

## **Rite for Reconciliation, Introduction**

Parents, catechists and other persons designated to prepare children for First Reconciliation must know and observe the teachings of the Church. To prepare themselves, these "teachers of the faith" should be expected to read and study the introduction to the Rite for Reconciliation, which is provided in its entirety below. This introduction explains:

- a) the mystery of Reconciliation in the history of salvation,
- b) the sacrament and its various parts,
- c) the necessity and benefits of the sacrament,
- d) the offices and ministers of reconciliation
- e) how to celebrate the sacrament

## **Rite for Reconciliation, December 02, 1974**

### **I. Mystery of Reconciliation in the History of the Church**

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1. The Father has shown forth his mercy by reconciling the world to himself in Christ and by making peace for all things on earth and in heaven by the blood of Christ on the cross. [1] The Son of God made man lived among us in order to free us from the slavery of sin [2] and to call us out of darkness into his wonderful light. [3] He therefore began his work on earth by preaching repentance and saying: "Repent and believe the Gospel" (Mk 1:15).

This invitation to repentance, which had often been sounded by the prophets, prepared people's hearts for the coming of the kingdom of God through the voice of John the Baptist, who came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk 1:4).

Jesus, however, not only exhorted people to repentance so that they would abandon their sins and turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, [4] but welcoming sinners, he actually reconciled them with the Father. [5] Moreover, he healed the sick in order to offer a sign of his power to forgive sin. [6] Finally, he himself died for our sins and rose again for our justification. [7] Therefore, on the night he was betrayed and began his saving passion, [8] he instituted the sacrifice of the New Covenant in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. [9] After his resurrection he sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, empowering them to forgive or retain sins [10] and sending them forth to all peoples to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name. [11]

The Lord said to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed also in heaven" (Mt 16:19). In obedience to this command, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached the forgiveness of sins by baptism: "Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). [12] Since then the Church has never failed to call people from sin to conversion and through the celebration of penance to show the victory of Christ over sin.

2. This victory is first brought to light in baptism where our fallen nature is crucified with Christ so that the body of sin may be destroyed and we may no longer be slaves to sin, but rise with Christ and live for God. [13] For this reason the Church proclaims its faith in "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

In the sacrifice of the Mass the passion of Christ is again made present; his body given for us and his blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are offered to God again by the Church for the salvation of the world. For in the Eucharist Christ is present and is offered as "the sacrifice which has made our peace" [14] with God and in order that "we may be brought together in unity" [15] by his Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, our Savior Jesus Christ, when he gave to his apostles and their successors power to forgive sins, instituted in his Church the sacrament of penance, Its purpose is that the faithful who fall into sin after baptism may be reconciled with God through the restoration of grace. [16] The Church "possesses both water and tears: the water of baptism, the tears of penance." [17]

## **II. Reconciliation of Penitents in the Church's Life**

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### **THE CHURCH, BOTH HOLY AND ALWAYS IN NEED OF PURIFICATION**

3. Christ "loved the Church and gave himself up for it to make it holy" (Eph 5:25-26) and he united the Church to himself as a bride." He filled it with his divine gifts, [19] because it is his Body and his fullness; through the Church he spreads truth and grace upon all.

The members of the Church, however, are exposed to temptation and often fall into the wretchedness of sin. As a result, "whereas Christ, 'holy, harmless, undefiled' (Heb 7:26), knew no sin (see 2 Cor 5:21) but came solely to seek pardon for the sins of his people (see Heb 2:17), the Church, having sinners in its midst, is at the same time holy and in need of cleansing, and so is unceasingly intent on repentance and reform." [20]

### **PENANCE IN THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND LITURGY**

4. The people of God accomplish and perfect this continual repentance in many different ways. They share in the sufferings of Christ [21] by enduring their own difficulties, carry out works of mercy and charity, [22] and adopt ever more fully the outlook of the Gospel message. Thus the people of God become in the world a sign of conversion to God. All this the Church expresses in its life and celebrates in its liturgy when the faithful confess that they are sinners and ask pardon of God and of their brothers and sisters. This happens in penitential services, in the proclamation of the word of God, in prayer, and in the penitential parts of the Eucharistic celebration. [23]

In the sacrament of penance the faithful "obtain from God's mercy pardon for having offended him and at the same time reconciliation with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion." [24]

### **RECONCILIATION WITH GOD AND WITH THE CHURCH**

5. Since every sin is an offense against God that disrupts our friendship with him, "the ultimate purpose of penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the

sinner who by the grace of a merciful God embraces the way of penance comes back to the Father who "first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19), to Christ who gave himself up for us, [26] and to the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on us abundantly. [27]

"The hidden and gracious mystery of God unites us all through a supernatural bond: on this basis one person's sin harms the rest even as one person's goodness enriches them ."28 Penance always therefore entails reconciliation with our brothers and sisters who remain harmed by our sins.

In fact, people frequently join together to commit injustice. But it is also true that they help each other in doing penance; freed from sin by the grace of Christ, they become, with all persons of good will, agents of justice and peace in the world.

## **SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND ITS PARTS**

6. Followers of Christ who have sinned but who, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, come to the sacrament of penance should above all be wholeheartedly converted to God. This inner conversion embraces sorrow for sin and the intent to lead a new life. It is expressed through confession made to the Church, due expiation, and amendment of life. God grants pardon for sin through the Church, which works by the ministry of priests. [29]

### **a. Contrition**

The most important act of the penitent is contrition, which is "heartfelt sorrow and aversion for the sin committed along with the intention of sinning no more." [30] "We can only approach the kingdom of Christ by metanoia. This is a profound change of the whole person by which we begin to consider, judge, and arrange our life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in his Son in the last days and given to us in abundance" (see Heb 1:2; Col 1:19 and passim; Eph 1:23 and passim). [31] The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within toward a progressively deeper enlightenment and an ever-closer likeness to Christ.

### **b. Confession**

The sacrament of penance includes the confession of sins, which comes from true knowledge of self before God and from contrition for those sins. However, the inner examination of heart and the outward accusation must be made in the light of God's mercy. Confession requires on the penitent's part the will to open the heart to the minister of God and on the minister's part a spiritual judgment by which, acting in the person of Christ, he pronounces his decision of forgiveness or retention of sins in accord w/the power of the keys.[32]

### **c. Act of Penance**

True conversion is completed by expiation for the sins committed, by amendment of life, and also by rectifying injuries done. [33] The kind and extent of the expiation must be suited to the personal condition of penitents so that they may restore the order that they have upset and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which they suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life. Thus penitents, "forgetting the things that are behind" (Phil 3:13), again become part of the mystery of salvation and press on toward the things that are to come.

#### d. Absolution

Through the sign of absolution God grants pardon to sinners who in sacramental confession manifest their change of heart to the Church's minister; this completes the sacrament of penance. For in God's design the humanity and loving kindness of our Savior have visibly appeared to us [34] and so God uses visible signs to give salvation and to renew the broken covenant.

In the sacrament of penance the Father receives the repentant children who come back to him, Christ places the lost sheep on his shoulders and brings them back to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit resanctifies those who are the temple of God or dwells more fully in them. The expression of all this is the sharing in the Lord's table, begun again or made more ardent; such a return of children from afar brings great rejoicing at the banquet of God's Church. [35]

### **NEED AND BENEFIT OF THIS SACRAMENT**

7. Just as the wounds of sin are varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing that penance provides is varied. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from communion with God in love are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who, experiencing their weakness daily, fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to reach the full freedom of the children of God.

a. To obtain the saving remedy of the sacrament of penance, according to the plan of our merciful God, the faithful must confess to a priest each and every grave sin that they remember after an examination of conscience. [36]

b. Moreover, the frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly. [37] In confession of this kind, penitents who accuse themselves of venial faults should try to be more closely conformed to Christ and to follow the voice of the Spirit more attentively.

In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among the faithful, it must take root in their entire life and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbor.

The celebration of this sacrament is thus always an act in which the Church proclaims its faith, gives thanks to God for the freedom with which Christ has made us free, [38] and offers its life as a spiritual sacrifice in praise of God's glory, as it hastens to meet the Lord Jesus.

### **III. Offices and Ministries in the Reconciliation of Penitents**

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#### **ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN THE CELEBRATION OF PENANCE**

8. The whole Church, as a priestly people, acts in different ways in the work of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by the Lord. Not only does the Church call sinners to repentance by preaching the word of God, but it also intercedes for them and helps penitents with a maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge

and confess their sins and to obtain the mercy of God, who alone can forgive sins. Further, the Church becomes itself the instrument of the conversion and absolution of the penitent through the ministry entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors. [39]

## **MINISTER OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE**

9. a. The Church exercises the ministry of the sacrament of penance through bishops and priests. By preaching God's word they call the faithful to conversion; in the name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit they declare and grant the forgiveness of sins.

In the exercise of this ministry priests act in communion with the bishop and share in his power and office as the one who regulates the penitential discipline. [40]

b. The competent minister of the sacrament of penance is a priest who has the faculty to absolve in accordance with canon law. All priests, however, even though not approved to hear confessions, absolve validly and lawfully any penitents without exception who are in danger of death.

## **PASTORAL EXERCISE OF THIS MINISTRY**

10. a. In order that he may fulfill his ministry properly and faithfully, understand the disorders of souls and apply the appropriate remedies to them, and act as a wise judge, the confessor must acquire the needed knowledge and prudence by constant study under the guidance of the Church's magisterium and especially by praying fervently to God. For the discernment of spirits is indeed a deep knowledge of God's working in the human heart, a gift of the Spirit, and an effect of charity. [41]

b. The confessor should always show himself to be ready and willing to hear the confessions of the faithful whenever they reasonably request this. [42]

c. By receiving repentant sinners and leading them to the light of the truth, the confessor fulfills a paternal function: he reveals the heart of the Father and reflects the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. He should keep in mind that he has been entrusted with the ministry of Christ, who accomplished the saving work of human redemption by mercy and by his power is present in the sacraments. [43]

d. Conscious that he has come to know the secrets of another's conscience only because he is God's minister, the confessor is bound by the obligation of preserving the seal of confession absolutely unbroken.

## **PENITENTS**

11. The parts that penitents themselves have in the celebration of the sacrament are of the greatest importance.

When with proper dispositions they approach this saving remedy instituted by Christ and confess their sins, their own acts become part of the sacrament itself, which is completed when the words of absolution are spoken by the minister in the name of Christ.

In this way the faithful, even as they experience and proclaim the mercy of God in their own life, are with the priest celebrating the liturgy of the Church's continual self-renewal.

#### **IV. Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance**

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##### **PLACE OF CELEBRATION**

12. The locations for the ministration of the sacrament of penance and the place of the confessor are those prescribed by canon law.

##### **TIME OF CELEBRATION**

13. The reconciliation of penitents may be celebrated in all liturgical seasons and on any day. But it is right that the faithful be informed of the day and hours at which the priest is available for this ministry. They should be encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance at times when Mass is not being celebrated and preferably at the scheduled hours. [44]

Lent is the season most appropriate for celebrating the sacrament of penance. Already on Ash Wednesday the people of God hear the solemn invitation, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel." It is therefore fitting to have several penitential services during Lent, so that all the faithful may have an opportunity to be reconciled with God and their neighbor and so be able to celebrate the paschal mystery in the Easter Triduum with renewed hearts.

##### **LITURGICAL VESTMENTS**

14. With respect to liturgical vestments in the celebration of penance, the norms laid down by the local Ordinaries are to be followed.

#### **A. RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS**

##### **PREPARATION OF PRIEST AND PENITENT**

15. Priest and penitents should prepare themselves above all by prayer to celebrate the sacrament. The priest should call upon the Holy Spirit so that he may receive enlightenment and charity; the penitents should compare their own life with the example and commandments of Christ and then pray to God for the forgiveness of their sins.

##### **WELCOMING THE PENITENT**

16. The priest should welcome penitents with fraternal charity and, if need be, address them with friendly words. The penitent then makes the sign of the cross, saying: *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.* The priest may also make the sign of the cross with the penitent. Next the priest briefly urges the penitent to have confidence in God. Penitents who are unknown to the priest are advised to inform him of their state in life, the time of their last confession, their difficulties in leading the Christian life, and anything else that may help the confessor in the exercise of his ministry.

## **READING OF THE WORD OF GOD**

17. Next, the occasion may be taken for the priest, or even the penitent, to read a text of holy Scripture, or this may be done as part of the preparation for the actual celebration of the sacrament. For through the word of God Christians receive light to recognize their sins and are called to conversion and to confidence in God's mercy.

## **PENITENT'S CONFESSION AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE PENANCE**

18. Next comes the penitent's confession of sins, beginning with the general confession formulary, *I confess to almighty God*, if this is the custom. If necessary, the confessor assists the penitent to make a complete confession; he also encourages the penitent to repent sincerely for offenses against God; finally he offers practical advice for beginning a new life, and, where necessary, gives instruction on the duties of the Christian life .

A penitent who has been the cause of harm or scandal to others is to be led by the priest to resolve to make due restitution.

Next, the priest imposes an act of penance or expiation on the penitent; this should serve not only as atonement for past sins but also as an aid to a new life and an antidote for weakness. As far as possible, therefore, the penance should correspond to the seriousness and nature of the sins. This act of penance may suitably take the form of prayer, self-denial, and especially service to neighbor and works of mercy. These will underline the fact that sin and its forgiveness have a social aspect.

## **PENITENT'S PRAYER AND THE PRIEST'S ABSOLUTION**

19. Next, through a prayer for God's pardon the penitent expresses contrition and the resolution to begin a new life. It is advantageous for this prayer to be based on the words of Scripture.

Following the penitent's prayer, the priest extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formulary of absolution, in which the essential words are: **I ABSOLVE YOU FROM YOUR SINS IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.** As he says the final phrase the priest makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. The form of absolution (see no. 46) indicates that the reconciliation of the penitent comes from the mercy of the Father; it shows the connection between the reconciliation of the sinner and the paschal mystery of Christ; it stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of sins; finally, it underlines the ecclesial aspect of the sacrament, because reconciliation with God is asked for and given through the ministry of the Church.

## **PROCLAMATION OF PRAISE AND DISMISSAL OF THE PENITENT**

20. After receiving pardon for sin, the penitent praises the mercy of God and gives him thanks in a short invocation taken from Scripture. Then the priest bids the Penitent to go in peace.

The penitent continues the conversion thus begun and expresses it by a life renewed according to the Gospel and more and more steeped in the love of God, for "love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8).

## **SHORTER RITE**

21. When pastoral need dictates, the priest may omit or shorten some parts of the rite but must always retain in their entirety the penitent's confession of sins and acceptance of the act of penance, the invitation to contrition (no. 44), and the formularies of absolution and dismissal. In imminent danger of death, it is sufficient for the priest to say the essential words of the form of absolution, namely: I ABSOLVE YOU FROM YOUR SINS IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

## **B. RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS W/INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION**

22. When a number of penitents assemble at the same time to receive sacramental reconciliation, it is fitting that they be prepared for the sacrament by a celebration of the word of God.

Those who will receive the sacrament at another time may also take part in the service.

Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance. The faithful listen together to the word of God, which as it proclaims his mercy invites them to conversion; at the same time they examine the conformity of their lives with that word of God and help each other through common prayer. After confessing and being absolved individually, all join in praising God together for his wonderful deeds on behalf of the people he has gained for himself through the blood of his Son.

If necessary, several priests should be available in suitable places to hear individual confessions and to reconcile the penitents.

## **INTRODUCTORY RITES**

23. When the faithful have gathered, a suitable hymn may be sung. Then the priest greets them and, if necessary, he or another minister gives a brief introduction to the celebration and explains the order of service. Next he invites all to pray and after a period of silence completes the opening prayer.

## **CELEBRATION OF THE WORD OF GOD**

24. The sacrament of penance should begin with a hearing of God's word, because through his word God calls his people to repentance and leads them to a true conversion of heart.

One or more readings may be chosen. If more than one is read, a psalm, another suitable song, or a period of silence should be inserted between them, so that the word of God may be more deeply understood and heartfelt assent may be given to it. If there is only one reading, it is preferable that it be from a gospel.

Readings should be chosen that will:

- a. let God's voice be heard, calling his people back to conversion and ever closer conformity with Christ;
- b. calls to mind the mystery of our reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of the Holy Spirit;

c. brings to bear on people's lives God's judgment of good and evil as a light for the examination of conscience.

25. The homily, taking as its source the scriptural text, should lead the penitents to examine their conscience and to turn away from sin and toward God. It should remind the faithful that sin works against God, against the community and one's neighbors, and against the person of the sinner. Therefore it would be good to recall:

a. the infinite mercy of God, greater than all our sins, by which again and again he calls us back to himself;

b. the need for inner repentance, by which we are genuinely prepared to make reparation for sin;

c. the social dimension of grace and sin whose effect is that in some way the actions of individuals affect the whole Body of the Church;

d. the duty of expiation for sin, which is effective because of Christ's expiation and requires especially, in addition to works of penance, the exercise of true charity toward God and neighbor.

26. After the homily a suitable period of silence should be allowed for an examination of conscience and the awakening of true contrition for sin. The priest or a deacon or other minister may help the faithful with brief considerations or a litany, adapted to their background, age, etc.

If it should seem suitable, the community's examination of conscience and awakening of contrition may take the place of the homily. But in this case the text of Scripture that has just been read should serve as the starting point.

## **RITE OF RECONCILIATION**

27. At the invitation of the deacon or other minister, all kneel or bow down and say a form of general confession (for example, the prayer, *I confess to almighty God*). Then they stand, if this seems useful, and join in a litany or suitable song to express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God's mercy. Finally, they say the Lord's Prayer, which is never omitted.

28. After the Lord's Prayer the priests go to the places assigned for confession. The penitents who desire to confess their sins go to the priest of their choice. After they have accepted a suitable act of penance, the priest absolves them, using the formulary for the reconciliation of an individual penitent.

29. When the confessions are over, the priests return to the sanctuary. The priest who presides invites all to make an act of thanksgiving to praise God for his mercy. This may be done in a psalm or hymn or litany. Finally, the priest concludes the celebration with one of the prayers in praise of God for this great love.

## **DISMISSAL OF THE PEOPLE**

30. After the prayer of thanksgiving the priest blesses the faithful. Then the deacon or the priest himself dismisses the congregation.

## **C. RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF PENITENTS WITH GENERAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION**

### **DISCIPLINE OF GENERAL ABSOLUTION**

31. An individual, complete confession and the receiving of absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to obtain reconciliation with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.

Special, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession.

In addition to the case of danger of death, general absolution for many of the faithful who have only confessed generically, but have been rightly disposed for penance, is lawful if there is a serious need. This means a case in which, given the number of penitents, not enough confessors are available to hear the individual confessions properly within a reasonable time, with the result that, through no fault of their own, the faithful would be forced to be for a long time without the grace of the sacrament or without communion. Such a situation may occur in mission lands particularly, but in other places as well and in groups of people to whom the serious need mentioned clearly applies.

When confessors can be made available, however, the procedure is not lawful solely on the basis of a large number of penitents, for example, at some great festival or pilgrimage. [45]

32. It belongs exclusively to the local Ordinary, after consultation with other members of the conference of bishops, to make the judgment on whether the conditions stated already are verified and therefore to decide when it is lawful to give general absolution.

If, apart from the instances established by the local Ordinary, any other serious need arises for giving general absolution, a priest is bound first, whenever possible, to have recourse to the local Ordinary in order to give the general absolution. If this is not possible, he is to inform the same Ordinary as soon as possible of the need in question and of the fact of the absolution. [46]

33. With respect to the faithful, it is absolutely required for the reception of general sacramental absolution that they have the proper dispositions. This means that they repent individually of their sins, have the intention of refraining from them, are resolved to rectify scandal or injuries they may have caused, and intend to make an individual confession in due time of those serious sins they cannot at the present time confess. Priests are to take pains to instruct the faithful about these dispositions and conditions that are prerequisites for the sacrament to have its effect. [47]

34. Unless there is a good reason preventing it, those who receive pardon for serious sin through general absolution are to go to auricular confession before any further reception of general absolution. And unless a moral impossibility stands in the way, they are absolutely bound to go to a confessor within one year. For

the precept binding every one of the faithful binds them as well, namely, to confess individually to a priest at least once a year all those grave sins not hitherto confessed one by one. [48]

## **RITE OF GENERAL ABSOLUTION**

35. For the reconciliation of penitents by general confession and absolution in the cases provided by law, everything takes place as described already for the reconciliation of several penitents with individual confession and absolution, with the following exceptions.

a. After the homily or during it, the faithful who seek general absolution are to be instructed to dispose themselves properly, that is, to have a personal sorrow for sins committed and the resolve to avoid committing them again; the intention to repair any scandal and harm caused and likewise to confess in due time each one of the grave sins that they cannot confess at present. [49] Some expiatory penance should be proposed for all to perform; individuals may add to this penance if they wish.

b. The deacon, another minister, or the priest then calls upon the penitents who wish to receive absolution to show their intention by some sign (for example, by bowing their heads, kneeling, or giving some other sign determined by the conferences of bishops). They should also say together a form of general confession (for example, the prayer, *I confess to almighty God*), which may be followed by a litany or a penitential song. Then the Lord's Prayer is sung or said by all, as indicated in no. 27.

c. Then the priest pronounces the invocation that expresses prayer for the grace of the Holy Spirit to pardon sin, proclamation of victory over sin through Christ's death and resurrection, and the sacramental absolution given to the penitents.

d. Finally, the priest invites the people to give thanks, as indicated in no. 29 and, omitting the concluding prayer, he immediately blesses and dismisses them.

## **V. Penance Services**

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### **NATURE AND STRUCTURE**

36. Penitential services are gatherings of the people of God to hear God's word as an invitation to conversion and renewal of life and as the message of our liberation from sin through Christ's death and resurrection. The structure of these services is the same as that usually followed in celebrations of the word of God [50] and given in the *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents*.

It is appropriate, therefore, that after the introductory rites (song, greeting, and opening prayer) one or more biblical readings be chosen with songs, psalms, or periods of silence inserted between them. In the homily these readings should be explained and applied to the congregation. Before or after the readings from Scripture, readings from the Fathers or other writers may also be selected that will help the community and each person to a true awareness of sin and heartfelt sorrow, in other words, to bring about conversion of life.

After the homily and reflection on God's word, it is desirable that the congregation, united in voice and spirit, pray together in a litany or in some other way suited to general participation. At the end the Lord's Prayer is

said, asking God our Father "to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us . . . and deliver us from evil." The priest or the minister who presides concludes with a prayer and the dismissal of the people.

## **BENEFIT AND IMPORTANCE**

37. Care must be taken to ensure that the faithful do not confuse these celebrations with the celebration of the sacrament of penance. [51] Penitential services are very helpful in promoting conversion of life and purification of heart. [52]

It is desirable to arrange them especially for these purposes:

- to foster the spirit of penance within the Christian community;
- to help the faithful to prepare for individual confession that can be made later at a convenient time;
- to help children gradually to form their conscience about sin in human life and about freedom from sin through Christ;
- to help catechumens during their conversion.

Penitential services, moreover, are very useful in places where no priest is available to give sacramental absolution. They offer help in reaching that perfect contrition that comes from charity and that enables the faithful to receive God's grace through a desire for the sacrament of penance in the future. [53]

## **VI. Adaptations of the Rite to Various Regions and Circumstances**

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### **ADAPTATIONS BY THE CONFERENCES OF BISHOPS**

38. In preparing particular rituals, the conferences of bishops have the authority to adapt the rite of penance to the needs of individual regions so that, after confirmation of the conference's decisions by the Apostolic See, the rituals may be used in the respective regions. It is the responsibility of the conferences of bishops in this matter:

- a. to establish regulations for the discipline of the sacrament of penance, particularly those affecting the ministry of priests and the reservation of sins;
- b. to determine more precisely regulations about the place proper for the ordinary celebration of the sacrament of penance and about the signs of repentance to be shown by the faithful before general absolution (see no. 35);
- c. to prepare translations of texts adapted to the character and language of each people; also to compose new texts of prayers for use by the faithful and the minister, keeping the essential sacramental formulary intact.

### **COMPETENCE OF THE BISHOP**

39. It is for the diocesan bishop:

- a. to regulate the discipline of penance in his diocese, [54] even to the extent of adapting the rite according to the rules proposed by the conference of bishops;

