



Catholic Parent Guide

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The Sacrament of

Penance and Reconciliation

Preparing Your Child for the Sacrament

Draw on Your Own Experience

Dear Parents,

Chances are you're reading this because your child is preparing to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time. What an exciting time for you and your family! When your child was baptized, you made a promise to raise him or her to learn and experience our Catholic faith. God is with you now as you take another step in fulfilling that promise.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is both a reminder and an experience of the reality that "God loves us no matter what." At his first Sunday Angelus, Pope Francis stated, "God's face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient.... He always has patience ... he understands us, he waits for us, he does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart" (March 17, 2013). Your child's first celebration of the sacrament will set the stage for what should become a lifetime of experiencing God's unconditional love in this great tradition of our faith. For this reason, it is important for parents and other teachers of the Faith to inform themselves concerning what the Church teaches about reconciliation and how best to communicate those teachings to our children. This guide is written to assist you in that process.

In these pages you will find information on what Scripture teaches about reconciliation, guidelines from canon law and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, information about how children's development influences their understanding of the sacrament, and recommendations for teaching about the sacrament at home.

As you use this guide, be sure to keep in mind that two of your most important tools in preparing your child for reconciliation are your own experience

with the sacrament and your relationship with your child. Be sure to go to confession regularly yourself as your child prepares for the sacrament. Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, so the Sacrament of Penance not only signifies the grace that is available to us through reconciliation with God and his Church, but

we actually receive this grace as we celebrate the sacrament. This grace will help you to be your child's best teacher, and it will help you draw from experience when speaking to your child about the sacrament. Also, be aware of how, through family relationships and interactions, you can nurture the desire to lead holy lives and to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Talk about how family rules relate to God's commandments, and talk openly about forgiveness when your child has a conflict with you or with a sibling. Most importantly, model forgiveness and reconciliation in your own interactions with

family members and pray for the grace to teach God's commandments by your example. Children are sometimes watching us more closely than we realize, and they learn much more from what we show them than from what they are told.

May God richly bless you with an extra measure of grace as you continue to fulfill the promises you made at your child's Baptism, and may your child desire to always stay close to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. You are planting the seeds of a faith that is eternal.



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What Catholics Believe

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

To understand reconciliation, we must first understand sin. Sin isn't merely disobeying a rule or doing a bad thing; it is an offense against God, which hurts our relationship with him. It also harms our relationship with the Church, since we are all connected as the Body of Christ. The Sacrament of Penance begins with a change of heart that precipitates God's forgiveness, thus enabling reconciliation and unity with God and others.

Through confession, sins are told to the priest, who represents Christ. Contrition, recognizing our sinfulness, and deciding not to sin again are all part of the sacrament. The Sacrament of Reconciliation not only helps form our consciences and strengthens us spiritually, but it also allows us to maintain a close friendship with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in the Faith. Grace received in this sacrament assists us in resisting temptation and avoiding sin in the future. Sanctifying grace is necessary for friendship with God and for salvation. Not all sins create the same break in communion with God and the Church. The most serious, called "mortal sins," create such a chasm that only formal confession can mend the result in a total loss of grace it causes. All Catholics who have reached the age of reason (about seven years old) are required by the Church to confess serious sins at least once each year. All unconfessed mortal sins must be confessed to obtain forgiveness. In a situation of imminent death, perfect contrition with the firm intention to confess, if possible, is also sufficient to obtain forgiveness.

In order for a sin to be considered mortal, it must be a "grave matter" such as murder, adultery, or theft; the person committing the act must understand the gravity of the sin; and the person must consent to the act in free will (by choice). For these reasons, few children are considered capable of committing mortal sin. All mortal sins committed after Baptism must be confessed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation in order to obtain forgiveness, restore sanctifying grace, and heal our relationship with God. Less serious sins, called "venial," weaken the work of God in our lives. Venial sins committed after Baptism harm us because they keep us from being the people that God made us to be and can result in a loss of grace. We are not required to confess venial sins. They are forgiven through the penitential rites of the Mass and the reception of the Eucharist, helping to restore our state of grace. However, we are strongly encouraged to bring all our sins to Christ in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. (See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1422–1498.)



A Sin or an Accident

As concrete thinkers, young children can understand actions as right and wrong, but sometimes kids have difficulties understanding motives. This can lead to some confusion over exactly what is a sin and what isn't. For example, children who forget to do something they were asked to do may think they have sinned.

In order to form their consciences appropriately, it's important that kids understand the difference between a sin and an accident, or mistake. Parents can help make this distinction clear by posing hypothetical situations and asking the children to tell if what is described would be a sin or an accident. Better still, they can point out examples in their own family's lives, such as when something is accidentally dropped and broken compared to when a child intentionally disobeys. To help make this distinction clear, be sure not to get overly upset or punitive about accidental rule infractions, but also point out that feeling sorry about a wrong choice we have made does not make that choice an accident. The real question is, "Did we do it on purpose?"

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What Jesus Taught About Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Penance was instituted by Jesus for the forgiveness of post baptismal sins and reconciling us to God and the Church. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' parables and his interactions with people provide us with several stories of reconciliation that can help to teach us about the sacrament. Here are a few examples:

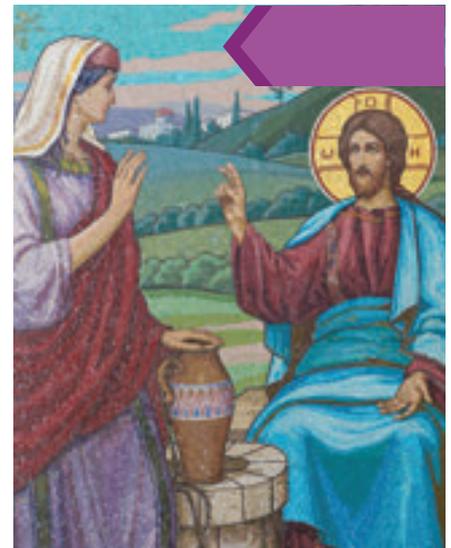


The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32). Here, Jesus describes a loving father whose door is always open to his children. Even after the prodigal son has renounced his family and squandered his father's wealth, the father runs to meet him and embraces him when he returns. While the son was hoping only that he could return and be a servant in the home, the father welcomes him back fully as his son and throws a great celebration for him. Worth noting in this story is the older brother's reaction to these events. The older brother reacts with resentment at the special treatment his younger brother is getting, especially because he has remained faithful and responsible, but the father cannot help but celebrate his reunion with his prodigal son. **When we have made wrong choices, God always desires to forgive us and welcome us back to him with love and celebration.**

The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1–7). Jesus describes a shepherd who, losing one of his 100 sheep, goes out to find the one that is lost. He rejoices when he finds the sheep again. Jesus told this parable to explain to the Pharisees why he was frequently in the company of people associated with sin, like tax collectors. Jesus taught about a loving and caring God who not only welcomes the lost but also goes out to find them. His love is so great that he is filled with joy when those who have gone astray come back to him. **We can be certain that God will seek us out when we stray; also, we can be God's instruments to lead others back to him.**

Jesus Forgives a Sinful Woman (Luke 7:36–50). While Jesus is dining at the house of a Pharisee, a woman who is known by the others to be very sinful (probably a prostitute) enters the house. She is weeping and washes Jesus' feet with her tears. She then anoints his feet with very expensive, sweet-smelling oil. The Pharisee is very troubled by the woman's presence, and is particularly appalled that Jesus is allowing such a sinful woman to touch him. Jesus answers this concern with a parable about a creditor who forgives a large debt, saying that those who have been forgiven much will show great love. Jesus teaches that **no sin is too large that it cannot be forgiven. We can always bring our failures to God.**

The Woman at the Well (John 4:4–42). Scripture tells us how Jesus revealed himself to this sinful woman who was shunned by others. The message of Christ was one she immediately shared with others, which helped to restore relationships between the woman and the rest of the community. In a sense, then, Jesus not only forgave the woman for her sins, but also reintegrated her into the community. **The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation has these same effects for us today: through the sacrament we are forgiven for our sins and united once again with Christ and his Church.**





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Zacchaeus is Forgiven (Luke 19:1–10).

Zacchaeus is a tax collector who has cheated the people. Zacchaeus is so touched by his meeting with Christ that he agrees to pay back four times as much to the people he has cheated and give half of his possessions to the poor. In the same way, our encounter with Christ in the Sacrament of Reconciliation leads us to do penance for our sins. **Penance is a special task we are given to help build up the relationship between ourselves and our neighbors or between ourselves and God.**



Jesus Gives his Disciples the Authority to Forgive Sins (John 20:21–23).

Jesus made his disciples participants in his ongoing ministry of reconciliation by giving them the authority to forgive sins. This apostolic authority has been passed on throughout the generations by the laying on of hands in the ordination of priests. In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, the priest acts as a representative of Christ and the entire Christian community, enabling us to be forgiven of our sins and reunited with our sisters and brothers in Christ. **Only priests can forgive sins in the Catholic Church. Priests must keep secret the sins confessed during the Sacrament of Penance, under the pain of excommunication. We should pray for priests daily, especially those who have heard our confessions.**

The Three Forms of the Sacrament

There is one Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, but the Sacrament can be celebrated in different ways, or forms (CCC, 1480-1484). While we may personally feel more comfortable with one form or another, it's important to realize that they each begin with a good, honest, and sincere confession and the firm intention of sinning no more in the future, and the effects of the sacrament are the same: restored unity with God. The grace of this sacrament is merited for us by the saving death and Resurrection of Jesus, who said, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Individual Confession

The most common form of the Sacrament of Penance is individual confession. In this form, the penitent (the person confessing) meets with the priest individually. The priest welcomes and blesses the penitent and may read from Scripture. The penitent then confesses his or her sins to the priest. The priest gives the penitent a penance (a special task to help repair the damage done by the sins confessed). The penitent then makes an Act of Contrition (a form prayer or a prayer in his or her own words that expresses sorrow for sin and a sincere desire to avoid sin in the future), and then the priest says the words of absolution. The rite ends with a prayer of thanksgiving and praise and a blessing by the priest.



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Communal Celebration with Individual Confession

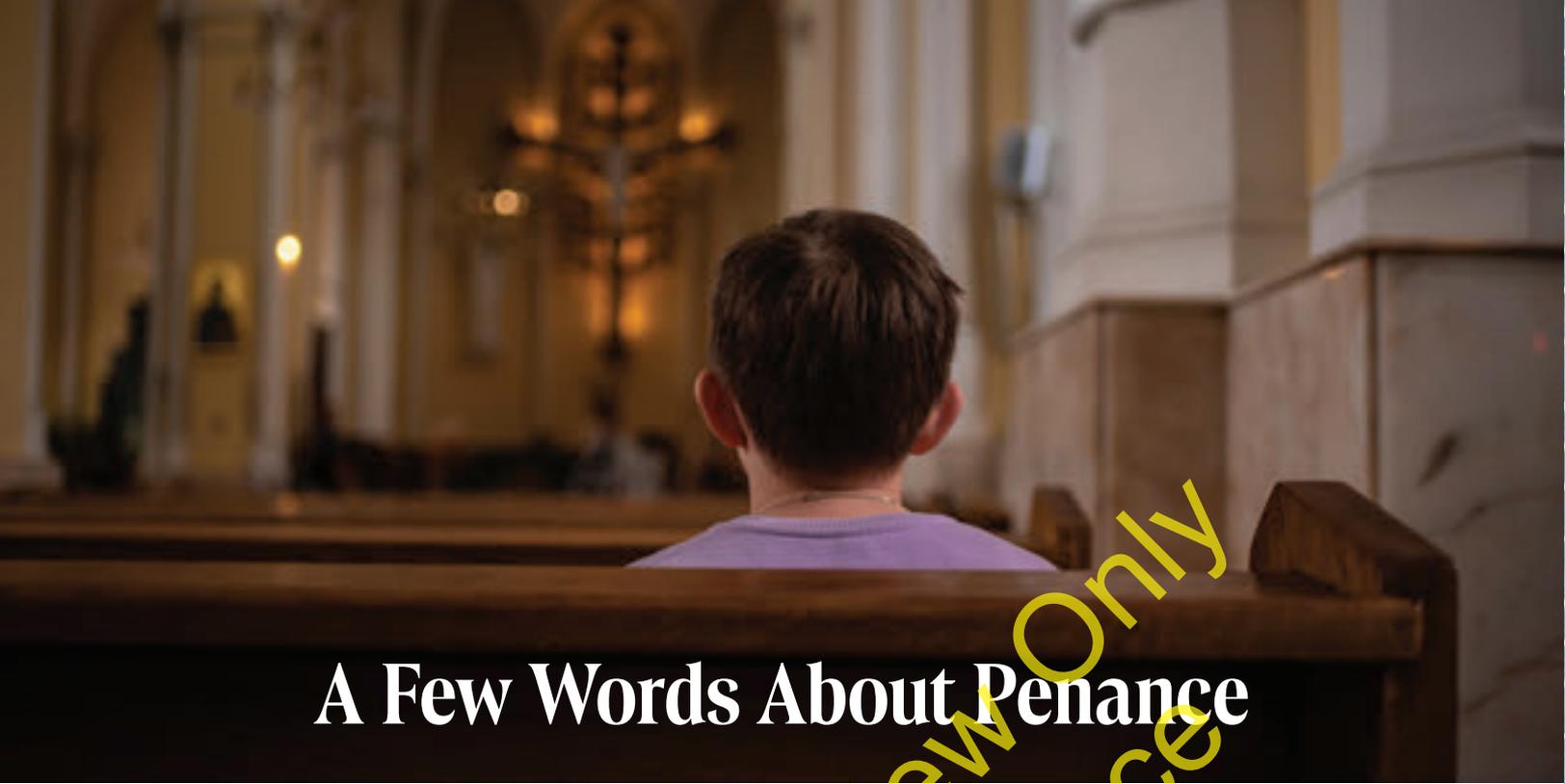
A second form of the rite is communal celebration with individual confession. When the sacrament is celebrated in a communal context, the people gather together to listen to God's Word and make an examination of conscience. The assembly may sing songs and pray the Act of Contrition together. Individual confessions are then celebrated according to the form outlined above. Sometimes several priests are available and are stationed in various places in the church with enough space to keep the content of confessions private. Communal celebration with individual confession is a common form for first reconciliation celebrations. This form may be less anxiety-provoking for children who are celebrating the sacrament for the first time, particularly if they can see others talking to the priest, because there is less mystery about what is going on.



Bob Rolley/CNS

Communal Celebration with General Confession and Absolution

In a third form of the rite, communal celebration with general confession and general absolution, sins are not confessed individually to the priest, but the priest grants absolution to the whole assembly. This form is meant to be used only in conditions of grave necessity, such as an imminent danger of death when there is not enough time for the priest to hear each person's confession. There are also other rare circumstances in which general confession and absolution would be appropriate. It is up to the local bishop to determine whether the conditions for this form are met.



A Few Words About Penance

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Although forgiveness is granted, the temporal punishment for sins remains and is satisfied through penances, those assigned by the priest in the sacrament as well as those prudentially self-imposed. Penance may include doing something nice for someone we have wronged, praying for the grace to conquer in times of temptation, praying for the deceased, taking up a “good habit,” or saying a special prayer. An indulgence is the remission of temporal punishment of sins that have already been forgiven. Sometimes the penance we are given in the Sacrament of Reconciliation involves more than one of the above. Remind your child to pay close attention to the penance he or she is given by the priest. Parents should lead one’s family in prayers such as an examination of conscience, the Act of Contrition, the Stations of the Cross, and praying for grace of final perseverance. Children are commonly asked to recite prayers for their penance. Here are some prayers that are frequently used:

Our Father

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Hail Mary

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Glory Be

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Act of Contrition

Your child will also need to know an Act of Contrition. There are many forms of the Act of Contrition, which is a prayer that expresses sorrow for sins. Here is one of the most commonly used versions:

O my God,
I am sorry and repent with all my heart
for all the wrong I have done
and for the good I have failed to do,
because by sinning I have offended you,
who are all good and worthy to be loved above all things.
I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid the occasions of sin.

Through the merits of the Passion of our Savior Jesus Christ,
Lord, have mercy.

How Children Understand the Sacrament

The first celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a key milestone in the life of a Catholic child.

It is, for most children, the first sacrament they will remember (having celebrated Baptism as infants) and one of the only sacraments they will continue to celebrate on a regular basis throughout adulthood. Families should receive the Sacrament of Penance as a family as regularly as possible.

In the United States, Penance is typically first celebrated around the second grade. Seeing children take such

Reconciliation should be a powerful experience of the truth that God loves us “no matter what.”

profound steps of faith at such a young age may cause us to wonder how much they comprehend the meaning of the sacraments. However, it is important to note that a child’s simple faith can be a strong asset in accepting

teachings that are sometimes more difficult for us as adults.

Seven-year-old children can sometimes have a hard time understanding abstract concepts (such as God’s forgiveness of our sins), but they learn well from concrete experiences. The “concreteness” of the experience of confessing one’s sins to a priest and hearing a reminder of God’s unconditional love from a person they can see can make God’s love and forgiveness much more real to them.

Second-graders also understand that the world functions according to certain rules. Knowing the rules and seeing that they are consistent is a source of security for children at this age (which is also why they often tattle on others who break the rules). The importance of rules in the life of a child presents us with an ideal opportunity to teach God’s rules for living, such as the Ten Commandments, and the concept of sin as purposely breaking God’s rules.

For many adults, discussion of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can evoke feelings of anxiety. We may picture dark, foreboding confessionals and remember feelings of shame or guilt associated with our experiences of confession in childhood. In recent years, many in the Church have worked to change both the form and instruction concerning this sacrament to make it the positive experience of unconditional love that God intends it to be. First and foremost, celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation should be a powerful experience of the truth that God loves us “no matter what.”



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Preparing for First Penance

Parents can help prepare children for their first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by helping them get a concrete picture of what will happen when they celebrate the sacrament. One helpful activity is acting out the sacrament using pretend situations. (In order to do this well, parents may need to brush up on their own knowledge of how the sacrament is celebrated.) Going to a communal celebration of Penance, such as those celebrated in many parishes during Advent and Lent, can also be helpful. This gives children a chance to see the sacrament being celebrated, taking away the element of the unknown that can cause them unnecessary fear. Practical discussions of rules for home and school, as well as a focus on God’s rules for living, can help get children in the right frame of mind for making a good examination of conscience.

A Child-Friendly Daily Examination of Conscience

Although young children rarely commit serious sins, it's important to teach them how to judge their actions and determine where they need to grow in love for God or others. We have a duty to form our conscience in accordance with the light of Christ and the teaching of the Church, so that we can rightly distinguish good and evil. Because children this age are concrete thinkers and are interested in rules, the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6–21) can provide a useful framework for helping them form and examine their consciences. The following is a child-friendly version of the Ten Commandments and related questions that can be used as an examination of conscience. For adults, the meaning of each of the Ten Commandments is discussed in detail in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see 2052–2557). A good examination of conscience should lead us not only to an awareness of our sins, but sorrow for our sins, called contrition. Imperfect contrition is sorrow for sins because of ugliness of sin or the fear of punishment. Perfect contrition is sorrow for sins because of the love of God.

“You shall have no other gods before me” (v. 7): Make God the most important thing in your life.

Have I put God first, or have I sometimes made other things in my life more important than God? Do I remember to talk to him? Do I choose what God wants for me over what I want for myself?

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (v. 11): Use God’s name the right way.

Have I used God’s name with care? Have I used God’s name in the wrong way (for example, saying “God” when I wasn’t really talking to him or talking about him)?

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (v. 12): Make Sunday a day to worship God.

Have I tried my best to worship God at Mass by singing, praying, and listening? Have I misbehaved during Mass?

“Honor your father and your mother” (v. 16): Love your parents and follow their rules.

Have I obeyed my parents — even when they are not looking? Have I talked back to them?

“You shall not murder” (v. 17): Be kind to the people and animals God made.

Have I been kind to others? Have I solved disagreements in a peaceful way? Have I fought with anyone? Have I taken good care of my pets?

“Neither shall you commit adultery” (v. 18): Be respectful in the things you do with your body.

Have I followed God’s rules in how I treat my body? Do I respect the bodies of others?

“Neither shall you steal” (v. 19): Take care of other people’s things; don’t take what belongs to someone else.

Have I respected other people’s things? Have I taken something that doesn’t belong to me?

“Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor” (v. 20): Tell the truth.

Have I told the truth? Have I told a lie or things that were only partly true?

“Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife” (v. 21): Keep your thoughts and words clean.

Have I told or listened to any dirty jokes? Have I watched any movies or shows that I shouldn’t have seen? Have I tried to keep my mind on good things?

“Neither shall you desire ... anything that is your neighbor’s” (v. 21): Be happy with the things you have.

Have I been happy with the things I have? Have I been jealous of others and what they have?

— Deuteronomy 5:7-21 (NRSV)



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