



DIOCESE OF AUSTIN

PENANCE



DIocese OF AUSTIN

Policy on Penance

Effective 2005

In order to serve the needs of the people of God in the Diocese of Austin and to be responsible stewards of the gifts given to the diocese, the Diocese of Austin issues the following policy:

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 maternal care and solicitude to acknowledge and 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 (*Rite of Penance*¹, 8).

I. Times

- A. The sacrament of penance may be celebrated at any time on any day but it should be publicized to the faithful (RP 13).
- B. The sacrament of penance is not permitted during the Mass “in such a way that it becomes a single celebration.”
 - 1. The reception of the sacrament during Mass in another location in the Church by a priest other than the celebrant is permitted in order to meet the needs of the faithful; however, it should be done in an appropriate manner (RP 13; *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 76).
- C. The Lenten season is clearly penitential.
 - 1. Priests are to be generous in providing convenient times during Lent for parishioners to make a sacramental confession of their sins.

¹ Hereafter RP

2. Though some sacraments are not to be celebrated on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick are certainly allowed on these two days. (BCL² 2/23/87; DCD³ 1/16/88 61, 75)
- D. Sufficient time should be allowed for penance on Saturdays; i.e., one (1) hour and two (2) hours in the larger parishes.
1. It is not helpful to schedule the sacrament for a particular time and then for the priest to leave the penance room after a short time because no one has come. He should remain the entire time.
 2. It would be helpful for parishes to have penance available on one (1) other day of the week in addition to Saturday. (BCL 2/17/86; 11/6/87)
- E. Communal celebrations with individual confessions are encouraged by the rite of penance. It is fitting to offer these celebrations during the season of Lent (RP 13) and during the season of Advent, as is the custom in the Diocese of Austin.

II. Place

Parishes and chapels should take care to provide suitable rooms for the sacrament of penance where the penitent may exercise the right to anonymous or face-to-face celebration of the sacrament. (BCL 11/10/72; PLBT⁴ 3)

- A. This right should also be preserved in communal penance celebrations (c. 964, § 2).

III. General Absolution

The conditions requisite for general absolution (c. 961) do not pertain within the Diocese of Austin, with the possible exception of a natural disaster.

- A. General absolution is not to be used without permission of the diocesan Bishop (c. 134; BL 3/33/69).

IV. Faculties

- A. Pastors are granted the habitual faculty to administer the sacrament of penance (*ipso iure*).
1. This same habitual faculty is extended to all parochial vicars and priests who have domicile in this diocese.

² *Bishops Committee on the Liturgy Newsletter* (USCCB)

³ *Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments*

⁴ *Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of Texas: Sin and the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

2. This faculty may be exercised anywhere in the world unless the local Ordinary has restricted its exercise in a particular case (cc. 968, § 1; 967, § 2).
- B. Confessors may remit an automatic (*latae sententiae*) penalty undeclared and not reserved for abortion, heresy, apostasy, and schism.
1. This faculty may be exercised only within the confines of the diocese and on behalf of any person regardless of the person's residence or the place where the penalty was incurred.

V. Confidentiality

All priest-penitent communication is legally protected under Texas law of September 1, 1983.

VI. First Penance

Stress has been laid upon the actual ecclesiastical discipline concerning the time of first confession that prescribes that children, once they have reached the use of reason, must be prepared to receive first Communion after sacramental confession. The basis for this observance, for children, is not so much the state of sin in which they may be, as the formative and pastoral aim: that is, to educate them, from a tender age, to the true Christian spirit of penance and conversion, to growth in self-knowledge and self control, to the just sense of sin, even of venial sin, to the necessity of asking for pardon of God and above all to a loving and confident abandonment to the mercy of the Lord. Such an education is mainly the task of the parents, educators, and priests.

- A. All children shall be prepared for and given the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament of penance before their first reception of the Eucharist (c. 914; *National Directory for Catechesis* (USCCB),⁵ 135).
- B. The age of discretion both for penance and Holy Communion is the time when a child begins is able to reason, that is about the seventh (7) year. From that time on begins the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both penance and Communion (*Quam Singulari*,⁶ 245-250).
- C. All the faithful having reached the age of discretion (around the seventh (7) year) are bound to confess grave sins at least once a year (cc. 988, 989).
 1. The faithful are also recommended to confess venial sins (c. 988).

⁵ Hereafter NCD

⁶ Hereafter QS

- D. The child's readiness for the celebration of each of the sacraments is to be determined by the child, the parent, who is the primary educator of their child, and the pastor or his delegate.
1. If the parent, catechist, pastor, or his delegate deems the child is not sufficiently prepared or there is not a sincere commitment to receive the sacrament, it may be recommended to the child and the parent(s) that celebration of the sacrament be postponed.
 - a. However, the preparation of the child to receive the sacrament should continue so that the postponement is a relatively short period of time (NCD).
- E. Catechesis for children must always respect the natural disposition, ability, age, and circumstances of the individuals.
1. Religious readiness for celebration of this sacrament should consider not only chronological age and school grade but also the child's preparedness to encounter Christ in this sacramental celebration (NCD 135).
 2. Special attention must be given to assist persons with special needs, mental retardation, emotional disabilities, and/or developmental disabilities (*U.S. Bishops' Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, 6/95).
- F. An assessment (i.e. meeting with child or child and parent(s) or other means) should be used to determine the child's readiness to enter formation for the sacraments; and, after appropriate formation, the celebration of the sacrament (NCD 135).
- G. The parochial community is responsible for providing a focused, immediate preparation for the sacrament of penance just prior to the celebration of the sacrament recognizing the validity of the preparation that has taken place in the home, parish religious education process, and the Catholic school.
- H. Responsibilities of Parents
1. Parents should be invited by the parish at the beginning of the year in which the child is to celebrate the sacrament of penance to participate in an information meeting outlining the requirements for preparation and celebration of the sacrament.

2. They should be encouraged to be an integral part of the child's preparation, use the appropriate resource materials provided by the parish, and take part in parent meetings sponsored by the parish which should inform and challenge them to a better understanding of the teachings and practice of the Church regarding the sacrament of penance.
3. The parent(s) should provide baptismal information for their child before celebration of the sacrament.