

The Historical Understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and First Penance

The celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a celebration of the forgiveness of God. It helps us to put the past behind us and go forward in faith with God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation might also be understood as Confession. Confession is the action of the believer participating in the sacrament. Reconciliation can be understood as the action of God, whose love for us surpasses anything we may have done. Reconciliation with God is important. It completes what God does in, with and through us.

Re + Concilare – are two Latin words that translate to mean “to unite”. This is what occurs through the sacrament of Reconciliation – we are united again with God.

“I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.” Romans 7:19

Sin is a shared human experience. In the bible this is portrayed through the story of Adam and Eve and entry of evil into our world. There was a plan for each one of us. In the story, Adam and Eve chose to oppose God’s plan and self-determine their own. They rejected God’s plan. This was the first sin. This first couple represent humanity and their sin shattered our relationship with God too.

He Gave His Only Son

God gave us another chance. As a loving God, he sent Jesus to repair the damage and limitations of sin. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection all sin was atoned for and forgiven. Sometimes referred to as original sin, because Jesus was sent to us, this original sin was overcome. Jesus showed us *“the way, the truth and the light”* as a plan for a full relationship with God. To follow Jesus was not meant to be easy. Sin weakens us when we don’t choose to do good. We are not always loving. If we sin against others we sin against God.

Sin can also be translated from Hebrew meaning, *“missing the mark”*. When we sin our aim is off target. We can sin in small and serious ways. Sometimes sin can separate us from God.

When we pray the Creed, we declare that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. God always gives us the opportunity to start again. We can do this through the prayers and ministry of the church. Whether we do so or not is up to us!

Sin is divisive. It isolates us from God and from other people. By giving us, the sacrament of penance Jesus offered us a way out of this painful situation. We can now lead full lives. Jesus said, *“I come that you may have life and live it to the full”* John 10:10.

Your child usually knows when he or she has done wrong. Celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation will bring relief and joy to his or her heart too. Sometimes the sacrament is known as a sacrament of peace.

We have an innate desire to be forgiven and to be united with God and others. Asking for forgiveness is one of the most difficult tasks that some people experience. The Church needs to apologise for the sins of its members. Individuals need to ask for forgiveness too. Reconciliation, forgiving and being forgiven plays an important role in history and in human life.

The Old Testament is full of stories of God’s mercy to the Israelites. After God saved them from slavery in Egypt and made them his chosen people. They created a golden calf to worship it as their god. Later he gave them the Promised Land and they still turned to other gods. Never tiring of taking them back, *God forgave them over and over!*

After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to the disciples gathered there and greeted them, *“Peace be with you.”* Then he breathed on them and said. *“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”* John 2:22-23

Only God has the power to forgive sins. The Church established a method for our reconciliation. Through Jesus' representatives we listen to the words of forgiveness. The power to act and give forgiveness is now handed on down through the apostles.

An advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation is hearing the words of absolution. They assure us we are forgiven. The sacrament also satisfies our need to ask for forgiveness of another human being. Sin has consequences. Sin separates us from others. Confessing sin is expressing sorrow and is part of the rehabilitation of us with other people.

Merciful Jesus

Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection *he* redeemed us and made us one with God again. Jesus came with a mission of mercy to each one of us.

"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." Mark 2:17

Jesus befriended sinners and offered mercy and salvation. Jesus spoke about the God of mercy. He illustrated to people in story and actions the mercy of God.

In the parables he spoke about God who welcomes sinners home. He spoke about God, like a shepherd, leaving the ninety-nine sheep to search for the one who has wandered off. Lost sheep are welcomed home with celebrations. Jesus spoke about celebrations in heaven with a sinner repents.

Some well-known examples of Mercy found in Scripture:

- He spoke about the women with ten coins who loses one. She lights lamps, cleans the house and searches until she finds the coin. Then she calls friends to celebrate too!
- The Prodigal Son is a story all about the mercy of God. It contains all the themes of rejection and re-joining the father.
- Our Father "forgive us our trespasses"
- John 8:1-11 Jesus forgives a woman who was caught in adultery
- Matthew 9:27 Jesus said to the paralytic "Your sins are forgiven" and then proceeded to heal him physically too.
- Luke 19:1-10 Jesus invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus house. He was a tax collector who in turn promised to return what he stole.
- John 4:4-42 Jesus transforms a woman into a disciple.
- Luke 7:36-50 Jesus forgives a sinful woman who in sorrow for her sins washed his feet with her tears.
- Luke 23:39-43 At the end of his life Jesus forgave the thief on the cross next to him and promised him paradise.
- John 20:19 Many of Jesus followers deserted him in his hour of need. Jesus forgave them and entrusted the Church to them. During his first appearance he said to them, "Peace be with you"
- Jesus knew what it meant to be tempted, but never sinned. He shows extraordinary compassion toward those who do sin, including us!

Did You Know?

- In the early Church, the Sacrament of Penance could be received only once in a lifetime. Penances assigned were often very long, severe and could last years! During this time penitents usually had special places in church, wore special clothes and just like catechumens (people preparing to be Christian), they had to leave Mass just after the homily.
- There used to be two types of Penance - Public and Private. Public sins required public penance and private sins required private penance.
- For centuries penitents were required to do their assigned penance and then return to receive absolution.

Did You Know?...

The Early Church – The RCIA

In the early Church, only adults were admitted to baptism. It was regarded as the sacrament of conversion that turned one towards God. It indicated a change of life. All sins prior to baptism were forgiven. It was hoped that the newly baptised would maintain this level of *sin-less-ness*! People began to postpone their baptism as late as possible so that all their sins might be forgiven.

Christians who committed serious sin after baptism could seek forgiveness by joining a group that were known as penitents. These people were asked to do acts of public penance. They were not allowed to receive communion. The Church prayed for them.

On Holy Thursday penitents were absolved and reconciled with the Church. This form of penance could only happen once in their lifetime.

In the eighth century, Irish monks established the private form of the sacrament that we are now familiar with. Their method was that the penitent would confess individually to the priest. Also, this form of penance could be repeated.

In 1451 the Council of Trent confirmed that penance was a sacrament. Sins were required to be confessed to a priest who could give absolution in the name of Christ. The Second Vatican Council (in the twentieth century) made the sacrament more user-friendly allowing people to confess –face-to-face with the priest.

The **Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults** (*often abbreviated RCIA*) is the process through which interested adults and older children are gradually introduced to the Roman Catholic faith and way of life.

The RCIA is a communal process and involves a number of stages punctuated by liturgical rites to aid and assist the potential convert toward the final rite, usually at the Easter Vigil at which time they will become full members of the Roman Catholic Church. The entire process takes several months, (ideally a minimum of one complete liturgical year), but participants are generally invited to proceed at a pace which suits them individually. The Church prefers to call this the process and not a program.

A **catechumen** is a person who has never received baptism. A **candidate** is a person who was already baptized. A **Penitent** is a person who is sorry and seeking reconciliation for things they have done wrong. The Catholic Church acknowledges other Christian baptisms as long as the Trinitarian formula “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” and flowing water was used.

FAQ's on the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Is this Sacrament called confession, penance or reconciliation?

- Yes! This sacrament involves all three elements and historically has been called by all three names. It is now referred to as the Sacrament of Penance or Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Why do we need a Sacrament of Reconciliation?

- “Sin is before all else an offence against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time, it damages communion with the Church. For this reason, conversion entails both God’s forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* –CCC 1440
- “Only God forgives sins. Christ has willed that in her prayer and life and action his whole Church should be a sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation.” CCC 1442.
- The priest “is not the master of God’s forgiveness, but its servant.” CCC1466

What happens in the Sacrament of Penance?

- Through the sacrament of Penance, the faithful, acknowledge the sins we have committed, express our sorrow for them, and intend to reform our ways to receive God’s forgiveness and in turn be reconciled with God and with the Church. “Jesus’ call to conversion and penance...does not aim first at outward works...but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion.” CCC1430

What Sins should be confessed?

- The Church teaches that “all serious (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...for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly.” CCC 145
- At the same time, confession of everyday sins (venial) “is strongly recommended...for it helps us to form our conscience, fight against evil...lets us be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. Be receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.” CCC 1458

What are the effects of this Sacrament?

- “The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being...He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.” (Pope John Paul II)
- “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God’s grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship.” CCC 1468
- “For those who receive the sacrament with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation.” CCC1551

Are there other ways that sins are forgiven?

- Yes. As soon as we are sorry for sin and pray and act of contrition we are forgiven. The Eucharist contains a ritual of forgiveness. At the beginning of Mass, we reflect on our sins, ask for mercy and pray an act of contrition. Later before communion – we pray “Lord have mercy” Doing acts of charity is also a means of having sins forgiven. The sacrament of reconciliation is the main method for obtaining forgiveness of sins.

How often should we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation?

- We are obliged to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation whenever we have committed mortal sin. Generally, people attend the sacrament during Advent or Lent – or before key celebrations or events. Around four times a year is a fair minimum. It is good practice to celebrate regularly especially with children so that they won’t forget the ritual.

Do we need to go to confession before we go to Communion?

- No one in a state of mortal sin can receive Communion. They need to be reconciled with God and the Church.

What if my child is afraid and refuses to go to confession?

- Talk with child and give reassurance. Involve the priest in this conversation where possible. A solution can always be found.

When can my child celebrate this sacrament again?

- Local parishes often list when confession is available. On request sometimes, appointments can be made with the local priest to celebrate the sacrament.

What if the child can't hear or understand the priest?

- Ask the Priest to speak up! Or repeat themselves.

What if I forget to tell a sin?

- You don't need to go back immediately if you are sorry for this sin; God will forgive you in other ways such as through the Eucharist. You can confess the sin, the next time you receive the sacrament.

What if I forget the penance?

- Try to do the act of penance immediately or as soon as possible otherwise let the priest know the next time.

Will the priest tell someone what I say?

- No. Priests are bound with the seal of confession. This means they can never reveal what people tell them in confession.

What if I hear (*by accident*) someone else's confession?

- Try to keep a good distance between you and what is going on. If you can't help hearing, you are bound not to tell what you heard.

Will the priest be upset or angry?

- No. He has probably heard everything before from others. He too sins and understands how we are weak and tempted.

Would a priest ever not forgive me?

- The priest denies absolution only if he knows that the person confessing the sin is not sorry. He would know this by talking to the person about the sin and learning that the person intends to keep committing it.

Does the priest give out to you?

- The priest is happy you are sorry for your sins. In confession he tries to help you to be a better person and love God more.

How can we celebrate the event...?

- Go to confessions when your child does many parishes have events where families can attend the sacrament at the same time. Make sure your child knows you are doing it. Your witness will be important. Even if you have not attended the sacrament for a long time, for whatever reason this is a good milestone to return to the practice. It is also an opportunity to reconcile with God. If you are not Catholic and or for some other reason you may still go the priest for a blessing.

Celebrating and Preparing for Your Child's First Confession

Parents can talk with their child about what they are learning about their First Holy Communion and First Confession, either in school or in their local parish programme. Here are some pointers and guidelines that you may find helpful to assist your understanding.

What are the children learning about the Sacrament of Confession or Sacrament of Reconciliation?

In your child's school or parish program it focuses on the fundamental goodness of us all as God's children. The children learn how, despite their own uniqueness, they need relationships. If they do not try, if they are selfish, bully or generally misbehave, they break these relationships. They become disconnected from their own goodness, from the group and from God. To re-establish these relationships, they are challenged to see where they have gone wrong or where they could have done better (*examination of conscience*), they acknowledge it and say sorry. In a very concrete way they learn what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is about.

What will happen on the day?

On the day of First Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation usually take place in the Church. The children will participate in readings and prayers. The child's confession will be heard by a priest in the open but is private. Confession boxes are not commonly used for First Confession. It will vary with different churches but typically the priest will be sitting on a chair and your child will sit opposite them. The parent or guardian brings the child forward and introduces the child to the priest. They stand back and wait for the child to finish. The child returns to the parent and gives them a hug. The parent if they so wish may receive the Sacrament when the child has finished.

How can you help prepare your child for and support your child during the Sacrament so they are not nervous?

Before your child receives the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it's important they understand what it is and why we do it. Spend time talking with your child about this great healing Sacrament. Maybe you can use an example in your own relationship with your child to illustrate what this sacrament is all about and what it means to you? Why not read together with your child about when Jesus instituted the Sacrament and gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins from the Gospel of John 20: 19 – 23 or The Healing of a Paralytic in the Gospel of Mark 2: 1 – 12, is also a good example of Jesus's authority to forgive sins and an example of faith and trust in His healing power. The example of the Prodigal Son is a beautiful story of God's

Welcome to this celebration of the love and forgiveness of God.

Even if we sometimes forget God, God never forgets us. Parents, when you brought your child to the Church to be baptised, you accepted the responsibility of accompanying your child on their journey of faith. Today your child takes a further step on that journey. We are going to remember the times when we were untrue to ourselves and didn't live up to the goodness that God sees in us. We are going to ask God to search for us, to find us and forgive us, just like the Good Shepherd found the sheep that was lost and brought it back to its flock... May God bless all those who care for and love these children and may God bless all those who accompany these children on their faith journey.

(Opening welcome from a First Confession celebration)

unconditional love and forgiveness from the Gospel of Luke chapter 15:11 -32.

Use these to illustrate and explain to your children that going to Confession is not about getting into trouble; it's about asking God, God who is waiting with outstretched arms and unconditional love for them, for forgiveness and receiving God's Grace to try our best to do better for ourselves and for others. Listen to your child's questions and encourage them to learn more by asking more questions.

Go over the prayers they are learning in school with them. Bring them into the Church during the week and say the prayers with them there. Assure them that you will be close by during the Confession.

How do I talk about sins to my child?

Use the idea of showing God's love and not showing God's love. There are examples and pictures in their workbook of scenes and situations where they can see how people play together, interacting or how they can be mean to others. Get them to talk about what's going on in these? Help them relate to these images and situations, and ask them to think about times when they did not show love or to think of something they were not proud of doing or indeed think of something they could have done better. Discuss appropriate and real situations with them, 'Do you think this is right or wrong?' and help your child to make judgments about them. Be careful not suggest sins to your child because if they do not recognise a sin then the child is not responsible for them. When something wrong is done, help to understand WHY it is wrong and help them not confuse *what annoys you* with what is *wrong!* This will help them think it, plan to do better and ask forgiveness.

There are some suggestions below to help your child think of some ways they have not shown God's love. You may have ones that are specific to your child and family life and values that you could include. If you feel that your child will be nervous on the day you could write the main points and prayers on a card which they can bring with them to the Priest.

Here are some suggestions for ways of considering how we have not shown God's love:

I didn't show love when:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| I didn't do what I was told, | I didn't play fairly |
| I used bad language, | I didn't listen very well |
| I lied to my parents, | I had a fight with my friend |
| I was mean, | I didn't share |
| I didn't say my prayers, | I called someone names |
| I hit someone, | I fought with my brother/sister |
| I could have been better doing this or that | |
| I took something that didn't belong to me | |

An Examination of Conscience for Children based on the 10 Commandments.

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.

*Have I wanted more things, making things or money more important than God?
Have I made an idol of sports or entertainment figures?*

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

*Do I use God's name carelessly?
Do I use God's name in anger?*

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

*Did I attend Mass on Sunday?
Did my behaviour make it difficult or impossible for my parents to get to church on time?
Have I remembered to pray daily?*

4. Honour your father and your mother.

*Do I obey my parents?
Have I done my chores without complaining?
Do I do my chores without being reminded?
Have I been disrespectful to teachers, coaches or others in authority?*

5. You shall not kill.

*Do I keep my patience or do I lose my temper?
Do I hold grudges and try to get even with others?
Have I been unfair to others, especially those who are different than I am?*

6. You shall not commit adultery.

*Do I show respect for my body?
Do I respect the bodies of others?
Do I avoid harmful things like drugs, tobacco and alcohol?*

7. You shall not steal.

*Have I taken something that belongs to someone else?
Have I "forgotten" to return something that I borrowed?
Have I used money responsibly?*

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

*Do I play fairly or do I ever cheat at school or games?
Have I been honest or have I lied?
Have I hurt someone by what I have said or done?
Have I copied someone else's homework?*

9. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.

*Have I been jealous of the friends that someone else has?
Have I tried to be kind to others?*

10. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.

*Have I been jealous of the things that my friends have?
Have I nagged my parents into buying things because my friends have them?
Have I helped others when they needed help?*

Children truly understand that they are forgiven when they say sorry. They have no problem accepting the unconditional love of God.

First Confession – Step by Step

(This is an example – it will vary in different schools and parishes)

Parent: Father, this is my daughter/son N.

Priest: N. you're very welcome. *(parents/guardian steps back)*

Priest: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Child: Bless me Father for I have sinned, this is my First Confession.

Priest: What ways have you not shown God's love?

Child: I didn't show love when.... *(see suggestions above)*

Priest: Thank you *(and he will say a few words of encouragement to your child)* and now will you pray your Act of Sorrow?

Child: O, My God. Thank you for loving me. I am sorry for all my sins. For not loving others and not loving you. Help me to live like Jesus and not sin again. Amen.

Priest: N. God the Father forgives you and I absolve you of all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Priest: Congratulations, you have made your First Confession.

(The Priest will shake your child's hand and invite you to give your child a hug and then return to your seat. You may have your child stand back now while you go to confession if you wish. It is OK for you to use the same formula as your child has used for attending your confession).

Practice, Practice ...

As the day of your child's first Confession approaches, why not use the above example to take time to role play with your child what they will do in their real confessions? Except you can tell them they don't have to really tell you their sins unless *of course they really want to*. Practice always lessens the nervousness!! Practice the prayers they are learning with them, such as the Act of Sorrow. Also pray with and for your child, asking God to prepare him or her for this great Sacrament.

Apart from practicing how to go to Confession with your child and practicing the prayers, consider going to confession as a family. The best way to really teach our children about faith is to practice it by living it out, doing it in and making it a normal and important part of our own everyday life. Showing your child that you can take the time to go to confession makes a deeper and longer-lasting impression than all the hours you might spend talking or reading about it with them. It teaches more than anything that they may learn in school or in parish. Maybe even make it a family tradition. This could be on the first Saturday of each month or another day that works for your family. Maybe add a little fun incentive and go out for ice cream, or go to the cinema afterwards and make it a family night out!