

# PENANCE



God the Father of mercies,  
through the death and  
resurrection of your son,  
you have reconciled the  
world to yourself and sent  
the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins.  
Through the ministry of the  
church, may God grant you  
pardon and peace.

~Prayer of Absolution

SACRAMENT OF PENANCE



## *First Penance*

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT— SACRAMENT OF PENANCE**

In Mark's Gospel, the first public words of Jesus are "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." (*Mark 1: 15*) and ever since, the Church has pondered the mystery of repentance and reconciliation.

For the first three centuries of Christianity, BAPTISM was the "sacrament of reconciliation"; baptism forgave all sin. As the Christian community grappled with those who "failed" by committing public, serious sin, the question arose as to the possibility of a "second Baptism"—but the idea was quickly dismissed. The embrace of the community represented the absolute fidelity of God; thus, since God's fidelity never faltered, "re-baptism" was impossible.

A document from the second century indicates the possibility of repentance and a one-time only forgiveness of public, serious sin. By the fourth century, this process was embodied in the Order of Penitents. The process was similar to the catechumenate, consisting of four stages: an interior admission of sinfulness; recourse to the Bishop and enrollment in the Order of Penitents; a long period (in some cases, a minimum of seven years) of penitential practices and the witness of a sponsor; and the invitation by the community and /or the Bishop to rejoin the Eucharistic feasts, usually for the Holy Thursday liturgy.

During the early Middle Ages, in the monasteries of Ireland, the practice of monks serving as "soul friends", first to other monks and eventually to lay people, began to emerge. In conversations, a person would speak about their struggles, their sins, their growth in faith and be assured that God's loving forgiveness was always present. For more public, serious sin, there was a sense of the need to be reconciled with the community. Thus developed a recognition of the need for someone to act as the "official representative" of the community as well as the one who spoke assurances of God's love and forgiveness—the priest. At first, there were no formal words of absolution; rather, there were prayers of petition, praise, and gratitude.

For the first three centuries of Christianity, BAPTISM was the "sacrament of reconciliation"; baptism forgave all sin.

By the twelfth century, we find that a shift has taken place: from once-only public penance to frequent, repeated, private confession, from an understanding of the role of the priest as representative of the community and healer, to judge and from acts of penance signifying inner conversion to penance as acts of satisfaction. The Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, mandated confession in private, ratified the specific words of absolution, and required the confession of serious sins at least once a year.

In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent required that all serious sins be confessed by number and kind; strictly speaking, venial sins did not have to be confessed, but the Council encouraged the confession of venial sins as an act of religious devotion.

*“The new Rite of Penance, promulgated in 1973 as a response to the call of the Second Vatican Council for revision of the rites and revised in accordance with the Second Edition of the Lectionary of the Mass and the emendations required by the 1983 Code of Canon Law, proclaims: The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free, and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God’s glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus.”*  
(*Rite of Penance, #7*)

Though the sacrament officially retains the title “Penance”, the term used throughout the rite is “reconciliation”. (Within the Rite of Penance are three “rites of reconciliation”.) The role of the community is emphasized, and the vision of priest as healer, wise judge and as representative of the community is restored.

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and confess their sins and to obtain the mercy of God, who alone can forgive sins. Further, the Church becomes itself the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors. (*Rite of Penance, #8*)

The Sacrament of Penance is also “called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion”. (*CCC, #1423*) “It is called the sacrament of forgiveness because the priest, standing in the place of Christ, extends his hand in absolution, granting the penitent pardon and peace”. (*CCC, #1424*) “It is called the sacrament of reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles”. (*CCC, #1424*)

# *Guidelines for the Sacrament of Penance*

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- The child is expected to have been previously involved in the liturgical life of the parish faith community by regular attendance at Sunday Eucharist with his/her parent(s).
- The child is expected to have participated in parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education classes for at least one year (e.g. First Grade) before he/she begins the direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance.
- Direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance is distinct from regular parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education, and is the responsibility of the parish.
- Both Catholic school and public school students are expected to participate jointly in all direct parish preparatory events. The direct preparation program should be explained in such a way that all parents clearly understand the distinction between regular Catholic school religious education and parish faith formation and direct preparation for the sacrament, as well as the responsibilities and events which pertain to them.
- When preparing students for the Sacrament, the person responsible for this preparation should be certain that there is a clear and distinct separation between the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Eucharist.

## COMPONENTS OF DIRECT PREPARATION

Direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance is that time period prior to the celebration of First Penance which focuses on the nature and meaning of the sacrament in the life of the Christian, as well as the preparation of the child and the parish community to meaningfully celebrate the Rite of Reconciliation. Direct preparation may consist of: student sessions, parent/child sessions, retreat days, and home options.

Parents, catechetical leaders, catechists, and pastors need to be conscious of the developmental level of the children when helping them to understand the sacrament.

Catechesis for direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance should enable each child to develop on an age appropriate level:

- a realization of God as One who always forgives
- some knowledge of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- an ability to distinguish right from wrong, mistake from sin, as well as an ability to make choices
- a realization of his/her participation in the parish faith community
- a recognition of the need for healing wounded or broken relationships
- a desire to celebrate the sacrament, not only for the first time, but regularly as an ongoing experience of God's forgiving love.

Parents and catechists involved in the preparation of children should come to realize when the child, by attitude and understanding, is ready for First Penance.

## FAMILY CATECHETICAL SENSITIVITY

The attitudes, actions and values of families constantly call individuals to open themselves to a Christ-centered life. Parents, especially, influence their children during each phase of the faith journey and need to be involved in the preparation for and celebration of the sacraments.

Effective preparation programs recognize and consider the many different family structures and respect the uniqueness of each. In addition, the parish recognizes that the preparation for and celebration of the sacraments presents an opportunity to minister to the special needs of families. Pastoral care and sensitivity should characterize the components of preparation programs that touch family members.

## PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Parents or guardians have a unique role to play in the initiation of their children into the sacramental life of the Church. They are to form and foster, along with the faith community, a spirit of faith which will help prepare the children for a fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Penance. The role of the parents is also expressed by their active participation in the celebration of the sacraments, especially Penance and Eucharist.

The lived experience of sacraments in the family is most important. An atmosphere in which faith is witnessed and discussed is most conducive to growth in faith. By becoming more aware of the meaning of the sacraments, and by participating in the preparation process, parents can fulfill their baptismal promises and nurture the faith life of their child.

For children, the family plays an important role in their faith formation and introduction into the sacramental life of the Church. Sacramental preparation is the responsibility and concern of the parent(s) with the full support and cooperation of the faith community. (NCD 25,212,229; RB 4)

Parents, by their Christian life, form children in prayer, a sense of faith, and in the importance of sacramental life. Parents have the responsibility to:

- assist children in the preparation for the sacramental celebration by:
  - ◆ celebrating regularly as part of the parish community, including Sunday Eucharist
  - ◆ modeling a life of Christian witness
  - ◆ assuring ongoing and in-depth catechetical formation through participation of their children in parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education, and in parish sacramental preparation processes
- full and active participation in the parent component of the parish sacramental preparation process
- provide continuing faith formation of their children after the reception of the sacraments by participation with their children in the life of the church.

“Parents you have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so, you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practices of the faith...”  
(*Rite of Baptism*)

## PARENT/GUARDIAN SESSIONS

Parent sessions are an integral part of preparation for the first celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. During these sessions, the parents will have the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of reconciliation in their daily lives and to focus on the Sacrament of Penance in a way that will help their children to understand its importance in Christian living. Areas to be explored during parent sessions include:

- the personal attitude of parents toward relationship with the Lord, the Church and the Sacrament of Penance
- the theology of the Sacrament of Penance and the Rites of Reconciliation
- the process of preparation for the Sacrament of Penance
- the individual’s relationship with Christ and with all others in Christ
- the role of the parent(s) in the parish sacramental preparation process
- the development of faith in young children and how to communicate with them about this sacrament
- the readiness of the child and how this is assessed by the parent(s) and members of the parish staff.

## THE MINISTERS

### *The Pastor/Priest*

In Jesus, God is revealed as one who forgives and heals. Children experience that forgiveness and healing first within the family, then within the parish community during their preparation for, and in the celebration of First Penance. It is extremely important that a child’s introduction to the Sacrament of Penance be one of gentleness and understanding, in order that the child be drawn to the sacrament throughout his/her life.

Pastors have a special responsibility to assure that proper catechesis for the sacrament be provided by:

- fostering in the parish an understanding of its role in sacramental preparation and celebration
- participating in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the preparation process
- determining the readiness of the children, in consultation with parents, catechetical leaders, and catechists.

### *Catechetical Leader/ Sacramental Coordinator*

The role of the catechetical leader/sacramental coordinator is to assist the pastor in his responsibility to provide for the sacramental preparation of the young children preparing to receive the Sacrament of Penance. This role often includes coordination of the preparation period, working with the parish staff, liturgy committee, parents, and the Diocesan and Regional Faith Formation Offices.

The catechetical leader/sacramental coordinator is responsible to see that the diocesan guidelines for the reception of First Penance are implemented. The following directives are essential to an effective preparation program for the Sacrament of Penance:

- The catechesis of the children preparing for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance is age-appropriate according to diocesan guidelines.
- There are parent sessions during the time of preparation so that the parents are well informed about the process and methods of preparing the children for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance.
- Parents receive catechesis on the history and theology of the Sacrament of Penance.
- Parents are encouraged to reinforce, throughout the life of the child, regular participation in the Sacrament of Penance.

### *Catechists*

The fundamental tasks of the catechist are to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead the children to a sense of prayer and worship, and to motivate children to serve others.

The catechist plays an important part in the preparation of the children for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance. The catechist for the First Penance Preparation Program provides opportunities to join the pastor, the catechetical leader and the parents in the direct preparation of children for the Sacrament of Penance. The catechist, pastor, catechetical leader/sacramental coordinator, and parents provide instruction and formation for those preparing for this sacrament. The catechist should be encouraged to use experiential methods of catechesis employing audio-visuals, digital tools, paraliturgical, scriptural as well as instructional techniques to prepare the children for their first reception of the Sacrament of Penance. They should guide the children into experiences of a loving and forgiving God within a loving and forgiving faith community.

### **THE PARISH COMMUNITY**

A critical aspect of all the sacraments, including Penance, is the vitality of the existing community and its ongoing relationship to each member of the faith community, even the very youngest members. This shifts the focus away from the individual at the moment of reception of the sacrament and underscores the role of the community in its ongoing relationship to its young members.

We celebrate reconciliation because of the community's experience of its sinfulness as well as of our individual sin and of God's love and forgiveness. In sharing our experiences of God's love and forgiveness with our young members, the entire parish community is reminded of how much our gracious God loves and forgives us.

The parish community is ever learning, celebrating, suffering, rejoicing, hoping, failing, forgiving, questioning, healing, loving but is always centered in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

### *The Role of the Parish Community*

As with Baptism, catechesis for Penance takes place within the parish community, who is invited to prayerfully support those preparing for this sacrament. The parish is the faith community where the children will experience the loving forgiveness of God. The following are some ways a parish community can become involved in the children's preparation for Penance:

- The parish community strives to be a welcoming community to the young persons and their parents as they prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance.
- Parishioners may also serve as prayer partners (adults who agree to pray for an individual child who is preparing for the Sacrament of Penance.) Parishes may have the parish community participate in an Enrollment Ceremony.
- Homilies may be given and /or mention made about the preparation program for the Sacrament of Penance.
- The entire parish may be invited to the liturgy celebrating the Sacrament of Penance.

## FIRST PENANCE AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

“By reason of their Baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling. Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community. Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at the appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them.”

*(Celebrating the Sacraments with Person with Disabilities, The USCCB, 1998)*

Parents should be instructed as to their right and privilege, as well as assisted in their role in the preparation of children with disabilities for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance.

When preparing persons with disabilities for the Sacrament of Penance, the person responsible for this preparation should be certain that there is, according to diocesan guidelines, a clear and distinct separation between the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Eucharist.

Great care should be taken in the preparation so that negative attitudes towards God are not conveyed to persons with disabilities. Because the person with disabilities responds to a warm and tender personality, a good catechist begins by presenting God’s goodness, love and mercy, especially in the person of Jesus. The person with disabilities experiences God’s forgiveness from parents, peers, and the entire faith community.

There is no definite age for persons with disabilities to receive the Sacrament of Penance. Each person will be ready for the sacrament in his or her own time and all concerned must be sensitive to this. Judgments should be made in a way that the reverence for the sacrament is maintained, while realistically taking into account the person’s need.

In assessing the readiness of a child with disabilities for the first celebration of the Sacrament of Penance one should consider:

- the ability to distinguish between right and wrong
- the awareness of the need for forgiveness and trust in Jesus’ forgiving love

- the ability to express sorrow
- the ability of the person with disabilities to describe wrongdoing in his/her own words.

A person with disabilities may find language difficult, and may express his/her sins in a halting or ungrammatical manner. However, this should not be an impediment to the sacrament. In addition, if there is difficulty with oral confession, it is sufficient for the person with disabilities to nod consent or denial to the questions of the confessor.

## PASTORAL LITURGICAL GUIDELINES

### *Introduction*

Thorough planning for both the catechesis and celebration of the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance itself is essential. It is extremely important, moreover, that a candidate’s introduction to the sacrament be one of gentleness and understanding, with primary emphasis on the reconciling love of God.

### *Preparation for the Rite*

Rituals are symbolic actions that help us to realize the significance of an event or a celebration. Although personal confession of sin and individual absolution are at the center of this sacrament, the communal celebration expresses more clearly its ecclesial character (CCC, #1482) in the supportive presence and prayer of the community gathered. In this celebration we are aware, as well, that in being reconciled to God, we are also reconciled to the Church. (CCC, #1469)

Children must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving the Sacrament of Eucharist for the first time. (CIC, can. 914; CCC, #1457)

### *Planning the Rite*

In a communal celebration of the rite of reconciliation, “the personal confession of sins and individual absolution are inserted into a liturgy of the word of God with readings and a homily, an examination of conscience conducted in common, a communal request for forgiveness, the Our Father and a thanksgiving in common”. (CCC, #1482)

Children receiving the sacrament for the first time should participate fully in the celebration through song and prayer. (*Rite of Penance*, #23-26)

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### *Space*

Using the Reconciliation Chapel/Room for individual confessions is ideal. When several priests are available to hear confessions and other space is needed, each space should be private and welcoming for the children. Two chairs facing one another with a table on the side bearing a single candle or cross adds to a comfortable and prayerful atmosphere. The option to kneel behind a screen for the celebration of the sacrament should be provided for those who wish to remain anonymous.

### *Dress of Candidates*

The celebration of the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance should be given the importance it deserves. Dress should be suitable for a weekend liturgy but not extreme. New or expensive clothing is not necessary.

### *Models for Reconciliation Celebrations*

The Sacrament of Reconciliation may be celebrated using:

- Individual Rite—The children receive First Reconciliation by appointment with the priest or during regularly scheduled Reconciliation times.
- Communal Rite—Parents and family members may be invited to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation either after their child or after all the children have received the sacrament.
- Parish Communal Service—Children may receive the sacrament at a Parish Reconciliation Service.

### *Music*

“Whenever...penance (is) celebrated communally, music is important. The general structure is introductory rite, liturgy of the word, sacrament and dismissal. The introductory rite and liturgy of the word follow the pattern of the Mass. At the time of the sacrament an acclamation or song by all the people is desirable.”  
(*Music in Catholic Worship*, #81)

“Communal celebrations of reconciliation normally require an entrance song or song of gathering; a responsorial psalm and a gospel acclamation during the liturgy of the word; an optional hymn after the homily and a hymn of praise for God’s mercy following absolution. The litany with the General Confession of Sins

(alternating between the deacon or cantor and assembly) or another appropriate song may also be sung, as well as the Lord’s Prayer. Singing or soft instrumental music may be used during the time of individual confessions especially when there is a large number of people present for the celebration.”

(*Liturgical Music Today*, #27)

It is appropriate to have music which children can sing. Music invites them to become actively involved, and creates a prayerful atmosphere. Music that expresses the theme of the celebration unites the community in giving thanks and praise to God.

### *Rehearsal*

In addition to practicing their roles for the prayer service, the children may be given the opportunity to:

- explore the Reconciliation Chapel/Room
- sit in the chair that faces the priest
- kneel behind the screen
- practice where to sit, stand, or kneel while waiting their turn to go to confession, making sure to leave ample room for the privacy of each penitent.

These considerations will help to eliminate any anxiety the children may be feeling.

### *Sanctuary Arrangements*

The church may be decorated to complement the liturgical season. The paschal candle may be brought forth as a sign of new life in baptism. Holy water and candles remind us to take the new light of Christ with us following the celebration.

### *Seating*

Seating arrangements should be made so that penitents may experience a quiet, reflective atmosphere. Children seated with their family, at the ends of the pew closest to the aisle, will have the opportunity to see and participate in the action of the celebration, taking the place of honor while enjoying the comfort of their family.

### *Following the Celebration*

A simple party following the celebration of the sacrament allows the parish to express the message of God’s loving embrace to the children. If there isn’t space conducive to a reception, families may be encouraged to prepare a special meal at home following the sacrament.

## *Preparation for First Penance: An Overview*

“Parents, you have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so, you are accepting the responsibility of training him/her in the practices of the faith...”

Parents, following up on the commitment made at their child’s Baptism, are called to form children in prayer, live an example of faith and share in the sacramental life of the church. Parents have the responsibility and delight to:

- assist children in the preparation for the sacramental celebration by:
  - celebrating regularly as part of the parish community, including Sunday Eucharist
  - modeling a life of Christian witness
  - practicing an example of loving forgiveness in the home
  - assuring ongoing and in-depth catechetical formation through participation of their children in parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education, and in parish sacramental preparation processes.
- The child is expected to have participated in parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education classes for at least one year (e.g. First Grade) before he/she begins the direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance.
- Direct preparation for the Sacrament of Penance is distinct from regular parish faith formation or Catholic school religious education, and is the responsibility of the parish.
- Both Catholic school and public school students are expected to participate jointly in all direct parish preparatory events.
- Full and active participation in the parent component of the parish sacramental preparation process is expected. (e.g. 3-4 sessions; parent/child retreat or workshop)
- Children must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving the Sacrament of Eucharist for the first time.
- There is no definite age for persons with disabilities to receive the Sacrament of Penance. Each person will be ready for the sacrament in his or her own time and all concerned must be sensitive to this. Judgments should be made in a way that the reverence for the sacrament is maintained, while realistically taking into account the person’s need.
- As this is the first celebration of the sacrament of forgiveness, parents will continue to bring their children to the Sacrament of Penance. Parents are expected to provide continuing faith formation of their children after the reception of the sacraments by regular attendance at Mass and ensuring their participation in further faith formation classes.
- The dates for parent/student sessions are:
- First Penance will be celebrated on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.

Date

Time