

THE RITE OF PENANCE

Diocesan Guidelines for Implementation

Introduction

Mercy is the free and generous gift of our loving Father. No number of penances we perform or rites we celebrate or prayers we say will ever earn us this incredible gift. This is not to say that what we do is not important. Our Baptism committed each one of us to dying and rising with Christ to the struggle of being "holy as the Father is holy" (Luke 6:36). We must embrace that commitment and live it each day.

The Sacrament of Penance, besides the Eucharist, is the most beneficial channel for preserving this baptismal dedication and growing in the knowledge of Christ. Our whole life is a process of conversion, a process of turning ever more completely to God in Christ and making the Gospel a living reality in the course of our daily existence. Penance allows us to celebrate the mercy of God and the mystery of Christian growth; it also deepens the life of Christ within us, and encourages us to search out the love of God ever more actively.

The revision of the Rite of Penance, called for by Vatican Council II, seeks to express more clearly the nature and effects of this sacrament. Especially noteworthy is the attempt to re-establish the communal or social nature of the sacrament. We not only are forgiven of our sins through God's mercy in this sacrament, but we are also reconciled with the communion of the faithful who have been wounded by our sins and who work for our conversion by charity, example and prayer. Since we frequently join together to commit injustice, it is only fitting that we should help each other in doing penance so that, freed from sin by Christ, we may work with all men and women of goodwill for justice and peace in the world.

What is crucial for the proper implementation of the revised Rite of Penance is good, solid catechesis on the mystery of reconciliation, the meaning of sin, and the rites themselves, as well as a deep formation in prayer, study of the scriptures, and a concern for right moral development. These are not simple tasks accomplished in a short period of time. Ongoing care for catechesis and faith formation is essential for all age levels of the Christian People.

In particular, catechesis should include all aspects of the new Rite, but take care that the individual celebration of the sacrament not be weakened or impaired by what is said or taught. Of course, no rite, no matter what form it takes, can serve as a corrective to routine, hurried, or mechanical confessions. The corrective comes rather from improved catechesis and preaching, and better celebrations of the sacrament.

What follows here are guidelines for the proper implementation of the new Rite of Penance. Not every aspect of the Rite is reviewed or explained below. Consultation of the text of the actual rite will provide a fuller explanation. Only those aspects needing particular application to diocesan practice are here considered.

Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents

This familiar form has been expanded so as to make the celebration a richer and more fruitful experience of the Father's mercy and forgiveness, and the sinner's return home to Him. It is a most important part of the Christian life since it allows the penitent the personalized ministry of the Church at a time when he or she most needs such compassion and understanding.

Great care should be taken on the part of the priest, therefore, that a warm welcome and friendly atmosphere be provided for the penitent in the spirit of Jesus' own healing ministry.

The sensitive use of the many options for prayer and scripture texts will also be an aid to the fruitful celebration of the sacrament. This will require prayerful preparation on the part of both priest and penitent.

Although the reading of God's Word in this form of the sacrament is stated as optional, still it ought to be omitted only after considering the spiritual advantage for the penitent. At the very least, a short passage from scripture, read by the priest or recited from memory, can place both penitent and priest in a calm, unhurried and meditative attitude, and open up the dimensions of the meaning of the Gospel. In addition, the reading of scripture is a simple and not too demanding opportunity for the penitent to become reacquainted with the circumstances of very personal confession.

No time limit can be placed on the celebration of the sacrament in this form. Sensitivity to the needs of the penitent should be primary, and the celebration should never become routine for either priest or penitent.

Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution

The great value of communal settings for the Rite of Penance is that they enhance the ecclesial nature of the sacrament — a dimension which has been lost in recent centuries. The celebration of the sacrament in communal forms is a priority since the sacrament itself is a public act of worship of the whole faith community. Care ought to be used in highlighting the communal dimensions of these celebrations in order to make them beneficial to all.



Photo by Susan McKinney

The conduct of the period of individual confessions and absolutions in this second form of the sacrament is an important consideration. The ritual encourages brevity, but not so individual encounters become hurried or perfunctory. A brief and careful explanation to penitents that their confessions of sins should be clear and concise, but deliberate and unhurried, could serve to alleviate potential abuses. The individual conscience and the dignity of the celebration ought to be respected.

The length of such celebrations ought to be reasonable, especially when a large number of children is present, lest they become weary and are slowly deadened in their spiritual growth (*Directory of Masses With Children*, #2).

Rite for the Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution

The guidelines for general sacramental absolution are to be understood in the fuller context of the mystery of God's mercy and forgiveness and His gift of reconciliation, the meaning of conversion in the Christian life, and the ecclesial or social aspects of the sacrament of Penance. Each person approaching the sacrament in this form should be encouraged to have the proper dispositions: to come with a sincere heart that respects conscience, the integrity of the sacrament, and the guidance offered by the Church.

The conditions requisite before general sacramental absolution is considered are the following:

(1) **danger of death** — always understood as a sufficient reason for general absolution. Thus, cases readily understood in the past which permitted absolution without individual and specific confession still have validity (for example, in time of war, epidemic, famine, and so on).

(2) **grave need** — that is, when sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions within a suitable period of time so that, as a result, penitents would be obliged to go without sacramental grace or holy Communion for a long time. To this must be added a third condition or requirement which has importance after the rite of reconciliation with general absolution, namely, that penitents must resolve individually to confess their grave sins at least within a year, unless this is morally impossible. Moreover, those who receive pardon for grave sins by a common absolution should go to individual confession before they receive this kind of absolution again, unless they are impeded by a just reason.

Large numbers of penitents alone is not a sufficient reason for general absolution when confessors are available.

It is not possible to anticipate all the cases when general absolution is permissible. However, an addition to danger of death, the following instances sufficiently illustrate occasions when the rite may be celebrated in this form in the Diocese of Rochester without further permission of the Ordinary:

(1) **Advent and Lent** — toward the end of these traditionally penitential seasons, it may seem appropriate to schedule general sacramental absolution, especially when it would require extraordinary and unusual measures to summon sufficient confessors for individual forms of the sacrament. While reasonable attempts should be made to provide enough confessors, the demands of the individual parish in these seasons should be recognized.

However, this permission should not deter a priest from the full exercise of the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to him. Adequate time for individual confessions should be

scheduled in these seasons and well publicized so that all the faithful who wish may avail themselves of this fruitful opportunity.

(2) **Resort Areas** — it may be that large numbers of people would gather in a place on a seasonal basis, thus creating a situation in which the number of confessors would be insufficient for those requesting the grace of reconciliation. General absolution may be given in these situations, provided the cautions mentioned above are observed.

(3) **"One-priest" Areas** — where one priest serves a large area, it may occur that a large number of penitents would appear unexpectedly at a scheduled time. Rather than deprive them of the gift of God's forgiveness and the opportunity to receive the Eucharist, general absolution may be given.

(4) **Special Family, Parish or Community Occasions** — these might include a wedding or a funeral, general first Communion, Confirmation, a religious order's founder's day, and so on. General sacramental absolution would seem appropriate when the conditions are met and the large number of people present request the sacrament of Penance.

If a case does not fall within the diocesan regulations but there is some other serious need for general absolution, the priest should inform the Ordinary, if possible, before the celebration takes place.

Please note: When the rite of reconciliation with general absolution is permitted, the minister of the sacrament may determine and announce to the penitents the appropriate external sign of penance to be shown, e.g. kneeling, bowing of the head, individual imposition of hands, standing (if penitents have been kneeling), a gesture such as the sign of the cross, and so on. Thoughtful experimentation with this sign will prove helpful in finding the one or two signs most effective for this form of the sacrament.

Place

It is desirable that small chapels or rooms of reconciliation be provided in which penitents might choose to confess their sins and seek sacramental reconciliation through an informal face-to-face exchange with the priest, allowing for the opportunity for appropriate spiritual counsel. The option of kneeling at a fixed confessional screen which would allow for the penitent's anonymity should also be provided. In every case, the freedom of the penitent is to be respected.

The design of such reconciliation rooms or chapels should reflect welcome, beauty and peace.

Time

Priests should make themselves readily available to the faithful when they reasonably request the celebration of the sacrament. Schedules for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance should be decided so that they are convenient for a large number of penitents.

However, care should be taken that Penance is not celebrated during Mass.

Vesture

Alb or cassock and surplice and a purple stole of some beauty are recommended vesture for priests at scheduled celebrations of the sacrament of Penance.