with him for
more of a conversation.

2.) Greeting, Sign of the Cross. You can say hello or return the priest's greeting. Bless yourself, "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." You will probably hear the priest join you in this. He may also say "God bless you," or some other words of prayer.

3.) Briefly give the priest your personal setting. For instance, it will still work to say, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's about six weeks since my last confession." You may include in your setting that you are married, or single. A priest confessing will tell the confessor that he is a priest. This brief information is helpful to the confessor.

4.) Maybe a Scripture reading. Very often this is omitted because at a scheduled time of parish confessions, there is not much time for all the penitents. But you can bring a Bible and ask to read a few verses that mean a lot to you at this moment.

5.) Confess your sins. You have to confess mortal sins committed since your last confession, their kinds and their numbers, as best you can remember. You are not required to confess venial sins at all, but most people mention those that matter to them. Try to name the sins, avoiding descriptions of them. This makes the confession easier and less embarrassing for you--and for the priest, too. He will ask a question if he needs more detail for his better understanding.

6.) Listen to his words of advice, and to the penance he assigns to you. This is usually some prayers to say out in the church. it might also be some good work. It will help if you say something like "Okay." You see, like a legal pardon, the penance must be accepted.

7.) Say an Act of Contrition. You may remember one from your childhood. Or you can say it from your heart, telling God that you're sorry, that you really mean to avoid sin, and that you love him. You may see a card there with the wording of different Acts of Contrition.

8.) The priest forgives you your sins. At the end of his prayer he says, "...and I absolve you from your sins, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." You bless yourself at these words and respond, "Amen."

9.) The conclusion. The priest can say, "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good." You are supposed to respond, "His mercy endures forever." This, as it turns out, is not usually how it ends, because the priest forgets or feels that you won't know the response anyway. But he will give some little prayer or blessing. And you will probably want to say thanks.
10.) IF YOU READ ALL OF THE ABOVE AND STILL FIND THAT YOU ARE TOO SCARED OR CONFUSED, JUST GO IN AND TELL THE PRIEST: "FATHER, IT'S BEEN AWHILE. YOU HAVE TO HELP ME OUT HERE." HE WILL GET YOU THROUGH ALL OF THE ABOVE.