

The First Celebration of The Sacrament of Penance with Children

Introduction

“Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offense 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 prayers labors for their conversion.” CCC #1422

- 1.** Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance for the first time should be an integral part of the ongoing religious experience of the children leading to a lifelong process of conversion. When catechizing, a child’s mental, moral, physical and cultural needs should be taken into consideration.
- 2.** Since Sacraments are a community celebration, First Reconciliation for a child should occur in a communal setting. All members of the parish community should be advised of and invited to the celebration of this sacred event. Opportunities for sacramental celebration of Penance in a communal setting with individual confession and absolution should be provided on a regular basis.
- 3.** As the primary educators of their child, parent/guardian have the first and most important influence on the faith development of their child. The best and most fruitful catechesis for the first reception of Penance must involve them. Parishes must provide catechesis for parent/guardian on Penance before their child’s first celebration of the sacrament. This catechesis must include the Church’s rich teachings of the sacrament and should be designed to deepen the parent/guardian understanding and love of the sacrament, to help them teach their child to grow morally and celebrate this sacrament.
- 4.** The normal time for a child to be catechized and receive the Sacrament of Penance for the first time is in the fall and winter seasons of second grade. Preparation for the First Reception of Holy Communion should begin after the catechesis and First Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has been completed.

Policies

Prerequisites for Candidacy

1. At least one parent should be a practicing, active members of their Parish Faith Community.
2. Parent/guardian must provide a copy of the child's Baptismal certificate if baptized in a Parish other than in the one in which he/she will receive the sacrament of Penance.
3. A child must have attained the age and/or use of reason.¹
4. Parent/guardian and the child are expected to participate in the Sunday Mass every week.
5. A child must have completed the previous year of formal religious education in a Catholic school, the parish program or in their previous parish. A child who receives catechesis as part of an overall home school program the previous year must follow text that is currently listed on the conformity list approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
6. A child must be currently participating in a program of systematic, approved catechesis either in a Catholic school or as a registered student of a parish program. A Child who is receiving religious education as part of an overall home school program must follow text that is currently listed on the conformity list approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
7. At the same time, the child must also be enrolled in a parish process of preparation for the sacrament of Penance in which children from the Catholic schools, home schooling and the catechetical ministry programs are united. They must participate in all of its communal dimensions (ritual, prayer services, etc.) and any other requirements determined by the parish.
8. Any child, through age 17, who does not meet these prerequisites, is addressed in the Pastoral Considerations section of this document.

¹ *Canon #97.2:* Before the completion of the seventh year a minor is called an infant and is to be held incompetent (non sui compos): with the completion of the seventh year one is presumed to have the use of reason.

Catechesis

- 1.** Catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede and be kept distinct and separate from the catechesis for the celebration of First Holy Communion.²
- 2.** Catechesis should be based upon the Rite of Penance, be attentive to the experiences of the child, sensitive to their language and family considerations and foster active involvement in liturgical celebrations.
- 3.** Catechesis for the child must be taken from text that have been found to be in doctrinal compliance with the Catechism of the Catholic Church by the Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on the Catechism and should:
 - A.** Emphasize God's infinite love, His call to conversion and His mercy and forgiveness.
 - B.** Familiarize the child with the Church's ministry of reconciliation entrusted to it by Christ and its power to forgive sin.
 - C.** Lead the child to understand and acknowledge the presence of good and evil in the world as well as in themselves and the need for forgiveness.
 - D.** Help the child establish values and priorities in accordance with those found in scripture and the teachings of the Church.
 - E.** Help the child understand the nature and effect of sin, both personal and social.
 - F.** Encourage the child to be truly sorry for their sins and help them understand the importance of good moral choices and of not committing the sin again.
 - G.** Prepare the child to turn to Christ and the Church for sacramental forgiveness.
 - H.** Acquaint the child with the Rite of Penance and with the prayers and responses used during penance celebrations.

² *Canon #914* part 1: It is the responsibility of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as the pastor to see the children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession.

CCC #1457: Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

- I. Call attention to the obligation to confess serious sins at least once a year.³ There should be an emphasis placed for on-going, regular and frequent reception of the sacrament.

4. Catechesis for Parent/Guardian

- A. Because of their intimate role in the formation of a child's moral conscience, parent/guardian are to be involved in the preparation of their children for this sacrament and be living witnesses of continuing conversion.
- B. Parent/guardian of all children are to participate in those catechetical programs offered by the parish for parent/guardian to help them grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the communal aspect of the sacrament of Penance and to assist them in catechizing their child.⁴ These sessions must include the Church's rich teachings of the sacrament and should be sensitive to the language and inviting to the faith experience of those involved.

Discernment of Readiness

1. The child should understand that sin is a bad moral choice that hurts one's relationship with God, themselves and others, that they should be sorry for their sins and that they should try not to sin again.
2. The child should clearly understand that only God forgives sin. In confession we receive absolution through the Divine Authority bestowed on the priest.
3. It is ultimately the responsibility of the parish Pastor or Sacramental Minister in collaboration with the parents/guardians, program director and catechist to ensure that the children have reached the age and/or use of reason and are properly prepared.⁵

³ *Canon #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.

CCC # 1457: According to the Church's command, "after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year."

⁴ *Canon #914*, part 1: It is the responsibility, in the first place, of parents and those who take the place of parents as well as the pastor to see that the children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared.

⁵ *Canon #843*, part 2: Pastors of souls and other members of the Christian faithful, according to their respective ecclesiastical function, have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority.

The Celebration of the Sacrament

1. Because of the communal nature of this sacrament, the Rite for Reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution is the preferred way to celebrate First Reconciliation.⁶
2. Confessors should be prepared for and be especially sensitive to the psychological, faith and moral development of the children.

Pastoral Considerations

1. Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance for children with disabilities

In compliance with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we should always strive to make all forms of liturgy and sacraments accessible to persons with disabilities. The inclusion of these special people provides the community with a reminder that the Christian community reflects the diversity of God's love. Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.

Through their Baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling. Only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin. As long as the child is capable of having a sense of contrition for having committed sin, even if he or she cannot describe the sin in words, the child may receive sacramental absolution.

Children who are deaf should have the opportunity to confess to a priest able to communicate with them in sign language if that is their primary means of communication. They may also confess through an approved interpreter of their choice. The interpreter is bound to respect the seal of confession.⁷ When no priest or interpreter with signing skills is

⁶ *NDC #124*: The revised ritual offers various forms and options for celebrating this sacrament. Among these are communal celebrations, which more clearly show its ecclesial nature.

⁷ *Canon # 983.2*: The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession are also obliged to observe secrecy.

available, they should be permitted to confess in writing. These written materials should be destroyed by the priest.

2. Home Schooled Children.

The diocese recognizes that parents are the primary educators of their child, and that some parents choose to live out their role of primary educators by providing formal catechesis at home. The parish pastor and his delegates also have the responsibility to provide catechetical instruction for the children. The rights and responsibilities of parents and the parish call for collaboration between the two. The same prerequisites for candidacy apply to children who are home schooled for religious education as are required for children in parish programs and Catholic schools. These are detailed in the **Prerequisites for Candidacy** section of this document.

3. Special Considerations

Every year most parish programs are faced with the enrollment of children Catholic and non-Catholic, who are not in sequence with the norms of our Diocese. Determination of where these students belong in a specific program/process must be made on an individual basis through an interview process that may include the family, pastor or sacramental minister and program coordinator.

Catholic Families

Baptized Catholic children of Catholic families who are not catechized to age/grade level need to fulfill the prerequisite of a year of approved formal catechesis before starting a sacramental preparation program. Special consideration should be given to the families of these older children, as the parents/guardians also have need of catechesis.⁸ Parishes should consider instituting a process such as *Remembering Church* or *Coming Home* as the best way to help bring these families back into the faith community. Parishes are strongly encouraged to require family participation in this type of process in addition to the child's regular participation in religious education classes. Participation in this type of process *may* fulfill the prerequisite of a previous year of religious education, but final decisions on this should be done on an individual basis.

⁸ N.B. Parishes catechizing baptized Catholic children over the age of seven may include those children in an RCIA process for catechesis. They should receive the Sacrament of Penance before the reception of First Holy Communion, and while they *may* receive First Holy Communion at the Easter Vigil, they should not be confirmed.

Catholic or Non-Catholic Families

Un-baptized children, from either Catholic or non-Catholic families, or baptized non-Catholic children, over the age of seven, should be included in an RCIA process. After completing this process, they should be fully initiated into the Church through Baptism/Profession of Faith, Eucharist and Confirmation. Family participation in this process is expected as these parent/guardian need to be involved in a formation process that supports their child's journey towards the sacraments as well as their own faith journey.

Promulgated on September 30, 2004 by

Most Reverend Michael J. Sheridan
Bishop of Colorado Springs

**Bibliography of References Used
For the Policies for the First Celebration of
The Sacrament of Penance with Children**

- Canon* The Code of Canon Law
- CCC* Catechism of the Catholic Church
- NDC* The National Directory for Catechesis