

### **Sacramental Considerations**

“The sacrament of Penance is a whole consisting in three actions of the penitent and the priest’s absolution. The penitent’s acts are repentance, confession...and the intention to make reparation and do works of reparation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 1491). The Sacrament of Penance is both an act of Christ and an act of the Church. Christ accomplishes the work of reconciliation. He is the one who established the sacrament (see Mt 16:19 and Jn 20:19, 22-23); he is present in it; and he acts through it by bestowing the grace he merited for sinners through the saving work of his Paschal Mystery. The whole Church is involved in the ministry of reconciliation. The Sacrament of Penance is celebrated by the Church, it occurs in the context of the Church and, consequently, the effect of reconciliation is experienced through and by the whole Church. Accordingly, the Church acts as a priestly people whose members gather together, pray to God for his mercy, listen to the proclamation of the Word of God, examine their consciences, confess their sins, go to individual confession and receive absolution, praise God, and are sent forth.

### **Liturgical Considerations**

It is through the liturgical action of the Sacrament of Penance that we receive a “new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification” and are restored to the state of innocence we first experienced at baptism when we turned away from Satan, sin, and death and toward Christ, light, and life (*CCC*, 1446 and 1480). Accordingly, the nature and effects of the Sacrament are more clearly expressed when it is celebrated according to the prescribed rites: (1) the Reception of the Penitent, (2) the Reading of the Word of God (optional), (3) the Confession of Sins and the Acceptance of Satisfaction, (4) the Prayer of the Penitent and the Absolution, and (5) the Proclamation of Praise of God and the Dismissal (*Order of Penance*, “Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents,” 41-47). “To neglect the fullness of the liturgy of penance, even while observing the laws for valid celebration, still communicates grace, but it does not ‘most effectively dispose the faithful to receive this grace in a fruitful manner’” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 59). The concern of the minister should always be not only that grace is given, but also that the recipient is disposed to the grace given, and that this grace is fully expressed and most fruitfully received” (USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, *Newsletter*, Volume LVIII, September 2022).

### Canonical Considerations

- ❖ The faithful are to be provided with opportunities to go to confession. Priests are to hear confessions whenever asked, provided that it is within reason (c. 986 of the *Code of Canon Law* 1983).
- ❖ The faithful are to be assisted in being properly disposed to make an integral confession and reminded of their duty to confess grave sins at least once a year (cc. 987-989).
- ❖ Children are to be prepared to receive the Sacrament of Penance (cc. 914 and 777, 2°).
- ❖ The faithful may be given the freedom to choose how they confess their sins: anonymously behind a fixed grate or face-to-face with confessors. Provisions should be made for a sufficient number of places for confession that are visible, accessible, and accommodate both options (USCCB, “Complementary Norms,” 283). Priests may ultimately decide to hear confessions only in a confessional with a fixed grate (Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, response, July 7, 1998: *AAS* 90 (1998) 711).
- ❖ The Prayer of Absolution is required. For validity, the essential words in the formula must be said: “I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (*Order of Penance*, 19, 21).
- ❖ The same priest who heard a penitent’s confession grants absolution.
- ❖ General absolution can only be given validly when the law permits it (cc. 960-963).
- ❖ Prudence and discretion are to be used when asking penitents questions to determine the nature and gravity of the sins confessed and their culpability as well as to assist them in confessing their sins. Names of accomplices are not to be asked (cc. 979 and 988).
- ❖ Interpreters may be used provided there is no danger of scandal or abuse and the obligation to observe secrecy on the part of the interpreter is assumed (cc. 983 §2 and 990).
- ❖ Priests are absolutely forbidden from violating the sacramental seal in any way or for any reason (c. 983 §1). They may not use knowledge about sins confessed in any manner, particularly in situations of authority. They may not use any knowledge they acquire within confession to the detriment of the penitent in any way (c. 984).
- ❖ Priests can remit undeclared *latae sententiae* censures of excommunication or interdict – even those reserved to the Apostolic See – while the appropriate action is taken when it is burdensome for penitents to remain in the state of grave sin (c. 1357). *See the enclosed chart.*
- ❖ Recording or the malicious diffusion through communications media of what is said in sacramental confession is a more grave delict (*Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*, art. 4, §2).

### Pastoral Considerations

- ❖ Use the opportunity the new translation provides for catechesis on the sacrament and its proper celebration.
- ❖ Clean out confessionals and arrange them to be spaces that are worthy of the celebration of this sacrament.
- ❖ Provide resources for those going to confession: guides on “how to”, pamphlets for further assistance (e.g., Project Rachael, Courage, Third Option, etc.), sample penances (e.g., prayers, scripture readings, etc.), etc.
- ❖ Restructure “Penance Services” using The Order for Reconciling Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.