



ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

NORMS FOR THE PLACE OF CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE WITH MINORS, AND FOR THE CONFIGURATION OF CONFESSIONALS IN CHURCHES AND ORATORIES WITHIN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

Following consultation of the priests of the Archdiocese, and the Council of Priests and College of Consultors the following norms are decreed for the Archdiocese of Sydney:

1. Both liturgical law and Canon Law require that, except for a just cause (legitimate reason), confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional.
2. Contemporary expectations regarding the safeguarding of minors (children aged under 18) require that the confessions of minors should where possible be held in a setting where the child or young person and the confessor are visible to other people, especially their parents or supervising teachers. In the Archdiocese of Sydney this is to be regarded as a just cause (legitimate reason) for hearing the confessions of minors in an open place within the church.
3. If confessions are to be heard in an open place, the privacy of the penitent must still be respected. The open place should not be within the ready hearing of anyone other than the confessor. The use of music may help ensure that a confession is not overheard.
4. As penitents, including children, have a right to retain anonymity from the priest when confessing, when confessions are heard in an open place consideration should be given to providing a free-standing curtain between the penitent and the priest, while always retaining visibility between the penitent and the other people in the church. (Information about obtaining such portable screens can be provided by the Archdiocesan Liturgy Office.)
5. Within the Archdiocese of Sydney, if a minor's confession is to be heard in a confessional in the context of a regularly scheduled Parish celebration of the Sacrament of Penance (as distinct from a celebration especially for children), either the door of the confessional must contain a sufficient amount of clear glass or the minors and supervising adult(s) encouraged to leave the door open so that the child or young person is visible to other people.
6. Within the Archdiocese of Sydney all confessionals are to have a fixed screen between penitent and priest so that physical contact between them is not possible; the fixed screen need not be opaque or impede visibility between priest and penitent, but in that case there is also to be a curtain which the penitent may freely use to preserve anonymity from the priest. There are to be separate entrances for penitent and priest. If access to the confessional for penitents is through a door, that door should be fitted with a window so that the interior of the confessional is visible from outside the confessional.

In the case of celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance intended specifically for minors, these norms are to be observed with immediate effect. In the case of regular Parish confessions not specifically intended for children, all confessionals in churches and oratories in the Archdiocese of Sydney are to conform to this norm by 1 July 2019; the Archdiocesan Liturgy Office should be consulted for assistance in modifying confessionals accordingly.

When preparing a suitable place for hearing the confession of penitents, the following should also be borne in mind:

- The confessional should be clearly visible and readily accessible; it is a visible and permanent sign of God's mercy even when not in use.
- The confessional is a public place for an ecclesial act: it is a space for a sacramental rite and should be designed accordingly.
- The confessional has the character of a sacred place more than an interview or counselling room, while being a welcoming and joyous place where the grace and mercy of God are celebrated.
- The confessional should be well lit, well ventilated and soundproofed rather than dark and closed, and it should be adorned with appropriate sacred art.
- Counselling and spiritual direction might more appropriately be conducted in a different setting.

RATIONALE

It is the earnest desire of the Church of Sydney to renew the practice of the great sacrament of mercy known as Penance, Reconciliation or Confession. As part of this process of renewal and in accord with contemporary 'best practice' regarding the safeguarding of children and young people, these new norms have been prepared regarding the place of celebrating the sacrament with children and the configuration of confessionals.

Informing this process of renewal and new norms are the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* regarding the Sacrament of Penance:

1426 ...the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.

1428 Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This second conversion [after Baptism] is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, "clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification, (and) follows constantly the path of penance and renewal." This endeavour of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a "contrite heart", drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first.

The Sacrament of Penance is a gift from the Lord, in which the baptised "obtain pardon from the mercy of God for the offence committed against Him and are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins, and which by charity, example, and prayer seeks their conversion." (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* no. 11)

By this sacrament, "those who by grave sin have withdrawn from the communion of love with God are called back in the Sacrament of Penance to the life they have lost. And those who through daily weakness fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of Penance to gain the full freedom of the children of God." (*Rite of Penance*, Intro, no. 7)

Therefore an important part of the pastoral mission of the Church, especially in the life of the Parish, is to make the Sacrament of Penance readily available to both adults and children who have reached the use of reason (usually 7 years of age) and have reasonably requested confession (*Code of Canon Law* can. 986) and to help them appreciate the sacrament and approach it willingly and with confidence.

Whether the sacrament is celebrated according to the *Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents*, or according to the *Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution*, it is always necessary for the penitent to make an individual confession of their sins to the priest. For various reasons some people will find it easier to approach the sacrament if they are confident that they can confess with anonymity to the priest. The pastoral experience of many priests suggests it is helpful that adults are aware of the ready availability of anonymity and that children and young adults come to know of it also.

Children and young adults in Catholic schools across the Archdiocese of Sydney will usually experience the Sacrament of Penance in the context of a class group celebration in the Parish Church. Adults in the Parish will generally experience this sacrament in the context of a regularly scheduled time for individual confession. While respecting the different characteristics of each form of celebration of the sacrament, it is also pastorally helpful to celebrate the sacrament with minors in such a way as to help ready them for a future in which they will approach the sacrament outside the context of a school group. It is also important to help adults, who may have been away from the sacrament for some time and who wish return to Confession, to do so as easily and comfortably as possible.

The purpose of these new norms is therefore to respond to contemporary expectations with respect to child protection while also helping to see that the places where confessions are heard are pastorally appropriate for their important sacramental purpose.

Dated this *twelfth* day of *July* 2018.

+ *Anthony Fisher*

Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP
ARCHBISHOP OF SYDNEY

Chris Meney

NOTARY