

BACKGROUND NOTES FOR TEACHERS THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

To help us understand this Sacrament we need to know a little bit about a Sacrament. A sacrament is something that uses signs – usually a combination of words and actions. By interpreting these signs correctly we can find out what the Sacrament is doing for those who receive it. The signs are not just words and actions that have a message for those who are celebrating it, they give them a gift. They actually do what they say they are doing!! They are effective. This gift (which Catholics call grace) is given by Jesus whom they meet in the Sacrament, to deepen and develop their relationship with him. Through the Sacraments God helps Catholics grow in friendship with him.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation the key signs are:

- The words of absolution which removes a person's sins.
- The laying on of hands which occurs many times during the sacraments. In each case it symbolises the giving of strength and power. When the sign is used in the Sacrament of Penance, it reminds us of the times when Jesus laid his hands on the sick and healed them.

Through these signs Jesus heals the penitent of sin and reunites them with God and God's family – the Church.

The Sacrament was given by Jesus after the resurrection when he said to his apostles 'Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain they are retained'. It was through these words that Jesus gave his Church the power to forgive sin and to reconcile sinners.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation brings penitents back to God, who forgives them and absolves them from their sins. During the Sacrament of Reconciliation the Church celebrates the gentle love and mercy of God which is illustrated in parables such as The Lost Sheep and The Prodigal Son. The Sacrament calls people to confess sins, seek forgiveness and be reconciled to God and to one another. It is a celebration because while Catholics regret their sins, their sorrow is not outweighed by the joy of knowing that, no matter how badly their friendship with God has been damaged, God still loves and heals the sinner.

For Catholics the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a source of joy and comfort. In the Sacrament they experience time and time again the extraordinary love of God. Through the Sacrament Catholics are strengthened, so that they are made more able to resist sin in the future. The sacrament can be celebrated often and helps Catholics to be better followers of Jesus.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is known by various names:

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION: This emphasises the confession of sins to a priest.

THE SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS: This emphasises the belief that through the priest's prayer of absolution God grants the forgiveness of sin.

THE SACRAMENT OF CONVERSION: This emphasises the call to return to the Father from whom one has strayed through sin.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION: This emphasis that through the Sacrament the penitent is reconciled to God, and to each other.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE: This is the official title given to the sacrament and emphasises the need for the penitent to do penance to repair any damage their sins may have done.

CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT - RITE 1

Part 1: Preparation

One of the most difficult things about going to confession is what to say. We all find it difficult to be honest and admit that we have been wrong. Therefore, before trying to think about what to say Catholics often pray to the Holy Spirit to give them strength, guidance and courage to make a sincere and honest confession.

Part 2: Examination of Conscience

Having asked for the strength to be honest Catholics make an examination of conscience. Your conscience is the sense of right and wrong that is inside you, and helps you to make good choices. During an examination of conscience the penitent thinks about what they have done – the good choices they have made for which they say thank you, and the bad choices for which they are sorry. The bad choices which are done on purpose are sins – that is something that spoils or breaks friendship with God and with other people. Sin is anything that breaks God's law of love. It is always something that has been done on purpose, not accidentally, (a sin of commission) or it is something we should do and do not do it (a sin of omission). These are the sins the penitent confesses.

Part 3: The Sacrament

Greeting:

The priest welcomes the penitent warmly and greets him or her with kindness in the name of Jesus.

Sign of the Cross:

They make the Sign of the Cross together. This is a reminder of God's love and presence in the sacrament.

Invitation to Trust in God:

The priest invites the penitent to have trust in God to give the penitent courage and reassurance. He may use words like these:

'May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy'.

Reading of the Word of God:

The priest might then read a short passage from the Scriptures for example, the parable of the Prodigal Son or The Lost Sheep. The Scripture passage will remind the penitent of the mercy and gentleness of God who loves us and is always ready to forgive us.

The Confession:

The penitent confesses his/her sins – the bad choices they identified during the examination of conscience.

The Penance:

After the confession the priest may give a few words of advice and encouragement and then gives a penance which may be a prayer or a practical act of kindness. The purpose of giving a penance is to give the penitent the opportunity to show the sincerity of their sorrow so that they may, in some small way, repair the damage his/her sins have done. It is a sign that they will try to do better in the future.

The Act of Sorrow (Contrition):

After a penance is given and accepted, the penitent expresses his/her sorrow. The person prays an act of sorrow, such as:

"O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you and with the help of your grace I will not sin again."

This is one of the most important parts of the Sacrament. If the Sacrament of Penance is to have an effect there must be true sorrow. To be truly sorry involves a determination to avoid repeating the wrong. It is not enough to say sorry – the penitent has to be willing to change and promise to make a new start. This is called **making a firm purpose of amendment.**

The words of forgiveness and Absolution:

The priest then administers the Sacrament of Penance. To do this he either places his hands on the penitent's head or extends his right hand over the penitent's head. *The laying on of hands occurs many times during the sacraments. In each case it symbolises the giving of strength and power. When the sign is used in the Sacrament of Penance, it reminds us of the times when Jesus laid his hands on the sick and healed them.*

The priest then prays the prayer of absolution which is the blessing that removes the person's sins. The priest makes a Sign of the Cross over the penitent as he recites the final words of the Prayer of Absolution, "And I absolve you from all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It is enough for the children to know that the sign of the cross reminds us how Jesus loved us so much he died for us. It reminds us of God's love and forgiveness.

The deeper significance is reflected in Scripture. Jesus "himself bore our sins in his body upon the Cross" (1 Peter 2:24a). Jesus has reconciled all things through himself, and he has made peace by the blood of his Cross (Colossians 1:20).

The penitent replies "Amen" to this prayer. In this very simple and undramatic way the Sacrament of Penance is administered.

The Conclusion (Dismissal):

The Sacrament ends with a very short prayer of thanks and dismissal which reminds the penitent of the great joy and comfort the Sacrament brings.

RITE 2

Sometimes Rite 2 of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is used. This often happens in Advent and Lent when people gather together to prepare for the feasts of Christmas or Easter. In Rite 2, a number of people come together for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, often with a few priests who have come from neighbouring parishes. There is a service of prayers and readings, which help people to prepare. They are then invited to make a personal confession to one of the priests available. Sometimes schools will have a penitential service with the opportunity for confession, Rite 2. Whatever a person talks to the priest about is absolutely in confidence. They can feel that they are talking to God alone. When the confessions are finished, the priest invites everyone to thank and praise God for his mercy and forgiveness.

RITE 3 is rarely celebrated in this country today. The rite is similar to Rite 2 but general absolution replaces individual confession.