



Essential Quick Guide for Catechists to – Preparing Children for First Reconciliation

BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PENANCE & RECONCILIATION

The Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to this sacrament as the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. It is one of the two sacraments of healing, the second being the Anointing of the Sick. It is a sacrament which celebrates conversion, change, growth, and, thus, a reconciling with God and with the Christian community, the Church.

'The follower of Christ who has sinned but who has been moved by the Holy Spirit to come to the sacrament of penance should above all be converted to God with his whole heart. This inner conversion of heart embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due satisfaction, and amendment of life. God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests.'

Introduction to The Rite of Penance ¶16

'The Sacrament of Penance is about much more than simply the forgiveness of a person's sins. It is about God the Father of mercies seeking to draw that person more deeply into the community of love that is the Church, united with Jesus.'

Thinking about Reconciliation, Pt 1 (Liturgy Office, Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, 2004)

PENANCE & RECONCILIATION IN SCRIPTURE:

Mark 1 :15 - Jesus began his work on earth by preaching repentance: 'Turn away from sin and believe the good news'.

Mark 1 :4 - John the Baptist came 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'

Luke 5:29-32 – Jesus eats with sinners, saying he has 'come to call sinners'

Matt 26:28 – the Last Supper, 'this is my blood..which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins

Luke 19:1-10 – In the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus gives a model for the sacrament of reconciliation.

Luke 15:4-7 & 11-32 – parables of the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son, teaching of the unconditional love and forgiveness of God

Luke 7:36-50 – the woman who was a sinner – our need for forgiveness

Matt 5:24 – Go first, and be reconciled with your brother

Matt 6:9-13 – the Lord's Prayer, the link between our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us

1John1:8 - "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." A recognition of our human weakness.

Matt 16:19 & John 20:19,22-23 – Jesus gives Peter, and the disciples, the power to forgive sins

Acts 2:38 – On the day of Pentecost Peter preaches the forgiveness of sins

PENANCE & RECONCILIATION IN THE CATECHISM:

1422 "Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labours for their conversion."

I. WHAT IS THIS SACRAMENT CALLED?

1423 It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.

It is called the sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.

1424 It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a "confession" - acknowledgment and praise - of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man.

It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace."

It is called the sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God." He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go; first be reconciled to your brother."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church continues the teaching of the Church on the sacrament of the Penance & Reconciliation in paragraphs 1425-1484, including Why a Sacrament of Reconciliation after Baptism? 1425-1426, The Conversion of the Baptized 1427-1429, Interior Penance 1430-1433, The Many Forms of Penance in Christian Life 1424-1439, The Acts of the Penitent 1450-1460, The Minister of This Sacrament 1461-1467, The Effects of This Sacrament 1468-1470, Indulgences 1471-1479, The Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance 1480-1484

IN BRIEF (the summary of the teaching of the Church on Penance & Reconciliation from the Catechism of the Catholic Church)

1485 "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week," Jesus showed himself to his apostles. "He breathed on them, and said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (Jn 20:19, 22-23).

1486 The forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism is conferred by a particular sacrament called the sacrament of conversion, confession, penance, or reconciliation.

1487 The sinner wounds God's honour and love, his own human dignity as a man called to be a son of God, and the spiritual well-being of the Church, of which each Christian ought to be a living stone.

1488 To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world.

1489 To return to communion with God after having lost it through sin is a process born of the grace of God who is rich in mercy and solicitous for the salvation of men. One must ask for this precious gift for oneself and for others.

1490 The movement of return to God, called conversion and repentance, entails sorrow for and abhorrence of sins committed, and the firm purpose of sinning no more in the future. Conversion touches the past and the future and is nourished by hope in God's mercy.

**1491** The sacrament of Penance is a whole consisting in three actions of the penitent and the priest's absolution. The penitent's acts are repentance, confession or disclosure of sins to the priest, and the intention to make reparation and do works of reparation.

**1492** Repentance (also called contrition) must be inspired by motives that arise from faith. If repentance arises from love of charity for God, it is called "perfect" contrition; if it is founded on other motives, it is called "imperfect."

**1493** One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience. The confession of venial faults, without being necessary in itself, is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church.

**1494** The confessor proposes the performance of certain acts of "satisfaction" or "penance" to be performed by the penitent in order to repair the harm caused by sin and to re-establish habits befitting a disciple of Christ.

**1495** Only priests who have received the faculty of absolving from the authority of the Church can forgive sins in the name of Christ.

**1496** The spiritual effects of the sacrament of Penance are:

- reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace;
- reconciliation with the Church;
- remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins;
- remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin;
- peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation;
- an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle.

**1497** Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church.

**1498** Through indulgences the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory.

The Catechism also gives teaching on the nature of sin, in Part 3 – Life in Christ, 1846-1876

**1854** Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience.

**1855** *Mortal sin* destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. *Venial sin* allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.

**1856** Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us - that is, charity - necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation:

"When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object . . . whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbour, such as homicide or adultery. . . . But when the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbour, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial." (St Thomas Aquinas)

**1857** For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."  
(*This is further explained in 1858-64*)

## PENANCE & RECONCILIATION IN CANON LAW:

*Canon Law is the body of laws and regulations that govern the Catholic Church and all its members.*

**Can. 959** In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a legitimate minister, are sorry for them, and intend to reform themselves obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism and, at the same, time are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning.

**Can. 960** Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church. Only physical or moral impossibility excuses from confession of this type; in such a case reconciliation can be obtained by other means.

**Can. 965** A priest alone is the minister of the sacrament of penance.

**Can. 981** The confessor is to impose salutary and suitable penances in accord with the quality and number of sins, taking into account the condition of the penitent. The penitent is obliged to fulfill these personally.

**Can. 983 §1.** The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.

**Can. 987** To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.

**Can. 988 §1.** A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

**§2.** It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.

**Can. 989** After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.

**Can. 991** Every member of the Christian faithful is free to confess sins to a legitimately approved confessor of his or her choice, even to one of another rite.

## PENANCE & RECONCILIATION AND CHURCH HISTORY:

Over the centuries the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord has varied considerably. During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation. To this "order of penitents" (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime.

During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church.

From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practised down to our day. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church ¶1447*)

## The essential elements of a programme of preparation for First Reconciliation:

- God, our creator gives us the gift of life
- We belong to the family of God
- God loves us unconditionally
- We are loved also by parents, families, teachers, friends
- God has shown that love by giving us his Son, Jesus
- Jesus teaches us how to love,
- Love for our neighbour and for God is the centre of our lives
- Ways in which we show that love
- Sometimes we stray from the way that Jesus shows us
- When I stray from the path my friendship with God and with others suffers
- God always forgives and calls us back
- Jesus shows us how to love and forgive one another
- The difference between doing something by mistake and deciding to do something that hurts others
- There are many ways to say sorry
- Making amends is part of that sorrow
- In the sacrament of reconciliation we experience the joy of the forgiveness of God and of the Christian community
- How we prepare ourselves for the Sacrament of Reconciliation – examining our conscience
- At this stage the children should know the traditional prayers of the Catholic community:
  - Sign of the Cross
  - Our Father
  - Hail Mary
  - Glory Be
  - An Act of Contrition

In preparation for First Reconciliation it is important that the readiness of the child is considered

A child is ready if they are capable of the following:

- To distinguish good from bad
- To forgive
- To accept forgiveness
- To admit their faults
- To be able to make amends so as to live as Jesus teaches us

The US National Catechetical Directory, *Sharing the Light of Faith*, outlines a four-fold catechesis for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, stressing:

- the relationship of the sacrament to the child's own life,
- the understanding of moral good and evil, the necessity of repentance, and the desire to turn to Christ and His Church for forgiveness,
- the knowledge that faith is expressed in this sacrament through forgiving and being forgiven, - the importance of approaching the sacrament freely and regularly.126

It is desirable that there be a significant period of time between the celebration of First Reconciliation and First Communion. Ideally the catechesis for Reconciliation should be clearly separate from that for First Communion so that the distinctive nature of the two sacraments is not confused.

## Resources for First Reconciliation Preparation:

Published resources:

*We Believe & Celebrate First Penance*, publ. Sadlier, 2006  
*Loved and Forgiven*, Joan Brown, publ. Kevin Mayhew, 1991

*Celebrating the Gift of Forgiveness*, Sr. Mary Fearon and Sandra Hirstein, publ. Brown-Roa, 1993

*As part of First Holy Communion programme:*

*I Belong*, Aileen Urquhart, publ. Redemptorist Publications, 1998 (11 sessions (2 of which prepare the children for the Sacrament of Reconciliation) and 7 parents meetings)

*God's Greatest Gift – Preparing for First Communion*, Bernadette Wilson, publ. ViewPoint Resources Direct, 1995 (10 sessions and 10 celebrations; the programme includes preparation for First Reconciliation)

FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS

*Journey Together Towards Reconciliation*, Paddy Rylands, publ. Kevin Mayhew, 2000

DVDs:

FOR WORKING WITH PARENTS

*First Holy Communion & Reconciliation – to run 2-4 sessions -* CaFE (Catholic Faith Exploration), [www.faithcafe.org](http://www.faithcafe.org)

*Parents – You, Your Children & their Catholic Faith* – David Wells – 7 talks - CaFE [www.faithcafe.org](http://www.faithcafe.org)

Further Reading:

FOR PARENTS

*Your Child's First Confession*: Rosemary Gallagher, publ. Redemptorist Publications

*Your Child's First Penance*: Carol Luebering, *Handing on the Faith Series*, publ. St. Anthony's Press, 2000

*Will our children believe?* Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., publ. Veritas Family Resources, Dublin, 1999

## DIOCESAN POLICY ON PREPARATION FOR FIRST RECONCILIATION

It is diocesan policy for the children to be prepared for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion in the parish. This preparation should take place in school year 3 (the year in which the child turns 8 years old).

Parents are expected to attend a number of sessions, so that they can understand the process of preparation that the parish is providing for the children, and to be helped to play their own particular and important part in helping prepare their children for their first and continuing reception of these sacraments. This involvement of the parents in the catechesis, and in witnessing to the place of the sacraments in the life of Catholics is regarded as a critically important element in the parish-based preparation for First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion.

In accordance with the mind of the Universal Church, First Reconciliation precedes First Holy Communion.

## Learning from the Rite of Penance:

**Rite 1 – for Individual Penitents**

**Reception of the Penitent**

Greeting

Sign of the Cross

Invitation to trust

Revelation of state of life

*The priest welcomes the penitent warmly and greets him or her with kindness, together they make the Sign of the Cross. The priest prays that the penitent may trust in the mercy of God. The penitent tells the priest that this is their first confession 'and anything else which may help the confessor in exercising his ministry.*

**Liturgy of the Word**

Call to conversion



The priest or the penitent may read a passage from scripture which helps in recognising the need for conversion and God's loving mercy.

### Liturgy of Reconciliation

#### Confession Of Sins

The penitent confesses his or her sins (according to the customary formula). The priest helps the penitent to make a complete confession and encourages them to have sincere sorrow for their sins. He will offer counsel to help the penitent to change and grow in the Christian life.

#### Acceptance of Satisfaction

The priest gives the penitent an act of penance or satisfaction. This should help to make up for the past, to begin again and to help the penitent in times of weakness. It may take the form of prayer, self-denial, service of one's neighbour, works of mercy (underlining the social aspect of sin.).

#### The Prayer Of The Penitent

The penitent prays a prayer of sorrow or contrition – resolving to try to begin again.

#### Absolution

The priest extends his hand over the head of the penitent and says the words of absolution:-

God the Father of mercies,  
through the death and resurrection of his Son,  
has reconciled the world to Himself  
and sent the Holy Spirit among us  
for the forgiveness of sins;  
through the ministry of the Church  
may God give you pardon and peace,  
and I absolve you from your sins  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

#### Conclusion

Proclamation of Praise of God and Dismissal

In words expressing praise of God in response to the sacrament, the priest dismisses the penitent.

Many parishes celebrate First Reconciliation as a communal celebration, with individual confession – Rite II. Parents are encouraged to celebrate the individual sacrament also

#### Basic outline of Rite II:

Opening song

Greeting

Opening prayer

Scripture reading

Short homily

General examination of conscience

Community confession of sorrow (possibly use the Act of Sorrow they memorized)

Individual confession and absolution

Personal or communal penance (according to circumstances)

Thanksgiving and dismissal

Depending on number the parish may consider inviting extra priests.

## THE ROLE OF PARENTS

To help parents grow in their understanding and appreciation of their right and responsibility to be intimately involved in preparing their children for the Sacrament of First Penance and Reconciliation some formation should be offered.

The role and importance of the family should be highlighted and affirmed while, at the same time, reinforcing the parents understanding of this sacrament as an opportunity to acknowledge their sinfulness, their times of estrangement from God and their need for ongoing conversion and forgiveness.

## Training for the Preparation Team:

- Training and formation will be initially offered by the parish priest who will be able to guide catechists in an understanding of the sacrament and will have resources available in the parish
- such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church and existing resources for First Reconciliation preparation
- Contact your diocesan Catechetical Adviser or check the diocesan website: [www.rcdow.org.uk/catechesis](http://www.rcdow.org.uk/catechesis), to ask what supplementary training opportunities there are in the diocese.
- Check the diocesan website for information, articles and resources.

## Further Reading & Resources for Catechists:

- **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, Geoffrey Chapman, London, revised 1999
- **On the Threshold – the report of the Bishops' Conference Working Party on Sacramental Initiation**, Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Matthew James Pub, 2000
- **A New Look at the Sacraments**, William Bausch, Twenty-third Publications, New London, Connecticut 1983
- **Sacraments Revisited**, Liam Kelly, Darton, Longman, Todd, London, 1998
- **The Quality of Mercy – A Fresh Look at the Sacrament of Reconciliation**, John Arnold, Pauline Multimedia, 1993

Useful websites for purchase of resources:

Pauline Books & Media- [www.pauline-uk.org](http://www.pauline-uk.org)

St Pauls – [www.stpauls.org.uk](http://www.stpauls.org.uk)

McCrimmons – [www.mccrimmons.com](http://www.mccrimmons.com)

Amazon Books – [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

## How to help and encourage lapsed parents:

- It is important to help parents who are distanced from the Church to feel welcome and to appreciate the importance of belonging to the Christian community. (See *On the Threshold*, in the resources for catechists listed above.)
- Introduce parents who are not practicing to parents with children of about the same age who are practising.
- Invite parents to come to the Parent & Toddler group (or other social groups for young parents and their children).
- Do not assume knowledge and be careful not to come across as patronising.
- Invite – but do not pressurise – the parents to become involved in the life of the parish.

## How to help and encourage a non-Catholic or a non-Christian parent:

- It is important to help parents to feel welcome and to appreciate the importance of belonging to the Christian community. (See *On the Threshold* in the resources for catechists listed above.)
- Consider inviting parents to come to the RCIA sessions in the parish, where they will learn more about Catholicism (without putting any pressure on them to become Catholics)
- Introduce the couples to other couples of mixed faith
- Consider giving them publications such as *How to survive being married to a Catholic* or *Your Faith – a popular presentation of Catholic belief*.