

SACRAMENTAL LIFE

prayer. Having frequently joined 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 good will for justice and peace in the world (RP #5).

What is crucial for the continued 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, the 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, such formation should enable each person to approach the sacrament with proper dispositions: sincerity of heart, desire for reconciliation, and sensitivity for the integrity of the sacrament. This will enable a renewed appreciation of Penance in the penitent's life.

Also, because of his office and ministry within the reconciling community, the priest is called to a fuller appreciation of the scriptural and theological dimensions of this powerful expression of God's reconciling love. Hence, a constant updating in the theology of sin, reconciliation, sacraments in general, and the power of the Word of God is the moral responsibility of the confessor. This will correct any tendency to routine, hurried or mechanical confessions; it can open the way for a fuller, more beneficial reconciling ministry in the Church.

Rite of Penance

RITE FOR THE RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

- A. Penitents often anticipate feeling awkward or uncomfortable, being confused or judged, despite their desire to find forgiveness of their sins.
 - 1) Great care should be taken on the part of the confessor so that a genuine, joyful welcome and a peaceful atmosphere be provided for the penitent. This care should include a sensitivity that permits a penitent the determination of the degree of privacy needed for the comfortable celebration of the sacrament.
 - 2) Sufficient time should be allowed for each penitent. Describing sinful actions or relationships, asking questions for spiritual guidance or personal growth cannot be done quickly or glibly. The penitent needs to be offered warmth and reassurance, and concerns of conscience should be treated seriously and compassionately.
 - 3) Penitents have the right to choose the privacy of a screen, or the intimacy of a face-to-face exchange in a reconciliation room or private interview.
 - 4) There is no single formula for the frequency of the celebration of this sacrament. Biweekly, monthly or seasonally may be equally appropriate, depending on the needs of the penitent.
- B. The reading of God's Word should place both penitent and priest in an unhurried, reflective and prayerful environment. When scripture is used, its place and value in this sacrament ought to be briefly explained by the priest. Either penitent or priest may select the scripture passage.
- C. Reconciliation rooms or small chapels should be provided in which penitents might choose to seek sacramental reconciliation through an informal face-to-face exchange with the priest, allowing also for the opportunity of spiritual counsel. The option of kneeling at a fixed confessional screen which would allow for the penitent's anonymity must also be provided. In every case, the freedom of the penitent is to be respected.
- D. Priests should make themselves available to the faithful when they reasonably request the celebration of the sacrament.

Penance is not to be celebrated at the same time that Mass is celebrated.

RITE OF RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

The celebration of the sacrament of Penance in communal forms emphasizes reconciliation with both a forgiving Father and a forgiving community. When penitents gather specifically as a sinful but faith-filled community, confident of the Father's mercy, participants sense that the sacrament is a public act of worship and celebration in the community.

- A. All parts of the celebration are to be well-planned. This would include providing an adequate number of confessors and making provision for active participation in song and prayer, readings and examination of conscience.
- B. The length of such celebrations must be reasonable. A sense of reverence and prayer can be lost because of boredom or tiredness.

It may be better to plan several smaller celebrations than one large one.
- C. Careful explanation to penitents that confession in this form should be clear, concise, and brief but unhurried will reassure them. Respect for individual conscience and an atmosphere of reverence in the group celebration should be kept in balance. This is not a suitable time for spiritual direction or counseling.

RITE OF RECONCILIATION FOR 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. However, it remains clear that individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with



God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.

- A. The conditions for general sacramental absolution are:
 - danger of death: always sufficient reason for general absolution. Thus, cases understood in the past which permitted absolution without individual and specific confession still have validity.
 - grave need: when sufficient confessors are not available to hear individual confessions within a suitable period of time so that penitents would be obliged to go without sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long period of time.
 - to these must be added a third condition, namely, that penitents must resolve individually to confess their grave sins within a year, unless this is morally impossible. Moreover, those who receive pardon for grave sins by common absolution should confess individually before they receive this kind of absolution again, unless they are hindered by a just reason.

A large number of penitents alone is not a sufficient reason for general absolution when confessors are available.
- B. It is not possible to anticipate all cases when general absolution is permissible. However, particular, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to celebrate the sacrament of Penance in this rite. In the Diocese of Rochester, they may include:
 - times of conversion and renewal, like Advent and Lent, when people seek the sacrament in greater numbers and it becomes extremely difficult to obtain enough confessors for individual forms of the sacrament;
 - where one priest serves a large area and when a large number of penitents may appear unexpectedly at a scheduled time;
 - when the conditions are met for a special family, parish or community occasion and a large number present request the sacrament of Penance.

General absolution may not be announced in advance.
- C. If a case does not fall within the diocesan guidelines, but there is some other serious need for general absolution, the priest should inform the Ordinary, if possible, before the celebration takes place.
- D. When this rite is permitted, the minister of the sacrament may determine and announce to the penitents the appropriate external sign of Penance to be shown, for example, kneeling, bowing the head, individual imposition of hands in silence, standing, and so on. (RP #35b)

VESTURE

Appropriate liturgical vesture, that is, alb and stole, is preferred for the celebration of Penance at regularly scheduled times.

* If this occasion occurs, it does not excuse priests from fully exercising the ministry entrusted to them. 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.

First Penance of Children

I. PREPARATION

- A. Every child who has reached the years of discretion must be given adequate basic catechesis for the celebration of Penance so that participation in the sacrament may be a free response of faith. No adequately prepared child may be denied the sacrament (Canon 854). On the other hand, no obligation to approach the sacrament may be imposed on the child, other than that which binds all Catholics, namely, the consciousness of personal, serious sin.
- B. While catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede first Eucharist, the principle of individual readiness for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance must be respected.
- C. The primary decision concerning the readiness of a particular child to celebrate Penance rests with the parents and

the child. They will be assisted by the priests and catechists so they will be able to make an informed decision about the readiness of their child.

- D. A child is to be considered ready to celebrate the sacrament of Penance when the following awareness and abilities can be found in the child, to a degree appropriate to his/her age:
 - 1) an awareness of the relationship of love that they have with God and neighbor;
 - 2) a knowledge that they can harm this relationship through sin, and must assume personal responsibility;
 - 3) the experience of personal sorrow for their failings and the expression of that sorrow;
 - 4) the realization that they must try to change their sinful behavior;
 - 5) an understanding that the sacrament of Penance is a special sign of God's forgiveness and or reconciliation with one's neighbor;
 - 6) a free desire to receive this sacrament;
 - 7) an ability to talk to the priest about the wrongs done in words and in a manner appropriate to their ages. Warm rapport between the priest(s) and children of the parish is a remote preparation for this.
- E. Immediate catechesis for and celebration of first Penance and first Eucharist must be kept distinct by a clear and unhurried separation. This is to be done so that the specific identity of each sacrament is apparent.
- F. Parents should assume as much responsibility as possible in the immediate preparation of their child for the sacrament of Penance.
 - 1) Remote preparation is made by the parents when they encourage attitudes of love, forgiveness and reconciliation in a Christian home, and when they seek the spiritual development of each family member.
 - 2) Parents have a serious responsibility to participate in the programs provided by the parish. They will be helped in the formation of their children by growing in their own understanding of conscience formation, conversion, reconciliation, and gospel values.
 - 3) When it is not possible for parents to accept this responsibility, the parish should provide other adults to serve as sponsors, who will assist in the preparation of the children in a family setting.
- G. Preparation program guidelines are found in the Appendix to this section.
- H. Persons who are developmentally disabled, who have severe learning disabilities, or who have other handicaps should be made to feel welcome in the parish programming. However, particular care and understanding of the situation of these persons is required for their preparation for this sacrament. Whenever possible, they should participate in regular liturgies and activities, and they should be included in parish sacramental celebrations.

II. CELEBRATION OF FIRST PENANCE

When several children will be celebrating first Penance together:

- A. Planning for the celebration of the sacrament should involve liturgical planners, the children who will celebrate, priests, parents, and catechists.
- B. All celebrations of Penance for children should be designed with signs, symbols, music, readings and prayers suitable to the age of those participating.
- C. Each child should have the option of anonymous or face-to-face confession.

III. CONTINUING FORMATION

Because continuing, life-long conversion is part of what it means to grow in faith, catechesis for the sacrament of Penance must be ongoing.

Concepts which must be presented at gradually deeper levels as the child's capacity develops include an understanding of sin, redemption, reconciliation, God's healing love, and the mission of reconciliation each person shares. Thus catechesis for Penance continues developmentally and progressively throughout a parish's religious instruction program, and its preaching.

Appendix: First Penance Preparation

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- A. Active involvement of parents and families in preparing children for Penance must be encouraged.
- B. Parishes will develop programs which will assist parents in their role as primary teachers of their children. Thus parents will be able to fulfill this ministry with knowledge and confidence.

Parishes will assist parents in determining the readiness of their child to celebrate Penance.
- C. Since the most important aspect of a child's introduction to the full meaning and value of the sacrament of Penance is the example of the parents' own participation in the sacrament of God's forgiving love, the adult catechesis available in the parish, as well as their experience of the sacrament, must be enriched continually.

CATECHESIS

- A. Preparation for first Penance:
 - 1) should be available for children and families yearly so that parents may have adequate help when they judge their child ready to celebrate the sacrament. An interview with the parent and/or child can be most helpful for this;
 - 2) shall consist of sessions for parents and children thus

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