

**Seven Frequently Asked Questions About
Children and the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

Written for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

by

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Season of Mercy

Lent 2010

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Introductory Note

These questions and answers are intended for teachers, catechists and parents of children in grades 1-8. We hope they lead to further discussion and understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

1. How can we tell if a child is ready to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation?

According to the National Directory for Catechesis (NDC): “readiness 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”.

The NDC further breaks this down into more concrete outcomes of catechesis:

- Children shall be able to acknowledge God’s unconditional love for all
- Children will be able to understand that they can turn to Christ and the Church for sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation
- Children will be able to recognize the presence of good and evil in the world and their personal capacity for both
- Children will be able to recognize their need for forgiveness, not only from parents and others close to them, but from God
- Children will have an understanding of the meaning of the symbols, gestures, prayers and scriptures of the Rite of Reconciliation
- Children will understand how to celebrate the Rite of Reconciliation
- Children will have an understanding 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’

It is important to note that these outcomes are aimed at young children, in about second or third grade. Catechesis is to be ongoing, with the goal of bringing children to a fuller understanding as they develop.

2. I am confused. When I was a child, we called this sacrament Penance. My mother called it Confession. Now, my daughter is preparing for Reconciliation. Which is the correct name for the sacrament?

It can be confusing. In a sense, each name is correct. Which term is used seems to be determined by which part of the rite is emphasized. In fact, the Catechism lists five different names for this sacrament:

“It is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.

It is called the *sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the sinner’s personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance and satisfaction.

It is called the *sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure of sins is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a ‘confession’ – acknowledgment and praise – of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinners.

It is called the *sacrament of forgiveness*, since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent ‘pardon and peace’.

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 and sister’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, nn.1423-1424).

Use of different terms also occurs in the *Rite of Penance*. In the decree at the beginning of the rite book, the Congregation for Divine Worship refers to the Rite of Penance as well as the Rite for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents, a Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents and a Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution (*Rite of Penance*, pg. 8).

The same appears to be the case in catechetical materials. Most textbooks written for children use the term “sacrament of reconciliation” although some prefer to use the term “sacrament of penance”. The Catechism seems to address the issue by referring to the sacrament as the “sacrament of penance and reconciliation” (*CCC*, title of Article 4, n.1422). Even though these different terms can be confusing, they point to the many aspects and richness of the sacrament.

3. What bible stories can I use to explain what Jesus taught about forgiveness and reconciliation?

Here are some of the many stories that can be used:

- The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15: 1 – 7)
- The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11 – 32)
- Jesus Forgives a Sinful Woman (Luke 7: 36 – 50)
- Zacchaeus is Forgiven (Luke 19: 1 – 10)
- The Woman at the Well (John 4: 4 – 42)
- Jesus Gives His Disciples the Authority to Forgive Sins (John 20: 21 – 23)

4. I thought that only those with “mortal sins” were required to go to Confession. Has that rule changed? Many people think that children are not capable of mortal sin. If that is true, why do children have to go?

No, that rule has not changed. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year.” Furthermore, “anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession”(CCC, n.1457) .

You are correct in asserting that many people question if children are capable of “serious” or “mortal” sin. According to the *National Directory for Catechesis*, “the formation of conscience is influenced by many human factors, such as the person’s age, intellectual capacity, psychological capacity, emotional maturity, family experience, and cultural and social conditions” (*National Directory for Catechesis*, pg. 165).

However, this does not mean that children should not participate in the sacrament of reconciliation. Instead, it is important to return to the Catechism for direction. “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the church. Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit” (CCC, n.1458).

The Church believes that “the example of Christ’s life and his teachings are the norm in the formation of conscience. The person’s relationship with Christ, expressed by frequent participation in the sacramental and prayer life of the Church, is the basis for the formation of the Christian moral conscience” (*National Directory for Catechesis*, pg. 165).

5. Is there a way to teach children the 10 Commandments that will make sense to them and their lives?

The following has been used effectively with children in grades one – four. In this activity, the words are changed in order to use language that the children are familiar with. The method incorporates active participation, repetition, novelty and bodily/kinesthetic strategies. Each commandment is tied to a particular hand gesture or symbol. The students stand as they learn each commandment and gesture. All previous commandments are reviewed when a new commandment is mastered. The following is a brief explanation of each symbol/gesture.

1. One finger – **Honor one God**
2. Two fingers crossed in an X – **Do Not Swear**
3. Three fingers – Jesus rose on the Third day – **Go to Church**
4. Four fingers – number of people in average family – **Honor your mother and father**
5. A fist – **Do not Kill**
6. With palms facing in and excluding thumbs, counting from right to left, the sixth finger is the ring finger – **Honor marriage** – Do not commit adultery
7. Forming a seven with the thumb and first finger, this can also look like a gun – **Do not steal**
8. Eight fingers over the lips – **Do not lie** – Bear false witness
9. “Junior Birds men” mask – Do not look with the eyes of envy – **Do not be jealous of your neighbor**
10. Ten fingers shaped like a house – **Do not be jealous of your neighbor’s things.**

6. What are some good resources for children’s Examinations of Conscience?

It is helpful when students are able to examine their consciences using prayers or scripture that they are already familiar with. This not only helps them to feel more comfortable, but it serves the dual purpose of helping students to understand the familiar in a new way. Teachers, catechists and parents are encouraged to pray an examination of conscience with children on a regular basis, not just as preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation.

An Examination of Conscience for Children Using the Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.

How often do I think about God?

How often do I say my prayers?

Do I pay attention and participate at Mass?

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Am I kind to others?

Do I do what Jesus wants me to do?

Do I share with others?

Am I helpful to my family and neighbors?

Do I show respect to my teachers and classmates?

Give us this day our daily bread.

Do I remember to say thank you?

Am I sometimes greedy?

Do I appreciate the good things I have in my life?

Do I think of ways to help those who have no food, clothes, shelter or money?

Do I take things that don't belong to me?

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Do I say I'm sorry when I have been wrong?

Do I forgive and forget when someone does something bad to me?

Do I help solve problems between my friends or do I cause more trouble?

Do I say bad things about people who have hurt me?

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Do I play fairly in sports and games?

Do I cheat in school?

Do I tell the truth?

Do I let other kids tempt me to do things I know I shouldn't do? Do I tempt others?

An Examination of Conscience for Children Using the 10 Commandments

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me.

Have I wanted more things, making things or money more important than God?

Have I made an idol of sports or entertainment figures?

2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Do I use God's name carelessly?

Do I use God's name in anger?

3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Did I attend Mass on Sunday?

Did my behavior make it difficult or impossible for my parents to get to church on time?

Have I remembered to pray daily?

4. Honor your father and your mother.

Do I obey my parents?

Have I done my chores without complaining?

Do I do my chores without being reminded?

Have I been disrespectful to teachers, coaches or others in authority?

5. You shall not kill.

Do I keep my patience or do I lose my temper?

Do I hold grudges and try to get even with others?

Have I been unfair to others, especially those who are different than I am?

6. You shall not commit adultery.

Do I show respect for my body?

Do I respect the bodies of others?

Do I avoid harmful things like drugs, tobacco and alcohol?

7. You shall not steal.

Have I taken something that belongs to someone else?

Have I "forgotten" to return something that I borrowed?

Have I used money responsibly?

8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Do I play fairly or do I ever cheat at school or games?

Have I been honest or have I lied?

Have I hurt someone by what I have said or done?

Have I copied someone else's homework?

9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

Have I been jealous of the friends that someone else has?

Have I tried to be kind to others?

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Have I been jealous of the things that my friends have?

Have I nagged my parents into buying things because my friends have them?

Have I helped others when they needed help?

An Examination of Conscience for Children Using the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 3 – 11)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Am I thankful for all that I have?

Do I thank God for all that I have been given?

Do I have more than I need? Do I share my abundance?

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Do I reach out to those who are sad or do I ignore them?

Do I share my sadness with others and especially with God?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Am I gentle or am I sometimes pushy or bossy?

Am I a bully?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Do I stand up for those who are being bullied and do I ignore the situation?

Do I follow the teachings of Jesus and the Church?

Do I practice the works of mercy?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Do I freely share with others?

Do I befriend those who are left out or lonely?

Am I forgiving or do I hold a grudge?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Do I put God at the center of my decisions and life?

Do I think anyone or anything is more important than God?

Do I live my life according to the teachings of Jesus and the Church?

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons and daughters of God.

Do I value everyone as a child of God?

Do I try to get along with everyone, especially family, neighbors and classmates?

Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Do I follow the teachings of Jesus and the Church, even if my friends disagree?

Do I remember that Jesus suffered and died for my sake and the sake of others?

7. Speaking of resources, I would like to update my methods for teaching about the sacrament of Reconciliation, but our budget is really tight this year. Do you have any suggestions that are free or very inexpensive?

One suggestion would be to try the websites offered by the major Catholic textbook publishers. They often offer free resources. Start with the series that you use, but take a look at some of the others too. Most scope and sequences are similar enough that activities can be easily adapted. Here are a few worth exploring:

www.loyolapress.com/games-for-christ-our-life Stump the Shepherd Grades 1 – 6
www.faithfirst.com kids only club games Grades 4 – 6
www.blestarewe.com/index.html catechist resources interactive chapter reviews
www.webelieveweb.com

Another suggestion is to hold a “Reconciliation Share Shop”. A share shop is an opportunity for teachers and/or catechists to share their favorite lessons with others. You could organize a share shop within your own parish, cluster or district. Everyone comes with instructions for their favorite activity or lesson and leaves with lots of new ideas that have already been tested in the field.

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