



**PENANCE  
AND  
FIRST PENANCE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

## **I. General Introduction:**

The title, *Ordo Paenitentiae*, given to the Rite of Penance as revised after Vatican II indicates a new emphasis in the sacrament. It is intended to designate the three sacramental rites (ceremony and words) and also the forms of penitential celebrations which are not concluded with sacramental absolution. In the past the sacrament of penance was referred to as “confession” because of the importance placed upon the confession of our sins. Confession does not convey all the richness of meaning which this sacrament has in the life of the Church. The change of name, Order of Penance (repentance), indicates the desire of the Church to call the faithful to continual conversion and renewal.

The community/social aspect of sin and of reconciliation is made evident through Rites II and III. The inclusion of penitential rites which are non-sacramental give the opportunity for Parish communities to gather at appropriate times to face their need for sorrow, healing and conversion of life because of their faults and sinfulness. They may be used to help prepare for confession, or for deepening and expressing in common our continual commitment to conversion. They may even serve the purpose of helping the faithful reach a sense of sin, conversion and repentance in a place where the priest is not available on a regular basis to celebrate the sacrament.

The Rite of Penance (sometimes referred to as Reconciliation) is a symbolic action through which people are reconciled to God and to one another. Therefore, the use of symbolic elements and actions expressive of God’s mercy and healing love serve as external vehicles carrying the message of what is happening internally. Often the effectiveness of the sacrament on lives is conditioned by how well we celebrate, how well we use our symbols and rituals.

The guidelines below address aspects specifically related to the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with children. However the outline of Rites I, II and III and the suggestions for preparation of the celebration apply to general parish celebrations which are greatly encouraged.

*The Code of Canon Law* requires that children be prepared for their first reception of the sacraments of Eucharist and Penance. Generally, First Penance is to precede First Eucharist (see below, Canon 914). Since the child is prepared, an opportunity to receive the sacrament of Penance must be offered at the parish prior to First Eucharist. However, children cannot be required to receive Penance as a condition for receiving communion (see Canon 912 & 988-§1).



## **II. Canonical Requirements:**

### **Canon 912**

*Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.*

### **Canon 914**

*It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children who have reached the use of reason are prepared properly and, after they have made sacramental confession, are refreshed with this divine food as soon as possible. It is for the pastor to exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach holy communion.*

### **Canon 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.*

## **III. Catechetical Preparation for First Penance:**

Parish catechetical leaders are charged with presenting a specific immediate catechesis for the sacrament of Penance prior to beginning the catechesis for First Eucharist. The bishops of the United States in the *National Catechetical Directory* have stated,

Catechesis for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to precede First Communion and 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 and so that, before receiving First Communion, the child will be familiar with the revised Rite of Reconciliation and will be at ease with the reception of the sacrament. The Sacrament of Reconciliation normally should be celebrated prior to the reception of First Communion (#126).

### **A. Remote Preparation:**

#### **1. Use of Reason**

- Before children are introduced to individual confession of sin, their capacity for moral judgment should be developed sufficiently so that they can distinguish between an accidental wrong and a deliberate wrong.
- They need to know the difference between a blameless act and one for which they are accountable.



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2. Consciousness of Sin (*National Catechetical Directory, #125*)

- Children should be introduced to the sacrament when their sense of sin is sufficiently developed and they are able to understand that sin injures their relationship with God and the community and calls for pardon. They are able to appreciate both the personal and social dimensions of sin and the public dimensions of reconciliation.
- Children should be introduced to the sacrament only when they sufficiently possess an ability to communicate with the confessor, in their own terms and in accord with their own experiences, about those failures to love for which they are accountable. Children who are overly dependent on memorized formulas and stylized lists of sins may not be ready for the sacrament.

3. Concerning Sequence and Timing

In the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings the specific immediate catechesis for First Penance and its reception must demonstrate the distinctiveness of this sacrament through a separate catechesis and by a substantial period of time (two to four months) between the reception of First Penance and First Eucharist.

4. Concerning the Role of Parents and Pastor

The decision as to whether or not a child is to receive the sacrament of Penance prior to First Communion is primarily the responsibility of the parents and the child who should consult with the priest and catechist. However, it is expected that in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings each child will normally celebrate Penance before First Eucharist.

Additional opportunities should be provided prior to First Communion for the reception of the sacrament of Penance by children who have celebrated First Reconciliation earlier.

- Preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation must be sufficiently removed in time from preparation for other sacraments so that each stands as a significant experience of their encounter with God (*NCD 126* ).
  - Ideally, preparation for the sacrament should take place during the season of Lent, in order to experience the atmosphere of repentance that the community of believers celebrates during that time.
  - Though preparation for Penance is offered prior to the child's experience of First Eucharist, the fact of preparation does not necessitate the immediate reception of the sacrament (*Canons 988-989* ).
  - The age at which children develop sufficient readiness for individual reconciliation will vary from child to child. Some may be ready at the age of seven or eight; others may be ready only when they have reached more mature years (*NCD #181*).
  - The child, and his or her parents, are responsible for deciding the timing of the first experience of sacramental reconciliation.



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- The decision about a child's readiness for individual confession should not be made hastily. The possible negative results of premature confession - anxiety, scrupulosity, negative attitudes about God, mechanical practice - pose risks that can be avoided if parents and catechists exercise diligence in leading the child to the sacrament. A child who is not ready can only experience distress and will ultimately be led away from this valuable experience of God's healing love.

**5. Content of Preparation (NCD #126)**

The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings recommends that age-appropriate curriculum materials and texts be used in the catechetical formation of children preparing for Penance. It is the policy of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings that only curriculum approved and listed on *The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts* is used in parish and school catechetical formation programs. This list is extensive and can be obtained by contacting the Diocesan Office of Youth Catechesis or the USCCB website:

[www.usccb.org/catechism/document/currentlist.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/catechism/document/currentlist.pdf)

Themes and content to be covered in catechesis should include:

- a) God's love at work in our lives
- b) Our freedom in responding to God's love
- c) The imperfection of human nature because of original sin, and the possibility of abusing our freedom, thereby offending God and hurting oneself and others
- d) God's love calling us to receive forgiveness, and becoming forgiving people
- e) The role of the family and Christian Community supporting us and calling us to repentance
- f) The method(s) by which Catholic Christians celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation
- g) The basic concept of the confessional seal

**B. Immediate Preparation**

1. Immediate catechesis for First Reconciliation may begin when most students have reached their seventh birthday (second grade).

2. After the parents and child have consulted with the pastor or priest and catechists regarding the child's readiness to receive, a ceremony of first reception may take place.

a) Regardless of the approved textbook/manual used, parental involvement is vital (NCD #126; CIC 914 – see the following section).

b) The process of preparation should not be limited to a school setting but joined to the parish religious formation program, so that the experience of preparation be more than an intellectual exercise and be seen as part of parish life.



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- c) An essential element of the catechesis of children is participation in penitential experiences and services in the home, the classroom and with the parish community. This helps to communicate the connection of the sacrament with everyday life. Therefore, these should be part of immediate preparation and all ongoing processes.
- d) Pastors must emphasize the role Catholic parents play in modeling the necessity of regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- e) Children need to become familiar with the Reconciliation Room so they have a comfort level with the space and the priest, and with being alone, without the parents, in the celebration of the sacrament.

3. Preparing children for three sacraments (Penance, Confirmation and First Eucharist) is a pastoral challenge. Therefore, pastors and catechists may wish to consider presenting Penance a year prior to the other two sacraments.

4. Parents are the primary persons involved in the actual preparation of the child. Catechists should be considered in the role of support to the family process.

- a) Support sessions are to be held for parents in order to assure them of their ability to work with the child
- b) Background and historical perspectives should be provided for parents to aid in their continued growth in the understanding of the sacrament

5. It is extremely helpful for the child's understanding of the social aspects of reconciliation for them to experience communal celebrations of non-sacramental reconciliation in which the family participates (NCD # 99) .

6. Pastors and catechists are encouraged to challenge parents to reflect on the sign-value of putting their children through this sacrament while at the same time do not receive the sacrament themselves.

### C. Penance and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and Children of Catechetical Age

Special consideration has to be given the topic of Penance in relation to the RCIA. Baptism is the first sacrament received; one may not receive other sacraments before being baptized. Baptism takes away all sin and gives us a new start in life. Therefore, there is no reception of the sacrament of Penance by those participating in the RCIA (adult or children of catechetical age).

However, the celebration of Scrutinies in the RCIA (with children and adults) is where careful preparation is needed as these celebrations form the basis of their later understanding of reconciliation and healing through the sacrament of



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Penance. The ritual of the Scrutinies in RCIA is done in litany form and consists of prayers to reject the things in one's life that are displeasing and contrary to Christ and the strengthening of those qualities which are positive and good.

The Scrutinies accent the rejection of evil and growth of good in one's life, but also mention sin and the fact that all are sinners. Thus, catechists can build on the understanding of the need to acknowledge the evil inclinations in our lives which may lead us into sin, the need to confess those times when we give in to sin, and the place of reconciliation and healing in order to promote and increase the good in our lives.

For adults this discussion could come when preparing for the celebration of Scrutinies during the three Sundays of Lent or it could be part of the session(s) on the sacraments of the Church. The discussion needs to cover the sacramental theology of confession, sorrow, forgiveness, healing through commitment to not sin again and the sacramental seal. It also needs to include time for development of conscience and moral decision making.

For children of catechetical age there is an added dimension which needs addressing. Their peers are often preparing for the completion of the sacraments of initiation. This will include (several months or the year previous) preparation for Penance. It is most important that the two celebrations (Scrutinies and Penance) be kept separate. They also need a basic understanding of sacramental seal.

Please note; in Part II of the RCIA which deals with the initiation of children of catechetical age, the Scrutinies are referred to as "penitential rites". In #293 there is the recommendation that the baptized peers may use this ritual as the time to celebrate their first sacramental Penance. Experts in the field are very concerned about mixing these two (sacramental and non-sacramental) in the same celebration and advise against it. If the baptized peers are to be present, it should be for their edification and increase in understanding; their celebration of the sacrament should come before or later. The children being initiated will need further instruction and preparation after they have been initiated and received First Eucharist.

The above may present some difficulty for parents as they ponder why children of the same age as those preparing for Penance are able to receive First Holy Communion without first receiving the Sacrament of Penance as part of the sacraments of initiation. This is where the theology of Baptism may need to be re-taught to the entire community.



**IV. Liturgical Guidelines for the first celebration of Penance with children:**

**A. Communal Celebrations (Sacramental)**

- It is recommended that the child's first experience with the sacrament of Penance occur within a communal setting
- The sacrament of Penance is an encounter with God that we experience in the midst of our community of faith, the Church
- Communal celebrations of reconciliation show more clearly the ecclesial nature of Penance (*Rite of Penance*, Introduction #22)
- If the faith community, especially the parents, model the values inherent in the sacrament and celebrate it as a natural and viable part of Christian life, then children will also recognize the need for continual conversion and reconciliation

**B. Penitential Celebrations (Non-sacramental)**

The *Rite of Penance* mentions children only in connection with the penitential celebrations (see *Rite of Penance*, Appendix II #43-53).

1. Penitential celebrations are helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart. They help children gradually form their conscience regarding sin in and about freedom from sin through Christ (*Rite of Penance*, Introduction #37).
2. The Rite of Penance suggests the value of progressive formation in conversion and repentance, proceeding from the penitential celebration to a communal celebration with individual confession and finally to the individual rite.
3. The season of Lent is the most appropriate time for celebrating the sacrament of Penance (*Rite of Penance*, Introduction #13).
4. It is fitting to have penitential celebrations during Lent, giving opportunities for both children and adults to be reconciled with God and neighbor, and leading to celebration of the Easter Triduum with renewed hearts. See *Rite of Penance*, Appendix II #5, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy CSL #109*.

**C. Preparation for the liturgical celebration (First Penance or parish celebration)**

In preparation for a penance service (i.e., Rite I, II or a penitential celebration, that is, a non-sacramental one) a person must understand the structures within which one works. These are found in the rite itself. Also, excellent background material is found in the *praenotanda* (introduction) to the rites. Preparation is a matter of choices and specific spelling out of what is to take place within a particular celebration, the when, what, by whom, and how. The preparation session needs to include priest, catechist, members of the liturgy commission, representative parents and children. Specific suggestions are listed following the outline of the rites.



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The space for celebrating the individual rite needs to be private and confidential and yet abide by the requirements of “Protecting our Children.” The conversation within the room should not be audible from outside. The option of anonymous confession must be available.

Know the structure of the sacrament of Penance (Order of Penance) before planning.

The three rites are outlined below. Rite II is the preference for the celebration of First Penance and thus is given first.





## **II. Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution**

### **Introductory Rites**

- Opening Hymn or Antiphon
- Greeting
- Prayer (exhortation, statement of purpose, invitation to pray; moments of silence; the prayer.)

### **CELEBRATION OF THE WORD**

- (Obligatory), Reading from Gospel or several texts. Responsorial Psalm and /or silence.
- Homily
- Examination of Conscience

### **RITE OF RECONCILIATION**

- General confession (e.g., Confiteor or litany)
- Song or litany
- Lord's Prayer
- Individual Confession
- Giving of an act of penance or satisfaction
- Individual Absolution
- Proclamation of God's mercy, hymn or antiphon, or prayer of presider.

### **CONCLUDING RITE**

- Blessing of all.
- Dismissal Dialogue with congregation.

## **I. Individual Penitent**

### **Introductory Rites**

- In the name of the Father...
- Presider briefly draws penitent to faith and trust in God's healing and welcomes the penitent.

### **CELEBRATION OF THE WORD**

(Recommended but not obligatory). Presider reads, or from memory, recites Sacred Scripture text in which the mercy of God is announced and person is called to conversion.



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RITE OF RECONCILIATION

- Confession of sins and the possible advice from the presider.
- Prayer of penitent in which sorrow is expressed.
- Giving of a penance or act of satisfaction
- Absolution, with the gesture of imposed hands.
- Praise of God in dialogue with presider.

CONCLUDING RITE

- Dismissal of penitent in proclamation form or in prayer form.



### **III Several Penitents (With General Absolution)**

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**\*\*\*\*This rite may be used only in exceptional circumstances  
and must be reported to the bishop afterward.**

#### GREETING

1. Opening Hymn
2. Greeting
3. Introduction; invitation, exhortation
4. Prayer

#### CELEBRATION OF THE WORD

4. (Obligatory), Reading from a Gospel or several texts. Response and/or silence.
5. Homily and examen that draws out confession of sinfulness, imposing of a penance or act of satisfaction.
6. Reminder that any grave sins are to be confessed later under more favorable circumstances.

#### RITE OF RECONCILIATION

6. General confession and sign of penance by those desiring to receive, (e.g. kneeling or head bowed, litany, Confiteor).
7. Our Father.
8. General Absolution
9. Proclamation of God's mercy.

#### CONCLUDING RITE

1. Song or hymn
2. Blessing of All
3. Dismissal Dialogue

#### Suggestions for preparing the celebration:

- Clearly define what you are going to celebrate, with whom (age group)
- Sacramental or non-Sacramental
  - Rite I or II: Community or Individual



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Decide on the central concept, understanding you wish to promote, based on:

- Time of liturgical year
- Type of Rite to be celebrated
- Age of persons involved
- Role of community

Begin by planning with the Scriptures:

- How many Readings?
- What theology; Old or New Testament?

Sacred space needs to foster the hearing of God's Word – a chapel-like setting perhaps.

- space arrangement
- seating
- sound system
- lighting
- environment

Choose options in relation to the Word and the understanding of reconciliation:

Words, actions, dialogue, homily, confession of sin, the choice of an act of satisfaction, the meaning of God's Word

Consider the use of symbols:

- A multiplicity of symbols confuses rather than facilitates celebration
- Differentiate between primary (laying on of hands) and secondary symbols/actions (use of incense or candles, etc.)
- Strive for integration of elements used

Facilitate an experience of reconciliation:

- with a spirit of comfortableness
- without over-directing
- within an appropriate period of time

**Scripture** - The Rite of Penance suggests over 100 readings and Psalms for use in communal celebrations of reconciliation. Other readings may be chosen from scripture according to the nature of the gathered community. The principles outlined in the *Introduction: To the Lectionary for Masses with Children* would apply to communal celebrations of reconciliation or penitential services (e.g. the Gospel is never omitted; see #16 *Introduction: Lectionary for Masses with Children*, 1993 USCC).

**Music** - The principles outlined in the liturgy document *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* provide fine reference for inclusion of music in the celebration.

"The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution normally requires 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 the absolution. The litany within the General Confession of Sins (alternating between the deacon or cantor and the assembly) or another appropriate song may also be sung, as well as the Lord's Prayer. Singing or soft instrumental



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music may be used during the time of individual confessions, especially when a large number of people is present for the celebration” (229).

**Silence** - The proper place of silence must not be neglected in communal celebrations of reconciliation (e.g., following the readings and homily and as part of the examination of conscience). Children are capable of silent reflection (see *Directory for Masses With Children*, #37 and *Rite of Penance*, Introduction #24).

**Ministers** - The Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and presbyters. In communal celebrations of reconciliation (like all liturgical celebrations) other ministers e.g., deacons, lectors, cantors, musicians, ministers of welcome and hospitality are to perform those ministries that pertain to their office (see *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #28).

**Good liturgy presumes something to celebrate, however, good liturgical celebration can also help bring about what is being ritualized.**

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