

The Sacrament of

PENANCE

Reference Card

Pope Francis continually reminds us of God's mercy - something that we experience intimately when we celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. This resource is designed to provide an update for those who are engaged in leading sacramental preparation.

Confession, Reconciliation, or Penance?

The Archdiocesan sacramental resources make the distinction, '**Sacrament**' of Penance and the '**Rite**' for Reconciliation. The 'rite' is the liturgical structure within which the 'sacrament' is celebrated. We come as penitents seeking to be reconciled. (You can read a further explanation of what each word means in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1423-1425).

Who celebrates the Sacrament?

Baptised members of the Roman Catholic Church who feel called to be reconciled with God and with the faith community can take part in the Sacrament of Penance. This call to conversion and reconciliation occurs when one considers, judges and changes one's life in the light of God's love revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Prayer and participation in the Eucharist are the regular means of asking for forgiveness and being reconciled with God and the community. However, there are times when the faithful need the Sacrament of Penance in their struggle to be forgiven and forgiving, to discover anew the gift of God's saving action in their lives, and to be strengthened to continue living as disciples of Jesus.



“...The Church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God's mercy....”

Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*

When should we receive the Sacrament?

The Easter Story reveals humanity at our worst. We witness Jesus suffering from the sins of others: he is beaten, tortured, humiliated and finally murdered. The story does not end with Jesus' death though. Jesus forgives those who sinned against him and rises bodily into heaven. With Baptism, we are welcomed into the Christian community, with the promise of life with God after death. Why? Because we are loved by God.

When we do wrong or ignore God calling us to goodness, we rupture our relationship with God and others. Christians have spent much time categorising and naming sin. What is important is God's mercy and forgiveness is always available to us as we try to repair these relationships.

We hear about God's mercy and forgiveness each time we celebrate Eucharist, because in essence, each time we gather, we celebrate the Easter story and are reminded our baptismal promise of life with God.

There are many ways to repent and ask God's forgiveness.

"The people of God accomplish and perfect this continual repentance in many different ways. They share in the sufferings of Christ by enduring their own difficulties, carry out works of mercy and charity, and adopt ever more fully the outlook of the Gospel message".
(Rite of Penance 2.4).

In the Sacrament of Penance, we ask God's forgiveness in a particular way. We acknowledge that our relationships have been ruptured and we seek to actively make amends and seek forgiveness from God and if possible, from those we have harmed.

God's Mercy

'Mercy' is an act of compassion or forgiveness towards someone who is deserving of punishment. Pope Francis has spent much of his papacy helping us to understand God's infinite mercy for us. He has spoken about the Church being a 'field hospital', 'a welcoming place taking in the wounded and serving them, ministering to them, not a place of judgment and condemnation'. (Pope Francis, 'The Name of God is Mercy').

If God's very nature is mercy, then who are we to judge?

"...God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy..."

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

What actually happens during the Sacrament?

It depends which rite of the sacrament you are receiving. There are three forms of the Rite for Reconciliation.

All three rites share a common structure:



Rite I: Reconciliation for Individual Penitents

This form is celebrated by an individual person in the presence of the priest. The place where this happens is usually a Reconciliation Chapel (what used to be called a "Confessional"). A bible, a crucifix and candle are placed on a table in the centre of the space. The person may choose to sit facing the priest or to sit behind a screen and remain anonymous. The Rite begins with a greeting, followed by words of encouragement from the priest. After a short reading from Scripture, the person reflects on his/her circumstances and confesses his/her sins and seeks reconciliation. The priest offers advice and gives a penance that is meant to help in starting a new life and to remedy any weakness. The priest pronounces absolution and the Rite concludes with a short thanksgiving.

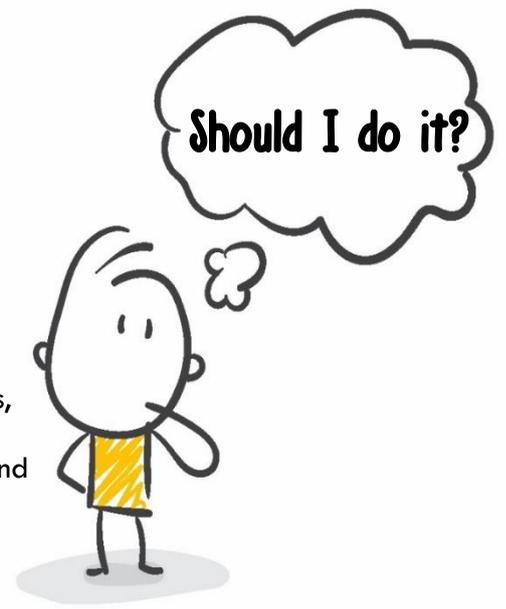
Rite II: Reconciliation for Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution

This form of the Rite begins with a communal Celebration of the Word – readings from Scripture, hymns, prayers, a homily and an examination of conscience, followed by a call to repentance. Private confession and reconciliation follow. The Rite concludes with a short thanksgiving, and a blessing and dismissal of the gathered assembly.

Rite III: Reconciliation for Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution

This form of the Rite follows the same pattern as Rite II, but does not include individual confession and reconciliation. It includes a communal prayer of confession and general absolution. The use of this form is restricted to emergencies and other special circumstances.

Conscience



Conscience, our true inner voice, does three things:

1. calls us to respond to God, creation and others with goodness,
2. helps us decide between right and wrong,
3. assists us in understanding when we have done wrong and encourages us to make amends.

"Deep within his conscience man (sic) discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment. . . . For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. . . . His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1776

Conscience in and of itself is not moral law but is a judgement of reason. An informed conscience uses all available information to make the best decision. Even though Catholics believe that we should always follow our conscience, sometimes it can be fallible when we don't have all the facts.

A process like SEE-JUDGE-ACT assists us in ensuring that we are as informed as we can be.

What does it take to be forgiven?

Very rarely a priest is not able to offer absolution. There are three reasons for this: (1) the person has not committed any sin, (2) the person who has committed the sin is truly not sorry for the sin, or (3) the person intends to continue sinning in the same way.

If the person is absolved by the priest, a 'penance' will be given. This is usually a prayer or reflection or an action that helps the absolution, such as returning stolen property.

A life-long journey

Sacraments are never about certification. They represent a life-long journey celebrated within the Body of Christ.