



Diocese of Buffalo
Department of Lifelong Faith Formation
A member of the Catholic Education Division

An Understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is grounded in the very essence of Christ's mission. Christ was sent by God to establish a new covenant: a relationship of everlasting mercy and love.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation should be understood as a way to help us deal with the reality of sin in our lives. Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of our relationship with God. At the same time, it damages our relationship with one another in the Church.

The Rite of the Sacrament of Reconciliation emphasizes the Church as a community of repentance and mutual forgiveness and stresses the responsibility of its members to extend Christ's love to all.

The purpose of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to help us celebrate and deepen our ongoing efforts to be persons of reconciliation in our world. Participation in the sacrament helps us to understand that just as our God freely forgives us our transgressions, we too should be willing to give and receive forgiveness freely.

The Catholic rite includes three options for liturgies:

1. A communal celebration with opportunity for individual confessions.
2. A rite for the reconciliation of the individual penitent in which the priest ministers to the person as a representative of the Church and the bishop.
3. A communal reconciliation without individual confession (Used only in extreme circumstances and following the directives of the Holy See).

With this in mind, the following is the **Diocese of Buffalo Policy Statement for the preparation of children for the Sacrament of First Reconciliation:**

Preparation for the celebration of First Reconciliation with children who are baptized is coordinated within the parish. The parish catechetical leader (often referred to as the DRE-director of religious education) coordinates the process of preparation and the celebration under the supervision of the pastor.

A. Age for Reception of the First Reconciliation:

The decision as to when a child is ready to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time is a decision which rests primarily with parents in consultation with the catechist and priest who will administer the sacrament (Canon 914) but not before the age of reason (age 7).

Each sacrament deserves its own concentrated preparation period. Formation for First Reconciliation is to be conducted separately from preparation for the Sacrament of Eucharist (National Catechetical Directory #122). Therefore, it is the policy of the Diocese of Buffalo that the celebration of First Reconciliation precedes First Eucharist and be at least six months apart. This means that parishes usually will provide preparation for **First Reconciliation in the 2nd grade** in keeping with diocesan guidelines that First Eucharist is celebrated in the 3rd grade.

Generally children will receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving First Eucharist; yet caution should be exercised so that *no child is forced* to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before he/she receives First Eucharist. Equal caution should also be exercised to see that the sacrament is not denied to one who desires it. (Canons 914, 988, 989)

B. Responsibility:

The parish is the primary Christian community (second to that of the home of the home). For this reason, First Reconciliation preparation and celebration for the first time should **occur in the parish faith community**. It is the parish faith community that bears witness to each Christian therefore, **all children of the parish are to unite for the preparation of the sacrament** - those enrolled in the parish religious education program, Catholic school, and those who may be home-schooled.

Preparation for the celebration of the sacraments of reconciliation, Eucharist, and confirmation is a process that is in addition to the regular curriculum for religious education that is implemented in either the parish faith formation program or the Catholic school one is attending. Sacramental catechesis enhances the initiation of one into the Christian community and their on-going, lifelong formation in the faith. Sacramental preparation and celebrations are the responsibility of the parish. All preparation programs should include the following elements:

- Parental catechesis
- Family Retreat
- Attention to learning specifically about the sacrament and its effects.
- Opportunity for Christian service, ideally, as a family.
- Content: catechesis on sin, conversion, and the Theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to be presented at each stage of the individual's development, including the adult community. (Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter 2)

C. Models for Preparation:

All children from the parish (those in the religious education program and Catholic School) prepare to celebrate their First Reconciliation together. The Diocese of Buffalo offers the following guidelines for developing and strengthening parish-based sacramental preparation processes. Attention must always be given to faith formation beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament with a focus on the development of the young person as a lifelong disciple.

1. **Home-Based.** The Diocese of Buffalo recommends the Home-Based model for sacramental preparation. A well-organized program can serve to support parents in their role as first teachers and Christian role models. Home-based catechesis has provided families with the tools to help develop good religious habits in the home and to give the proper emphasis on the priorities and benefits of the Christian life.

Parents have a right and duty to be involved in preparing their children for First Reconciliation. Catechesis aims to help parents grow in understanding and appreciation of the Christian and participate readily in catechizing their children. (*National Directory for Catechesis*, 127).

Parents control the development of faith practices of their household, including regular reception of the sacraments. The household of faith (domestic church) is the primary building block upon which our Church is built. Consideration should be given to the following elements when developing a home-based sacramental preparation process:

- One or more gatherings with parents to provide formation/instruction about the sacrament and catechetical materials to be used.

- One or more gatherings with parents and children to support/enhance the work being done at home (eg. Advent or Lenten program for families to come together).
 - One or more gatherings designed to deepen the faith and relationships of parents with one another in the parish (eg. Strong Catholic Families-Strong Catholic Youth or other parent faith sharing session).
 - Opportunities for families to become active in the liturgical life of the parish and engaged in service to the parish and/or community (eg. Involvement in planning a family mass, or service event such as a collection for Catholic Charities, etc).
 - A system of communication and clear timeline for families and the coordinator to cultivate conversation and accountability (eg. Calendar, email, social media group).
 - Use of written materials should be balanced with experiences of prayer, service, and community building. Only textbooks found on the USCCB's listing of approved textbooks may be used, however, a parish is not required to use a textbook.
 - Invitation for parents to celebrate the sacrament either prior to that of their child, or on the same day.
2. **Age-Specific/Grade Level Formation.** Parishes may wish to use a model for sacramental preparation which gathers the children together in age-specific (or grade level) groups. Please note the following elements should be included:
- At least one parent-child gathering designed to strengthen to role of parent as leader of faith in their household.
 - Active engagement of parents throughout the preparation period (eg. Take-home materials, social media, classroom involvement, etc)
 - Well-planned catechetical sessions should be the equivalent of about 8-10 contact hours only. **Preparation for a sacrament is not a year-long process.** This **does not** replace regular religious instruction provided in the parish religious education program or Catholic school.
 - Use of written materials should be balanced with experiences of prayer, service, and community building. Only textbooks found on the USCCB's listing of approved textbooks may be used, however, a parish is not required to use a textbook.
 - Invitation for parents to celebrate the sacrament either prior to that of their children of on the same day.

Additional Considerations:

1. Remember no matter which model is used: the celebration of the sacrament is not the end – the preparation process must always have as its goal the development of a positive disposition and religious practices that will grow within the family/household for years to come. Cultivate good relationships with these families and continue to invite their involvement in the parish throughout the year. Parents must be actively engaged in the process because it is the parents who have the primary responsibility for the faith growth of their children.
2. Research shows that children whose parents are involved in their faith development and cultivate faith practice in the home (regular prayer, mass attendance, etc) have higher levels of religious practice as adults and report as having happier, healthier lives.
3. Individuals with disabilities are to be given special consideration. (See U.S. Bishops' *Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments With Persons With Disabilities*, Section II #19-21, or contact the Dept. of Lifelong Faith Formation at 716.847.5501).

4. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Christian Initiation - Although not a sacrament of initiation, there are often questions about celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation in conjunction with the process of initiation. These policies are provided here for the sake of completeness.

Catechumen's Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: Catechumens preparing for baptism (both children and adults) do not celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to baptism. They are to be invited to participate in non-sacramental penitential rites as found in the RCIA #291-303 so that they may come to understand the reality of sin and appreciate the comforting message of God's pardon.

Children's Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: Non-Catholic children who are baptized in infancy but preparing for reception into the full communion of the Roman Catholic Church should be adequately prepared and encouraged to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation sometime prior to their formal reception into the Catholic Church. (RCIA #482, National Statutes #27)

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