
Policy of the Diocese of San José

PENANCE

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. These guidelines apply to all candidates who have been baptized, children, youth and adults.
- B. Children, youth and adults must be prepared for and celebrate the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time,¹ unless some serious pastoral reason suggests otherwise in a particular case.
- C. High schools who prepare students for completion of the sacraments of initiation should also prepare them for the sacrament of Penance.
- D. Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to celebrate the sacrament of Penance and to participate in the preparation for the sacrament according to this policy, insofar as they are able (cf. *Reception of Sacraments for People with Disabilities*). For specific guidelines see: *For the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, NCCB 1995.
- E. This policy is based on the *Norms of the Rite of Penance*, the *Code of Canon Law*, the *National Directory for Catechesis*, the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the *Directory for Masses with Children*, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. All norms in this policy are to be interpreted in the light of these sources.

¹ *Can #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 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.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #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." Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received the sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession. Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

RCIA #408- The period of catechesis for these adults should be properly coordinated with the liturgical year. This is particularly true of its final phase, which should as a rule coincide with Lent. During the Lenten season penitential services should be arranged in such a way as to prepare these adults for the celebration of the sacrament of penance.

II. PREREQUISITES FOR CANDIDACY

Those who request the sacrament of Penance for the first time:

- A. Must provide a copy of their baptismal certificate. Baptismal certificates of adults must have been issued within the last six months.
- B. Must have attained the use of reason.²
- C. Must have heard the proclamation of God's love, mercy and forgiveness in the midst of the community and have the desire to respond to Christ through an on- going life of conversion and penance.
- D. Are expected to participate in the weekly Sunday liturgy.
- E. Must be participating in a program of systematic catechesis either in the parish, the Catholic school or the home.
- F. Adaptation for children:
 - 1. Children should be enrolled in a parish process of preparation for the sacrament of Penance in which children from the Catholic school and the catechetical ministry program are united.
 - 2. Children who are home schooled should be enrolled in the parish sacramental preparation program and participate in all its dimensions: catechesis, ritual, service, spiritual (retreats, etc.) and any other requirements determined by the parish.
 - 3. Parents/guardians of all children should participate in adult faith formation parent sessions offered by the parish to help them grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of Penance and to assist them in catechizing their children.³ These sessions should be sensitive to the cultural and faith experiences of those involved. See *NCD #194* and the *Bishops' Pastoral on Hispanic Ministry*.

² *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."

³ *Can #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 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.

III. CATECHESIS

- A. Catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede and be kept distinct and separate from catechesis for the celebration of First Holy Communion.⁴
- B. Catechesis should be based upon the rites of Penance, be attentive to the experiences of the participants, be sensitive to the cultural and family considerations, and foster active involvement in the liturgical celebrations.
- C. The inclusion of communal penitential services in the process of preparation can be helpful “in promoting conversion of heart and purification of life.”⁵
- D. Catechesis for the sacrament of Penance should:
 1. Emphasize God’s infinite love, his call to conversion, and his mercy and forgiveness.
 2. Familiarize the candidates with the Church’s ministry of reconciliation entrusted to it by Christ and its power to forgive sin.
 3. Lead the candidates to understand and acknowledge the presence of good and evil in the world as well as their own sinfulness and need for forgiveness.
 4. Help the candidates measure their values and priorities against those of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.
 5. Help the candidates understand the nature and effects of sin, both personal and social.

⁴ *Response to question about Canon 914*: That children should be prepared to celebrate First Confession before First Communion. “The basis for this observation, for children, is not so much the state of sin in which they may be, as the formative and pastoral aim; that is, to educate them, from a tender age, to the true Christian spirit of penance and conversion, to the necessity of asking pardon of God and above all to a loving and confident abandonment to the mercy of the Lord. (*LETTER FROM THE CONGREGATION FOR THE SACRAMENTS TO THE NCCB ON THE SACRAMENTS OF RECONCILIATION, HOLY ORDERS AND MARRIAGE, Rome, December 20, 1986*)

⁵ *The Rite of Penance*, #37- Care must be taken to ensure that the faithful do not confuse these (Penitential services) celebrations with the celebration of the sacrament of penance. Penitential services are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart.

It is desirable to arrange them especially for these purposes:

- to foster the spirit of penance within the Christian community.
- to help the faithful to prepare for individual confession that can be made later at a convenient time;
- to help children gradually form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ;
- to help catechumens during conversion.

6. Encourage the candidates to repent of their sinfulness and lead them to develop a heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more.
7. Prepare the candidates to turn to Christ and to the Church for sacramental forgiveness.
8. Acquaint the candidates with the rites of the sacrament of Penance and with the prayers and responses used during penance celebrations.
9. Call attention to the obligation to confess serious sins at least once a year.⁶

E. Adaptation for children

1. Catechesis for the sacrament of Penance is to precede catechesis for the celebration of First Holy Communion. It must be kept distinct by a clear and unhurried separation.
2. Catechesis for children should be respectful of their natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances of development.
3. Because of their intimate role in the formation of a child's moral conscience, parents should be involved in the preparation of their children from this sacrament and be living witnesses of continuing conversion.

IV. DISCERNMENT OF READINESS FOR CHILDREN

- A. Candidates for the sacrament of Penance should have developed a heartfelt sorrow and aversion for sins committed along with the intention of sinning no more.
- B. It is ultimately the responsibility of the pastor, in collaboration with the parents and the catechist entrusted with the task of immediate preparation, to ensure that those presented for the sacrament of Penance have reached the use of reason and are properly disposed.⁷

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church #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.' Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received the sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession. Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.

⁷ *Can 914 Part 2* - It is also for the pastor to be vigilant lest children come to the Holy Banquet

V. MINISTRIES FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

- A. The catechist is the minister for the preparation for the sacrament. The following ministers work collaboratively to support the catechist: the pastor, the director of catechetical ministry, the Catholic school principal, the director for liturgy, the religion coordinator in the school, and the director of the catechumenate.
- B. Parents/guardians have a special responsibility to educate their children in the faith.⁸
- C. The parish community should be an active participant in the process of preparing candidates for the sacrament of Penance by witnessing to its spirit of repentance and forgiveness.⁹
- D. The minister of the sacrament of Penance is the pastor and any other priests whom he designates.

VI. THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

- A. The sacrament of Penance may be celebrated on any day in all liturgical seasons except during the Easter Triduum and during the celebration of any eucharistic celebration.¹⁰ Exceptions to the latter can be made for pastoral reasons.¹¹ Lent is the season most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of Penance.¹²

who have not reached the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed.

⁸ *GDC #227*- Parents receive in the sacrament of Matrimony “the grace and the ministry of the Christian education of their children,” to whom they transmit and bear witness to human and religious values. This educational activity which is both human and religious is “a true ministry,” through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated so that family life is transformed into a journey of faith and the school of Christian life.

⁹ *GDC #227* - It is for this reason that the Christian community must give very special attention to parents. By means of personal contact, meetings, courses and also adult catechesis directed toward parents, the Christian community must help them assume their responsibility - which is particularly delicate today – of educating their children in the faith.

¹⁰ *Rite of Penance #13* – The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day, but it is desirable that the faithful know the day and time at which the priest is available for this ministry. They should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated and especially during the scheduled periods.

Eucharisticum mysterium, 1967 # 35 – the faithful are to be constantly encouraged to accustom themselves to going to confession outside the celebration of the Mass, and especially at the prescribed times. In this way, the sacrament of Penance will be administered calmly and with genuine profit, and will not interfere with participation in the Mass.

¹¹ *Misericordia Dei, April 7, 2002*- Local Ordinaries, and parish priests and rectors of churches and shrines, should periodically verify that the greatest possible provision is in fact being made for the faithful to confess their sins. It is

Diocese of San Jose

Policy on Penance

Approved by the Priest Council on June 13, 2002

- B. The place for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance is the parish church.¹³ The setting should provide for both the option of celebrating the sacrament behind a screen or the option of celebrating “face-to-face” with the confessor.¹⁴
- C. Sensitivity to cultural experiences of those involved should be considered in the preparation of the celebration of the sacrament.
- D. Accommodations should be made for candidates with special needs. Interpreters of sign language for deaf and hearing-impaired candidates should be provided.
- E. The Rite for Individual Reception of the Sacrament of Penance:¹⁵
- Greeting
 - Penitent Statement
 - Scripture
 - Confession of Sins
 - Act of Contrition
 - Absolution
 - Proclamation of Praise to God and Dismissal

particularly recommended that in places of worship confessors be visibly present at the advertised times, that these times be adapted to the real circumstances of penitents, and that confessions be especially available before Masses, and even during Mass if there are other priests available, in order to meet the needs of the faithful.

Congregation of the Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments (Novitiae Vol 37, 2001 pp. 183-188) – Therefore, it is licit to hear confessions during the celebration of the Mass whenever the faithful ask for this ministry. If there is a concelebration, we strongly urge some priests to abstain to concelebrate in order to be available to serve the faithful who wants to receive the sacrament of Penance.

¹² *Introduction to Norms for Good Friday in the Roman Missal, # 1* - According to the Church’s ancient tradition, the sacraments are not celebrated today (Good Friday) or tomorrow (Holy Saturday).

Rite of Penance, #13 - The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated at any time on any day ... The season of Lent is most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance...so all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbor and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter Triduum with renewed hearts.

Circular Letter on the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter’s Feasts, #37- It is fitting that the Lenten season should be concluded, both for the individual Christian as well as for the whole Christian community with a penitential celebration, so that they may be helped to prepare to celebrate more fully the paschal mystery. These celebrations however, should take place before the Easter Triduum, and should not immediately precede the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper.

¹³ *Canon #964* - The proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or an oratory.

¹⁴ *NCD, #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. Penitents have a choice of the customary anonymity or a setting face-to-face with the confessor.

¹⁵ *Rite of Penance: Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents # 41-47.*

- F. The Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution:¹⁶
- Introductory Rite: Song, Greeting, Opening Prayer
 - Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word: Readings, Homily, Examination of Conscience
 - Rite of Reconciliation: General Confession of Sins, Our Father
 - Individual Confession and Absolution
 - Proclamation of Praise for God's Mercy
 - Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving and Dismissal
- E. The principles of the *Directory of the Masses with Children* may be applied to the celebration of the sacrament of Penance with children. In particular, the variety of ministers should be exercised by different persons during the celebration of the sacrament of Penance.¹⁷
- F. Adaptations for children:
1. When the number of children who are to celebrate first Penance is very large, smaller groups should be formed in which children from parish programs and Catholic schools are integrated in order to insure attentive and conscious participation during the celebration.
 2. Children in parish catechetical programs and Catholic schools should be integrated in each celebration. No group should have a private or separate celebration.
 3. Confessors should be prepared for and be especially sensitive to the psychological, faith and moral development of young people.

VII. MYSTAGOGY

- A. Those who have celebrated first Penance should gather afterward to celebrate and reflect on their experience of God's mercy and love.

¹⁶ *Rite of Penance: Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution* #48-59

¹⁷ *DMC, #24* - The diversity of ministries should be encouraged in Masses with children so that the Mass may be evidently the celebration of a community. For example, readers and cantors, whether children or adults, should be employed. In this way variety will keep the children from becoming tired because of the sameness of voice.

- B. Catechesis toward lifelong conversion should continue after the first celebration of Penance for adults, youth and children.¹⁸
- C. Opportunities for celebration of the sacrament of Penance should be provided regularly for adults, youth, and children as an integral part of their faith formation.

¹⁸ *NCD #126* - Because continuing, lifelong conversion is part of what it means to grow in faith, catechesis for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is ongoing. Children have a right to fuller catechesis each year.