

RECONCILIATION: The SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

A VERY Brief Overview of the Sacrament of Penance

(Excerpts from the Diocese of Green Bay's 1997 Sacrament of Penance Guidelines)

Theology of Reconciliation

- Meaning and Source of Reconciliation
- Reconciliation as a Process
- Reconciliation in Relationship to Other Sacraments
- Celebrating the Sacrament of Penance

Reconciliation: Its Various Forms (pp 2-5)

- Early Penitential Discipline
- Canonical Penance
- Tariff Penance
- Teaching on Penance
- Tridentine Teaching on Penance
- The New Rite of Penance

Reconciliation Competencies, Components and Experiences

These statements of competencies, components and experiences are meant for those who coordinate or direct the formation process for all who wish to celebrate reconciliation, including those preparing for First Reconciliation. Competencies, components and experiences that can be expected of elementary children, including those who have reached the age of reason . . .

- Understanding of Reconciliation
- Signs of Readiness
 - Psychological/Spiritual Well-being
 - Moral Development
- Experiences of Reconciliation: Demonstrated Skills

References

- National Catechetical Directory 125 An understanding of sin, of oneself as a sinner, and of the conditions requisite for a serious sin are necessary preliminaries in catechesis for this sacrament. The catechesis itself emphasizes God's mercy and loving forgiveness. It also emphasizes that faith, a gift of God, is a call to conversion from sin. Catechesis for Reconciliation challenges people to acknowledge the difference between good and evil in the social order, to measure their values and priorities against those of the gospel and the church, to accept individual and corporate responsibility for their decisions and the consequences of those decisions, and to repent of their participation in evil.
- Canon 959 In the sacrament of penance the faithful, confessing their sins to a legitimate minister, being sorry for them, and at the same time proposing to reform, obtain from God forgiveness of sins committed after baptism through the absolution imparted by the same minister; and they likewise are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning.
- Decree on Penance I, 1. Jesus, however not only exhorted men (people) to repentance so that they should abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, but he also welcomed sinners and reconciled them with the Father. Moreover, by healing the sick he signified his power to forgive sin, Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justification, Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion, he instituted the sacrifice of the new covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. After his resurrection he sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name.
- The Lord said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed also in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). In obedience to this command, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the forgiveness of sins by baptism: "Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Since then the Church has never failed to call men (all) from sin to conversion and by the celebration of penance to

	show the victory of Christ over sin.
Canon 965	Only a priest is the minister of the sacrament of penance.
Canon 966.1	For the valid absolution of sins it is required that, besides the power received through sacred ordination, the minister possess the faculty to exercise that power over the faithful to whom he imparts absolution.
Canon 983.1	The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason.
Canon 983.2	An interpreter, if there is one present, is also obliged to preserve the secret, and also all others to whom knowledge of sins from confession shall come in any way.
Decree on Penance III, 8.	The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation which has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with material care and solicitude to acknowledge and admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors.
Decree on Penance: Introduction, 2.	"This victory is first brought to light in baptism where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God. For this reason the Church proclaims its faith in "the one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."
Decree on Penance 11, 7.	Moreover, frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly. In confession of this kind, penitents who accuse themselves of venial faults should try to conform more closely to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively.
Catechism of the Catholic Church 1446	Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as "the second plank (of salvation) after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace."
Decree on Penance IV, 22.	When a number of penitents assemble at the same time to receive sacramental reconciliation, it is fitting that they be prepared for the sacrament by a celebration of the word of God. Those who will receive the sacrament at another time may also take part in the service, Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which proclaims his mercy and invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After each person has confessed his (or her) sins and received absolution, all praise God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son. If necessary, several priests should be available in suitable places to hear individual confessions and to reconcile the penitents.
Canon 964.1	The proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or an oratory
Canon 964.2	The conference of bishops is to issue norms concerning the confessional, seeing to it that confessionals with a fixed grille between penitent and confessor are always located in an open area so that the faithful who wish to make use of them may do so freely.
Canon 964.3	Confessions are not to be heard outside the confessional without a just cause.
Decree on Penance II, 4.	The people of God accomplishes and perfects this continual repentance in many different ways. It shares in the suffering of Christ by enduring its own difficulties, carries out works of mercy and charity, and adopts ever more fully the outlook of the Gospel message. Thus the people of God becomes in the world a sign of conversion to God. All this the Church expresses in its life and celebrates in the liturgy when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. This happens in penitential services, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayer, and in the penitential aspects of the eucharistic celebration.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1459	Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much. But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself (or herself), as well as his (or her) relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his (or her) full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he (or she) must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his (or her) sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance."
Catechism of the Catholic Church 1456	Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance: "All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly." When Christ's faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember, they undoubtedly place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon. But those who fail to do so and knowingly withhold some, place nothing before the divine goodness for remission through the mediation of the priest, "for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know."
Decree on Penance IV, 19.	After this the penitent manifests his (or her) contrition and resolution to begin a new life by means of a prayer for God's pardon. It is desirable that this prayer should be based on the words of Scripture. Following this prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution, in which the essential words are: I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. As he says the final words the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. The form of absolution (see no. 46) indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.
Canon 987	In order to receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, the Christian faithful ought to be so disposed that, having repudiated the sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, they are converted to God.
Decree on Penance II, 6, a	The most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is "heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more." "We can only approach the Kingdom of Christ by metanoia. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge, and arrange his (or her) life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance" (see Hebrews 1:2; Colossians 1:19 ff). The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within so that it may progressively enlighten him (or her) and render him (or her) continually more like Christ.
Catechism of the Catholic Church 1455	The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others. Through such an admission man(one) looks squarely at the sins he(she) is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens himself(herself) again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible.
Canon 960	Individual and integral confession and absolution constitute the only ordinary way by which the faithful person who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God and with the Church; only physical or moral impossibility excuses the person from confession of this type, in which case reconciliation can take place in other ways.
Canon 988.1	A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and in number all serious sins committed after baptism and not yet directly remitted through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which one is conscious after diligent examination of conscience.
Canon 988.2	It is to be recommended to the Christian faithful that venial sins also be confessed.
Decree on Penance III, 10.	In order to fulfill his ministry properly and faithfully the confessor should understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them. He should fulfill his office of judge wisely and should acquire the knowledge and prudence necessary for this task by serious study, guided by the teaching authority of the Church and especially by fervent prayer to God. Discernment of spirits is a deep knowledge of God's action in the hearts of men (all); it is a gift of the Spirit as well as the fruit of charity. The confessor should always be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful when

they make a reasonable request of him.

By receiving the repentant sinner and leading him (or her) to the light of the truth the confessor fulfills a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and shows the image of Christ the good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who mercifully accomplished the saving work of man's (human) redemption and who is present by his power in the sacraments.

Decree on Penance II, 5

Since every sin is an offense against God which disrupts our friendship with him, "the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him." Therefore, the sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who "first loved us" (1 John 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly.

"By the hidden and loving mystery of God's design men (all) are joined together in the bonds of supernatural solidarity, so much so that the sin of one harms the others just as the holiness of one benefits the others." Penance always entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who are always harmed by our sins.

In fact, men (all) frequently join together to commit injustice. It is thus only fitting that they should help each other in doing penance so that freed from sin by the grace of Christ they may work with all men (people) of good will for justice and peace in the world.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1454

The reception of this sacrament ought to be prepared for by an examination of conscience made in the light of the Word of God. The passages best suited to this can be found in the moral catechesis of the Gospels and the apostolic Letters, such as the Sermon on the Mount and the apostolic teachings.

Canon 843.1

The sacred ministers can not refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, are properly disposed and are not prohibited by law from receiving them.

Decree on Penance III, 1

The acts of the penitent in the celebration of the sacrament are of the greatest importance.

When with proper dispositions he (or she) approaches this saving remedy instituted by Christ and confesses his (or her) sins, he (or she) shares by his (or her) actions in the sacrament itself; the sacrament is completed when the words of absolution are spoken by the minister in the name of Christ.

Thus the faithful Christian, as he (or she) experiences and proclaims the mercy of God in his (or her) life, celebrates with the priest the liturgy by which the Church continually renews itself.

National Catechetical Directory 125, continued

Catechesis prepares the community to celebrate in ritual the realities of repentance, conversion, and reconciliation. Everyone needs this sacrament, for we are all sinners, not just those seriously estranged from God and the Church, and we all find here an opportunity to confront our sinfulness, acknowledge our need for conversion, seek

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.

[These are excerpts from the 1997 Diocesan Sacrament of Reconciliation Guideline, which contains much more information about the Sacrament, the preparation and celebration.]