

PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Penance, like all the Sacraments, is a special event for the whole parish community as well as the individual. Preparation takes place on many levels. Certainly, the home is the first and most basic community in which the child first experiences reconciliation, personally and vicariously, as it is lived out by the adults and other family members.

As the formal catechesis of children begins, the children can relate their experience of forgiveness and "making up" to a loving God who holds out unconditional love and forgiveness to each of us. For children to connect lived experience and sacramental celebration of the reality of forgiveness, parents need to be aware of how to help them see the connection. Therefore, parent meetings are essential and current resources offer excellent suggestions as to content and procedures for such meetings. Involving parents is a way of reminding them that reconciling and healing is something that should be a part of everyday living and is essential to human relationships and family peace.

It is in the parish that all members should experience welcoming and reconciliation. The transforming love of God is always enfleshed in people and sacramental encounters take place in that community that embraces the whole assembly. This is clearly stated in *The Rite of Penance*.

The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the Word of God, but it also helps penitents with maternal care and solicitude to admit their sins and so obtain the mercy of God who alone can forgive sins. Furthermore, the Church becomes the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors. (#8)

In the process of confessing and reconciling the whole church community is strengthened.

The Rite of Penance contains these basic elements: confession, sorrow for sin, penance, and absolution. The celebration emphasizes the public nature of the rite moving from "God and me" to a special moment in the Church's public worship. In the sacrament, the Word of God is proclaimed and prayer is shared. These are key elements and shift the emphasis from "confessing" as the highlight of the sacrament, which in the past was often a fearful experience, to conversion. The desired outcome of the preparation is an understanding of conversion as a change of heart, a central element of Christ's preaching.

Essential to the preparation process is helping all involved to recognize the public nature of the sacrament for it is important to see that sin always has a public and social dimension. This is evident in issues of peace and justice. Forgiveness takes one far beyond just "God and me". It makes one aware of the responsibility to heed the call to reconciliation so as to grow as loving persons, aware of God's persistent love for us.

The children themselves are probably the ones most ready and open to the preparation process. For the most part they are excited and eager to learn. Respect them as children and find ways, mostly concrete ways, of tapping their experiences, their sense of wonder and delight. Help them to recall their experiences of loving, sharing, and praying and times when they have failed to do so. Help them to see how this relates to this wondrous sacrament and to appreciate being a child of a loving God who works wonders in their lives and forgives unconditionally. Rely on texts and resources to aid you in your efforts to make this sacrament a powerful experience in peoples' lives.

Preparation for Penance must take place prior to preparation and reception of First Communion. Care must be taken to keep the preparations distinct for each of these sacraments. Readiness to receive the sacrament of Penance should be determined by the child, pastor and parents. Parishes should follow the preparation with first celebration of the sacrament at a parish Penance service prior to First Communion. This practice helps children as well as other parishioners understand that there is a communal dimension to sin and reconciliation.

COMPONENTS OF PREPARATION FOR PENANCE

There are components to be included in the actual preparation for the Sacrament of Penance. It is important to involve the parents/guardians at the start. Preparation must respect the natural disposition, age, learning ability and any special circumstances of the child. "Readiness for reception of this sacrament includes knowledge of the person of Jesus and the Gospel message of forgiveness, knowledge of sin and its effect, and understanding and experience of sorrow, forgiveness, and conversion." (NDC p.135) Working with young children preparing for the Sacrament of Penance is an important undertaking. Orienting the child toward God and encouraging an understanding of God's mercy and love is important.

Textbooks offer the catechetical components to be covered. It is important that the child comes to realize that:

- the heart of the sacrament is conversion
- the sacrament celebrates the forgiving action of God in one's life
- the sacrament is closely related to one's life
- morality includes good and evil
- there is a need to be sorry when one has done wrong and to be willing to confess sin
- the sacrament is a gift by which one turns to Christ for forgiveness and it is given
- the relationship of the child to the Church is an important element in the process
- the sacrament is a gift for a lifetime and guarantees that one need never feel abandoned by God who is always ready to forgive
- one needs to be open and willing to receive God's forgiveness
- there are certain signs and symbols that are integral to the sacrament.

Parents witness to their children when they consistently and lovingly accompany their children in their prayer life, by taking an active role in the catechesis, by reinforcing learning at home and by modeling

forgiveness and reconciliation. This process of forgiveness experienced in everyday life is ritualized, celebrated and made real through the Sacrament of Penance. The parish catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance should "emphasizes God's plan for the salvation of all, his desire for every person to be reconciled with him and live in communion with him..." (NDC p. 132).

It is important for parents/guardians to have an understanding of and appreciation for the Sacrament of Penance. Only then will the newly formed penitent grow in his/her fidelity to the sacrament. Thus, sacrament preparation meetings are essential and provide an opportunity for good solid adult faith formation.

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