

FIRST PENANCE

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

1) *Why do we celebrate the Sacrament of Penance?*

As a rite of penance or reconciliation beyond the Eucharist evolved over the centuries, the sacrament of Penance has been celebrated for one of two reasons: forgiveness of serious sin or growth in holiness. These reasons are still valid.

The *Rite of Penance*, paragraph 7, says: “Those who *by grave sin* have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who *through daily weakness fall into venial sins* draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God” (emphasis added).

More deeply, however, we all need divine mercy and pardon in Christ when our sins have weakened or broken our friendship with the Triune God; at the same time we need reconciliation with the Church which has been wounded by our sins (see *Rite of Penance* 5). The sacrament of Penance is God’s gift for such forgiveness and reconciliation.

2) *You named it the “Sacrament of Penance.” Isn’t it the “Sacrament of Reconciliation”? Why are there so many names for this sacrament?*

The official name of the ritual book is “Rite of Penance,” although the individual rites within it are labeled “Rite of Reconciliation for....” So even the official book has two titles! In fact, there is still a third title floating around this sacrament: “confession.” Each name emphasizes a different aspect of the sacrament: the means by which we express our contrition for sin (“confession”), the process of rebuilding our relationships in Christ (“penance”), and the goal of the celebration (“reconciliation”).

Although it has gained great popularity in the last couple of decades, we cannot speak of Penance as *the* sacrament of reconciliation; Baptism and Eucharist are also rightly considered sacraments of reconciliation (see *Rite of Penance* 2). So perhaps we need to redeem the word “penance” from the negative connotations of punishment and burden that it earned in the recent past, and restore its deeper sense of “rebuilding right relationships in Christ.”

3) *What are my children learning today about this sacrament?*

According to the *National Directory of Catechesis* (36-B,2), preparation for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance should help children: to acknowledge God’s unconditional love for us; to turn to Christ and the Church for sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation; to recognize the presence of good and evil in the world, and their capacity for both; to recognize their need for forgiveness, not only from parents and others close to them, but from God; to explore the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers, and scriptures of the Rite; and to understand how to celebrate the Rite. Catechesis for the sacrament is ongoing, and children have a right to a fuller catechesis each year.

4) *When I was young, we learned about mortal and venial sins. What sins need to be confessed?*

The *Rite of Penance*, paragraph 7, acknowledges that “the wounds of sin are varied and multiple in the lives of individuals and of the community,” and for this reason “the healing that penance provides is varied.” It distinguishes, amidst the many variations, two basic kinds of sinfulness, “grave” and “venial,” for which the sacrament offers God’s healing.

Many sins are not easily categorized (for example, confessing instances of “impatience” may represent a more serious lack of care for one’s physical and emotional health). So what is crucial in knowing what to confess is a well-formed conscience.

Mature conscience formation is a life-long process of putting on the mind of Christ more and more. All our relationships (with God, others, the earth and world around us, and our own persons) are meant to be lived in Christ, and so every Christian has the responsibility of growing in the knowledge and love of God. Knowing what sins to accuse ourselves of is the result of humbly and prayerfully examining what we have done, what our attitudes and motives are and have been, and what is the quality of our many relationships in Christ.

5) *Can a child receive First Holy Communion without having received First Penance?*

Yes, a child may receive First Holy Communion without receiving First Penance, given the conditions outlined in Section III.A in the Diocesan Guidelines. Children are prepared for participation in the Rite of Penance and are strongly encouraged to take part in that sacrament prior to receiving the Eucharist for the first time. However, a child may not be conscious of sin and therefore may choose not to approach this sacrament.

6) *What if my child isn’t ready for the sacrament, even after we have done the preparation?*

Even with preparation, some children may not yet be mature enough to participate in the sacrament as “a free response of faith.” It remains with the parents or guardians of the child, in consultation with the catechetical or pastoral leader, to delay the child’s participation in the sacrament of Penance.

7) *How often should my child receive the sacrament of Penance?*

Parents should foster in their children, as in themselves, a habit of celebrating regularly the sacrament of Penance. (Who doesn’t need the mercy and reconciling grace of Christ?) Consequently, it is strongly urged that children and adults celebrate the sacrament at least once a year.

A better practice would be to do so twice a year – prior to the feasts of Christmas (that is, in Advent) and Easter (that is, in Lent).

More frequent confession, as the child matures, is encouraged which, when coupled with the self-reflective practice of the examination of conscience, can help an individual become more aware of growth in the response to grace.

8) *How should First Penance be celebrated?*

It is strongly recommended that First Penance be celebrated according to the “Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution” (popularly known as “Rite 2”). It clearly places the sacrament in its proper communal and liturgical context, and is therefore more appropriate for children. Careful planning of readings, music and prayers is essential so this rite speaks to children and adults alike.

Catechists, catechetical leaders and pastoral leaders are reminded that the *Rite of Penance*, paragraphs 36 and 37, opens the way for developing creative “penitential celebrations” for use in catechetical sessions, liturgical seasons, family catechesis, or other occasions.

These can assist the children in their ongoing growth in conscience and the sense of God’s love and mercy.