

## 600 - Sacramental Preparation

The Value sought: A joyous relationship between creator and creature.

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First Penance - Diocesan Policy 610

#### **Guidelines for Interpreting This Document**

This document is written in two sections. Please read the following descriptions to properly understand how to interpret each section.

**Diocesan Policy:** This section of the document is to be implemented in all parishes of the Diocese. The need to make individual exceptions for pastoral need could be considered.

**Diocesan Preferences:** This section of the document is to be considered Diocesan suggestions. These suggestions are offered to parishes to help them celebrate sacramental initiation with a greater faithfulness to the spirit of Church documents. Parishes are asked to consider these suggestions seriously.

First Penance Guidelines Diocesan Policy - 610

610: Parishes will follow the *First Penance Preparation Policies and Guidelines*

#### [First Penance Checklist](#)

#### **611.00:** Administrative Policies

611.10: The Sacrament of Penance will be celebrated only with those who have been properly prepared, who are actively involved in the parish preparation process, and who freely choose to be reconciled. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

611.20: Sacraments are celebrations of the believing community. The option for home-schooling during the preparation for this sacrament is discouraged except for serious pastoral need. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

611.30: The recommended time for first Reconciliation is once the person has reached the age of discretion. (Canon 989) Children baptized before reaching the age of discretion will celebrate first Reconciliation in second grade. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

611.40: The Sacrament of Penance will be celebrated prior to the child's reception of first Eucharist. (Canon 914) Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

611.41: There will be a significant period of time between the celebration of first Reconciliation and first Eucharist. The catechesis for Reconciliation must be done separately from the catechesis for first Eucharist, and the preparation periods for these two Sacraments must not take place within the same time period nor overlap in any way. (NCD, 2005 quoted at #36, B-2, p.135) Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

### **612.00: Parent Policies**

612.10: Parishes must provide a minimum of one meeting with parents prior to the child's celebration of first Reconciliation. Parent(s)/guardian(s), the primary educator(s) of their children, are to be intimately involved in the catechesis for first Reconciliation. This helps parent(s)/guardian(s) renew and strengthen their own faith, and enables them to serve as a positive faith example for their children. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

612.11: Requirements for the preparation process leading to first Reconciliation are to be clearly communicated to parent(s)/guardian(s) in a timely manner. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

### **613.00 Catholic School Policies**

613.10 Children attending a Catholic school which is not in their home parish will prepare for and celebrate the sacrament in their home parish. Exceptions to this will only be made with the express consent of the child's pastor. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

### **614.00: Catechist Policies**

614.10: It is essential that a parish utilize the talents of the most gifted and highly trained catechists for preparation for this sacrament. The first celebration of this sacramental encounter with God through Christ is an experience of significant and special grace and deserves the parish's best effort. Effective date: Sept. 1, 1995

Policy Effective Date

**615.00:** Educational/formational content for first Penance 615.10: The preparation process must follow Diocesan Curriculum Guidelines published on 1/1/95. (Available in the diocesan Religious Education Policy - Section 500) **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.20: The preparation process must respect the natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances of the individuals. **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006  
615.30: The catechist for first Reconciliation will emphasize the love and mercy of a forgiving God and the importance of repentance and conversion. **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.31: Sin will be presented in a manner and language understood by the child. (This issue is addressed directly in the Religious Education Department video - *Sin & Discipleship* 1999 and in the accompanying information which is attached at the end of this document for reference.) **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.32: Sacramental Reconciliation is required of those who are in serious sin; it is recommended for those in venial sin. (Canon 988) The catechist of seven year old children must strive not to blur this distinction and make venial sin into something more than it is. **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.33: Catechesis for first Reconciliation should “explore the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers and Scriptures of the Rite of Reconciliation.” (NDC #36, B-2, p. 136) **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.34: Children must “understand how to celebrate the Rite of Reconciliation.” (NDC, 2005 #36, B-2, p. 136) **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

615.40: A very simple Act of Contrition is to be used: one which is easily understood by the child. (see the example which follows at the end of the Diocesan Preferences section) **Effective Date:** Jan. 1, 2006

616.00: Liturgical Policies 616.10: The liturgical experience of first Reconciliation will follow the *Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution* as described in the Book of Rites. **Effective Date:** Sept. 1, 1995

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### **First Penance Guidelines - Diocesan Preferences**

1. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults suggests that it is important for all Catholics, including our children, to reflect on the nature of sin in their lives, in the community and in the world around them. This reflection is best done within the context of the larger Catholic community. The proper liturgical season for this reflection is the season of Lent. It is, therefore, the preference of the Diocese that preparation for first Penance be completed prior to the beginning of Lent; that the children be exposed to the community’s reflection on the reality of sin and that they be sacramentally reconciled shortly before the beginning of the Triduum.
2. The celebration of first Reconciliation should be held as a parish celebration, e.g., children in the Religious Education program celebrate with the children in the Catholic school.
3. First Penance preparation process should be parish-based and include children from both the Religious Education program and Catholic school if there is one. Every effort should be made to bring the group together for such events as a retreat, parent/child gatherings, etc. so that the children get to know one another as the “parish First Reconciliation group” before they are asked to celebrate the sacrament.

4. Two meetings with parents prior to the celebration of first Reconciliation are preferred.
5. Since it would help the child to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance with confidence, it is recommended that every effort be made for the priest(s) who will be the minister of the sacrament to be familiar with the children. This may be accomplished through his (their) presence at the retreat or other gatherings with the children, as well as, a consistent presence in the Catholic school and Religious Education program.
6. Since all the sacraments are celebrations of the larger faith community, it would be appropriate to ask the parish to pray for the children preparing to make their first Reconciliation. This can be done in various ways, e.g., banners with names and/or pictures of children displayed somewhere in the church, frequent bulletin announcements, etc. One example of an appropriate Act of Contrition is the following which is adapted from the Rite of Penance:

My God,  
I am sorry for my sins  
with all my heart.  
In choosing to do wrong  
and failing to do good,  
I have sinned against you  
whom I should love above all things.  
I firmly intend, with your help,  
to do penance, to sin no more, and  
to avoid whatever leads me to sin.

Any parish which would find it necessary, for pastoral or theological reasons, to deviate from these guidelines, will submit an alternate plan to the appropriate diocesan office (Liturgy: Office of Worship; Catechesis: Department of Religious Education) for recommendations and final approval.

*Diocese of Erie*  
*Department of Religious Education*  
*September 1, 1995*  
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#### First Penance Guidelines Appendix

In 1998 the Department of Religious Education did a student assessment process with grades 5, 8 and 11 across the diocese. One of the results of the assessment was an awareness that students need a clearer understanding of moral formation.

As a response to the assessment, the Department of Religious Education produced a video entitled “Sin and Discipleship.” This video was distributed to each parish as a part of a larger catechist in-service process.

The video synopsis gives specific guidelines on how to present the issue of sin to young children and can serve well for an interpretation of policy 615.31.

First Penance Guidelines Appendix  
Sin and Discipleship - Video Synopsis

The inner voice of our soul is called the **conscience**.

The ability to choose to respond to our conscience is **free will**.

Sin is using our free will to reject our conscience.

Our conscience alone is not enough to keep us on the path to God. We need a community, some concrete guidance, and one to show us the way. These are essential.

When we recognize the fact that God gave us a conscience, we become a believer. When we make the second choice of committing to the journey and following the map, we become disciples.

It’s important to be clear from the beginning, there **are two ways we can turn away from God**, and one is more serious than another.

Mortal sin is using the gift of free will to turn away from God and severing their relationship with God.

**Venial sin** is a poor choice that slows down the journey to God. This kind of poor choice does not end the journey and does not sever a person’s relationship with God.

**Not all poor choices carry the same consequences.** Some poor choices will require a major effort on our part to repair a broken relationship with God (mortal sin). Other poor choices (venial sin) will require that we make some corrections and pay closer attention to God’s teachings so that we don’t run the risk of slowly — choice by choice — veering off the path altogether.

Scrupulous older woman story (told in the video):

If we only look at the rules and our behavior to figure out where sin exists and what kind of sin it is, we run the risk of judging ourselves too harshly.

**Adulterous man story (told in the video):**

Some choices are definitely, objectively wrong. He was all too willing to look at the circumstances as he defined them to justify his choice.

Misunderstandings always happen when sin is reduced to only one thing, either intention or behavior.

To represent every stumble, every mis-step, and even every detour as a complete rupture in one's relationship with God is a serious mistake. To say that a rupture isn't possible as long as one claims to be a disciple is equally wrong. (CCC 1854-1864)

**To be a Christian disciple means to be a student of the way of Christ.**

**A student does not stop being a student because of an error.** The student-teacher relationship continues, and in reality, a good teacher will use the mistakes of the student as an opportunity for more lessons. In other cases, the errors may get progressively worse, or there may be signs that the errors are not really "mistakes" but rather an intentional rejection of the lesson. In these cases, the relationship between student and teacher is brought into question.

The Catechism stresses that while we are very capable of making poor choices, the judgment of these mistakes and failures is not automatic. It says we need to take into account three things: 1) the gravity of the offense, 2) the judgment of the person, and 3) the person's knowledge of right and wrong. (CCC 1857)

Teaching young disciples: a gradual approach.

"Students of Christ" that haven't been students for very long are still learning the ropes, and they are prone to make more poor choices as a result. We need to teach **a reality-based approach to sin.**

Talk about sin in terms of poor choices rather than behaviors.

Keep in mind the ages and maturity of the ones we are teaching.

**First graders:** reinforce that God teaches us certain things are definitely right and certain things are definitely wrong. We also need to stress that God expects us to correct our mistakes.

**Second and third graders:** we must introduce the concept of sin, but we must be careful how we present it. Disciples of this age are not yet capable of having full knowledge or mature judgment. It doesn't make sense, at this level, to describe poor choices using the word mortal sin. It can also be potentially harmful for them to be given the idea that they can sever their relationship with God at this point in their development.

**Fourth, fifth and sixth graders:** can grasp the point that some choices hurt a relationship more

than other choices and some choices are more disrespectful than others. It is necessary, in fact, **to highlight the dangers of a pattern of poor choices.** These students are still young and their judgment lacks maturity and freedom. Their ability to grasp consequences is still limited. They are certainly capable of making seriously, even gravely, wrong choices. Yet, it remains doubtful that they are, in most cases, capable of mortal sin (willful, free, fully informed choices that completely sever a relationship with God.) This means that great care should be taken in discussing the idea of mortal sin. It should not be a major emphasis in these years. If they get the wrong idea that certain choices automatically cut them off from God, great damage may be done to their spiritual life. Instead, most of our energy should be spent on giving them an understanding that we owe God and others respect, and some choices show more disrespect than others.

**Junior and senior high schoolers:** remember, maturity grows at different speeds. It is possible for some of these disciples to make poor choices or a pattern of poor choices that are best described as mortal sin. It is proper to re-emphasize teachings on venial sin that slow down our journey home. It also makes sense to talk about the consequences of a pattern of poor choices that can lead a person to wander off the path. Finally, it is proper to talk about gravely poor choices using the term mortal sin. We want them to have not only knowledge of right and wrong, but also a firm understanding that certain poor choices are the same as playing with fire. Yet, we have to deal with reality.

We *cannot automatically say* that the consequence of seriously poor behavior is a rupturing in their relationship with God. The issue of a free and mature judgment is legitimate for them. Therefore, even though we teach disciples of this age about right and wrong using the words venial and mortal sin, we need to do so with great care so that they never feel as though they are outside of the love of God.

Young disciples need to be able to **separate right from wrong** without losing a sense of **God's compassion** for them.