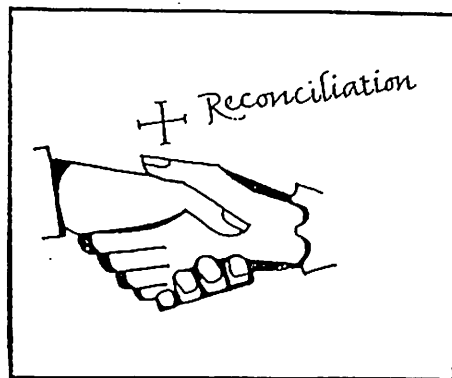


# DIOCESAN FIRST PENANCE GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES

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## INTRODUCTION

With a profound sense of pastoral responsibility, I present to all who share my teaching ministry, the Diocesan First Penance Guidelines and Resources. This manual contains a wealth of information on the proper implementation of the clear and unambiguous directive of the Church that children be prepared and given the opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance before their first reception of the Eucharist.

When then this directive was repeated in the revised Code of Canon Law (1983), there were some religious educators who continued to embrace the flawed pedagogy that children at the age of discretion were psychologically and emotionally unable to understand the wrongness (evil) of sin, and at such a tender age could not commit sin. The scholarship of current child psychologists, notably Robert Coles of Harvard University, have exposed the fallacy of this opinion, and confirmed the long standing practice of the Church which acknowledged that children at the age of reason are capable of knowing that their acts are right or wrong, good or bad. They are capable also of seeking forgiveness from God.

The failure to prepare children for confession at the time of First Communion, and the meager efforts to promote among young people the Sacrament of Penance as a regular source of growth in holiness, has led to the serious pastoral problem of many, many teenagers preparing for Confirmation in the 10th, 11th or 12th grade who have either never been to confession in their lives, or who have not been to confession since the first confession at the age of 7 or 8.

This tragic situation carries over into adult life and, in my opinion, is a major reason why the Sacrament of Penance is almost a relic of the past, and its powerful graces that Jesus gave to the Church for the forgiveness and reconciliation of sinners is practically lost except for a very, very few people. The assisting graces that flow from the celebration of this sacrament, which are an enormous boon to growth in holiness and the likeness of Christ, are not activated for the many because regular confession is a rarity, due to a great extent, I believe, to the lack of proper training and understanding of the sacrament in childhood.

It is my prayerful hope that this regrettable pastoral problem can be effectively addressed by a proper catechesis of children preparing for First Eucharist and continuing throughout their formative years. The involvement of parents is, of course, critical. For many of them it may be the first time that they have been properly instructed about the Sacrament of Penance. Their example of going to confessors regularly will be a powerful influence of their children.

Every religious education program in this diocese, without exception, must follow these guidelines. If for any reason, a parish has not been preparing children for First Penance at the time of First Eucharist, that practice is to be replaced immediately with the program in this manual.

I wish to thank all those in every parish, priests, deacons and catechists, for sharing with me the vitally important ministry of preparing children for the sacramental life of the Church and forming them to grow in holiness and the likeness of Christ

+ Joseph A. Fiorenza  
Bishop of Galveston-Houston

## THE CANDIDATE

1. Children shall be prepared for and given the opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance before their first reception of the Eucharist. (C #914, Paul VI)
2. The age of discretion both for Penance and Holy Communion is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Penance and Communion. (Decree of the Congregation of the Sacraments on the Age of Children Who are to be Admitted to First Holy Communion #245-50, Quam Singulari)
3. All the faithful having reached the age of discretion (around the seventh year) are bound to confess grave sins at least once a year. (C #988, 989) The faithful are also recommended to confess venial sins. (C #988, NCD #125)
4. The child's readiness for the celebration of each of the sacraments is to be determined by the child, the parent, who is the primary educator of his/her child, and the pastor or his delegate. (Diocesan Policy, 9/18/85) If the parent, catechist, pastor or his delegate deems the child is not sufficiently prepared or there is not a sincere commitment to receive the sacrament it may be recommended to the child and the parent(s) that celebration of the sacrament be postponed. However, the preparation of the child to receive the sacrament should continue so that the postponement is a relatively short period of time. (GCD Add. #4, #5)
5. Catechesis for children must always respect the natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances of individuals. Religious readiness for celebration of this sacrament should consider not only chronological age and school grade but also the child's preparedness to encounter Christ in this sacramental celebration. (NCD #126) Special attention must be given to assist persons with special needs, mental retardation, emotional and/or developmental disabilities. (U.S. Bishops' Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, 6/95)
6. Some manner of assessment (i.e. meeting with child or child and parent(s) or other means) should be used to determine a child's readiness to enter preparation for and, after appropriate formation, celebration of the sacrament. (NCD #126)
7. A child's readiness for the celebration of the sacrament is to be judged using the following criteria:
  - a. a trust in God's forgiving love (RP #5, CCC #1482, GCD Add. #2)
  - b. a sense of self-worth, a self-image based on a good relationship with God (RP #6b; GCD Add. #2; NCD #126)
  - c. a sense of belonging to the Church community (RP #4,5; NCD #126; CCC #1440)
  - d. an understanding of forgiveness, a desire to receive and give forgiveness. (GCD Add. #3; NCD #126)
  - e. a sense of right and wrong and of the reality of evil (RP #6b; GCD Add. #2; NCD #126)
  - f. knowledge of sin, an ability to describe wrong doing in his/her own words (RP #7a; GCD Add. #2; NCD #126; CCC #1440, 1455, 1456, 1458)

- g. a desire for reparation, to make amends for wrongs done to God, to others (RP #6b, #18; CCC #1459-60, GCD Add. #3)
- h. an ability to make a good examination of conscience (RP #7a; CCC #1454, 1456, GCD Add. #2)
- i. knowledge of how to confess sins to a priest (RP #6, 6b; CCC #1456)
- j. an ability to say "I'm sorry," to express a sense of repentance, contrition, metanoia (RP #6a; CCC #1450-1451-1453, GCD Add. #3)
- k. awareness of God's gift of grace (RP #5, GCD Add. #5)
- l. ability to pray an Act of Contrition either through a formal prayer or in his/her own words. (RP #18, CCC #1460)
- m. understanding of the need for continual conversion and renewal. (RP #4, #5, #6a, GCD Add. #3, #4, #5)
- n. knowledge of the Sacrament of Penance and the Rite of Penance, individual and communal. (RPA#15, NCD #124)

*"A full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary either for First Confession or for First Communion. Afterwards, however, the child will be obliged to learn gradually the entire Catechism to his (her) ability."* (Decree of the Congregation of the Sacraments on the Age of Children Who Are to be Admitted to First Holy Communion, #245-50, Quam Singulari, GCD #111)

8. Careful attention and sensitivity should be given to the needs of the child regarding language and cultural religious practices of the family. (NCD #194, Many Members, One Body, Pastoral Letter, Bishops of Galveston-Houston)

9. In cases where the child, because of exceptional reasons and under the guidance of his/her parent(s), chooses not to receive the Sacrament of Penance, he/she should not be deprived of the right to celebrate his/her First Eucharist. The child should be encouraged to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance within a relatively short period of time. (GCD Add. #4, #5)

## **THE PARENT/GUARDIAN**

1. Keeping in mind that parents/guardians have the first responsibility for the education of their children, the parish should provide education/formation and support to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of children preparing for the Sacrament of Penance by:

- a. instituting a communication process (i.e. an interview) whereby the needs of a particular family are assessed with regard to the Sacrament of Penance.
- b. offering enriching opportunities for parents/guardians to be updated on the Sacrament of Penance if this is a need.
- c. giving consideration to the lived experience in the home when setting requirements for attendance at parent sessions and also in scheduling meetings and celebrations.
- d. setting up parish programs that are flexible so as to meet the needs of the families.
- e. being sensitive to individuals with special needs and persons with disabilities in the formation and reception of the sacrament.
- f. being culturally sensitive to the language and practices of the people of the community.

2. Parents have a right and a duty to be intimately involved in preparing their child for the Sacrament of Penance. (NCD #126) Catechesis aims to help parents grow in understanding and appreciation of the sacramental life of the Church in order to participate readily in catechizing their children. (NCD #212) Parents may do this by their support and encouragement in the spiritual growth of their child by:

- a. sharing faith with their child. (CCC #2223, #2225, #2226)
- b. asking for and modeling forgiveness. (RP #6a, CCC #1450, GCD Add. #3, NCD #212, #126)
- c. witnessing to a Christian lifestyle. (CCC #1657, #2222, GCD Add. #3)
- d. praying and teaching prayer. (CCC #2223)
- e. participating with their child in worship especially Sunday Eucharist. (CCC #1657)
- f. providing opportunities for formal religious education/faith formation. (NCD #212)

- g. being a healthy model for their children by approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis. (C #988, #989)
- h. continuing their own personal growth and understanding of the Sacrament of Penance by attending classes designed for parents/guardians of children preparing for the celebration of the sacrament. Catechesis for parents should include:
- knowledge of sin. (personal and social) and its degrees (mortal and venial)
  - knowledge of the Sacrament of Penance and the Rite of Penance. (individual and communal)
  - an invitation to deepen their relationship with Christ and their involvement in the community life of the Church.
  - an understanding of the role of parent as model of faith and primary educator of their child.
  - suitable resources and support to families by the faith community in the preparation of their child for the sacrament.
  - knowledge of the faith development of the children thus assisting parents in assessing their children's readiness for the sacrament. (NCD #212, Diocesan Policy 9/18/95)

3. When formally participating in the catechesis of their children, parents must be mindful of the pre-eminent right of the Church to specify the content of authentic catechesis. They always have an obligation to catechize according to the teaching authority of the Church. (NCD #212)

4. Parents are to provide Baptismal information to the parish prior to the reception of the Sacrament of Penance and First Eucharist.

## CATECHESIS

1. Formal instruction for the Sacrament of Penance must precede and be separate and distinct from preparation for first reception of Eucharist so that the integrity of each sacrament is maintained. (NCD #126)

2. Parishes should provide catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance and catechesis for the Sacrament of Eucharist within the same school year. However, each of these Sacraments should be taught separately and distinctly. Opportunities to celebrate each of these Sacraments should be provided during the same year. (Diocesan Policy 9/18/85) The opportunity to celebrate Penance must precede the reception of Eucharist with the strongest encouragement that a sacramental penance precede first Eucharistic reception. (C#914)

3. Catechesis must respect the natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances of the individual preparing for the Sacrament. (NCD #126)

4. Catechesis for the sacrament should include the traditional and essential elements: contrition, confession, absolution and satisfaction. (NCD #124) Catechesis should also include recognition of God's gracious action in bestowing on us grace enabling and empowering us to make an act of contrition, confess our sins and carry out acts of satisfaction to give Him honor and glory. (Council of Trent, Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance, Can. 14)

5. Catechesis should assist the child in

- \* relating to God as Our Lord and Father, appreciating His love for us, and understanding that Jesus, the Son of God, became man for us, died and rose again. (GCD Add. #2)
- \* thinking about the love of God, in order to perceive the malice of sin, which offends God the Father and Jesus and which is opposed to the charity with which we must love our neighbor and ourselves. (GCD Add. #2)
- \* recognizing moral good and evil. (NCD #126)
- \* repenting of wrongdoing (NCD #126)
- \* turning for forgiveness to Christ and the Church (NCD #126)
- \* seeing that, in this sacrament, faith is expressed by being forgiven and forgiving (NCD #126)
- \* approaching the sacrament freely and regularly (NCD #126)
- \* relating the sacrament to the child's life experience. (NCD #126)

*Catechesis for preparation of the Sacrament of Penance should also be based upon the criteria used to assess a child's readiness to receive the sacrament. (See Section - The Candidate #7)*

6. Catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance is found throughout the diocesan curriculum guidelines, Catechesis for Children and Adolescents and should be a guide and resource of appropriate catechetical materials to be used in the preparation. (NCD #229, #264, #249)

7. The family, the domestic Church, is the primary place for faith formation. From the earliest age a young person is formed through relationships and the witness of faith within the family and within the community.

Preparation for the celebration of First Penance can occur through formal religious education in several ways:

#### **Family Faith Formation**

#### **Parish Religious Education**

#### **Catholic School Religious Education**

The child should be participating in the parish religious education process or the Catholic school religious education formation which provides ongoing, systematic catechesis using appropriate materials that focus on an understanding of the Sacrament of Penance, prayer, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. (NCD #228)

Parents may choose to provide formal, systematic catechesis at home for their child(ren). They should be aware of the parish process for preparation, the use of appropriate resources and the requirements for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. (See Parent/Guardian Section #3)

8. The parochial community is responsible for providing a focused, immediate preparation for the Sacrament of Penance just prior to the celebration of the Sacrament recognizing the validity of the preparation that has taken place in the home, parish religious education process and the Catholic school.

Parents should be invited by the parish at the beginning of the year in which the child is to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance to participate in an Information Meeting outlining the requirements for preparation and celebration of the Sacrament. They should be encouraged to be an integral part of the child's preparation, use the appropriate resource materials provided by the parish, and take part in parent meetings sponsored by the parish which should inform and challenge them to a better understanding of the teachings and practice of the Church regarding the Sacrament of Penance. The parent(s) should provide Baptismal information for their child before celebration of the Sacrament. (See Parent/Guardian Section #4)

The pastor, parent(s) and the catechist (designated by the pastor) should assess the child's readiness for celebration of the Sacrament of Penance by an interview or equivalent process prior to the celebration of the Sacrament. (See Candidate Section #7)



The validity of faith formation which takes place in the home, parish religious education program or Catholic school religion class is to be respected. (NCD #224, #225) The parochial community is the place where the reception of the Sacrament of Penance is to take place. Assessment of the readiness of the child for the celebration of the Sacrament and immediate preparation are the responsibility of the parochial community.

9. Special catechesis should be provided to assist persons with special needs, i.e. mental retardation, physical or emotional disabilities to prepare for the reception of First Penance. (U.S. Bishops Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, 6/95)

10. Catechesis should be provided in the language of the candidate and family as needed. Personnel who minister to the candidate and family should be sensitive to their needs with special attention to a hospitable environment. Materials should be provided which are appropriate to the cultural context.

## **THE COMMUNITY**

1. The Church is the family of believers in Jesus Christ, a community of persons formed in His life, death and resurrection, the Paschal Mystery. The community involves the sharing of beliefs, experiences, ideals and values. (NCD #70) Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God's holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (CCC #2182) Therefore, families should be regularly participating in the life of the Church, especially in the celebration of Sunday Eucharist.
2. Parishes should provide sacramental catechesis for parents with a special focus on the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. (Diocesan Policy 9/18/85, NCD #212)
3. The faith community should provide ongoing formation, knowledge and skills for catechists who work with children preparing for sacraments. (NCD #213, Serving Life & Faith #76-105)
4. The entire faith community should be involved in the faith formation of children and youth. All members of the parish and its ministries are called to pray with the children and youth as they prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and to work for their conversion by charity and example. (NCD #181, LG #116, CT #24)
5. Opportunities for Parish Communal Penance celebrations should be readily available. At these celebrations, children, youth and adults come to acknowledge their sinfulness, ask for forgiveness and celebrate God's forgiving love. In this way the adult community witnesses to the young their commitment to ongoing conversion and reconciliation. (LG #116)
6. A spirit of evangelization within the community should prevail where the healing of pains and hurts of those within and outside the community can take place.

## **THE CONFESSOR**

1. The confessor should always be ready and willing to hear the confession of the faithful. (RP #10b)

2. It is important that the confessor of the Sacrament of Penance be hospitable and sensitive to the needs of children. He should foster a joyful celebration of the sacrament so that the child has a good experience, thus encouraging regular celebrations of this sacrament in the future. (RP #21, C #991, CCC #1426-#1433)

## **THE CELEBRATION**

1. The celebration of the Sacrament of Penance for children and youth should be in accordance with the Rite of Penance promulgated in 1973. (RP#1-App.III) (See Section on Celebration)
2. Celebration of the sacrament of Penance with children must be given at an appropriate time and place to accommodate their needs. (RP #10) The penitent must always have the option for anonymity in celebrating the sacrament. (C#964.2)
3. Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance should be available in a language and a cultural context accommodating the needs of the penitent. (NCD 185(b))
4. Community involvement in the liturgical ministries at a communal celebration of Penance for children is encouraged. Ministers should be sensitive to the cultural context and attitude of the candidate and family by providing an environment that is welcoming and hospitable. Worship aids and music should also be appropriate to their cultural context. (Bishops' Pastoral Letter, Many Members, One Body, U.S. Bishops Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, 6/95)