

# Reviewing parish ministry of the *Rite of Penance* – an introduction

*Down through history in the constant practice of the Church, the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)... has always been seen as an essential and highly esteemed pastoral duty of the priestly ministry, performed in obedience to the command of Jesus.*

Pope John Paul *Misericordia Dei* (2002) (hereafter MD)

The Sacrament of Penance is one of the most effective and personal ways of ministering the love of God to the faithful. It provides the penitent with an opportunity of speaking heart to heart with a minister of the Church of the disappointments and failings that are part of all our lives, but take on a particular form in the life of each person. It provides the minister with an occasion to once more present to God’s faithful, ‘Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself.’ (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 37.) This sacrament is a primary means of building-up the Church and strengthening her faith. It provides the members of the Church with a fresh experience of being the beloved of God and can give them a deeper appreciation of their baptismal vocation to be ministers of the Gospel of Christ.

## Good experiences

Many people, clergy and lay faithful, will have experienced something of the power of this sacrament during the celebrations of the Jubilee Year 2000. The occasion of the Jubilee gave encouragement to pastors and penitents to consider the sacrament with new confidence. There were many celebrations, prepared with care and creativity. It was particularly noteworthy how many young people took the opportunity to approach the sacrament, and with what benefit they celebrated it.

## Changes and Developments

Over the past 50 years there have been remarkable changes in the way the sacrament of Penance features in the lives of our communities. Many people now will not have personal experience of the great lines of people waiting in our parish churches to make their weekly or monthly confession – but it was the usual practice for very many Catholics in the 1950s. At that time very few would have even dreamt of what is now quite a common experience – twice a year, in Lent and Advent, the whole church full of parishioners gathering to celebrate the sacrament, beginning with a Liturgy of the Word and continuing with an opportunity for each person present to celebrate individual confession and absolution, before the liturgy concludes with a great act of thanksgiving for the mercy of God.

Throughout this period there has been concern about what is often referred to as a ‘crisis of sin’. What do people understand sin to be? What do they understand to be sinful? The uncertainty has been provoked by many things – the influence of psychological accounts of human behaviour, the changing attitudes to authority, the Church’s own change in language and practice about sin and penance. Doubtless these sorts of things have contributed to the reduced frequency with which many Catholics approach the Sacrament nowadays.

## Looking again at what we do

This paper is not written with the direct intention of ‘getting more people back to the sacrament more often’. It is written because it is thought there is a value in a number of things:

- Fresh catechesis on the nature of the sacrament and its place in the lives of individuals and communities. These things often do not seem to be well understood.
- Fresh thinking about how we make the sacrament available in our communities. Many parishes have kept the ‘old times’ for confession, but it is far from clear that those times best suit the life-styles of people today.
- Looking again at the revised *Rite of Penance*. A number of its features have not yet found a secure place in parish practice, and yet they seem likely to be of pastoral benefit.

It is hoped that parish leaders will be willing to engage with issues such as how the sacrament is celebrated, in its various forms; what people are learning about the sacrament – through its celebration, of course (*lex orandi, lex credendi* – i.e. the rule of prayer teaches our faith, or our prayer is our belief), but also from the participation aids that are made available, and the processes of catechesis we offer to children and adults, particularly as they prepare for their first celebrations of the sacrament.

A good preparation for such a review would be a re-reading of the Rite of Penance, in particular its ‘Introduction’. This offers a brief theological description of the sacrament of Penance and a useful explanation of the liturgical rites. It may be helpful also to read Pope John Paul’s recent letter *Misericordia Dei*. Appendix A offers a series of questions that merit consideration. They might be used by an individual reader, or by a parish team.

There would be value in a number of matters being discussed at a Deanery meeting. Suggested questions are provided in Appendix B.

Both the ‘Introduction’ to the *Rite of Penance* and *Misericordia Dei* are available to be downloaded from the Liturgy Office website: [www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources). Other documents include: *Celebrating Reconciliation Together* which is designed to assist collaboration between parishes in organising a celebration of Form 2 of the Sacrament and *Thinking about Reconciliation* which offers an oversight of reconciliation in the life of the Church. Also available is an extract from *Consecrated for Worship*: a directory on Church Buildings, a forthcoming publication of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, which addresses the provision of a place for reconciliation in churches.

The Liturgy Office has prepared a range of resources to help individuals, parishes and others in their celebration of the Rite of Penance. A description of these is available on the Liturgy Office website, from where the resources can all be downloaded.

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*Reviewing Parish Ministry* © 2004 Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. It is one of a series of resources supporting the Rite of Penance prepared by the Liturgy Office.  
[www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources](http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources)

## Appendix A:

### Questions to help review current practice in a single parish.

1. Section 1 of the 'Introduction' to the *Rite of Penance* places celebrations of the Rite firmly in the context of the mystery of salvation. This same mystery is evoked in the opening words of the Absolution:

*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...*

What indications are there in the celebration of the sacrament in your community of this broader context to an individual penitent's turning from his or her sins?

2. Section 2 of the 'Introduction' to the *Rite of Penance* makes the connections between the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Penance.

In what ways might these connections be made more clear for the people of your community?

3. The social and ecclesial dimensions of sin and penance features strong in the 'Introduction' to the *Rite of Penance*, (e.g. *RP* 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 19, 22, 36 and 37).

In what ways are these presently explored in your parish's celebrations and catechesis? Are there ways in which they might be still more effectively brought out?

4. In considering the ministry of Penance the 'Introduction' to the *Rite of Penance* first gives consideration to the ministry of the whole Church, c.f. *RP* 8.

In what ways does your Community express its part in this ministry? Are there ways in which its responsibilities and opportunities to fulfil this role might be made clearer?

5. The revision of the *Rite of Penance* placed new emphasis on the place of God's word in people's preparation for the sacrament and in its celebration (c.f. *RP* 4, 17, 24, 25, 26, 36).

In what ways does this assist the penitent make their 'inner examination of heart and ... exterior accusation... in the light of God's mercy'? ('Introduction', 6b)

How might more assistance be provided to penitents in making use of the scriptures as part of their preparation for the sacrament? And in the celebration of particularly the first form of the Rite, the *Rite of Reconciliation for Individual Penitents*?

6. What resources are available in the parish to assist penitents to familiarise themselves with the various forms of the *Rite of Penance* and the various options it provides them with – e.g. prayers of sorrow?  
Who is responsible for renewing the provision or varying what is provided according to the season?
7. In *Misericordia Dei*, Pope John Paul reminds that all priests are ordained to reflect the image of the Good Shepherd. In the scriptures the Good Shepherd shows special care for his sheep, tending the wounded, going out in search of the lost, to welcome them back to the fold. He urges that confessors do all they can to be available for penitents at times that are suited to the real circumstances of their lives.  
What are the times presently advertised for celebrations of the *Rite of Penance* in your community during the year – both for individual and for communal celebrations? How were they arrived at? What are their advantages/disadvantages? Might alternative arrangements be more attractive? (NB It is likely that a certain amount of consultation with people – those in work; those retired or unemployed; school-children; students; those with young families etc – would be necessary to answer this question adequately.)  
How might additional provision to be made to assist those children who have celebrated their ‘first reconciliation’ get into the habit of regular celebrations of the sacrament – both individually and communally?
8. How fitting to its sacred purpose is your community’s place of reconciliation – i.e. reconciliation chapel or room, or confessional box? Is it reserved for one purpose, or is it pressed into other alternative use? Is it kept clean and tidy? Are there art-works (e.g. a crucifix; a statue, perhaps of the Good Shepherd; an icon) to give visual expression to the saving love of God).
9. What advantages does the non-sacramental Penitential Celebration (*RP*, 36f) offer to a community? What are the opportunities for such celebrations in your community?

Appendix B:

**Questions to help consider current practice in a deanery.**

1. What recent positive experiences of the *Rite of Penance* are you aware of?  
What circumstances promoted these positive experiences?
2. What promotes or inhibits worthy celebration of the *Rite of Penance* in the parishes of the Deanery?
2. In what ways might Deanery collaboration further assist the faithful in their celebration of the various forms of the *Rite of Penance*? (i.e. *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*; *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*; *non-sacramental Penitential Celebrations*.)
  - a) In parishes
  - b) In chaplaincies
  - c) In other ways – e.g. Youth Days
3. What resources are made available to the following people to assist them with their present needs?
  - a) Parents whose children are preparing to celebrate the sacrament for the first time, but have themselves very little direct experience of the sacrament.
  - b) Adults preparing for their own Christian initiation?
  - c) Adults who wish to deepen their participation in the sacrament, or related processes of spiritual development?