

## The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

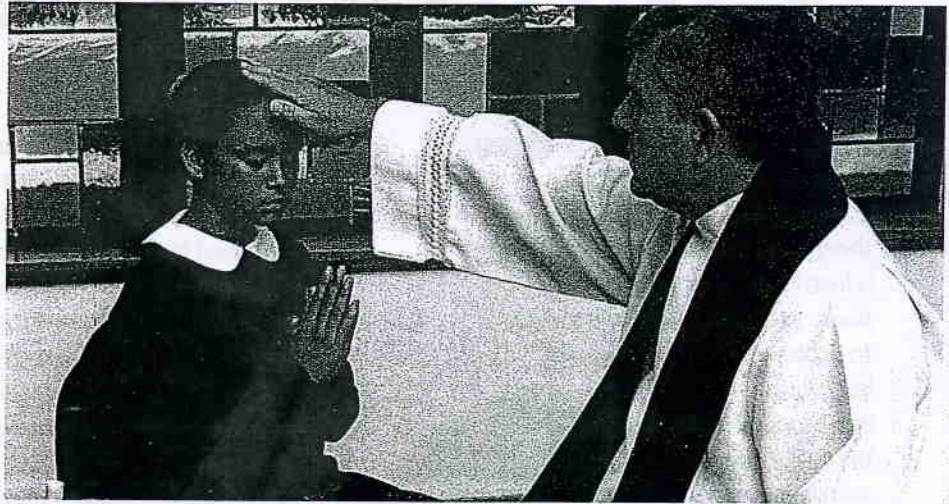
# What Catholics Believe

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. Reconciliation, therefore, is a change of heart, which restores unity with both God and the people of God. For Catholics, this happens through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

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.

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 rift. 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.

In order for a sin to be considered mortal — that is, deadly — to our relationship with God, it must be "grave matter" — such as murder, adultery, theft, defrauding another — and the person committing the act must (1) understand how serious it is and (2) do it by choice. For these reasons, few children are



Photos: Karen Callaway, Shutterstock

considered capable of committing mortal sin.

Less serious sins, called "venial," weaken the work of God in our lives. Venial sins harm us because they keep us from being the people that God made us to be. We are not required to confess

venial sins. They are forgiven through the penitential rites of the Mass and the reception of the Eucharist. 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.

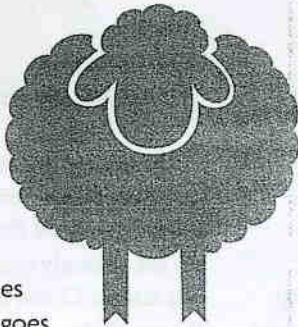


In order to form their consciences appropriately, it's important that kids understand the difference between a sin and an accident, or mistake. Parents can help make this distinction clear by posing hypothetical situations and asking the children to tell if what is described would be a sin or an accident. 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?"

# What Jesus Taught About Reconciliation

## 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 frequently associated with tax collectors and sinners. He paints a picture of 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.**



## 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.**



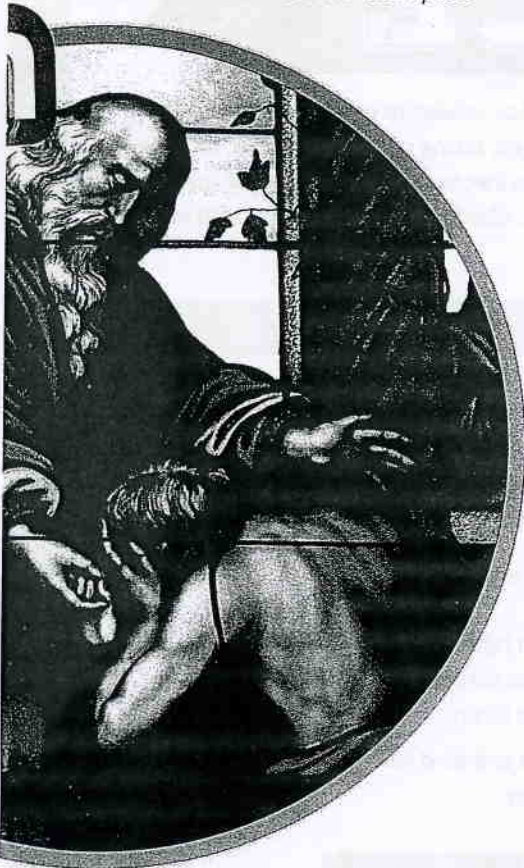
**Zacchaeus is forgiven** (Luke 19:1–10). Zacchaeus is a tax collector who has cheated the people. Zacchaeus is so touched by his meeting with Christ that he agrees to pay back four times as much to the people he has cheated and give half of his possessions to the poor. In the same way, our encounter 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.**

**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.**

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:



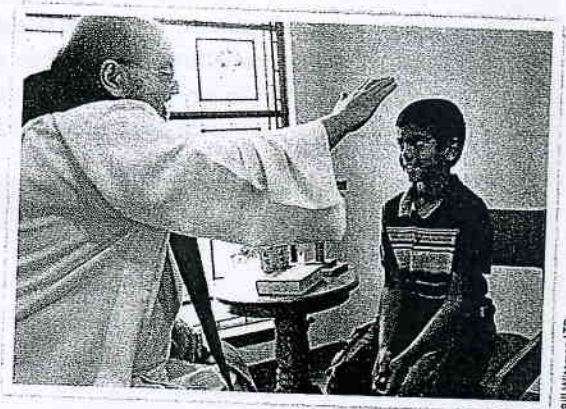
At left: Nancy Bauer / Shutterstock.com

## The Three Forms of the Sacrament

There is one Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, but the sacrament is celebrated in three different ways, or forms. The three forms are described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (see 1480–1484). While we may personally feel more comfortable with one form or another, it's important to realize that the effects of the sacrament are the same in each form.

### 1 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 improve), 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.



Bill Wittman LTD.

### 2 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



Bob Hoiler/CNS

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.

### 3 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.

### 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.**

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT

# PENANCE

A penance is a special task we are given by the priest to help repair the damage our sin has caused to our relationship with God or others. Penance may include doing something nice for someone we have wronged, taking up a "good habit," or saying a special prayer. 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. 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:*

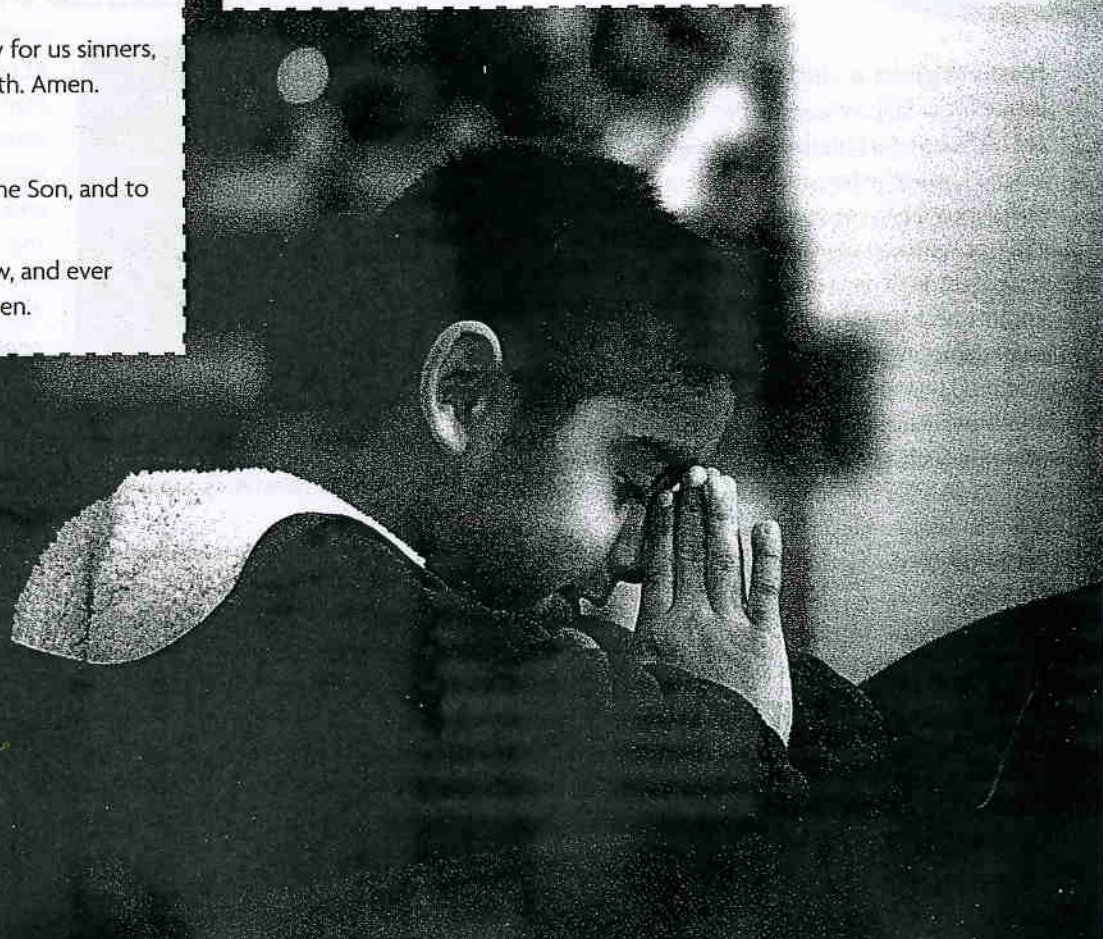
My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good,

I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things.

I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.

In his name, my God, 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. In that sense, reconciliation can set the tone for future experiences of the Catholic faith.

In the United States, first penance is typically celebrated around the second grade. Seeing children take such 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 have a hard time understanding abstract concepts (such as God's forgiveness of our sins) but 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 becomes very important to children at this age (which is also why they often tattle on others who break the rules). This 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.

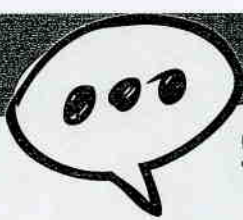
For many adults, discussion of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation evokes

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."

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

## 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.



# 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. 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).

**1** "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?

**2** "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)?

**3** "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?

**4** "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?

**5** "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?

**6** "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?

**7** "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?

**8** "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?

**9** "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?

**10** "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)