

Celebrating Reconciliation together

Parishes and the Second Form of the Rite of Penance

One of the more significant developments in the liturgy in recent years has been the revision of the Rite of Penance. The second form of that Rite – the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution – has in many places been found to bring great benefits to parish communities. It has assisted with a deeper catechesis concerning the nature of sin and of God’s reconciling love revealed for us in Jesus Christ. It has enabled members of the local Church to deepen their awareness of their collective need for reconciliation, and of their vocation to become themselves ministers of Christ’s healing and mercy in our world.

This document introduces the second form of the Rite of Penance and offers a guide for parishes in how they might collaborate to enable its worthy celebration.

Part One: Overview

‘The rite and formulas of penance are to be revised in such a way that they may more clearly express the nature and effects of this sacrament.’¹

In 1976 the revised *Rite of Penance* requested by Vatican Council II was published. There was much in it that was new that priests and penitents alike needed to receive, consider, and learn to make their own. There was the greater use of the vernacular; the opportunity of celebrating the sacrament ‘face to face’ rather than behind a screen; in many places a move from Confessional Boxes to Reconciliation Rooms.

There was also a new freedom in the *Rite*. There were a variety of texts that the priest might use to greet the penitent and invite them to place their trust in the Lord. Rather than a single familiar ‘Act of Contrition’ such as that beginning: ‘O my God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins...’ penitents were invited to select from the selection of 14 (!) alternatives given in the ritual book, or to use another text which was more familiar or more suitable. Additionally there was encouragement for the reading or listening to a passage of scripture during the celebration of the sacrament.²

Sin's effect on our relationship with God

The revision of the *Rite of Penance* following the Council was particularly intended to promote an awareness of sin which goes beyond the sinful action in itself, to an awareness of its effects on the relationship between the individual with God and the Church. The previous Rite for Individual Confession and Absolution was especially effective at assisting individual Christians to live more faithful and loving lives. However it did not especially assist the individual penitents nor the Church as a whole to remain mindful of the broader social dimensions of sin and reconciliation.

Even when a single penitent celebrates the Rite with a single priest, the priest is there representing the Church as well as ministering the sacrament of God's mercy. But to more strongly bring out this ecclesial dimension the post-Conciliar revision of the *Rite of Penance* introduced a new form of the Rite, the 'Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution'.

This second form of the Rite gives a more public expression both of the reality of sin in the lives of the members of the Church, wounding the Church and harming our brothers and sisters and to the nature of the Church as a reconciling community.

The outline of this form of the Rite is as follows:

Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution

Introductory Rites

- Song
- Sign of the Cross
- Greeting
- Introductory Words
- Opening Prayer

Liturgy of the Word

- Readings
- Homily
- Examination of Conscience

Liturgy of Reconciliation

- General Confession of Sins
- Individual Confession of Sins and Absolution
- Exhortation to do good works to proclaim the grace of repentance
- Proclamation of Praise for God's Mercy
- Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving

Concluding Rite

- Blessing
- Dismissal

Celebrations of the 'Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution' provide an invaluable opportunity for reenergising a community and focussing it afresh on its responsibilities of witnessing to the Gospel in the world.

Fewer going to confession

In 1976 as well as being asked to take these changes and opportunities on board, both priests and penitents would have been aware of other changes regarding the sacrament. It was being celebrated far less frequently than had previously been the case. This decline in frequency of confession seems to have begun sometime before the Council, but certainly in the years following it, the decline was even more marked

The reduced frequency has been accounted for in many ways – by the introduction of the vernacular confession and absolution for the congregation at the beginning of Mass; by a reaction against what was considered an excessive preoccupation with sin earlier in the century, and particularly the exaggeration of the necessary importance of certain faults and failings to the level of serious or mortal sin. To some extent these changes were welcomed as a sign of a greater personal maturity on the part of individual Christians, capable of exercising their conscience and to decide when they had need of the sacrament rather than being pressed to a too regular celebration by habit or custom. However sometimes individuals' best of intentions to exercise personal responsibility as to when they should 'go to confession' simply led to their relative neglect of the sacrament.

Within the culture at large there seemed a new readiness to speak of things which had previously been regarded as taboo – not only in media exposés, but in people's willingness to admit to different values and practices to the 'norm' in their own lives. Sometimes they challenged previous understandings of 'sin' and sometimes they simply more freely acknowledged that they were sinners. There is a certain naïve virtue in this, but such 'confession' did not necessarily support the process of Christian conversion which is integral to the *Rite of Penance*, and certainly did not check the decline in the numbers going to confession.

Many people, perhaps most, welcomed the revisions to the *Rite of Penance*, but in most pastoral settings the *Rite* was used less and less.

General Absolution

The one exception to this was the extraordinary popularity over a number of years of the 'General Absolution service'. This third form of the Rite, not an innovation of the Council but understood to be such by many people, is provided for truly exceptional circumstances such as times of war or where it was rare for a community to have access to a priest. However its publication in the revised *Rite of Penance*, at a time of considerable liturgical change, led many people to see this as a form of the *Rite* that could be used at will.³

On a number of occasions since the publication of the *Rite* the Church, both locally and through the Holy See sought to correct that perception.⁴ In some places this authentic teaching was less easily and quickly received than in others.

However even leaving aside the irregularity of this exceptional form of the Rite outside of the permitted circumstances, many priests and faithful have come to recognise other shortcomings in such celebrations. Inevitably the focus of the celebration is more general, and so will often not address the needs and concerns of particular individuals. Furthermore the absence of personal and individual ministry means that the penitent does not necessarily receive the particular help they need to take the step from sorrow for sin to true contrition and to resolve to live their life more deeply rooted in Christ. Sometimes too such celebrations can have the unintended effect of trivialising the significance both of our sin and of God's mercy.

A Rite only partially received?

Even so the sometime popularity of the third form of the Rite, and of the so-called Rite 2½ meant that the opportunities provided by the second form of the *Rite of Penance*, the ‘Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution’, were not explored as they might have been.⁵

One demand of this second form of the *Rite* presented a particular challenge, namely the requirement that sufficient priests should be available to hear all the individual confessions within a reasonable time. When this is not possible, and an attempt to celebrate this form is made the consequences can be unfortunate. Either people will leave after their individual confession, or the community will stay together under sufferance until the last penitent’s confession has been heard. Either way, the quality of the celebration suffers and the virtues of this particular form of the *Rite* are compromised.

A continuing need

Ironically it is perhaps only now, almost thirty years later and in the context of a decline in the number of available priests, that the Church’s need for this form of the Rite of Penance is becoming ever more clear: the opportunity it provides for engaging with the mystery of the Church as well as of reconciliation is a timely one.

A well-prepared celebration of the ‘Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution’ will have the main benefits of a General Absolution service – the community gathered to be nourished by the word, active in its song and prayer, conscious of its need for reconciliation and its call to minister reconciliation in its turn. In addition it allows for the more personal ministry of priest to penitent, giving time and space for individuals’ worries and needs to be voiced and responded to. It also allows for a richer expression of the nature of the Church, for the ministry will not be simply of this parish and its ministers, but will involve other ministers of the local Church, coming to this community, to help it once more experience the healing reconciling love of God, and to learn afresh that it is part of a Church that is larger than just itself.

New experiences, new opportunities

Good quality celebrations of this form of the Rite of Penance often have a remarkable effect on the life of individuals and communities. This has been seen time and time again at special celebrations around the time of the Jubilee Year 2000, at the World Youth Days, at Diocesan celebrations for young people and other groups, and on pilgrimages to Lourdes and other shrines. People experience God and the Church in a new way, they are given the opportunity to consider their own lives in a new perspective. They are given an invitation to respond to the Lord’s call, and so often they respond with great generosity.

What such services will not have, of course, is General Absolution. For some that will be a great lack. Either because of previous bad experiences of individual confession, or more commonly because of a lack of solid catechesis and encouragement, some people fear the one-to-one encounter with a priest. Often, but not always, those fears are unreasonable but not the less real. Because of such fears such people are deprived of one of the most pastorally important sacraments. Their need can be a great prompt to offering fresh catechesis on the Rite of Penance, on sin and God’s mercy. Such catechesis can be offered in a variety of forms.

- Often the Sunday readings provide opportunities for preaching on the subject; particularly during Lent and Advent there are occasions for using the Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation, and these again provide matter for exploring in the homily.⁶
 - In addition written materials provided by the Liturgy Office are suitable to make available for parishioners to take away and read at home.
 - Perhaps most important of all is providing people with the opportunity to talk about their experiences, their concerns and their needs. Many parishes provide such opportunities for the parents of children who are preparing for their first celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. However, when the reality is that many people in the parish have long been out of the habit of individual confession and reconciliation, there is every advantage in providing still more opportunities for reflection and discussion – for example in house groups or CAFÉ style meetings. Some of the materials provided by the Liturgy Office would be suitable for use on such occasions, or alternatives may be available from your Diocesan Liturgy Commission or Adult Education service.
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Part Two:

Preparing for a Celebration of Form 2 of the Rite of Penance

(the 'Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution')

This section is very largely based on the successful practice of a Deanery in North London. Grateful thanks are due to Elizabeth Anderson who coordinated the celebrations, and who made her notes available for the writing of this chapter.

With effort any individual parish can undertake the coordination of such a celebration, and of course many already do. However when a number of parishes are able to collaborate in preparing a number of local celebrations duplication of effort can be avoided, and frequently more satisfactory results will be achieved. It is this model that is presented here.

In some places the obvious group to coordinate such celebrations will be the Deanery meeting. In other places it will need to be a smaller group.

A typical timetable of the actions a Deanery might take is given below.

June Fr Jim proposes that the priests and full time lay ministers of the Deanery collaborate in preparing a celebration of Form 2 in each of the parishes during the coming Advent.

Following discussion it is agreed that desirable objectives from such a project include

- a renewal of local practices concerning the Rite of Penance
- fresh catechesis on the sacrament
- encouraging more parishioners to make regular use of the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament
- promoting the sense amongst parishioners of belonging not only to a parish but to a deanery.

The members of the Deanery meeting agree to think about it and to decide whether to proceed at the next meeting.

July The members of the Deanery agree to the project. The priests agree to assist at as many of the celebrations as possible. The lay members agree to assist form the necessary liturgy preparation group, and take responsibility for producing posters, service booklet etc. It is also decided how the expenses of the project are to be divided between the participating parishes.

It is agreed that all the Deaneries celebrations will take place on weekday evenings between 13th and 22nd December.

A letter is sent to the priests asking them to confirm which nights they are available, and dates are agreed for each parish's celebration.

A letter is also sent to the Bishop inviting him to preside at one or more of these celebrations.

It is agreed that, except where the Bishop presided each parish priest would preside at the celebration in his parish. It is also agreed that a single service booklet will be prepared for all the celebrations in the Deanery. The liturgy preparation group is asked to ensure that details of the music and readings are circulated to each parish in good time for any new music to be learnt and rehearsed.

August

The Bishop has confirmed that he is able to preside at one of the services and also has written a letter welcoming the venture to be printed inside the service booklet.

It is agreed that as this is a new venture for the deanery it needs to be carefully introduced to the parishes. It is agreed that the principal way of doing this will be by 'pulpit swaps' on the feast of Christ the King. Each parish priest will take the place of a neighbouring parish priest at all that Sunday's Masses and preach about Reconciliation and the value of the 2nd form of the Rite of Penance. Inserts are also to be prepared for newsletters for that and subsequent Sundays.

A letter confirming all the details agreed to date is sent to each parish, as follows.

Dear Fr John

*Re Deanery Pulpit Swap and Deanery Reconciliation Services
Advent 2003.*

As agreed at the last Deanery Meeting, I have prepared the enclosed list for the pulpit swap on the weekend of 22/23rd November.

You will be presiding and preaching at St. Bridget's, Swinbury. The Mass times are 6pm (Sat); 9.30 and 11am (Sun). It will be helpful to contact Fr Peter at Swinbury before hand on 020 8235 3866 for details of those celebrations.

Fr Brian Castle will be coming to preside/preach in your parish. He will be contacting you shortly about this.

Your parish reconciliation Service at Sacred Heart is at 8pm on Friday 12th December.

The details of the other services are as follows:

<i>Oak Lane</i>	<i>St Matthew's</i>	<i>15th December</i>
<i>North Ridge</i>	<i>St Stephen's</i>	<i>16th December</i>
<i>Swinbury</i>	<i>St Bridget's</i>	<i>17th December</i>
<i>South Ridge</i>	<i>St Monica's</i>	<i>18th December</i>
<i>Newbridge</i>	<i>St John's</i>	<i>19th December</i>
<i>Burstone</i>	<i>St Thomas's</i>	<i>22nd December</i>

Fr Mark and I will be visiting all of the parishes taking part in the project on Wednesday 20th August to think about the positioning of Confessors etc. While we would welcome a chat with you your presence is not essential, so don't come back from holiday especially! If your church is usually locked during the day could you please let me know who to contact so as to gain access.

I would be grateful if you would inform your choir/music groups about the service as soon as possible. It would also help if you could give me a contact name and number so that I can give them the music to practice in good time.

Best wishes ...

September A poster has been prepared for display in all parishes which gave the dates and places of each celebration within the deanery.

A leaflet has been prepared for each parish which is to be handed out after mass on the feast of Christ the King and on the two Sundays before the celebration inviting parishioners to attend, and to bring someone else with them to the celebration.

October A text has been prepared to be inserted into parish newsletters the Sunday before, and the Sunday of, the pulpit swap.

Next week we will welcome/*This week we welcome* Fr Mark, parish priest of St Monica's, South Ridge, to celebrate Mass and preach about Penance and Reconciliation in our parish. Fr Denis will be doing/*is doing* the same in South Ridge.

This is in preparation for the Services of Reconciliation with opportunities for individual confession which are being held in each parish in our Deanery during the last weeks of Advent. The service in our parish will be on Monday 22nd December at 8pm. Details of the other services in the Deanery are given on the notice board.

Bishop Paul has written that these services provide an opportunity to 'invite back into our parish communities those who for one reason or another have strayed or drifted away. We must go out to meet them. Then – and how important this is – we must make sure they know they are truly welcomed.'

It is recognised that St John's parish, Newbridge does not have music resources sufficient for their Reconciliation service. After consulting with the music ministers at St Stephen's North Ridge and St Bridget's Swinbury, it is agreed that they will assist with the celebration of Reconciliation on 19th December. It is also agreed that these music ministers will collaborate in running a training course for cantors in the New Year and help start to form a new music group at St John's, ready to go 'live' for Lent 2004.

November Service Booklets have been printed ready for distribution at the Deanery Meeting. Copyright has been straightforward for most parishes, as they already have copyright licence agreements with Decani music which covers all the music being used. One-off arrangements have been made for St John's parish and St Monica's.

Prayer cards have been printed for distribution after all services

Guidelines for the 'pulpit swap' are distributed at the Deanery meeting, as follows:

Texts for Liturgy of the Word

First Reading: Daniel 7.13-14

His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty

Psalm 92:1-2.5 (Response: The Lord is king, with majesty enrobed.)

Second Reading: Apocalypse 1.5-8

Ruler of the kings of the earth... he made us a line of kings, priests to serve his God.

Gospel Acclamation

Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessings on the coming of our father, David!

Gospel: John 18.33-37

It is you who say that I am king.

Things to include in the Homily

1. Date and time of the Reconciliation Service in the parish.
2. Ideas drawn from Bishop Paul's letter – copy included.
3. This Advent is an opportunity for new beginnings, new starts.
4. The objectives of the project are
 - to achieve a renewal of local practices concerning the Rite of Penance
 - to provide fresh catechesis on the sacrament
 - to encourage more parishioners to make regular use of the opportunity to celebrate the sacrament
 - to promote the sense amongst parishioners of belonging not only to a parish but to a deanery.
5. The celebration in the parish offers an opportunity to reach out to those who are baptised but are inactive or lapsed and draw them back into the family of the Church. Include the idea that each person might invite and accompany someone to the celebration. However, this is not a 'one-off' commitment – it might involve supporting and walking alongside that person for some time to come.

It is recognised that had it been thought of earlier the Deanery homilists might have done more work on preparing a homily together, or that the project team might have produced fuller homily notes, perhaps especially drawing out themes from the readings that were pertinent to the topic being preached on.

December The Celebrations take place.

January Time is set aside at the Deanery Meeting for members to reflect on how the project has gone and to make plans for similar services prior to the Triduum 2004.

Appendix A

Alternatives for when the 2nd Form of the Rite is impractical.

Without the cooperation of a number of priests it is virtually impossible to provide a celebration of the second form of the Rite of Penance for the whole parish. If local parish priests are not willing or able to assist with a celebration, sometimes there may be a local community of religious priests that would be willing to make such a celebration possible.

However where there is an obstacle to the celebration being ministered solely from the resources of the Diocese this is a matter that the Ordinary of the Diocese will wish to reflect on.

But if it is impossible to have a whole parish celebration of the Rite of Penance there are two principal alternatives that might be considered.

1. A number of smaller group celebrations of the 2nd Form of the Rite
Examples might be with the families whose children celebrated first sacraments of reconciliation and penance in the last year; or the confirmation candidates; or the weekday Mass community. Where a second or third priest is available all to the good. Where they are not, at least the numbers present are likely to be more manageable.
2. The Rite of Penance also provides for non-sacramental celebrations of Penance. Making use of this option would at least present the parish community with the opportunity of gathering to reflect together on the Lord's call to conversion of heart and life. A parish might usefully hold a number of such celebrations, for example, during the season of Lent. The celebrations may persuade some of those taking part to make use of those other opportunities for individual confession and absolution. For others in the group, not conscious of serious sin or desirous of the sacrament for another reason, such celebrations will in any case promote conversion of life and purification of heart, fostering the spirit and virtue of penance.⁷

Such non-sacramental celebrations have the further advantage of being suitable also for the equal participation of Roman Catholics and members of other churches. They provide a useful opportunity to reflect on the sinfulness of the continued divisions within the Church and to urge repentance and a desire to work for deeper unity between Christians of all traditions.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 72
- ² A more extensive consideration of Reconciliation in the life of the Church is provided in *Thinking about Reconciliation*, published by the Liturgy Office and available for downloading from www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources
- ³ This despite RP 31: Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession.
- ⁴ Most recently the Holy Father emphasised this point in *Misericordia Dei*. The Bishops of England and Wales have recently published Norms.
- ⁵ What is often referred to as ‘Rite’ 2 ½’ developed at least partly in response to the unavailability of ‘General Absolution’ services. ‘Rite’ 2 ½’ combined ‘General Absolution’ with an opportunity for individual confession, but generally members of the assembly were requested to ‘mention only one sin’. This requirement made it impractical for those who were aware of grave sin to meet the requirement of making full and integral confession.. The practice is excluded in the Norms published by the Bishops of England and Wales.
- ⁶ The rubrics of the 3rd edition of the Roman Missal now allows for the use of these prayers on Sundays, including those of Lent and Advent. Concerning preaching on texts from the Mass other than the Lectionary see *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* 65.
- ⁷ RP 37 and Appendix II, 1

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