



The Roman Catholic
Diocese of Thunder Bay

Sacrament of Penance Guidelines

June 2007

Sacrament of Penance

Christ entrusts to the Apostles the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God and preaching the Gospel of conversion (cf. *Mk 16:15; Mt 28:18-20*). On the evening of the day of his Resurrection, as the apostolic mission is about to begin, Jesus grants the Apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the authority to reconcile repentant sinners with God and the Church: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (*Jn 20:22-23*).

Down through history in the constant practice of the Church, the "ministry of reconciliation" (*2 Cor 5:18*), conferred through the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance, has always been seen as an essential and highly esteemed pastoral duty of the priestly ministry, performed in obedience to the command of Jesus. Through the centuries, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance has developed in different forms, but it has always kept the same basic structure: it necessarily entails not only the action of the minister – only a Bishop or priest, who judges and absolves, tends and heals in the name of Christ – but also the actions of the penitent: contrition, confession and satisfaction. (*MISERICORDIA DEI*)

In the Diocese of Thunder Bay, the normal and ordinary way for penitents to avail themselves of the Sacramental Grace of Penance is in Form I of the celebration. This is encouraged by the Bishop and our Pastors and every parish must set aside special times each week when a confessor is available for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

During the seasons of Advent and Lent, each parish is encouraged to make additional times available for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, Form I, for the parishioners of that community in order that they better prepare themselves spiritually for the great feasts of Christmas and Easter.

An entire day (a Penitential Day) is recommended in order that the faithful have sufficient opportunity to avail themselves of this sacrament.

GENERAL ABSOLUTION

For General Absolution a request is made in writing to the Bishop to use FORM III.

FORM III is *General Confession and Absolution*, requested during Advent and Lent.

Realistic parish needs are to be considered.

*“Particular, occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession”
(Rite of Penance, no 31)*

Such a celebration takes place within a liturgy of the word. After the homily and examination of conscience, the rite is celebrated in the following order:

Special Instruction regarding the rite
General expression of sorrow: Examine; Act of Contrition
Hymn
Lord's Prayer
General Absolution
Prayer of Gratitude/Praise
Blessing and Dismissal

In the special instruction, the congregation is reminded of their personal responsibility regarding grave sins: that though forgiven, they are strictly bound, unless this is morally impossible, to go to individual confession within a year.

In every Service, God calls us to repentance and renewal through the saving power of his word.

IN A PENANCE CELEBRATION, as the readings are proclaimed and homily given, the Spirit stirs up our hearts, and invites us to be converted, turning away from our sins and turning back to our forgiving Father. We are assured of forgiveness and are invited to renew our lives through the saving death and rising of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A PENANCE CELEBRATION:

Form I is the reconciliation of the individual penitent.

Form II is the reconciliation of a number of persons during the penance celebration, with individual confession and individual absolution.

Form III is the reconciliation of a number of persons with a general confession and general absolution.

In our Catholic Schools, Form III is not to be used in any circumstances. The students of our Catholic Schools are to be instructed and encouraged to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in the normal or first form.

RITE FOR RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH GENERAL ABSOLUTION

The priest explains to the faithful who wish to receive General Absolution, that proper dispositions are needed. Each one should repent of their sins and resolve to turn away from these sins, to make up for any scandal and harm they may have caused, and to confess individually at the proper time each of the serious sins which cannot now be confessed. Some form of penance should be proposed to all, and individuals may add something if they desire.

(Suggested Introduction)

Our liturgy this evening, which is a communal celebration of the Sacrament of Penance with General Absolution, is one way that we as Catholics participate in preparing ourselves for the Table for the Lord.

Each of us is called to accept the reconciliation and forgiveness of Christ, both as individuals and members of a community.

In our celebration this evening, we focus on the communal aspect of this forgiveness. God is calling each of us to reconciliation through the ministry of the church.

This evening we make our own, the words of St. Paul who wrote: "It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ; It is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: to be reconciled to God". (2 Cor. 5)

For those who are conscious of having committed one or more mortal sins there is another responsibility, namely, that at your next individual confession, you mention those sins to the priest and that you do this before receiving general absolution again, and at least within a year.

Let me just repeat this again for emphasis:

For those who are sorry for their sins, having firm purpose of amendment and receive sacramental absolution in our celebration this evening, all their sins are forgiven. However, to assist us in rooting out sin and the causes of sin and complete the process of reconciliation, the church obliges us to mention those mortal sins at our next individual confession to a priest.

And now let us turn our thoughts to God our Heavenly Father, and ask his blessing on our celebration this evening.

OUTLINE STRUCTURE OF PENITENTIAL SERVICES

INTRODUCTORY RITES:

- Entrance Hymn
- Sign of the Cross
- Greeting
- Introduction
- Opening Prayer

CELEBRATION OF THE WORD OF GOD:

- Scripture Readings
- Psalm Response (sung) and Gospel Acclamation (sung)

LITURGY OF RECONCILIATION:

- Examination of Conscience
- Act of Contrition (or Confiteor)
- Litany of God's Mercy or Song of God's mercy, forgiveness
- The 'Our Father' (never omitted)
- General Absolution... or Individual Confession and Absolution
- Exhortation to Thanksgiving and good works (Penance)
- Praise for God's mercy (e.g. Magnificat, psalm, hymn)
- Concluding prayer of Thanksgiving

CONCLUDING RITE:

- Blessing
- Dismissal

Rev. Monsignors and Rev. Fathers:

November 07, 2005

The Sacrament of Penance

I have carefully considered the input that you have given me at our recent deanery meetings concerning the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in our diocese, in particular with regards to the use of Form III. As you know, I have allowed this celebration because the response by our people has been very positive, the celebrations have always been very prayerful and sincere, I have sensed true contrition and a sense of repentance during these celebrations. Also I have seen them as an opportunity to teach an understanding of sin and to support an appreciation of the need for the Sacrament of Penance in our lives. This has been my experience as a parish priest and as a bishop in these past years.

As you know, there has been much questioning of the use of this third form due to abuses in some diocese around the world. I do not feel that this has taken place in our dioceses, however, I can never be absolutely sure. I know that you engage in a fervent effort each year to encourage your parishioners to prepare themselves spiritually, in particular for Christmas and Easter, by providing opportune and frequent times for them to receive the Sacrament of Penance and be reconciled with God and the Church in the regular way. I know and believe that you also make yourself available on a regular basis (weekly) for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in its ordinary form with your people, which is normal pastoral ministry practice.

Having prayed about the situation in our diocese, and having listened to you, I cannot believe that by eliminating the celebration of Form III we will 'force' (if this is the proper term) our people to better appreciate the importance of this Sacrament in their lives. Therefore, I am suggesting that we embark on a gradual process, with a strong and continued effort, in particular during Advent and Lent, of educating our people through preaching, bulletin announcements, articles of reference etc. about the importance of the Sacrament of Penance and how it should be received for the forgiveness of sins and for reconciliation to God and the Church.

As our parish priests, I must rely on your insights and knowledge of the pastoral and in particular, the 'spiritual' needs of your people. You minister to them daily, and you should be aware of their spiritual lives and how you can best serve them by guiding them and helping them to grow in their

relationship with God through the Sacraments. With this in mind, I will allow the celebration of Form III in our parishes, once a year only, based on certain conditions and only after a written request is sent to me for this permission. Conditions will be enunciated in my response to any written request for this permission.

I sincerely hope that in moving in this direction, we will help our people to better appreciate the importance of the Sacrament of Penance for their spiritual lives, and that they will receive this sacrament more often than just during Advent and Lent, assured that the mercy of God is available to them in particular through the practice of individual confession at all times. We will examine this course of direction again in the years ahead. May God's Holy Spirit guide us in this important ministry.

If you have any questions concerning this letter or direction, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ *Fred J. Colli*

Most Rev. Fred J. Colli
Bishop of Thunder Bay

Conditions for the Use of Form III Sacrament of Penance

1. You must not advertise the use of Form III. In your parish bulletins or announcements, you must only mention that you will celebrate a 'communal or parish celebration of Penance'. Form III is only employed if the conditions are present at the celebration. You cannot assume these conditions. The Holy See does not want us to advertise the use of Form III
2. You must be sure that a true examination of conscience is used for the careful reflection on the part of the people. I have included a copy of the examination, which was published by the Bishops of Canada in their original book on Penance. Please use this as a guide, adding where necessary.
3. In order for penitents to be properly disposed for forgiveness, they must be conscious of their sins in a particular way and present these sins to the Lord in a sincere and honest spirit – as they would normally confess them in individual confession.
4. You must inform those present that if they have been forgiven of serious (mortal) sin in this celebration, they must attend individual confession noting the forgiveness they have received, before they attend a general service again. It might be more beneficial to include the paragraph from the document noting this instruction in your ceremony booklet for the people.

“For the faithful to avail themselves validly of sacramental absolution given to many at one time, it is required that they not only be suitably disposed but also at the same time intend to confess individually the serious sins which at present cannot be so confessed”. The obligation to confess serious sins at least once a year remains, and therefore “a person who has had serious sins remitted by general absolution is to approach individual confession as soon as there is an opportunity to do so before receiving another general absolution, unless a just cause intervenes.” (Misericordia Dei #7)

5. You must allow for extra times for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in its regular form for your parishioners and they must be informed of these extra available times.
6. If it is possible, you should have another priest present for the celebration, who would be available to assist anyone who wishes to speak with him to seek counsel or attend an individual confession immediately following the ceremony in response to the conditions noted above.
7. During the celebration, I ask you to please use your homily or instruction after the appropriate reading to instruct those present about the nature of sin in our world and the need for reconciliation to God and the Church through the Sacrament of Penance, both during special seasons and throughout the year. See the Catechism of the Catholic Church numbers 1420-1498.
8. The conditions will be met for you to employ general absolution if the number of penitents who attend the celebration are far too great for you to hear their confessions individually in a proper and appropriate time. If the numbers do not warrant it, then the conditions are not met and general absolution cannot be used.
9. The exceptional use of Form III does not absolve us of our responsibility as ministers of the Sacraments, to encourage our people to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance in its normal way so that those who are forgiven of serious or mortal sin, receive the proper and necessary instruction and direction from the confessor in order that they may not fall into the temptation of serious sin again in the future.
10. It is recommended that during the seasons of Advent and Lent, in preparation for the major feasts, every parish set aside a particular day for individual reconciliation with an appropriate number of hours when the priest will be available to penitents. This could be an entire Saturday for example, during which exposition of the blessed Sacrament is celebrated while individual confessions are being heard in the parish Church.