

## THE CELEBRATION OF FIRST PENANCE WITH CHILDREN

### *Preamble*

“Dear friends, celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation means being enfolded in a warm embrace: it is the embrace of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us recall that beautiful, beautiful parable of the son who left his home with the money of his inheritance. He wasted all the money and then, when he had nothing left, he decided to return home, not as a son but as a servant. His heart was filled with so much guilt and shame. The surprise came when he began to speak, to ask for forgiveness, his father did not let him speak, he embraced him, he kissed him, and he began to make merry. But I am telling you: each time we go to confession, God embraces us. God rejoices! Let us go forward on this road. May God bless you!”

*(Pope Francis, General Audience, Wednesday, February 19, 2014)*

### *Necessary Requirements*

1. Follow the canons relative to penance. (Please reference the addendum, “Canon Law on Penance,” at the end of this document.)
2. A child must have attained the age and/or use of reason. A seven-year-old is presumed to have the use of reason. (Canon 97 §2, see addendum)
3. A valid baptism is a requirement for the sacrament of penance. The parent/guardian must provide the candidate’s original baptism certificate. After photocopying it, the original should be returned to the parent/guardian. If the original baptism certificate cannot be located, and the candidate was baptized at your parish, check your baptismal records to verify the baptism. If the candidate was not baptized at your parish, have the parent/guardian contact the baptismal parish to request a new certificate. Once received, photocopy it, and give the original back to the parent/guardian for their records.
4. To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God. (Canon 987, see addendum)
  - A. Rejecting sins committed: The penitent has heartfelt contrition for the sins committed.
  - B. Having a purpose of amendment: The penitent vows to make amends (satisfaction/penance) for his/her sins and to sin no more.
5. The normal time for a child to be catechized and receive the sacrament of penance for the first time is in the fall and winter seasons of second grade. Preparation for a child’s First Holy Communion should begin shortly thereafter and be celebrated, preferably, during the Easter Season of second grade.

### *Recommended Catechesis*

1. The pastor has discretion as to what catechetical materials are used for First Penance catechesis. Texts and programs listed in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’

(USCCB) document “Conformity Listing of Catechetical Texts and Series” can be used but are not required. That listing can be found on the USCCB website.

2. Catechesis for First Penance should be comprehensive. The diocese has available a suggested, but not required, curriculum for parish use upon request. Our curriculum can be modified to fit the needs of your children, but the core concepts of the sacrament should be discussed.
3. Parents/guardians are highly encouraged to participate in their child’s First Penance preparation. The best and most fruitful catechesis for the sacrament of penance should involve the parents/guardians as much as possible. By participating in the catechetical programs offered by the parish, parents/guardians can grow in their own understanding and appreciation of the sacrament and more readily guide their child into fuller participation in the life and worship of the Christian community.
4. If possible, the child should be enrolled in a parish process of preparation for the reception of First Penance in which children from the Catholic school, home schooling and the parish catechetical program are united and come together periodically for preparation. They should all participate in the communal dimensions (e.g., ritual, prayer services, etc.) and any other requirements determined by the parish.

### ***Discernment of Readiness***

It is the responsibility of the parish pastor, in collaboration with the parents/guardians and the candidate, to establish that the candidate for First Penance has heartfelt contrition, appropriate for their age, for the sins he/she has committed and a purpose of amendment. The pastor, or his delegate, should meet individually with each candidate during the formation process to determine his/her readiness.

### ***Celebration of the Sacrament***

1. It is suggested that children in parish catechetical programs, Catholic schools, and home-schooled children be integrated into each celebration of First Penance.
2. Sensitivity to language issues of those involved should be considered in the preparation of the celebration of the sacrament.

### ***Recording of the Sacrament***

It is not necessary to record reception of First Penance.

### ***Special Considerations***

1. **Home Schooled Children** – The child’s pastor must see to it that proper catechetical instruction for the child is provided. The rights and responsibilities of the parent/guardian and the parish call for collaboration between the two. The same policies apply to children who are home schooled for religious education as are required for children in parish programs and Catholic schools. It is expected that home schooled children receiving sacrament of penance catechesis in the home will participate in the other communal aspects of preparation at their

parish (e.g., prayer services, special projects, etc.) that are prescribed for preparation for the sacrament.

2. **Children with Disabilities** – Special considerations and adaptations may need to be made for those children with disabilities. Please see the USCCB document “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, Revised Edition” for more information. Contact the Diocesan Pastoral Center should you need resource assistance.

### *Unique Circumstances*

Every year most parishes are faced with the enrollment of children, Catholic and non-Catholic, catechized and uncatechized, who are not in sequence with the norms of our diocese and are seeking First Penance and First Holy Communion. Determination of where these students belong in a specific program/process should be made on an individual basis through an interview process that may include the family, pastor or sacramental minister, and the program coordinator.

### *Frequently Asked Questions*

1. **How long should the First Penance preparation process be?**

It depends on whether the necessary requirements for reception of the sacrament have been met. If they have been met, reception of the sacrament of penance should take place as soon as possible. There is no set timeframe for this. However, it would be reasonable to expect candidate participation in a parish process during the school year the candidate celebrates the sacrament.

2. **If the candidate currently attends a Catholic school and is receiving First Penance preparation at the school, do they need to be enrolled in parish preparation as well?**

If the candidate belongs to the same parish where the school is located, it is the pastor’s discretion as to what preparation is necessary. There may be communal aspects that the parish is doing (e.g., prayer services, special projects, etc.) that are not done at the school that the candidate may benefit from participating in. If the candidate does not belong to the parish where the school is located, then the pastor where the family worships has discretion as to what preparation is necessary.

3. **What if the candidate currently attends a Catholic school and is receiving First Penance preparation at the school but belongs to another parish. Where should that child celebrate the sacrament?**

It is preferable that the candidate celebrates the sacrament at the parish where the family worships. Because this is a communal celebration, the sacrament should be celebrated with the faith community in which the family worships and is registered. If the family desires the candidate to celebrate his/her First Penance at the parish where the school is located, the family should request the family’s pastor to grant permission, in writing, to the school pastor allowing the candidate to celebrate the sacrament at his parish. This permission, if granted, does not excuse a candidate from participating in the communal First Penance activities (e.g., retreats, service projects, etc.) at the candidate’s parish. This permission is a courtesy between pastors, but it is not an impediment for receiving the sacrament.

**4. How often can someone celebrate the sacrament of penance?**

As often as he/she wishes, assuming there are sins to confess.

**5. Should a child celebrate the sacrament of penance before receiving his/her First Holy Communion?**

Yes.

**6. Can we withhold the sacrament if a candidate, or parent, does not attend a certain number, or percentage, of catechetical classes?**

If the requirements of Canon 987 (see addendum) are met, you cannot withhold the sacrament. Let Canon 987 be your guide.

**7. The original baptism certificate for the candidate cannot be located and the parish where the candidate's baptism took place doesn't have a record of the baptism. What do I do next?**

If no record of the baptism can be found, seek a witness who can confirm that the baptism took place. Only one witness is necessary per Canons 875 and 876. Pictures taken at the baptism can be helpful as well. If procedural clarification is needed, contact our diocesan Tribunal and/or Chancellor's Office for assistance.

***Addendum: Canon Law on Penance***

**Canon 97 – §1.** A person who has completed the eighteenth year of age has reached majority; below this age, a person is a minor.

§2. A minor before the completion of the seventh year is called an infant and is considered not responsible for oneself (*non sui compos*). With the completion of the seventh year, however, a minor is presumed to have the use of reason.

**Canon 983 – §1.** The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.

§2. The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession are also obliged to observe secrecy.

**Canon 984 – §1.** A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded.

§2. A person who has been placed in authority cannot use in any manner for external governance the knowledge about sins which he has received in confession at any time.

**Canon 987 –** To receive the salvific remedy of the sacrament of penance, a member of the Christian faithful must be disposed in such a way that, rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment, the person is turned back to God.

**Canon 988 – §1.** A member of the Christian faithful is obliged to confess in kind and number all grave sins committed after baptism and not yet remitted directly through the keys of the Church nor acknowledged in individual confession, of which the person has knowledge after diligent examination of conscience.

§2. It is recommended to the Christian faithful that they also confess venial sins.

**Canon 989** – After having reached the age of discretion, each member of the faithful is obliged to confess faithfully his or her grave sins at least once a year.

**Canon 990** – No one is prohibited from confessing through an interpreter as long as abuses and scandals are avoided and without prejudice to the prescript of can. 983, §2.

**Canon 991** – Every member of the Christian faithful is free to confess sins to a legitimately approved confessor of his or her choice, even to one of another rite.

**(all canons related to penance: 959 – 997)**

***Other References on Penance:***

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church: 1422 – 1498*
- *The Order of Penance*