



CELEBRATION? It might seem strange to say that one celebrates the sacrament of Reconciliation. After all, isn't that "going to confession"? That hardly seems celebratory! Yet, Christ gave us the sacrament of Reconciliation to demonstrate God's ever-faithful love for us and his forgiveness of us, and this is indeed a reason for celebration! Your child's first encounter

with the sacrament will set the stage for a lifetime of returning to God again and again, resting assured of God's great love and mercy. And even though it may have been a number of years since your own first reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation, your child's experience can be a wonderful reminder of God's love and mercy over the years in your own life.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

Unlike some of the other, more “public” sacraments—Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, and Holy Orders—the sacrament of Reconciliation

is less public: The person expressing sorrow for his or her sins speaks to a priest alone and in strict confidence. That, however, does not make the sacrament of Reconciliation less

important than the others, because it, like all the other sacraments, is a manifestation of God’s great love for us. It helps us to start anew each and every time we fail in our obligations toward God and toward others.

Having a healthy appreciation for the sacrament of Reconciliation is life-giving for each individual and for parishes as a whole. Who of us has not failed in what we should have done or in what we should not have done? Since parishes are made up of individual members, when the members acknowledge their need for God’s grace and mercy, it can only serve to strengthen the whole parish. We are members of the body of Christ, and, as St. Paul noted, we are interconnected. When one member is hurting, we are all hurting; when one member is graced, we are all graced.



A LITTLE HISTORY

In the earliest days of the Church, there was no formal sacrament of Reconciliation. Jesus encouraged his followers to express their sorrow for what they had done wrong to both God and the person wronged; and the idea is implicitly there in the commission Jesus gave to his apostles—“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven, and whose sins you hold bound are held bound.” But the early Church considered Baptism to be the sacrament for the forgiveness of sins, and the formal sacrament of Reconciliation only developed later. For those who were baptized and committed serious sins (such

as murder) *after* their baptism, the Church recommended formal—and often public—penances that they had to complete before they would be allowed back into the Church.

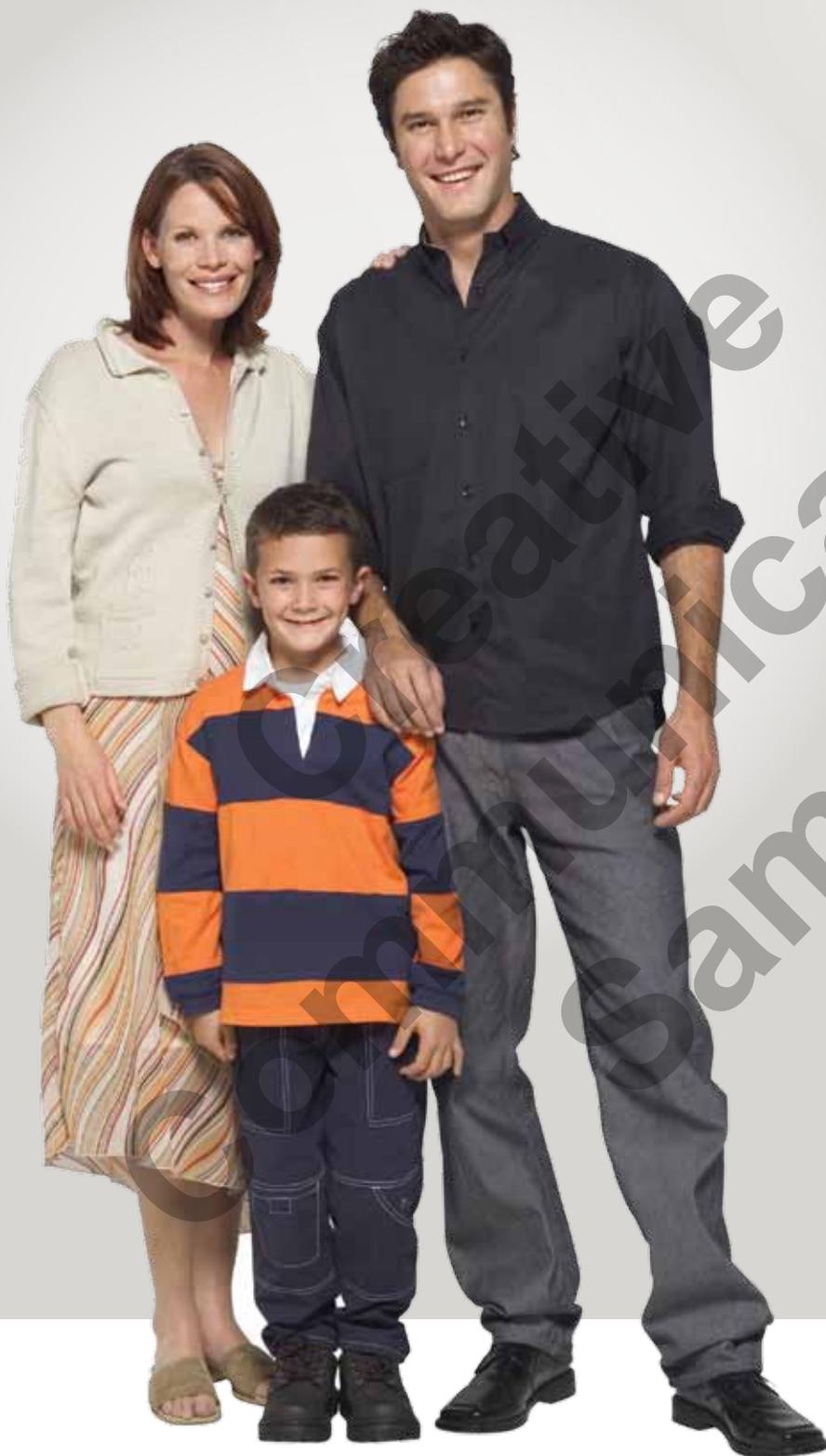
The practice of confessing sins to another person developed in certain monasteries during the Middle Ages; monks would confess their failings to their abbot, who would, in turn, give advice on what to do to avoid the failing in the future and then impose a penance on the monk to help him think about what he had done (or failed to do) and to make some effort at restoring what his sin had damaged.

Over time, the practice spread beyond monasteries to ordinary laypeople and their priests.

Children did not confess their sins until much more modern times. Currently, most dioceses believe that a given child should receive the sacrament of Reconciliation sometime in the 2nd or 3rd grade (or between 7 and 9 years of age), but it always comes before First Communion.

Although the vast majority of children do not have serious sins, many parents worry that making a confession will burden a young child with guilt. In fact, however—with the right preparation in class and at home—the opposite almost always occurs: a child knows that even when he or she has done something wrong, God is always there to love and forgive.

YOUR EXAMPLE IS IMPORTANT!



Many children are confused by the fact that they never see their parents receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation or by the disparaging comments that some adults make about the sacrament. Children know that adults do far worse things than children do. So, why is it that adults don't *have to* receive the sacrament of Reconciliation but children do?

If you have not received the sacrament of Reconciliation for a while, or if you have the habit of saying things like, "I'm not going to tell my sins to another human being!" you might want to reconsider your actions or attitude. This sacrament is a great gift from God, and it should be approached with that attitude. Priests are bound by the Seal of Confession; this means that they are forbidden to reveal the content of anyone's confession to another party. So, there is no chance that what you say to the priest will be repeated to anyone else.

If you are concerned that the priest will treat you differently, based on what you say to him, keep in mind two things: 1) priests hear many confessions, and the likelihood that they will remember details of any single confession is small; 2) if you really want anonymity, you can always confess behind a screen, which makes the likelihood of identification small.

Things you need to know

YOUR CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

If your child is a younger elementary school-age child at the time of his or her First Reconciliation, his or her intellectual and psychological development will play a large role in how he or she approaches the sacrament.

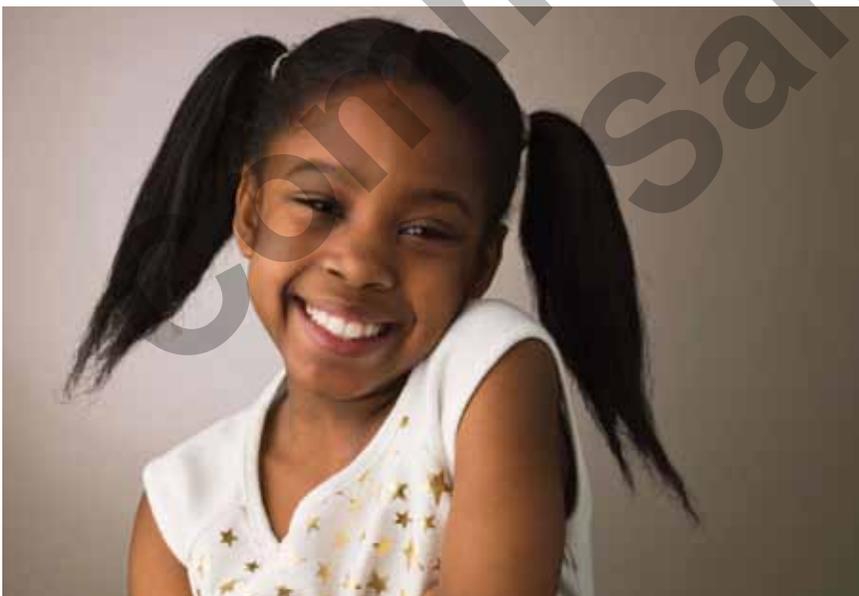
Children at that age tend to be very literal; things are either up or down, right or wrong. There are no in-between stages! Some of this is just how children are made at this age, and some of it is due to the fact that, in school, there tends to be only right answers or wrong ones, especially on tests!

This means that children of this age tend to approach the sacrament of Reconciliation as cut-and-dried. Something is wrong, or it isn't. I should have done something, or I shouldn't have. They will likely compose a list of wrongs that they have done and want to read it verbatim...or they will memorize it. Sometimes the list is long, and they worry that the priest won't like them anymore because they have been so "bad." You can reassure your child that the priest hears many confessions and can't possibly remember everything that is said to him. Also, the priest

is there to represent the forgiving Christ, so there is no question that the priest won't like your child after hearing his or her confession.

A very good aspect of this age group's literality is that they love Scripture stories, especially those that involve Jesus, whom they always take at his word. They really enjoy Scripture stories in which good overcomes evil, and those stories in which magnificent deeds are done. They also appreciate those Scripture stories in which Jesus forgives someone, like Jesus forgiving Peter for denying that he knew Jesus. With respect to this particular story, children are impressed that even though Peter denied knowing him, Jesus still reached out to Peter and wanted to be his friend.

Children of this age also know that to succeed in school or at sports they have to work hard. The same is true if we want to develop our spiritual gifts. But if they think they have to work hard to earn the love of their parents, or to earn the love of Christ—that's simply not true. They cannot lose Christ's love and they cannot earn it—they can only accept it or reject it. You must always emphasize this, in order to avoid any misunderstanding on your child's part.



FAQs

→ *I haven't been to confession since I got married 14 years ago, and that was only because the priest made me do it. I just don't understand why I can't confess my sins to God directly. Why do I need a priest?*

You can and should confess your sins to God directly. Many people find this helpful to do each night before they go to sleep, as they review their day, asking God's forgiveness for what they have done and what they have failed to do, and God's help in doing better in the future.

But confessing one's sins to God directly doesn't mean that one doesn't also need to confess in the presence of a priest. Among other things, the priest can give the reassurance of the Church (based on the promises of Christ) that one is indeed forgiven and is given a new start. Many people find this "out-loud" reassurance enormously comforting. In addition, certain sins of a serious nature require the reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

→ *I hear people refer to an Examination of Conscience. Exactly what is that?*

The examination of conscience is a method by which one systematically reviews one's

actions (or failure to act). There are different forms of the examination, the most common one using the Ten Commandments to review one's failings. Since the first three commandments relate to God and the next seven commandments relate to other people, it is a good

way to carefully review one's life.

Although some people might view an examination of conscience as bordering on the scrupulous, it need not be. If there are no failings readily recalled when considering a particular commandment, one moves on to the next; one need not

