

First Penance of Children

I. EUCCHARIST AS THE CENTER OF SACRAMENTAL LIFE

God of love and mercy, you are always ready to forgive; we are sinners, and you invite us to trust in your mercy.

Time and time again we broke your covenant, but you did not abandon us. Instead, through your Son, Jesus our Lord, you bound yourself even more closely to the human family by a bond that can never be broken.

When we were lost and could not find the way to you, you loved us more than ever: Jesus, your Son, innocent and without sin, gave himself into our hands and was nailed to a cross. Yet before he stretched out his arms between heaven and earth in the everlasting sign of your covenant, he desired to celebrate the Paschal feast in the company of his disciple.

Father, look with love on those you have called to share in the one sacrifice of Christ. By the power of your Holy Spirit make them one body, healed of all division.

*Eucharistic Prayer for
Masses of Reconciliation I*

Lord our God, your Son has entrusted to us this pledge of his love. We celebrate the memory of His death and resurrection and bring you the gift you have given us, the sacrifice of reconciliation.

Therefore, we ask you, Father, to accept us, together with your Son. Fill us with his Spirit through our sharing in this meal. May he take away all that divides us.

In that new world where the fullness of your peace will be revealed, gather people of every race, language and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ the Lord.

*Eucharistic Prayer for Masses
of Reconciliation II*

- A. The Eucharist, one of the sacraments of initiation, is the core of the Church's sacramental life. Every facet of the Church's life has its birth in the Eucharist, each word and action of the Church flows from the Eucharist and all the Church's activities lead back to the Eucharist (*see Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #10*). The faithful come to the table of the Eucharist to bolster and sustain the faith of their baptism. Confirmed in faith, they go forth from the table to live out their mission as anointed people of God.
- B. When its members gather for the Eucharist, the community of faith manifests itself most completely as the Sacrament of Christ alive in and for the world. When the community welcomes new brothers and sisters to the table of the Eucharist, it carries out the will of Christ who longs to bring all people together as daughters and sons of the one God who is Creator and Father of all.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUCCHARIST AND THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

- A. As children take their place with others to participate fully in the Eucharist, they experience the joy of Christian fellowship and learn the value of being bonded and united with a community of faith. As they take communion with people of different ages and various racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, children come to understand and appreciate the realities of diversity, acceptance and tolerance. In this context, children can be invited to reflect on the realities of separation, alienation and rejection that can help them understand the nature of sin and realize the need for healing, conversion and reconciliation.
- B. As a sacrament of love and unity, the Eucharist celebrates and strengthens the bonds that exist among the members of the faith community. At the same time, the Eucharist brings to light the failures of love and unity experienced by individuals and the community itself. The Eucharist, then, constantly challenges the community and its members to mend and heal every source of alienation that jeopardizes the love and unity that are destined to be enjoyed by all people. Through Eucharist each person is linked to the One, and through the One is linked to all within the community.

- C. There is, then, a real and active connection between the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance. For this reason, children who are preparing to receive their first communion are to be introduced to the sacramental rite of reconciliation.

III. PREPARATION

“Catechesis for children prior to their first reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation must always respect their natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances.”

*National Directory for Catechesis,
Chapter 5, section #36, heading B2*

“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 children who have reached the use of reason are correctly prepared and are nourished by the divine food as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession.”

*Canon 914
(See also RS #87 and CCC ¶1457)*

“Parents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example; godparents and those who take the place of parents are bound by equivalent obligation.”

Canon 774, ¶2

- A. Every child who has reached the age of reason 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. 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. A child is to be considered ready to celebrate the sacrament of Penance when the following awareness and abilities can be demonstrated in the child, to a degree appropriate to his/her age:
- i) an awareness of the relationship of love that they have with God and neighbor;
 - ii) a knowledge that they can harm this relationship through sin, and must assume personal responsibility;
 - iii) the experience of personal sorrow for their failures and the expression of that sorrow;
 - iv) the realization that they must try to change their sinful behavior;
 - v) an understanding that the sacrament of Penance is a special sign of God’s forgiveness and/or reconciliation with one’s neighbor;
 - vi) a free desire to receive this sacrament;
 - vii) an ability to talk to the priest about the wrongs done in words and in a manner appropriate to their ages.
- C. Preparation program guidelines are found in the appendix to this section.
- D. 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.
- E. While catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede First Communion, the principle of readiness for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance must be respected.
- F. The primary decision concerning the readiness of a

particular child rests with the parent and the child with the assistance of the catechetical leadership so they will be able to make an informed decision about the readiness of their child.

IV. CELEBRATION OF FIRST PENANCE

When several children will be celebrating First Penance together:

- A. Planning for the celebration should be done by liturgical planners in consultation with those directly involved with the catechesis and the celebration.
- B. All celebrations of First Penance for children should be designed with signs, symbols, music, readings and prayers suitable to the age of those participating. The preacher should be one close to the children and one who can easily relate to the candidates.
- C. Each child should have the option of anonymous or face-to-face confession, done in a manner that respects the privacy of the confession and makes clear the church's concern to protect the child's safety.
- D. Adequate preparation must be done so that the candidate may participate as completely as possible in the liturgical celebration.

V. 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. The catechesis for Penance continues developmentally and progressively throughout a parish's religious education program and its preaching.

Parents and pastoral teams must make it their responsibility to provide adequate opportunities for one-to-one celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance. Since young people often celebrate First Penance using Rite II, it becomes necessary that a child have adequate exposure to feel comfortable with Rite I as the norm.