

Instruction for Sacraments

First Penance



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Diocese of Richmond

Office of the Bishop

September 1, 2018

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to affirm the use of the diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments – First Penance*. This *Instruction* includes four elements: a brief Introduction to the theology of the sacrament, Pastoral Directives, Frequently Asked Questions (in English and Spanish), and Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities. The latter three sections explain how Church law pertaining to First Penance is to be implemented within our diocese.

The task of creating the diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments* was undertaken by the Office of Catholic Education in collaboration with the Christian Formation Commission, Office of Hispanic Ministry, and the Office of Persons with Disabilities, in an effort to update policies presented in the 1997 *Called to Faith* sacramental guidelines. I am grateful for their dedication and commitment to this project.

Our Catechism states, "...the family home is rightly called 'the domestic church,' a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity" (CCC 1666). With this principle in mind, the *Instruction* directs our parish efforts to the "first teachers of their children in the ways of faith," the parents or guardians (*Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 70). Recognizing the positive influence of the parish community, the *Instruction* encourages parishes to welcome families seeking First Penance for their children and strengthen their ability to pass on the faith to their children by means of catechesis and ongoing support of Catholic home life. Through genuine hospitality toward all who come seeking sacraments for their children, parishes spread the Good News of God's unconditional love for all people.

To assist with the implementation of this *Instruction*, the Office of Christian Formation will provide catechetical models and samples and recommend published resources, making this help available as an online companion to this *Instruction*.

Full implementation of this diocesan *Instruction for Sacraments – First Penance* will enrich parish communities, sacrament formation teams, and families who request First Penance for their children. Therefore, I affirm the continued implementation of this *Instruction* through study of the document, review of the associated online offerings, and thoughtful examination and renewal of existing parish practices.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout
Bishop of Richmond

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Table of Contents

Getting Started..... 4

Introduction: Understanding First Penance..... 6

Key Documents for Further Reading.....8

Pastoral Directives Regarding First Penance 9

Role of Parents and Guardians 9

Role of Godparents..... 11

Role of Parish Community and Catholic School..... 12

Role of Pastor, Deacons, and Lay Catechists 13

Catechesis prior to First Penance 13

Readiness for First Penance 15

Celebration of First Penance 16

Catechesis after First Penance 17

FAQ: Sacrament of First Penance..... 18

FAQ: Sacramento de la Primera Penitencia..... 24

Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities – First Penance..... 31

Acknowledgements 36

References 37



Getting Started

Guiding Principles

Parents are the primary teachers of their children.

Sacraments are gifts of grace.

Sacraments create opportunities for new evangelization.

Sacramental catechesis can help invigorate the faith participation of families.

All catechesis seeks to draw persons into deeper communion with Christ and his Church.

What is a diocesan *Instruction*?

A diocesan *Instruction* is an official document explaining the basic Catholic theology of the sacrament and describing how the body of instruction that introduces the rite for each sacrament and other law pertaining to the sacraments are to be implemented within a particular diocese.

Rev. Msgr. R. Francis Muench J.C.L., Judicial Vicar

What is the intent of the *Instruction*?

The *Instruction* is intended to be a positive, pastoral, helpful tool for shaping effective parish sacramental formation for families and children.

Who should use the *Instruction*?

Pastors, deacons, parish leaders, sacrament teams, and others designated by the pastor.

When does the *Instruction* become policy?

July 1, 2013

What does the *Instruction* include?

The *Instruction* consists of an Introduction to the theology of the sacrament, Pastoral Directives, Frequently Asked Questions (in English and Spanish), and Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities.



How should implementation proceed?

Implementation should begin on the policy date and proceed step-wise, as follows:

- Study *Instruction* with staff and sacramental team(s).
- Examine and evaluate existing parish formation for First Penance in light of *Instruction*.
- Develop a plan for renewal of parish practices.
- Provide formation for sacramental team(s) and parish community, as necessary.
- Renew parish practices for full implementation.

Will additional print copies of the *Instruction* be available?

Yes, print copies may be ordered from the Office of Christian Formation. Parishes may also view the *Instruction* from the Christian Formation website.

Where can the parish get help implementing this *Instruction*?

For assistance, with implementation or resources, contact the Office of Christian Formation. Specific questions related to persons with disabilities can be addressed by the Center for Marriage, Family & Life; and the Office of Hispanic Ministry website contains resources in Spanish for adults.

Where can the pastor/deacon and pastoral staff find additional clarification of *Instruction* directives?

Questions related to canon law, interpretation of the *Instruction* directives, and other pastoral questions will be answered by the Judicial Vicar.

Diocesan Assistance

Office of Christian Formation	804-622-5158
Office of Hispanic Ministry	804-622-5241
Center for Marriage, Family & Life	804-622-5109
Office of Tribunal	804-355-9155



Introduction: Understanding First Penance

The Lord Jesus Christ obtained the forgiveness of sins and restored our relationship to God by means of the Paschal Mystery: his Passion, Death, and Resurrection.¹ After being raised from the dead, Christ entrusted the power to forgive sins to the Church: “ ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained’ ”(Jn 20: 21a-23; cf. Mt. 16:19; 2 Cor 5:18).²

The Church exercises this power through the sacraments.³ In each of them, Christ renews his Paschal Mystery through the action of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Thus, Baptism immerses a person into the Lord’s Death and Resurrection (cf. Rom 6:3–4),⁵ and so forgives original sin and personal sins.⁶ The Sacrament of Penance likewise celebrates the Paschal Mystery. It forgives sins—especially grave ones—committed after Baptism,⁷ thereby reconciling persons both to God and to the Church.⁸

The formula of absolution expresses the nature and purpose of the Sacrament of Penance:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and the resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father,
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁹



Like the other sacraments, Penance is directed toward the Eucharist,¹⁰ a Sacrifice that is one and the same as the Paschal Mystery: “For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”¹¹ The celebration of the Eucharist (Mass) begins with the Penitential Act, whereby the people acknowledge their sins and plead for God’s mercy.¹² Receiving Christ in the Eucharist “strengthens our charity” and “revives our love,” thereby forgiving everyday faults and failures (venial sins) and preserving us from future grave (mortal) sins.¹³ However, anyone conscious of having committed a grave sin must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion.¹⁴

The connection between Penance and the Eucharist¹⁵ is evident in the current practice of the Latin Church: “The age of discretion both for Confession and Holy Communion is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion.”¹⁶ Moreover, at the age of reason, a child acquires the *right* to receive the Sacrament of Penance, so that as that child matures, he or she may always have a *way home*, a means of returning to the Eucharist after committing a grave sin.¹⁷

In the history of the Church, the Sacrament of Penance has been administered in different ways,¹⁸ although its four essential components have remained the same: (1) contrition, (2) confession, (3) satisfaction, and (4) absolution.¹⁹ *Contrition* means a sense of sorrow for sin, coupled with a resolve not to sin again.²⁰ *Confession*, or the disclosure of sins to a priest, is “an essential part of the sacrament.”²¹ *Satisfaction* includes completing the penance assigned by the priest and repairing, if possible, the harm caused by sin.²² The purpose of satisfaction is to facilitate the interior conversion that Christ proclaims: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk1:15).²³ *Absolution* refers to the words pronounced by the priest, who acts in the person of Christ to forgive the penitent of his or her sins.²⁴

In summary, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that, “ ‘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.’ Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament.”²⁵



Key Documents for Further Reading

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 1422–1498. The *Catechism* is also available in online format at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website (<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm>).
2. *Rite of Penance* (1973) (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), Introduction, nos. 1–40. The *Rite of Penance*, along with other ritual books, can also be found in *The Rites*, vol. I (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990). The introductions to the ritual books are available in online format at the Catholic Liturgical Library website (www.catholicliturgy.com).
3. Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on First Communion, *Quam singulari* (1910). The document is available in online format at Papal Encyclicals Online website (<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10quam.htm>).
4. *Codex Iuris Canonici* (Code of Canon Law) (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1999), canons 959–997. The *Code* is also available in online format at the Vatican website (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGLI04/_INDEX.HTM).
5. For a helpful summary of canonical aspects of the Sacrament of Penance, consult John Huels, *Pastoral Companion: A Canon Law Handbook for Pastoral Ministry* (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1992), chapter 5: “Penance,” pp. 119–148.



Pastoral Directives Regarding First Penance

Role of Parents and Guardians

In presenting their child for Baptism, parents accept the privilege and responsibility “to bring him or her up in the practice of the faith.”²⁶ By practicing forgiveness and reconciliation in the home, and by their own regular participation in the Sacrament of Penance, parents nurture the grace bestowed in Baptism, laying the foundation for their children’s preparation for and eventual participation in the Sacrament of Penance. Parents begin preparing their child for First Penance early on, by instilling values, a sense of right and wrong, and an understanding of the words “sorry,” “apology,” and “forgiveness.” In the family, children learn through their experience of forgiveness that no matter what happens, their parents and God still love them.²⁷ The *National Directory for Catechesis* explains that,

Since the family is intimately involved with the formation of a child’s moral conscience and ordinarily integrates the child into the wider ecclesial communities, parents should be involved in the preparation of their children for this sacrament [Penance], so that they can affirm and reinforce frequent participation in the sacraments. They orient the child toward God and encourage continual growth in the understanding of God’s mercy and love.²⁸

Parents’ involvement in their child’s preparation reinforces the connection between the Sacrament of Penance in the Church and the experience of forgiveness in the home.

Parents are encouraged to establish family faith practices that develop their child’s readiness to prepare for First Penance. Regular participation in the Sunday Mass is the most fundamental of these practices. By attending Mass with their children, parents can highlight moments of reconciliation throughout the liturgy and assist their children in learning the relevant prayers by heart (e.g., I confess to almighty God..., Our Father..., Lord I am not worthy..., etc.).



Stories from the Bible that deal with forgiveness and reconciliation, told on a child's level, can help that child learn about God's unconditional love. The kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of God revealed in Scripture will become more real for the child who experiences these signs of love in the family; from parents, siblings, godparents, and extended family members; and also, between them.

Daily prayer in the home (e.g., at meals, at bedtime, etc.) makes a lasting impression on children. Parents who regularly pray with their children can easily incorporate prayers for forgiveness into the daily routine.

The Church recommends various forms of penance that can work well for families. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

*The seasons and days of penance in the course of the liturgical year (Lent, and each Friday in memory of the death of the Lord) are intense moments of the Church's penitential practice. These times are particularly appropriate for spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, pilgrimages as signs of penance, voluntary self-denial such as fasting and almsgiving, and fraternal sharing (charitable and missionary works).*²⁹

For example, abstaining from meat on Fridays, during Lent, or throughout the year (the preferred form of Friday penance in the United States³⁰), can be a helpful and regular reminder of the need to turn away from sin and toward God. Involving children in the purchase of non-perishable items for the local food bank with the money saved can encourage them to turn toward God by helping others in need.

Concerning a child's readiness to prepare for First Penance, parents can discern this by reflecting on the following questions:

- Has the child been baptized and reached the age of reason (about seven years)?³¹
- Does the child know the difference between right and wrong?
- Can the child distinguish between mistakes or accidents and deliberate wrongdoing?
- Can the child express sorrow for sin?
- Can the child forgive others?
- Does the child pray at home and at Mass?
- Does the child relate to Jesus as one who forgives?

Once parents have discerned that their child is ready to begin sacramental preparation for First Penance, they should attend a parents' session at the parish to deepen their own understanding of the sacrament and to prepare for their role in the home learning component of the parish preparation program for First Penance. Sacramental preparation is a commitment for parents and children, requiring time, effort, and energy. Some rearrangement of family priorities may be necessary to ensure that both the child and the family benefit fully from it.



Normally, children preparing for First Penance should be concurrently participating in systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school); sacramental preparation occurs in addition to this ongoing instruction in the faith (see FAQ #6). Parents are responsible for their child's participation in the First Penance preparation program offered by the parish, and for attending family sessions or retreats with their child. If exceptional circumstances arise during the period of preparation for First Penance, parents should communicate with the parish as soon as possible, so that alternative arrangements can be made.

Parents who regularly provide systematic religious education in the home may embrace the parent-led home-learning component of the parish preparation process with enthusiasm and desire to do more of the necessary instruction at home. In such cases, flexibility and goodwill can lead parents and parish to common ground. For example, an additional portion of the preparation (as might be taught by a catechist to the children in a classroom setting) may take place at home with the parents as catechists. At the same time, regular participation in the Sunday Mass should be expected, as well as attendance at First Penance family sessions and retreats. In this way, preparation for the sacrament will occur within the context of the Christian community,³² providing greater support to all the families involved.

Children learn by observing and imitating. Parents who take an active role in preparing their child for First Penance, and who receive the sacrament themselves, especially during the period of their child's preparation, will lead that child to the sacrament by their example.

Role of Godparents

The church does not specify a formal role for godparents in a child's preparation for First Penance. Nevertheless, the promise godparents made at the child's Baptism to assist the parents "in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers"³³ still holds. By remaining in regular contact with their godchild, godparents can help parents discern the child's readiness for First Penance. Those who live nearby can take an active role in their godchild's sacramental preparation. With the help of technology, even godparents who live at a distance can share their stories of forgiveness and reconciliation, and their experience of the Sacrament of Penance.



Role of Parish Community and Catholic School

Sacramental catechesis “is intended for all members of the Christian community, takes place within the community, and involves the whole community of faith.”³⁴ Yet, the Sacrament of Penance, by its very nature, often takes place behind the scenes of parish life. Communal celebrations with individual confession and absolution³⁵ (e.g., Advent, Lent) raise its profile on an occasional basis, but primarily for those who attend these services. The preparation of children for First Penance presents an opportunity for the whole parish to deepen its understanding and appreciation of this sacrament and to embrace its identity as a reconciling community. Children preparing for First Penance, their parents, and their catechists all benefit from the increased awareness and prayerful support of the parish community.

To bring the Sacrament of Penance to the fore in the parish, and inspire the engagement of the whole community, while maintaining the confidential nature of each penitent’s participation in the sacrament, parishes may consider the following strategies:

- Publish short articles in the bulletin and on the parish website to catechize about the Sacrament of Penance and the community’s role in modeling the faith through participation in the sacrament.
- Bless the families entering the period of formal preparation for First Penance, as they stand together with the rest of the assembly, just before the final blessing at Mass.
- Include those preparing for First Penance in the Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful) at Mass, without mentioning names (e.g., “For the children among us, preparing to receive the Sacrament of Penance for the first time; for their parents and catechists, who are teaching them about this gift of the Lord Jesus...we pray.”).
- Invite parishioners to include “the families with children preparing for First Penance” in their daily prayers, without announcing or publishing names.

The responsibility for sacramental preparation rests on the parents and the parish. Catholic schools may reinforce and enhance this preparation but may not replace it. Adapting the strategies above, schools can support Catholic school children and their families who are preparing for the sacraments in their parishes.



Role of Pastor, Deacons, and Lay Catechists

According to the *National Directory for Catechesis*, “All believers have the right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it.”³⁶ This includes “suitable catechesis...for the celebration of the sacraments.”³⁷ In fulfilling his duty to provide catechesis for children’s First Penance, the pastor may entrust much of the work to others (parochial vicars, deacons, lay catechists, and parents). In this way, he fosters “a sense of common responsibility for catechesis in the Christian community, a task which involves all, and a recognition and appreciation for catechists and their mission.”³⁸

Although his direct involvement may therefore be limited, the pastor should find opportunities to be present to the children’s preparation, for example, by visiting one or more of the sessions for children or families. Parochial vicars and priests in residence, who administer the sacrament in the parish, should do the same. This will allow the children to become familiar with some of the priests who will be available to hear their confession.

It is not appropriate for the pastor to designate himself as exclusive confessor for children’s First Penance. Sacramental preparation is meant to help children participate in the rite with confidence and to feel at ease in approaching any priest to celebrate the sacrament.³⁹ For the children to begin developing a lifelong appreciation for the sacrament of Penance, this sense of approachability needs to extend to priests besides the pastor. In addition, Church law upholds a child’s right to choose his or her confessor.⁴⁰ In the interest of providing such a choice and of accommodating the number of children receiving their First Penance within a reasonable amount of time, pastors should invite other priests to assist with celebrating the sacrament.

Depending on the structure of the parish program, catechists may teach the children, the parents, or both, reinforcing the learning that has taken place at home. In this way, they can accompany families on their journey toward the sacrament.

Catechesis prior to First Penance

Preparation for First Penance should precede (not follow) preparation for First Holy Communion and “be kept distinct by a clear and unhurried separation.”⁴¹ These two periods of preparation should be offered in addition to systematic religious education. Being thus separate from children’s ongoing instruction in the faith, sacramental preparation need not be bound to a particular grade. Rather, a child’s readiness, as discerned by his or her parents (see criteria, p. 12), should determine the best time for the child to begin preparation. Although the majority of children may attain the use of reason at about age seven and be deemed ready to prepare for First Penance and First Holy Communion together with their peers, some may need more time to mature (but not necessarily an entire year). In addition, there may be older children who, for various reasons, did not receive First Penance and First Holy Communion at the age of reason. Catechetical leaders and catechists should be flexible in accommodating these children and their families.



Parishes may prepare children for First Penance through some combination of parent-led home learning, catechist-led instruction for children, formation opportunities for parents, and learning events for children and parents together (family sessions, family retreats). The number of children, the space available, and other factors unique to each parish will influence the program's structure, but all four contexts merit consideration. Since families are expected to participate in sacramental preparation in addition to systematic religious education, whether in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school (see FAQ #6), a reasonable preparation program that combines parent-led home learning with a limited number of catechist-led sessions for children, parents, or both, often works best. Those families in exceptional circumstances, for whom the normal expectations of the parish represent a hardship, may contact the pastor to seek an accommodation.

Recognizing the role of parents as the “first teachers”⁴² and “primary educators in the faith,”⁴³ parishes should provide parents with the option of instructing their children at home in preparation for First Penance. At the same time, parishes should set forth the expectation that families choosing this option will participate regularly in the Sunday Mass and take part in family sessions and family retreats offered by the parish in preparation for First Penance.

Wherever it occurs, catechesis before the sacrament should make use of materials approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁴⁴

Following the guidance of the National Directory for Catechesis,⁴⁵ preparation for First Penance should help children to:

- Accept God's unconditional love for them.
- Turn to Christ and to his Church for forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Become aware of good and evil in the world and their own capacity to do either.
- Recognize their need for forgiveness, not only from parents, family members, and friends, but also from God.
- Explore the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers, and biblical texts in the *Rite of Penance*.
- Learn how to receive the sacrament, that is, how to participate in the “Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents”⁴⁶ and the “Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.”⁴⁷
- Understand the Sacrament of Penance as a way of receiving pardon for sin, and the necessity of receiving the sacrament in the case of serious sin.

Church law requires that children receive the Sacrament of Penance before their First Holy Communion⁴⁸ (see FAQ #13). If a child prepares for First Penance, but does not celebrate the sacrament along with his or her peers, the child should not be excluded from sacramental preparation for First Holy Communion. Rather, the parents should be reminded of the necessity of their child's reception of First Penance before First Holy Communion.⁴⁹ They should also be encouraged to arrange a suitable time for the child to celebrate First Penance with the priest.



Readiness for First Penance

A non-sacramental penitential service, celebrated during the preparation process, can help children “gradually form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ.”⁵⁰ The *Rite of Penance* provides a sample penitential service for children,⁵¹ focused on the theme of “God comes to look for us.” This liturgy includes a Greeting, an Entrance Chant (opening song), a Scripture Reading, a Homily, an Examination of Conscience (in silence), an Act of Repentance (litany), the Lord’s Prayer (Our Father), an Act of Contrition, a Closing Prayer, a Song of Thanksgiving, and a Dismissal. Since it mirrors the movement of the “Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents,”⁵² and contains many elements in common with the “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution,”⁵³ a non-sacramental penitential service can lay a foundation for children’s future participation in either rite. Of course, it is important to make a clear distinction between such a service and the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.⁵⁴

As a child’s sacramental preparation for First Penance comes to an end, a process of discernment should once again take place. This time, the catechist, the catechetical leader, and the pastor assist the parents in assessing the child’s readiness to receive the Sacrament of Penance. This process may take various forms but focuses on the child’s knowledge of Jesus and his message of forgiveness, his or her awareness of sin and its effects, and his or her experience and understanding of regret, forgiveness, and conversion⁵⁵ (see FAQ #8 and #10). The testimony of the catechist, along with that of the parents, can be especially valuable in the discernment process; it is not essential that the pastor interview each child individually. Once the child has been duly prepared and found ready, he or she may receive the sacrament at any time, although the family may choose to wait for a parish celebration specifically designated for children’s First Penance.

A child who has completed the parish sacramental preparation program and meets the above criteria for readiness, and who has met the parish priests and even investigated the confessional with his or her parent, may still be reluctant to celebrate the sacrament. In such cases, caring adults (parents, catechist, catechetical leader, and pastor) should reassure the child by listening to his or her concerns and addressing them with care. Through such dialogue, a way forward can often be found. For example: A child afraid of entering an enclosed confessional might be willing to celebrate the sacrament with a parent nearby (in sight but out of earshot). A more open confessional, set up in a well-lit corner of the church (such as might be used when multiple priests hear individual confessions at a seasonal Penance service) can serve well in this situation.⁵⁶



Celebration of First Penance

Parishes should plan ahead to accommodate the number of children preparing to receive First Penance. In communities with a just a few children, the regularly scheduled opportunities for Confession may suffice. Even in larger communities, a fair number of children ready to receive the sacrament can do so in the normal course of the parish's sacramental life.

Communal celebrations of the sacrament (e.g., Advent, Lent) that follow the “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution,”⁵⁷ can be excellent opportunities for families to receive the sacrament together. Notably, the rite intends for members of the assembly to wait for one another until all individual confessions have been completed, and to conclude the celebration with the Proclamation of Praise for God's Mercy and a Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving. This form of the sacrament of Penance can work well for children, reinforcing their sense of the church as a reconciling community. However, even with several priests present and available for individual confessions,⁵⁸ a large assembly can mean a long wait.

For large groups of children, alternative arrangements should be made that take into account their limited capacity for sitting in silence. Consider the following possibilities: The parish might provide multiple opportunities for children to receive the sacrament (with two or more priests available), asking families to sign up, and setting a limit on the number of penitents present at any one time. Considering the difficulty of securing several priests for multiple occasions, a parish might designate a single extended period for children's confessions, asking families to sign up for particular times within the extended period, and simply allowing them to come and go quietly from the confessional(s).

A parish could also begin an extended period of confessions with a non-sacramental penitential service⁵⁹ for all the children and their families. The children could then be divided into smaller groups and rotated through various activities (in locations around the parish). In this way, at any given time, only a small group of children would need to wait quietly to receive the sacrament individually (by means of the “Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents”⁶⁰).

Parishes should make sure that parents are aware of additional opportunities for children to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance during the months leading up to First Holy Communion. By providing information about seasonal Penance services and regularly scheduled periods for Confession, and by encouraging families to participate, parishes can help parents establish a pattern of frequent participation in the Sacrament of Penance. This information and encouragement is especially important for the parents of children who completed the preparation for First Penance but did not celebrate the sacrament, since Church law requires the reception of First Penance before First Holy Communion.⁶¹



A child's reception of the Sacrament of Penance is not a matter of parish record. As is the case for any member of the faithful, reception of the sacrament, and the penitent's manner of participation in the rite, is held in confidence by the confessor and is protected by the inviolable seal of the sacrament.⁶² This prohibits any sort of public acknowledgement of children who have received their First Penance. Accordingly, their names are not to be announced or listed in the bulletin, and no certificates are to be issued. For the same reason, no photos may be taken nor video recorded as children approach or return from the confessional. It is appropriate to include "the children who have received their First Penance" in the Universal Prayer at Mass, as long as specific names are not mentioned.

Catechesis after First Penance

The same family practices that prepare children for First Penance will deepen their understanding and appreciation of the sacrament over time. Regular Mass attendance by the whole family, prayer in the home; and forgiveness and reconciliation practiced in the daily life of the family will continue to foster the child's moral development and formation of conscience. In addition, the period between First Penance and First Holy Communion presents a natural opportunity for the family to establish the pattern of regular reception of the Sacrament of Penance, whether by attending seasonal Penance services (e.g., Advent, Lent), or by receiving the sacrament during regularly scheduled Confession times.

The National Directory for Catechesis states that, "Since conversion is a lifelong process, catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance is ongoing. Children have a right to a fuller catechesis each year."⁶³ To provide this "fuller catechesis," parishes should procure instructional materials based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (particularly the sections that relate to divine worship and morality), as well as the Sunday Lectionary (especially Advent and Lent). The diocesan catechetical curriculum, the correlations provided to the diocese by various publishers, and the USCCB Conformity Review, can all provide guidance for the selection of appropriate resources. Published curricula with a "spiral" structure, designed to explore faith topics on an ever-deeper (and age-appropriate) level from year to year, can serve well the need for "fuller catechesis," provided that they include the sacrament of Penance among the faith topics covered.



FAQ: Sacrament of First Penance

1. What is the name of the sacrament—Penance, Reconciliation, or Confession?

Each of these terms is correct. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains the various designations of the sacrament, as follows:⁶⁴

- *Sacrament of conversion* because it makes present Jesus Christ’s call to conversion.
- *Sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction in the sinner’s journey back to God and to the Church.
- *Sacrament of confession*, since “confession” refers both to the essential disclosure of sins and to the acknowledgment and praise of God’s mercy.
- *Sacrament of forgiveness*, since God grants pardon through the priest’s sacramental absolution.
- *Sacrament of Reconciliation* because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles, drawing the sinner back into a right relationship.

2. Who decides when a child is ready to receive the sacrament of Penance?

Parents decide when a child is ready to begin formal preparation for the sacrament. At the conclusion of sacramental preparation, the pastor, catechetical leader, and catechist assist the parents in discerning whether the child is ready to receive the sacrament. If a child needs more time or additional instruction, the parish can work with the parents to provide it.

3. How can parents discern a child’s readiness for First Penance?

Discernment of a child’s readiness for the sacrament occurs in two stages. First, the parents observe the child’s behavior within the family and decide when the child is ready to begin formal preparation for the sacrament. Reflection on the following questions can assist them in discerning their child’s readiness:

- Has the child been baptized and reached the age of reason (about seven years)?⁶⁵
- Does the child know the difference between right and wrong?



- Can the child distinguish between mistakes or accidents and deliberate wrongdoing?
- Can the child express sorrow for sin?
- Can the child forgive others?
- Does the child pray at home and at Mass?
- Does the child relate to Jesus as one who forgives?

Second, after the child has completed sacramental preparation for First Penance, the pastor, catechetical leader, and the catechist assist the parents in assessing the child's readiness to receive the sacrament. This process may take various forms but focuses on the following criteria: the child's knowledge of Jesus and his message of forgiveness; his or her awareness of sin and its effects; and his or her experience and understanding of regret, forgiveness, and conversion.⁶⁶

4. Who prepares a child for the sacrament—parents or the Church?

When parents present their child for Baptism, they accept the privilege and responsibility of "training him (her) in the practice of the faith."⁶⁷ They begin preparing their child for First Penance before he or she starts school, as they instill values, a sense of right and wrong, and an understanding of the words "sorry," "apology," and "forgiveness." The Church recognizes that "the family is intimately involved with the formation of a child's moral conscience,"⁶⁸ and that parents are ordinarily responsible for a child's connection to the Church. Therefore, the Church encourages parents to take an active role in preparing their child for First Penance. Parents involved in their child's preparation reinforce the link between the sacrament of Penance and the experience of forgiveness in the life of the family.

For its part, the parish should support the preparation already underway in the family by offering formation to parents and children within the larger context of the Christian community. To assist parents in their duty as "first teachers"⁶⁹ and "primary educators,"⁷⁰ parishes should help them to deepen their own understanding and appreciation of the sacrament and equip them to help prepare their children to receive it.

5. If a child attends a Catholic school, will he or she be prepared for the sacrament there?

Sacramental catechesis "is intended for all members of the Christian community, takes place within the community, and involves the whole community of faith."⁷¹ Although the child will learn about the sacrament in the course of his or her religious education at the Catholic school, sacramental preparation for First Penance should take place in the parish where the family regularly attends Mass.

Preparation for First Penance should be offered in the parish in addition to systematic religious education for children, as a separate and distinct program that combines parent-led home learning, with a limited number of catechist-led sessions for children, parents, or both. As such, it should be a manageable commitment for Catholic school families, as well as for those participating in systematic religious education in the parish or in the home.



6. Should the parish require one year of religious education before a child begins preparation for First Penance?

Although a year of systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school) in advance of preparation for First Penance would certainly be helpful, readiness to *begin* formal preparation for First Penance can be attained by other means. For example, children who attend Mass with their families and experience a Christian home life can meet the criteria for readiness to *begin* preparation (see p. 12), whether or not they have participated in a year of systematic religious education. Parishes may reasonably expect that families with children preparing for First Penance attend Mass regularly and participate in systematic religious education (in the parish, the home, or the Catholic school) during the concurrent year.

For children whose families have not attended Mass regularly, some remedial catechesis may be appropriate, but this can be offered during the same year that the children are prepared for First Penance and First Holy Communion. Parishes should make every effort to meet these families where they are and welcome them into the life of the Christian community, while at the same time helping the parents to recognize and embrace their responsibility as “first teachers in the ways of faith.”⁷² Kindness and flexibility should characterize the words, actions, and attitudes of parish leaders, so that these families on the margins of parish life may be drawn closer to Christ and his Church.

Readiness to *begin* formal preparation for First Penance is not synonymous with readiness to *receive* it. As a child’s sacramental preparation for First Penance comes to an end, the pastor, catechetical leader, and the catechist assist the parents in assessing the child’s readiness to *receive* the sacrament. If a child needs more time or additional instruction, the parish can work with the parents to provide it.

7. What if an older child has not yet received First Penance and First Holy Communion?

Various circumstances can prevent a child from receiving First Penance and First Holy Communion with his or her peers. In this case, the parish should assist the parents in providing age-appropriate sacramental preparation, as well as basic catechesis, as needed.

For example, in addition to participating in sacramental preparation, a child with some previous formation in the faith could join his or her peers for religious education. If the child needs instruction on a more basic level, he or she could attend sessions with the children of catechetical age who are preparing to receive the sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion. (However, care must be taken that a baptized Catholic not be confused with a child who was baptized in another Christian denomination, or with an unbaptized child.)

Family catechesis, under the guidance of a parish catechist, can be a useful approach for addressing complex situations.



8. What do children need to know to receive the sacrament?

“A full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary”⁷³ for children to receive their First Penance. Rather, children need to:

- Know the difference between right and wrong.
- Know that accidents or mistakes are not sin.
- Understand sin as deliberately choosing to do wrong, in violation of God’s commandments.
- Recognize their need for forgiveness from other people and from God.
- Know that God loves them unconditionally.
- Know the person of Jesus and his message of forgiveness.
- Understand the sacrament as a means of receiving forgiveness.
- Know how to receive the sacrament, that is, how to participate in the “Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents”⁷⁴ and the “Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.”⁷⁵
- Understand the difference between simply telling God that one is sorry and receiving the sacrament of Penance.

9. If a child is afraid to go to Confession, can a parent go with him or her?

No. A parent must not accompany a child to his or her individual confession. If a child is afraid to receive the sacrament, caring adults (parents, catechist, catechetical leader, and pastor) should reassure the child by listening to his or her concerns and addressing them with care. Through such dialogue, a way forward can often be found. For example, a child afraid of entering an enclosed confessional might be willing to receive the sacrament with a parent nearby (in sight but out of earshot). A more open confessional, set up in a well-lit corner of the church (such as might be used when multiple priests hear individual confessions at a seasonal Penance service) can serve well in this situation.⁷⁶

10. Does a child need to memorize the Act of Contrition?

No. According to the “Rite of Reconciliation for Individual Penitents,” the priest asks the penitent to express his or her sorrow “in these or similar words.”⁷⁷ The rite then provides two texts for the Act of Contrition and makes reference to a collection of other possibilities.⁷⁸ Children may learn the traditional prayer (“My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart...”), any one of the others provided, or they may compose their own prayer of sorrow. Regardless of which prayer they choose to use, they may bring a copy with them into the confessional. When the “Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution” is celebrated, the Act of Contrition is recited communally; therefore, it is not necessary for the penitent to repeat this prayer during his or her individual confession.⁷⁹



11. Will the parish issue a certificate after a child receives First Penance, so that he or she can receive First Holy Communion?

No. A child's reception of the sacrament of Penance is not a matter of parish record. As is the case for any member of the faithful, reception of the sacrament, and the penitent's manner of participation in the rite, is held in confidence by the confessor and protected by the seal of the sacrament.⁸⁰ This prohibits any sort of public acknowledgement of the children who have received their First Penance. Their names are not to be announced or listed in the bulletin, and no certificates are to be issued attesting to their having received the sacrament.

According to Church law, a child must receive First Penance prior to First Holy Communion,⁸¹ however, he or she cannot be required to *prove* that he or she has done so. Such a requirement would violate the seal of the sacrament.⁸²

12. How can parents encourage a child's participation in the sacrament after First Penance?

Parents can best encourage a child by their own participation in the sacrament. The period between First Penance and First Holy Communion presents a natural opportunity for the family to establish the pattern of regular Confession, whether by attending communal Penance services in Advent and Lent, or by receiving the sacrament more frequently. If parents make a firm commitment and the whole family participates, a child will come to embrace the sacrament as an integral part of practicing his or her faith.

13. Why must a child receive First Penance before First Holy Communion?

According to Church law, the reception of First Penance prior to First Holy Communion is the norm.⁸³ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states it clearly: "Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time."⁸⁴ Indeed, "The age of discretion both for Confession and Holy Communion is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion."⁸⁵

Readiness to receive Holy Communion requires not only an ability to discern the difference between Eucharist and ordinary bread, but also an appreciation (appropriate to the child's age) that the same Jesus who feeds us also saves us from our sins, asks for our repentance, and forgives us through His body, the Church. The same Savior who offers us the chalice of his blood, "poured out...for the forgiveness of sins,"⁸⁶ at Mass, offers us healing and forgiveness through the Sacrament of Penance.

Once a child (through the use of reason) knows the difference between right and wrong, he or she becomes capable of committing personal sin (by deliberately choosing to do wrong). This means that the child, at some point in his or her future, could also commit a grave sin and *need* to receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion again. Therefore, at the age of reason, the child acquires the *right* to receive the Sacrament of Penance, so that as he or she matures, he or she may always have a *way home*, a means of returning to the Eucharist after committing a grave sin.⁸⁷



To ensure that the child is able to exercise this *right*, he or she must complete preparation for First Penance, and receive it, before receiving First Holy Communion. The child cannot, however, be required to *prove* that he or she has received the Sacrament of Penance, since such a requirement would violate the seal of the sacrament.⁸⁸

14. What if a child's parents are not married or not married in the church?

The grace of the Sacrament of Penance should not be withheld from the child due to the irregular marital status of his or her parents. Rather, the sincere desire of the parent or parents that the child receive First Penance should be seen as a gesture of good faith, and perhaps, the beginning of a new relationship to the Church.

Certain marital situations do prevent the parent from receiving absolution in the Sacrament of Penance. For example, a person who has divorced one, living spouse and married another may not receive sacramental absolution until the Church has granted an annulment of the previous marriage and witnessed the present one according to the required rite.

Such circumstances do not preclude parents from taking an active role in the child's sacramental preparation. Indeed, involvement in the child's preparation may stir in the parents a desire for reconciliation with the Church and motivate them to approach their pastor, another priest, or the diocesan tribunal for assistance in beginning the annulment process.

Once the priest has been made aware of their situation, parents may approach him during confessions to receive guidance, encouragement, and prayers, however, sacramental absolution must be withheld until annulments have been granted for previous marriages that ended in divorce.



FAQ: Sacramento de la Primera Penitencia

1. ¿Cuál es el nombre de este sacramento?—¿Penitencia, Reconciliación, o Confesión?

Cada uno de estos términos son correctos. El *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica* explica las varias denominaciones del sacramento, que siguen a continuación:⁶⁴

- *Sacramento de conversión*, porque realiza la llamada de Jesús a la conversión.
- *Sacramento de la penitencia*, porque consagra un proceso de conversión, arrepentimiento y de reparación en el camino del pecador que lo trae de vuelta hacia Dios y a la Iglesia.
- *Sacramento de la confesión*, porque “confesión” se refiere tanto a la esencial declaración de los pecados y al reconocimiento y alabanza de la misericordia de Dios.
- *Sacramento del perdón*, porque Dios concede el perdón a través del sacerdote con la absolución sacramental.
- *Sacramento de reconciliación*, porque otorga al pecador el amor de Dios que reconcilia, trayendo al pecador de vuelta a una relación perfecta con Dios.

2. ¿Quién decide si un niño está preparado para recibir el Sacramento de Penitencia?

Los padres deciden si su niño/a está preparado para comenzar la preparación formal del sacramento. A la conclusión de la preparación de este sacramento ya sea el párroco, el líder catequético y/o el catequista ayudarán a los padres en el discernimiento para que ellos puedan decidir si su hijo/a está preparado para recibir dicho sacramento. Si el niño/a necesitase más tiempo o instrucción adicional, la parroquia puede trabajar con los padres proveyéndole la ayuda necesaria.



3. ¿Cómo los padres pueden discernir si el niño/a está preparado para recibir el Sacramento de la Primera Penitencia?

El discernimiento de si un niño/a está preparado para recibir el sacramento se realiza en dos etapas. Primero, los padres observarán el comportamiento del niño/a en la familia y decidirán si éste está preparado para comenzar la preparación formal del sacramento. El siguiente cuestionario puede ayudar a los padres a reflexionar en dicho discernimiento:

- ¿El niño/a ha sido bautizado y ha llegado al uso de razón (alrededor de los 7 años)?⁶⁵
- ¿El niño/a puede diferenciar entre lo que es bueno y lo que es malo?
- ¿Puede el niño/a distinguir entre lo que es un accidente y una acción mal intencionada?
- ¿Puede el niño/a expresar pena o dolor por sus pecados?
- ¿Puede el niño/a perdonar a otros?
- ¿El niño/a ora en casa y en la misa?
- ¿El niño/a asocia a Jesús con aquel que perdona?

Segundo, después de que el niño/a ha completado la preparación formal de la *primera penitencia*, el párroco, el líder catequético y el catequista ayudarán a los padres a valorar si el niño/a está preparado para recibir el sacramento. Este proceso puede ser de varias formas, pero deberá basarse en el siguiente criterio: el niño debe conocer a Jesús y su mensaje de perdón; debe tener conocimiento del pecado y de las consecuencias; y su experiencia en cuanto al entendimiento del remordimiento, perdón y conversión.⁶⁶

4. ¿Quién prepara a los niños para el sacramento, los padres o la Iglesia?

Cuando los padres presentan a sus hijos para ser bautizados, ellos aceptan el privilegio y la responsabilidad de “educarlos en la fe.”⁶⁷ Ellos comienzan preparando a sus hijos para la *primera penitencia* antes de entrar a la escuela, inculcándoles valores, la diferencia entre lo bueno y lo malo, el significado de las palabras “lo siento” “disculpe” y “perdón.” La Iglesia reconoce que “la familia está íntimamente ligada con la formación de la conciencia moral del niño/a,”⁶⁸ y los padres son los responsables de la conexión entre el niño y la Iglesia. Por lo tanto, la Iglesia anima a los padres a tomar un rol activo en la preparación de sus hijos para la primera penitencia. Los padres que están involucrados en la preparación de sus hijos, refuerzan la conexión entre el sacramento de la penitencia y la experiencia del perdón en la vida familiar.

Por su parte, la parroquia debe apoyar la preparación ya existente en las familias, a través de una formación tanto para padres como hijos en el contexto amplio de la comunidad cristiana. Para ayudar a los padres en su tarea como “maestros primarios”⁶⁹ y “principales educadores,”⁷⁰ las parroquias deben ayudarlos a profundizar en sus conocimientos del aprecio por el sacramento, proveyéndoles ayuda para que puedan preparar a sus hijos a recibir el sacramento.



5. ¿Si un niño/a asiste a una escuela católica, él/ella será preparado allí para recibir el sacramento?

La catequesis sacramental “está prevista para todos los miembros de la comunidad cristiana, y se lleva a cabo en la comunidad, involucrando a toda la comunidad de fe.”⁷¹ Aunque el niño/a aprenderá acerca del sacramento en el curso de su educación religiosa en la escuela católica, la preparación sacramental de la *primera penitencia*, debe llevarse a cabo en la parroquia donde la familia regularmente asiste a misa.

La preparación de la *primera penitencia* deberá ser ofrecida en la parroquia en adhesión a la educación religiosa sistemática para niños, en un programa separado y distinto que estará combinado con el aprendizaje guiado en casa por los padres y con un número limitado de clases para niños, padres o ambos. En este sentido deberá existir un compromiso razonable tanto de parte de las familias que asisten a escuelas católicas así como también para aquellos que participan en una educación religiosa sistemática en las parroquias o en sus casas.

6. ¿La parroquia deberá requerir que los niños completen un año previo de educación religiosa antes de comenzar la preparación de la *primera penitencia*?

Aunque un año previo de educación religiosa sistemática (ya sea en la parroquia, casa o en la escuela católica) antes de la preparación de la *primera penitencia* ciertamente es beneficiosa, la determinación si el niño/a está listo se puede obtener a través de otros medios. Por ejemplo, los niños que asisten a misa con sus familias y llevan una vida cristiana en sus hogares, cumplen con los requisitos de estar listos para comenzar su preparación (vea p. 12), aunque ellos no hayan participado antes de una educación religiosa sistemática. Las parroquias de una manera razonable esperan que las familias cuyos niños se están preparando para la *primera penitencia*, asistan a misa regularmente y participen en una educación religiosa sistemática (ya sea en la parroquia, casa o escuela católica) durante el año concurrente.

Para los niños de familias que no asisten a misa regularmente, será apropiado darles una catequesis adecuada, la misma que puede ser dada en el mismo año que el niño se está preparando para la *primera penitencia* y la *primera comunión*. Las parroquias deberán hacer todo lo posible para acoger a estas familias y darle la bienvenida a la vida de la comunidad cristiana, al mismo tiempo ayudar a los padres a reconocer y aceptar la responsabilidad “como primeros educadores en los caminos de la fe.”⁷² Amabilidad y flexibilidad deberán ser las palabras, acciones y actitudes de los líderes catequéticos, para que así estas familias que se encuentran al margen de la vida parroquiana puedan ser atraídas a Cristo y a la Iglesia.

El estar listo para comenzar una preparación formal para la *primera penitencia* no es sinónimo de estar listo para recibirla. Cuando la preparación sacramental del niño/a finaliza, el párroco, el líder catequético y el/la catequista ayudarán a los padres a determinar si el niño/a está preparado para recibir el sacramento. Si el niño/a necesitase más tiempo o instrucción adicional, la parroquia puede trabajar con los padres proveyéndole la ayuda necesaria.



7. ¿Qué pasa si un niño de mayor edad no ha recibido el Sacramento de la Primera Penitencia ni la Primera Comunión?

Son varias las circunstancias por la cual un niño no ha podido recibir la *primera penitencia* ni la *primera comunión* con los niños de su edad. En estos casos, la parroquia ayudará a los padres para que el niño/a sea preparado de acuerdo a su edad en cuanto a la preparación del sacramento, además de recibir una catequesis básica si es que la necesita.

Por ejemplo, si un niño/a tiene una formación catequética previa, él/ella podrá participar de la educación religiosa con los de su edad. Si el niño/a necesita instrucción a un nivel más básico, él o ella pueden asistir a las clases con los niños que están recibiendo instrucción para recibir los sacramentos de *iniciación cristiana, bautismo, confirmación, primera comunión*. (Sin embargo, se debe de tener cuidado de no confundirlos con aquellos niños que han sido bautizado en otra religión o que no está bautizados.)

La catequesis familiar que está guiada por catequistas parroquiales puede ser muy útil para atender situaciones complejas.

8. ¿Qué necesitan saber los niños para recibir el sacramento?

“Para que un niño reciba el sacramento de la *primera penitencia* no es necesario que tenga un perfecto y completo conocimiento de la doctrina.”⁷³ Más bien, los niños necesitan:

- Saber la diferencia entre lo bueno y lo malo.
- Saber que un error o un accidente no es pecado.
- Comprender que el pecado es escoger hacer el mal de una manera deliberada, en contra de los mandamientos de Dios.
- Reconocer la necesidad del perdón de otras personas y de Dios.
- Saber que Dios los ama incondicionalmente.
- Conocer a la persona de Jesús y su mensaje de perdón.
- Entender el sacramento como significado de recibir el perdón.
- Saber cómo recibir el sacramento y como participar en el “Rito de reconciliación de penitente individual”⁷⁴ y el “Rito de reconciliación de varios penitentes con confesión y absolución individual.”⁷⁵
- Entender la diferencia entre arrepentirse ante Dios y el recibir el sacramento de la penitencia.



9. ¿Si un niño tiene miedo confesarse solo/a pueden los padres acompañarlos durante la confesión?

No. Los padres no deben acompañar a su hijo/a cuando él/ella haga su confesión individual. Si un niño/a tiene miedo de recibir el sacramento, tanto los padres, como los catequistas y su párroco deben apoyarle, escucharle y contestarle a sus preguntas y/o preocupaciones. En este dialogo con el niño/a puede encontrarse la solución al problema. Por ejemplo, a lo mejor el niño le da miedo los confesionarios porque son encerrados, en estos casos se puede pedir a los padres que estén a la vista del niño/a pero lo suficientemente lejos para no alcanzar a escuchar la confesión. También pueden traer al niño/a a confesarse en la época de las confesiones comunales que tiene la parroquia, donde se invitan y asisten varios sacerdotes, a los cuales se los coloca visibles en las esquinas dentro de la iglesia.⁷⁶

10. ¿El niño/a necesita memorizar el Acto de Contrición?

No. De acuerdo al “rito de reconciliación de penitentes,” el sacerdote le pide al penitente que exprese su arrepentimiento” con estas o con palabras similares.”⁷⁷ El rito provee dos textos para el acto de contrición y hace referencia a la recopilación de otras posibilidades.⁷⁸ Los niños pueden aprender la oración tradicional (“Señor, me arrepiento de todo corazón...”), o cualquiera de las otras que son ofrecidas, o también puede componer una oración propia de arrepentimiento. Independientemente de cuál oración escojan, deberán traer consigo una copia al confesionario. Cuando el “rito de reconciliación de varios penitentes con confesión y absolución individual” es celebrado, el acto de contrición es recitado comunamente; por lo tanto ya no es necesario que el penitente repita la oración durante su confesión individual.⁷⁹

11. ¿La parroquia emitirá un certificado al niño/a después de haber recibido su primera penitencia, para que pueda recibir su primera comunión?

No. La recepción del *sacramento de penitencia* de un niño/a no es anotado en los registros de la parroquia. Tal como ocurre con cualquier feligrés, la recepción del sacramento y la manera de participación es guardada confidencialmente por el confesor y protegida por el sello del sacramento.⁸⁰ Esto prohíbe cualquier tipo de publicación o anuncio de los que reciben la *primera penitencia*. Los nombres no deben ser anunciados en el boletín y no se debe entregar certificado alguno donde manifieste que se ha recibido el sacramento.

De acuerdo con las leyes de la Iglesia, un niño/a debe recibir la recepción de la *primera penitencia* antes que la *primera comunión*;⁸¹ sin embargo, ellos nos pueden ser obligados a *probar* que lo han hecho, pues dicho requerimiento viola el sigilo sacramental.⁸²



12. ¿Cómo pueden los padres ayudar a sus hijos a seguir participando del sacramento después de recibir su *primera penitencia*?

Los padres pueden ayudar a sus hijos participando ellos mismos del sacramento. El periodo entre la *primera penitencia* y la *primera comunión* presenta una oportunidad natural para que la familia establezca el modelo de confesarse regularmente ya sea durante los servicios comunales durante el adviento o la cuaresma o recibiendo el sacramento más frecuente. Si la familia establece un compromiso de participación, el niño/a acepta el sacramento como una parte integral en la práctica de su fe.

13. ¿Por que el niño/a debe recibir la *primera penitencia* antes de la *primera comunión*?

De acuerdo con las leyes de la Iglesia, la norma es que la recepción de la primera penitencia sea antes que la primera comunión.⁸³ El *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica dice claramente*: “Los niños deben acceder al sacramento de la penitencia antes de recibir por primera vez la sagrada comunión.”⁸⁴ De hecho, “La edad adecuada para la recibir la confesión y la primera comunión es durante la edad de la discreción esto sucede alrededor de los siete años y es cuando el niño/a comienza a razonar. Desde ese momento comienza la obligación de cumplir con ambos preceptos, confesión y comunión.”⁸⁵

El estar preparado para recibir la sagrada comunión requiere no solo de la habilidad de diferenciar entre la eucaristía y un pan ordinario, sino también el reconocimiento (apropiado a la edad del niño/a) de que el mismo Jesús que nos alimenta, es el que nos salva del pecado, busca nuestro arrepentimiento y nos perdona a través de su cuerpo, la Iglesia. El mismo Salvador que nos ofrece el cáliz de su sangre, “derramada... para el perdón de los pecados,”⁸⁶ en la misa, nos ofrece la salvación y el perdón a través del sacramento de la penitencia.

Una vez un niño/a (a través del uso de la razón) sabe la diferencia entre lo bueno y lo malo, él/ella es capaz de cometer pecados individuales (al escoger deliberadamente hacer el mal) Esto significa que en algún momento en el futuro puede cometer un pecado grave y *necesitará* recibir el sacramento de la penitencia antes de recibir la santa comunión. Por lo tanto, a la edad del uso de razón, el niño/a adquiere el *derecho* de recibir el *sacramento de la penitencia*, y a medida que va madurando entenderá que hay siempre un *camino a casa*, un medio que los llevará a la eucaristía, aun después de haber cometido un pecado grave.⁸⁷

Para asegurarse que un niño es capaz de ejercitar su *derecho*, él o ella deberá completar la preparación de la *primera penitencia* y recibirla antes de recibir la primera comunión. Sin embargo, no se puede requerir prueba alguna de haber recibido el *sacramento de la penitencia*, pues esto violaría el sigilo sacramental.⁸⁸



14. ¿Qué pasa si los padres del niño/a no están casados en la Iglesia?

No se le puede retener a un niño/a la gracia del *sacramento de la penitencia* debido al estatus irregular del matrimonio de sus padres. Siendo sincero el deseo de los padres que su niño/a reciba sus sacramentos, este gesto deber ser visto de buena fe, probablemente es el comienzo de que están buscando una nueva relación con la Iglesia.

Ciertas situaciones maritales previenen a los padres de familia de recibir la absolución en el sacramento de la penitencia. Por ejemplo, una persona que ha estado divorciada una vez y se volvió a casar con otra, no recibirá el sacramento de reconciliación hasta que su primer matrimonio sea declarado nulo por la Iglesia y el presente matrimonio sea celebrado en la Iglesia.

Estas circunstancias no excluyen a los padres de tomar un rol activo en la preparación sacramental de sus hijos. De hecho, la participación en la preparación de sus hijos puede mover en los padres el deseo de reconciliarse con la Iglesia y motivarlos a acercarse a su párroco, a otro sacerdote, o al tribunal de la diócesis para pedir ayuda y comenzar el proceso de anulación.

Una vez el sacerdote está enterado de la situación, la pareja pueden acercarse a él durante la confesión y buscar guía, apoyo y oración, sin embargo la absolución deberá retenerse hasta que la anulación sea otorgada por el matrimonio anterior que terminó en divorcio.

Los números superíndices remiten a las referencias en página 37.



Pastoral Notes for Persons with Disabilities – First Penance

The following insights augment corresponding sections of the Pastoral Directives found on pp. 9-17 of this Instruction. Please read the Pastoral Directives in their entirety.

Role of Parents and Guardians

“The central importance of family members in the lives of all persons with disabilities, regardless of age, must never be underestimated. They lovingly foster the spiritual, mental, and physical development of the disabled person and are the primary teachers of religion and morality.”⁸⁹

The family of a child with a disability knows him or her best. For example, in the case of intellectual disability, parents or siblings can often interpret body language and verbalizations that others cannot easily decipher. Thus, the engagement of family members in the child’s preparation for First Penance is invaluable. Parents of a child with a disability are the “first” and “best” teachers⁹⁰ of their child but should not be expected to be the only teachers. The level of participation of a parent (or other family member) in the sacramental preparation of a child with a disability should be tailored to the specific situation, addressing the needs of the child, and the other children preparing for First Penance, without putting undue stress on the family.⁹¹

Role of Godparents

Godparents of a child with a disability are his or her first link with the larger Christian community. Thus, they are in a unique position to assist the parents in bringing the child into the catechetical and sacramental life of the parish. For example, they can share the stories of the child’s Baptism, and then join in his or her sacramental preparation, reinforcing the connection between Baptism, First Penance and First Holy Communion with their presence and participation.

Role of Parish Community and Catholic School

Children with disabilities are among those “particularly beloved of the Lord”⁹² and are indispensable members of the body of Christ.⁹³ Their involvement in all aspects of parish life proclaims the Gospel of Jesus in the midst of God’s people in a profound way. This “living witness” tests the values of the parish community, refines its mission, and enriches its faith.⁹⁴



It makes sense, then, that the catechesis of children with disabilities should take place within the mainstream of parish life. To the extent possible, children with disabilities should be included in catechetical programs in the parish, recognizing that some adaptation of program methods and adjustment of learning objectives may be necessary to meet their particular needs.⁹⁵ Even for children whose disabilities make participation in parish catechetical programs difficult, some degree of inclusion should be considered.

To offer a truly pastoral response to the family of a child with a disability, the parish should endeavor to learn about the disability, seeking information and insight from the parents, from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, and from others with expertise in serving persons with disabilities. Thus informed, the parish can work with the family to develop the best approach for the child's formation, so that he or she can be heartily welcomed into the catechetical and sacramental life of the community.⁹⁶

The Catholic school can be a resource for nearby parishes seeking information and expertise on the catechesis of children with disabilities. For example, if a child with disabilities attends a Catholic school, the strategies that support that child's learning in the school context can be shared with the parish catechetical team, and adapted, as appropriate, to sacramental preparation in the parish.

Role of Pastor, Deacons, and Lay Catechists

"In accord with canon 777, no. 4, pastors are responsible to be as inclusive as possible in providing evangelization, catechetical formation, and sacramental preparation for parishioners with disabilities."⁹⁷ In carrying out this duty, pastors depend on the assistance of others: deacons, catechetical leaders, catechists, and parents. These, in turn, may consult the Center for Marriage, Family & Life for insight on adapting sacramental preparation programs to meet the needs of children with various disabilities. The Office can also help identify persons with relevant expertise, as well as additional resources available in the local area.

Realistically, not every parish can achieve full accessibility and availability of programs for children with disabilities. Hence, parishes in a given area may work together to provide such services.⁹⁸

Pastors are encouraged to collaborate with their brother priests to make available the sacrament of Penance to children with special needs. For example, priests fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) can be called upon to hear the confessions of children who regularly use ASL to communicate.⁹⁹ Similarly, the increase in autism spectrum disorder has generated a need for priests with the requisite aptitude to master adaptive strategies for celebrating the Sacrament of Penance with children whose capacity for verbal interaction is limited.¹⁰⁰



Catechesis prior to First Penance

The Church believes that every human person “is capable of growth in holiness.”¹⁰¹ Grace makes this possible, regardless of the limitations imposed by disabilities. In light of this, “All baptized persons with disabilities have a right to adequate catechesis and deserve the means to develop a relationship with God.”¹⁰² Parish efforts on behalf of children with disabilities should aim to uphold that “right” and provide those “means.”

As much as possible, children with disabilities should be included in catechetical programs in the parish, recognizing that some adaptation of program methods may be necessary to meet their particular needs.¹⁰³ For example, a parish that regularly prepares children for First Penance through some combination of parent-led home learning, catechist-led instruction for children, formation opportunities for parents, and learning events for children and parents together (family sessions, family retreats), may work with parents to create a unique blend of these learning contexts to serve the particular needs of a child with a disability.

A child who has difficulties with verbal interaction may benefit from learning with visual story cards. This adaptive strategy can help the child to recognize the impact of his or her actions on others and to learn the “sequence” of forgiveness and forgiving others.¹⁰⁴ While parish catechesis before the sacrament should normally make use of materials approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB),¹⁰⁵ parishes desiring to use materials adapted for persons with disabilities (not yet included in the USCCB Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts and Series) may seek approval from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life.

Some adjustment of learning objectives may be appropriate for children with certain disabilities. For example, for children with intellectual disabilities, learning objectives for sacramental catechesis in preparation for First Penance¹⁰⁶ might be simplified, so that this formation helps the children to:

- Accept God’s unconditional love for them.
- Know Jesus through stories about his love and forgiveness.
- Become aware of good and bad choices and their own ability to make them.
- Know that bad choices hurt others as well as themselves.
- Desire forgiveness, not only from parents, family members, and friends, but also from God.
- Understand the sacrament as a special way of receiving God’s healing and love.
- Learn how to receive the sacrament (using adaptive communication methods, as needed.)

Under normal circumstances, children preparing for first sacraments should participate in systematic religious education for their particular age group. For children with disabilities, the appropriate level of inclusion with peers should be agreed upon by catechetical leaders, catechists and parents; and adjusted, as needed through ongoing dialogue. Examples of participation adapted to a child’s learning needs might include full-time inclusion with peers, with the child accompanied by a learning partner (background-screened, VIRTUS-trained adult or teen, who assists one-on-one in the classroom); part-time inclusion,



augmented by at-home tutoring by a catechist or parent; and at-home parent-led instruction of the child.

Readiness for First Penance

A child with disabilities may benefit from *repeated* participation, over time, in non-sacramental penitential services and in the communal portion of seasonal Penance services. Similarly, *multiple* visits to the confessional, allowing the child to sit or kneel quietly (as he or she might to receive the sacrament), may help the child to become aware of the special purpose of the place and to feel at ease there.

In the case of a child with an intellectual or emotional disability, those responsible for determining the child’s readiness to receive First Penance (parents, catechists, catechetical leader, and pastor) may call upon others with relevant expertise (e.g. diocesan personnel from the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, psychologists, mental health professionals) to assist with the discernment process, as needed.¹⁰⁷

The Church recognizes that while “only those who have the use of reason are capable of committing serious sin,” a child with an intellectual disability may “experience a sense of guilt and sorrow”¹⁰⁸ for his or her actions. As long as the child has some capacity for contrition, even without the ability to name the sin, the child may receive sacramental absolution. (A child with a profound intellectual disability, who has no discernible capacity for contrition, may join the parish community for penitential services, participating according to his or her ability.)¹⁰⁹

If a child has used visual story cards during his or her formation to overcome verbal difficulties, review of a familiar story board about reconciliation, just before his or her reception of the sacrament, may reassure him or her with images of God, Jesus, and thumbs up gestures.¹¹⁰

Celebration of First Penance

“Parish sacramental celebrations should be accessible to persons with disabilities and open to their full, active and conscious participation, according to their capacity.”¹¹¹ Recognizing that this presents a challenge for individual communities, parishes and pastors are encouraged to work together to make the Sacrament of Penance available to children with special needs.

A deaf child, who regularly communicates using American Sign Language (ASL), should be allowed to make his or her confession in that language, if at all possible, either to a priest fluent in ASL or through a certified ASL interpreter (who is strictly bound to respect the seal of the sacrament). If no such arrangement can be made, a deaf child may confess in writing (with written materials destroyed afterward).¹¹²



A child whose disabilities limit his or her capacity for verbal interaction may use gesture (signing, thumbs down) or an “I’m sorry” image card to express contrition.¹¹³ Adaptive strategies that allow the child to express contrition non-verbally but directly to the priest are preferable to the use of a “translator” to interpret the child’s non-verbal signals. Before “hearing” such a confession, the priest should become familiar with the form of communication the child has been taught to use. If the child’s disability precludes the use of other adaptive strategies, another person may “translate” the child’s non-verbal expression of contrition, but must do so objectively and confidentially, maintaining the seal of confession.

For additional information, contact the Center for Marriage, Family & Life, Catholic Diocese of Richmond, 804-622-5109.



Acknowledgements

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- ¹ Cf. Mt 20:28; 26:28; Mk 10:45; 14:24; Lk 22:20; Rom 3:25; 5:8 I Cor 15:3–4; I Tm 2:6; I Pt 1:18; I Jn 2:2; 4:10; Rev 1:5; 4:9; 14:3; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 601–605, 609, 613–617, 654.
- ² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1086–1087, 1442, 1444–1455, 1461; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* (2005), no. 36, B, 2, p. 132.
- ³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 981, 986–987, 1086–1087, 1421.
- ⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1084–1085, 1088, 1092, 1099, 1104, 1127.
- ⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1214.
- ⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1263.
- ⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1446, 1458.
- ⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 981, 986–987, 1422, 1440, 1445.
- ⁹ *Rite of Penance*, no. 46; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1449.
- ¹⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1324, 1374.
- ¹¹ Vatican Council II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 5, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1324; cf. nos. 1323, 1362, 1366–1367.
- ¹² Cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, third edition (2010), nos. 51–52.
- ¹³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1394–1395, 1436.
- ¹⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1385, 1395, 1457.
- ¹⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1436.
- ¹⁶ Sacred Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on First Communion, *Quam singulari* (1910); cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 914, 989.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam singulari*.
- ¹⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1447.
- ¹⁹ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 6; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1448–1449.
- ²⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1451.
- ²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1456.
- ²² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1459.
- ²³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1430–1431.
- ²⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1449.
- ²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1468.
- ²⁶ *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 93.



- ²⁷ Cf. “You Are the Church in Your Home,” *Follow the Way of Love: A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to Families*, USCC, 1994.
- ²⁸ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135.
- ²⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1438; cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 1250–1251.
- ³⁰ Cf. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence (1966)*, nos. 23–24.
- ³¹ Cf. Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam singulari*.
- ³² Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 35, B, p. 114.
- ³³ *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 40.
- ³⁴ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 35, B, p. 114.
- ³⁵ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 48-59.
- ³⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *On Catechesis in Our Time (1979)*, no. 64; cited in *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 54, B, 1, p. 220.
- ³⁷ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 54, B, 1, p. 220.
- ³⁸ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis (1997)*, no. 225.
- ³⁹ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135; *National Catechetical Directory*, no. 126.
- ⁴⁰ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 991.
- ⁴¹ *National Catechetical Directory*, n. 126; cited in *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2.
- ⁴² *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 70.
- ⁴³ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 255.
- ⁴⁴ Cf. Current USCCB Conformity List, available online (<http://www.usccb.org/about/evangelization-and-catechesis/subcommittee-on-catechism/conformity-review/>).
- ⁴⁵ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, pp. 135-136.
- ⁴⁶ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 41-47.
- ⁴⁷ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 48-59.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 914; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1457.
- ⁴⁹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 914; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1457.
- ⁵⁰ *Rite of Penance*, no. 37.
- ⁵¹ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, Appendix II, nos. 44-53.
- ⁵² Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 41-47.
- ⁵³ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 48-59.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 37.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135.
- ⁵⁶ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 22.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 48-59.
- ⁵⁸ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 22.
- ⁵⁹ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, Appendix II, nos. 44-53.
- ⁶⁰ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 41-47.
- ⁶¹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 914; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1457.
- ⁶² Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 983.1, 1388; Ap. Ltr. *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*.
- ⁶³ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36 B, p. 136; Cf. *National Catechetical Directory*, no. 126.



- ⁶⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1423-1424.
- ⁶⁵ Cf. Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam singulari*.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135.
- ⁶⁷ *Rite of Baptism for Children, Rito del Bautismo de Niños*; no. 39.
- ⁶⁸ *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135.
- ⁶⁹ Cf. *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 70.
- ⁷⁰ Cf. *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 226.
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- ⁷³ Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam singulari*.
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- ⁷⁵ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 48-59.
- ⁷⁶ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 22.
- ⁷⁷ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, no. 45.
- ⁷⁸ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 85-92.
- ⁷⁹ Cf. *Rite of Penance*, nos. 27, 55.
- ⁸⁰ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 983.1, 1388; Ap. Ltrr. *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*.
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- ⁸⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*; no. 1457.
- ⁸⁵ Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam Singulari*; cf. *Code of Canon Law*, canons 914, 989.
- ⁸⁶ English Translation of *The Roman Missal*, International Commission on English in the Liturgy (2010); cf. Mt 26:28.
- ⁸⁷ Cf. Congregation of the Sacraments, Decree *Quam Singulari*.
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- ⁸⁹ Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities, USCCB (1978, 1988, 2001), no. 15.
- ⁹⁰ Cf. *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 105.
- ⁹¹ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 49, p. 208.
- ⁹² *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 189.
- ⁹³ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 49, pp. 206-207.
- ⁹⁴ Cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 49, p. 207.
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- ⁹⁶ Cf. *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*, USCCB (1999); *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, I. General Principles, no. 5.
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- ⁹⁸ Cf. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, I. General Principles, no. 3.



- ⁹⁹ Cf. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, II. Particular Sacraments, Reconciliation, no. 24.
- ¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, II. Particular Sacraments, Reconciliation, no. 25.
- ¹⁰¹ *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 189.
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- ¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Helper Guide for Adaptive Reconciliation Kit*, Loyola Press, Adaptive Reconciliation Kit, pp. 6-7.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cf. Current USCCB Conformity List, available online (<http://www.usccb.org/about/evangelization-and-catechesis/subcommittee-on-catechism/conformity-review/>).
- ¹⁰⁶ Cf. Pastoral Directives Regarding First Penance, p. 16; *National Directory for Catechesis*, no. 36, B, 2, p. 135.
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- ¹¹² Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 990; *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, II. Particular Sacraments, Reconciliation, no. 24.
- ¹¹³ Cf. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, II. Particular Sacraments, Reconciliation, no. 25.

