

Does the number of prayers I am told to say after confession reflect how bad I have been; (example: more prayers for mortal sins, fewer for venial sins)?

As part of your confession, the priest will instruct you to do some form of penance. This may involve reciting prayers, but can also take other forms. The Catechism gives us the reason: *“Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’”* (CCC #1459)

The word *penance* can have a negative connotation and imply punishment. But the penance we receive in confession can also be intended to help us improve ourselves. We may say prayers, read scripture, or do good works to guide our growth in virtue to better resist a particular sin. The Catechism states: *“The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent’s personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, ‘provided we suffer with him.’”* (CCC #1460)

Priests must use their individual judgment regarding penance, and all priests are different. The number, and type, of prayers you receive as penance will be influenced by the degree of your sinfulness, but will also be dependent on many other factors as well. A priest may reduce your penance, for example, if he can clearly sense true sorrow and contrition for your sins.

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