

GRACE + MERCY AND



SACRAMENT OF  
FIRST CONFESSION

DIOCESE OF PHOENIX  
SACRAMENT OF FIRST CONFESSION  
POLICY AND GUIDELINES 2006

# SACRAMENT POLICY & GUIDELINES

## FIRST CONFESSION

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. Eph. 1:3-4.*

### A SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS and HEALING

There are two Sacraments of Healing celebrated by the Church: the Sacraments of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick.

We approach Confession as the continuance of Baptism's gift of forgiveness and conversion. Through the Sacrament of Penance we receive the grace to live as children of God and the strength to serve God and neighbor as Jesus taught (Rite of Penance 7). The Sacrament of Penance helps form our consciences and strengthens us spiritually, and all the while we are continually building our relationship with a loving God and being called to unity with our brothers and sisters.

In the Diocese of Phoenix, the norm for preparation and reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to be at the age of discretion, when a child is around seven years of age. The grade level at this age tends to be Second Grade.

### UNDERSTANDING

#### THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Children are naturally spiritual and are drawn to God. It is therefore a profound step in faith when young children first acknowledge they have intentionally chosen to do wrong and failed to do good and in doing so, have offended a loving God. A good Confession requires the basic understanding of right and wrong, mortal and venial sin, free will and the freedom to choose.

We continue to remind our children that God loves them unconditionally, and that in no way are they to be led to the belief that they must earn the privilege of receiving God's forgiveness and mercy.

*"The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.*

*Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for."*

*Catechism of the Catholic Church 27*

*"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son be with you in truth and love.*

*Amen"*

*Rite of Penance 94*

*"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. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy."*

# POLICY I: ROLES FOR THOSE INVOLVED

*“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” Luke 15: 11-32.*

## 1.1: THE CHILD

A candidate must be at the age of discretion for sacramental preparation, seven years of age or above, and must meet the following requirements:

- Be baptized
- Be Catholic (children baptized in another denomination must make a Profession of Faith)
- Have the ability to recognize the difference between right and wrong
- Have the capacity for sincere sorrow
- Be properly instructed

“Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.” Catechism of the Catholic Church # 1457

“In the Latin Church, children must receive the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for the first time prior to their first reception of the Eucharist.”  
General Catechetical Directory, Addendum 5

Participation in the sacrament must be a free response of faith.

## 1.2: PARENTS

1.2.1 Parents have a right and a responsibility to be intimately involved in preparing their children for sacraments and are to be models for them in the life of Faith.

1.2.2 Parents discern the readiness of their children to prepare for and receive the Sacrament of Penance in consultation with their pastor or his delegate.

This policy deals with children clearly dependent on their families. By focusing first and with considerable attention on parents, this policy honors the principle that parents hold the primary responsibility of forming their children in faith--in partnership with their pastor and the parish community. This affirms the promises made at Baptism that parents, sponsors and the faith community support and nurture the faith formation of the child in the love of God.

1.2.3 Parents, who due to extraordinary circumstances cannot assume their role in preparation of their child for the sacraments, may designate another adult to fulfill this responsibility (*Discerned in dialogue with pastor or designate*).

## 1.3: CATECHISTS

Catechists involved in the formal catechesis of the candidates must have fulfilled the requirements to be a *Certified* Catechist. (For certification information, contact the Office of Catechetical Ministry.)

## 1.4: PASTORS

“According to their respective offices in the Church, both pastors of souls and all other members of Christ’s faithful have a duty to ensure that those who ask for the sacraments are prepared for their reception. This should be done through proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, in accordance with the norms laid down by the competent authority.”

Code of Canon Law 843 § 2.

“The witness of Christian life given by parents in the family comes to children with tenderness and parental respect. Children thus perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first experience frequently leaves decisive traces which last throughout life. This childhood religious awakening which takes place in the family is irreplaceable.”

General Directory for Catechesis 226

# GUIDELINES FOR THOSE INVOLVED

## CHILD'S READINESS

“ , , , Parents and the parish catechetical leader, together with the pastor are responsible for determining when children are ready to receive First Penance and Reconciliation. Readiness for reception of this sacrament includes knowledge of the person of Jesus and the Gospel message of forgiveness, knowledge of sin and its effect, and understanding and experience of sorrow, forgiveness, and conversion.” NDC 36, B2

Children, according to their age and capacity, are to be considered ready to celebrate their First Confession when there is:

- An awareness that God loves them;
- Regular participation in Sunday Mass
- Prayer as a part of the child's life and also experienced within their family
- A growing ability to distinguish between accidents and the right and wrong choices they make
- A capacity for sincere sorrow and ability to change their actions
- The ability to express sorrow for sin
- A knowledge that relationships with God and others can be broken through sin
- An understanding that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a special sign of God's forgiveness

## PARENTS/ADULT/FAMILY MEMBERS

“Since the family is intimately involved with the formation of a child's moral conscience and ordinarily integrates the child into the wider ecclesial communities, parents should be involved in the preparation of their children for this sacrament so that they can affirm and reinforce frequent participation in the sacraments. They orient the child toward God and encourage continual growth in the understanding of God's mercy and love.” National Directory for Catechesis #36 B2

1. “Participation in the life of the Church” can vary in degrees in accordance to the circumstances of each family. One must approach families with an evangelizing attitude and pastoral consideration of the faith life of the parents. Parents are to be encouraged to participate in Sunday Eucharist with their children.
2. Parents assume the responsibility to model a commitment to personal prayer, community worship and apostolic service expected of a mature Christian. It is the role of an adult family member to assist their children to meet the attendance and formation requirements. It is vital that they pray for and with their children and show willingness to share their faith story.

## PASTORS/DESIGNATED STAFF/CATECHISTS

Pastors of souls and other members of the Christian faithful, according to their respective ecclesiastical function, have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority.

Code of Canon Law 843 § 2

Priests have an active roll in the preparation for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance. As confessors they are to shepherd the people through reconciliation and healing.

## PARISH COMMUNITY

The parish is the pre-eminent place for catechesis (Catechesi Tradendae # 67.) Catechesis should be extended within the community of the faithful. Parishioners should strive to build a community that:

- Witnesses to Christ and demonstrates forgiveness
- Lives sacramental and prayerful lives

# POLICY 2: SACRAMENTAL FORMATION

*“If we say, ‘We are without sin,’  
we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” 1 John 1:8.*

## 2.1: CURRICULUM

2.1.1: The textbook used must be on the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops’ (USCCB) list of Textbooks in Conformity with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Updated lists are provided by the Diocesan Office of Catechetical Ministry, or found on the USCCB website:

<http://www.usccb.org/catechism/document/Currentlist.pdf>

2.1.2: All Christian formation is to draw its’ inspiration and direction from the principles and processes of the Order of the Christian Initiation.

“ Catechesis for children prior to their first reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation must always respect their natural disposition, ability, age, and circumstances.”

*National Directory for Catechesis (NDC) #36 B2*

## 2.2: PARISH AS LOCALE OF PREPARATION

2.2.1: Sacramental preparation is to be received in the parish.

2.2.2: There should be one preparation process for all parents and children in a parish, in addition to the on-going catechetical formation that takes place in the catechetical programs and/or the Catholic School.

## 2.3: FAMILY COMPONENT

2.3.1: Parents have a right and responsibility to be intimately involved in preparing their children for the Sacrament of First Confession.

2.3.2: There is to be a component to help parents grow in their understanding and appreciation of conversion.

Enable parents to reflect on their own experience of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and to participate readily in catechizing their children.

2.3.3 The component should raise awareness of the role and responsibilities of the family and provide skills for Christian parenting.

## 2.4: PRAYER DAY/RETREAT COMPONENT

A day or weekend retreat should be planned for parents and their children.

This is to be a time to reflect upon the Church’s teachings on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation in language suited to the children’s age level. A time of prayer and practice for the sacramental experience should be included in this retreat.

... true conversion needs to be prepared and nurtured through the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture and the practice of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.<sup>26</sup>

Conversion, therefore, fosters a new life, in which there is no separation between faith and works in our daily response to the universal call to holiness. In order to speak of conversion, the gap between faith and life must be bridged. Where this gap exists, Christians are such only in name.<sup>26</sup>

Hence there is a need to renew constantly “the encounter with the living Jesus Christ”, since this, as the Synod Fathers pointed out, is the way “which leads us to continuing conversion”.<sup>28</sup>

*Ecclesia in America  
On the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: The  
Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in  
America*

# CATECHETICAL CONTENT and FORMATION GUIDELINES

## ESSENTIAL TEACHINGS:

Parishes should present catechesis for the first reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation that helps children to:

- Acknowledge God's unconditional love for us
  - Turn to Christ and the Church for sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation
  - Recognize the presence of good and evil in the world and their personal capacity for both
  - Recognize their need for forgiveness, not only from parents and others close to them, but from God
  - Explore the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers, and Sacred Scriptures of the Rite of Penance and Reconciliation
  - Understand how to celebrate the Rite of Penance and Reconciliation
  - Understand that sacramental Confession is a means offered children of the Church to obtain pardon for sin, and furthermore that it is even necessary per se if one has fallen into serious sin
- NDC # 36 B2

*It is called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God, "He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go; first be reconciled to your brother."*

*Catechism of the Catholic Church 1424, 1442;  
2 Cor.5:20; Mt. 5:24.*

Conversion is a lifelong process, and catechesis for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is to be ongoing.

## **FAMILY FORMATION CELEBRATIONS AND RITUALS**

The full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful demands careful instruction in the ritual and its symbols.

In the family component, the role and importance of the family should be highlighted and affirmed, while at the same time reinforcing the parents understanding of this sacrament as an opportunity to acknowledge their sinfulness, their times of estrangement from God and their need for ongoing conversion and forgiveness.

The rites and symbols of the sacraments are ideal sources for catechesis. Parishes should consider adding rituals or celebrations to the preparation period for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation to enhance the family understanding of Jesus' Gospel message of forgiveness, the devastation of sin and its effect, the importance of expressions of sorrow and the need for ongoing conversion. (Pastoral consideration: Missing an occasional celebration must not hinder the rights of candidates to receive these sacraments.)

## **TEXTBOOKS FOUND IN CONFORMITY**

Any textbook used in the preparation process, must be on the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) list of textbooks in Conformity with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. An updated list of approved texts can be obtained from the Diocesan Office of Catechetical Ministry or found on the internet at <http://www.usccb.org/catechism/document/Currentlist.pdf>. See Policy 2 Curriculum

## POLICY 3: CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

*“Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.*

*Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”*

John 20:21-23.

### 3: CELEBRATION OF FIRST CONFESSION

The child's First Confession is usually to be received in the context of a communal celebration with individual confession.

*According to the Church's command,  
“after having attained the age of  
discretion, each of the faithful is bound by  
an obligation faithfully to confess  
grave sins at least once a year.”  
Code of Canon Law 989*

### POLICY 4: REGISTRATION OF SACRAMENTAL INFORMATION

- 4.1: Any documentation for the Sacrament of First Confession is to be a temporary record of preparation for candidates.
- 4.2: Permanent records are not to be maintained for the Sacrament of First Confession.
- 4.3: Certificates are not to be given for First Confession.

*“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins;*

*through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”*

Rite of Penance 46

Parishes are to provide ongoing catechesis on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation for children, youth and adults on a regular basis. Various opportunities for sacramental catechesis on the Rite of Penance occur periodically in the liturgical life of the parish (Lent, parish missions, etc.) and formation should be suited to the age, life stage and maturation of the participants. Catechetical content should include the liturgical rite, sin (personal and social), contrition, conversion and forgiveness.

# GUIDELINES FOR SPECIAL SITUATIONS

## SITUATIONS OF HOME SCHOOLING

Mindful of parents' privilege as the primary educators of their children in the ways of faith, we also recognize that the sacraments are properly to be celebrated within the context of the parish community. The rights and responsibilities of parents, pastors and parishes alike in this endeavor calls for a true partnership.

Whether their children attend a parish religious education program, a Catholic school, or are instructed at home, parents are required to participate actively in preparing their children to receive the sacraments, especially First Confession, Confirmation and Eucharist. This includes participation in the parish sacramental preparation programs and sacramental celebrations. In light of the entire process for catechesis to include the four components of knowledge, community, service and worship, home schooling alone cannot replace catechesis or sacramental preparation in the parish church. (GCD #17; NCD #32; CT #202-26)

The parish must continue to be the prime mover and preeminent place for catechesis. (CT #67)

"In a special way the parish priest or his delegate is to ensure, in accordance with the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop that: an adequate catechesis is given for the celebration of the sacraments; children are properly prepared for First Confession, the Sacrament of Confirmation, and First Holy Communion by means of catechetical formation over an appropriate period of time; children after they have made their First Holy Communion, are given a richer and deeper catechetical formation." (Canon Law #777.1.2.3)

1. Materials must be on the approved list provided by the Division of Formation and Education. The preferred text will be the one used in the parish religious education program or the parish elementary school program. The pastor or parish life coordinator will approve the home program and text(s).
2. The home schoolers will follow the Religion Curriculum Guidelines for the Diocese of Phoenix.
3. Pastor, or designate will meet periodically with the home schoolers to review the progress of the program.
4. Reception of the Sacraments of Initiation and Penance will be celebrated in family's parish of registration.

## CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Persons with developmental disabilities who seek the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and have been baptized, shall receive them. Persons, who because of developmental or mental disabilities may never attain the use of reason, are to be encouraged either directly or through their parents or guardian to receive the Sacrament of Penance at the appropriate time. Parents, guardians, those who catechize and pastors retain the responsibility to see that candidates for the reception of these sacraments are appropriately prepared, and properly disposed.

### Rationale and Guidelines

- An individual may never attain a developmental age that is an equivalent age required by diocesan policy, or be able to meet preparatory requirements.
- Grace of the sacraments and fullness of initiation is of greater value than program preparation.
- Suitable instruction directly related to the celebration of the sacrament and appropriate to the developmental need of the individual(s) shall take place.
- Pastors and their delegates are to consult with the Diocesan Office of Disabilities and Pastoral Care Ministries regarding decisions that will make exemptions to the stated diocesan policy.

## PARENTS IN MILITARY OR DISTANT

See policy I.1, second paragraph addressing when a parent is unable to participate.

## CANDIDATES OR PARENTS WHO ARE INCARCERATED

Incarcerated parents of children preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, should be offered an opportunity to be involved in the preparation of their children insofar as is possible.