Examinations of conscience for kids

Before you celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation with your kids (see Celebrate Reconciliation with Your Kids: 9 Ways to Make It Happen), help them to prepare by coaching them through an examination of conscience.

An examination of conscience is a prayerful reflection on our actions in light of our faith in order to identify sins, patterns of sin, or ways that we are falling short of who God is calling us to be. Once we recognize our sins, we can ask God for forgiveness and healing. (Check out the end of this article for some other ways to explain to your kids why we go to Confession.)

A good examination of conscience considers all areas of our lives—our thoughts and words, what we have done, and what we have failed to do (to paraphrase the Confiteor). Typically it consists of questions in three categories: the call to love God, the call to love others, and the call to love one's self. Most forms of the examination of conscience draw on the Ten Commandments; however, some draw on the Beatitudes, the Our Father, Catholic social teaching, or portions of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

You can find many forms of the examination of conscience in various prayer books and online; the U.S. Catholic bishops provide versions that use the Ten Commandments and the principles of Catholic social teaching, as well as versions geared toward children, young adults, single adults, and married adults on their website. Find those links below (under Learn More).

Three Tips for a Good Examination of Conscience

Here are some tips for making a good examination of conscience:

1. Ask for help. Encourage your kids to pray to the Holy Spirit to enlighten them about their sins, or ways that they have fallen short of being the person God is calling them to be.

2. Don't wait until the last minute. If you use a written examination of conscience as a guide, post it on your refrigerator or in your Home Oratory a few days before going to receive the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

3. Pray the Examen. Praying the Ignatian Examen regularly as a family will help older kids and teens become more aware of their spiritual lives generally, and make their examinations of conscience more fruitful.

4. Examine bad habits and opportunities for growth. Teach your kids that besides looking at the obvious sins they might have committed, they ought to consider broader patterns of behavior, habits, attitudes, and ways they could grow in grace. We're called to be saints, each in his or her own way; kids can think about the person God calls them to be, and what needs to happen to get there.

Prayer for a Good Confession

Encourage your kids to begin their examination of conscience with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment. Here's an example:

Come, Holy Spirit, into my soul.
Show me my sins,
both the wrong that I did
and the good I failed to do.

Give me the grace
to be sorry for my sins
out of love for God,
so that through Confession
my soul might be healed
and strengthened to do good.
Amen!

An Examination of Conscience for Children

The following examination of conscience is by Fr. Thomas Weinandy.

Responsibilities to God:

- Have I prayed every day?
- Have I prayed my morning prayers and night prayers?
- Have I prayed with my parents and family?
- Have I been moody and rebellious about praying and going to church on Sunday?
- Have I asked the Holy Spirit to help me whenever I have been tempted to sin?
- Have I asked the Holy Spirit to help me do what is right?

Responsibilities to others:

- Have I been obedient and respectful to my parents?
- Have I lied or been deceitful to them or to others?
- Have I been arrogant, stubborn or rebellious?
- Have I talked back to parents, teachers or other adults?
- Have I pouted and been moody?
- Have I been selfish toward my parents, brothers, and sisters, teachers, or my friends and schoolmates?

- Have I gotten angry at them? Have I hit anyone?
- Have I held grudges or not forgiven others?
- Have I treated other children with respect or have I made fun of them and called them names?
- Have I used bad language?
- Have I stolen anything? Have I returned it?
- Have I performed my responsibilities, such as homework and household chores?
- Have I been helpful and affectionate toward my family?
- Have I been kind and generous with my friends?

An Examination of Conscience for Older Kids, Teens, and Parents

This examination of conscience is taken from *The Catholic Family Book of Prayers*.

This brief examination of conscience, loosely based on the Ten Commandments, may be used in preparation for receiving the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, or as a kind of daily examen. Your family may wish to review it together silently, or with the guidance of a reader.

- Have I made anything more important than God: myself, others, money, things I own, things I want, ideas, activities, or goals? Have I set aside time to pray to God every day?
- Have I acted pridefully, as if I know everything, am better than others, or don't need God or others?
- Have I used God's name in a bad way? Have my words hurt God, his Church, or the good he wants for all people?
- Have my words and actions given glory to God's name? Have I shared my faith with those who do not know God?
- Have I gone to Mass when I should? Have I fully shared in the celebration of Mass? Have I listened to the Word of God and the homily? Have I received the Eucharist

reverently? Have I spent my Sundays in prayer, rest, service, and family time?

- Have I given love and respect to my father and mother? Have I obeyed them? Have I tried to help them without being asked? Have I whined, complained, nagged, or otherwise been difficult toward them? Have I been loving and respectful to my brothers and sisters?
- Parents: Have I shown love and respect to my children? Have I been patient and kind? Have I disciplined my children with love, and in ways that help them become the people God wants them to be?
- Have I been a good citizen? Have my words and actions strengthened my community, or harmed it?
- Have I hurt others, with my hands or my words? Have I given support or encouragement to those who hurt others? Have I excluded others, or treated others with less than the respect they deserve as children of God? Have I held onto anger or hatred toward others? Have I refused to forgive others?
- Have I respected my body? Have I given my body what it needs to be strong and healthy? Have I viewed pornography, engaged in sexual acts outside of marriage, or otherwise offended human dignity for my own pleasure?
- Have I taken what does not belong to me? Have I wasted time or resources? Have I used my talents and resources to help those in need? Have I let others borrow my possessions for good reason? Have I done my work well? Have I contributed to the good of others through my work? Have I done my chores and schoolwork as best I can, with a good attitude?
- Have I always told the truth to myself, God, and others? Have I gossiped, or shared information I shouldn’t have?
- Have I been grateful for what I have, or greedy to have what others have? Have I been generous with my time and possessions? Have I given away what I do not need?

"Return to your conscience, question it. . . . Turn inward, brethren, and in everything you do, see God as your witness." (St. Augustine)

Looking for something for your parish? Check out these cards, available in packs of 50.

Why Go to Confession?

Most Catholics do not participate in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for one reason or another. Here are some common objections that might be raised by your kids, and some responses you might try out:

► **I don't know what to confess.** If your kids don't know what to confess, help them out by doing a Daily Examen for several days before confession; then, provide them with a printed Examination of Conscience.

► **I haven't done anything bad enough to confess.** Encourage kids—especially older children and teens—to think not only about what they did wrong, but how they have fallen short of being the person God made them to be. Even saints, priests, and religious sisters and brothers regularly celebrate the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, recognizing that the grace of the sacrament strengthens them to follow God's will more perfectly, and so become more truly themselves. Comparing the person we have been to the saint we would like to be opens up all sorts of possibilities for confession.

► **Confession is all about guilt and shame; I believe in a loving God.** The reality of God's unconditional love lies at the heart of the sacrament, which recalls the parable of the Prodigal Son (*Catechism* #1439,1465). Because God loves us, he wants to heal us of whatever hurts us—most especially sin. We

don’t go to confession in order to focus on what bad people we are; we go to confession because ignoring our sins doesn’t make them go away. Just as we bring our physical injuries to the doctor for healing, we go to confession to be healed of our sins (*Catechism* #1456).

► **I am too embarrassed or ashamed.** It is natural for children to feel shy about confessing their sins in front of a priest. Simple repetition is the best remedy to this issue, although depending on the child, it might help to get to know the priest better outside of confession—or to confess with a different priest at another parish. It might help to remind your child that, during the sacrament, the priest acts in the person of Christ; it is Jesus who hears and forgives our sins. Read stories of Jesus’ mercy toward sinners to reinforce the point. Finally, remind your child that anything she confesses must be kept secret by the priest (*Catechism* #1467).

► **Why can’t I just ask God for forgiveness directly?** Anyone can pray to God for forgiveness at any time, as King David did (see Psalm 51 for a beautiful song of repentance). However, God came to us in Jesus in order to forgive us “in the flesh,” and he continues to do so even today by making the whole Church the sign and instrument of his forgiveness. In the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, then, the priest, acting in the person of Christ, makes the tender mercy of God tangible. Moreover, Catholics confess their sins before a priest in recognition that their sins not only hurt their relationship with God, but one another, and especially the Church (*Catechism* #1441-1445).

Learn more

- Celebrate Reconciliation with Your Kids: 9 Ways to Make It Happen
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1454

- Examinations of Conscience page at the USCCB . . . The USCCB offers many forms of the Examination of Conscience at its website, including examinations based on Catholic social teaching, the Ten Commandments, and examinations especially for children and young adults.