



How and When to Make Use of Private Confession?

The Lutheran Way of Private Confession and Absolution

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. James 5:16a

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." John 20:19-23

Yes, Lutherans do have Private Confession and Absolution Available.

Despite what you may have heard, Lutherans do have the availability of Private Confession and Absolution in confidentiality with their pastor. Private Confession is not a uniquely Roman Catholic practice. However, the Lutheran practice is somewhat different in significant ways.

What Private Confession and Absolution Is Not

1. Private Confession and Absolution is not to be a burden on the conscience but rather for the healing of the conscience by the forgiveness of sins pronounced in Christ's name.
2. Private Confession and Absolution is not the same thing as "pastoral counseling" or "Christian counseling." Nor is Private Confession and Absolution focused on the psychological or problem-solving side of personal life. It is focused on repentance and faith in terms of law and gospel.
3. Private Confession and Absolution is not the same thing as what some knew as "communion announcing," though sometimes confession and absolution in some form could be part of that exchange. Confession and Absolution is a part of personal preparation for Holy Communion.
4. Private Confession is not merely for going through the motions of "getting something off your chest" but rather the accent is on the pronouncement of Absolution (forgiveness from Christ Himself). In that sense, confession is not just venting or explaining one's actions or feelings but agreeing with God's verdict on sin and hearing and receiving the cleansing word of Christ that lifts sin off the conscience.
5. Private Confession and Absolution is not forced on anyone in Lutheran practice but is a gift and opportunity for pastoral care in terms of God's law and gospel, especially for when we have sins that we have a hard time believing are really forgiven before God. This is one particular benefit of Confession and Absolution in private in distinction from the general form at the beginning of the Divine Service or in private prayer.
6. Private Confession isn't only for sins of the Sixth Commandment (adultery), but for any sin that bothers our conscience.
7. Private Confession isn't a shameful thing to use but is a help.

Private Confession is a very Lutheran practice.

Our Lutheran Confessions in the Smalcald Articles of Luther state on this matter (Part III, Article VIII. Of Confession):

Since Absolution or the Power of the Keys is also an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience, ordained by Christ [Himself] in the Gospel, Confession or Absolution ought by no means to be abolished in the Church, especially on account of [tender and] timid consciences and on account of the untrained [and capricious] young people, in order that they may be examined, and instructed in the Christian doctrine. [21](#) But the enumeration of sins ought to be free to everyone, as to what he wishes to enumerate or not to enumerate. For as long as we are in the flesh, we shall not lie when we say: "I am a poor man [I acknowledge that I am a miserable sinner], full of sin." Rom. 7:23: *I see another law in my members*, etc. For since private absolution originates in the Office of the Keys, it should not be despised [neglected], but greatly and highly esteemed [of the greatest worth], as [also] all other offices of the Christian Church.

Likewise we are taught in a simple way in the *Small Catechism* regarding private confession with one's pastor:

What is Confession? Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and in no wise doubt, but firmly believe, that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess? Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. **But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts. (Emphasis added.)**

Luther's "Brief Exhortation to Confession" says:

...When I urge you to go to Confession, I am doing nothing else than urging you to be a Christian. If I have brought you to the point of being a Christian, I have thereby also brought you to Confession. For those who really desire to be true Christians, to be rid of their sins, and to have a cheerful conscience already possess the true hunger and thirst. They reach for the bread, just as [Psalm 42:1](#) says of a hunted deer, burning in the heat with thirst, [33](#) "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for You, O God." In other words, as a deer with anxious and trembling eagerness strains toward a fresh, flowing stream, so I yearn anxiously and tremblingly for God's Word, Absolution, the Sacrament, and so forth...

So When Should I Come to Confession and Make Use of It?

You may make use of Private Confession and Absolution with the pastor whenever there is a burden on your conscience for which you need to hear God's forgiveness pronounced and delivered. The pastor is there "in the stead and by the command" of Christ our Lord to speak the forgiveness of God to you in that setting so that your doubt about being forgiven through Christ's death and resurrection may be removed and forgiveness delivered to your ears and your heart. It is to soothe and console the conscience and set free the one tormented by sin and the accusations of the devil. The pastor is pledged in his ordination vows not to divulge sins committed that are confessed in private. In this use, Private Confession and Absolution complements General Confession and Absolution as well as confessing one's sins to God in prayer. This is a particular context and application of this gift of God. While we distinguish between confession and counseling, they may work together for your personal benefit. There a professional counselor and the pastor may both help in their own way according to their vocations.

One may also make use of Private Confession and Absolution as a preparation for Holy Communion. Before general Confession and Absolution became dominant, Christians in times past often made use of this opportunity to prepare for receiving Christ's body and blood. It has been historic Lutheran practice that a communicant be examined and absolved prior to communing, including first communion. Other known practices are remnants of this earlier confessional Lutheran practice.

How Do I Take Advantage of this Means of Grace?

1. Either the pastor may have certain hours set aside for hearing confessions or you may contact the pastor for an appointment.
2. It is good practice to review the Office of the Keys and Confession in the *Small Catechism* as well as the Ten Commandments with explanation. The Psalms are very fitting for devotional preparation.
3. Confession might be held either traditionally in the sanctuary at the altar rail or in a set of chairs in the sanctuary, or perhaps in the pastor's study.
4. Typically a churchly rite is used for the conduct of Private Confession and Absolution. In *Lutheran Service Book*, the rite is found on page 292. The pastor will guide you through confession with prayer and other helps. You may wish to look over the rite ahead of the meeting time.
5. If you are nervous, that's normal. God is with you and rejoices in Christians living in the life of repentance and He will help you to rejoice in the forgiveness of sins in Christ.