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The *Rite of Penance* notes that a communal celebration of the sacrament portrays its ecclesial nature.

Liturgy for Rite of Penance Celebrates God's Compassion

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At the heart of the Church's life is mercy. The Body of Christ makes God known in the world through compassionate acts. As the Church reaches out to people, she heals the broken as Jesus did in his ministry. More than five years ago, when Pope Francis declared the Extraordinary Year of Mercy, he spoke of how mercy is to permeate the Church.

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. (*Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy* [MV], 10)

The *Rite of Penance*, one of the Church's liturgical treasures, manifests this tenderness and expresses God's mercy and compassionate love. Since the promulgation of the rite in 1975, its communal nature has been, in many cases, deemphasized if not ignored. If one were to check parish liturgical schedules, in most cases, regular opportunities for individual confessions would be found. Except for gatherings of religious formation

classes or Catholic school students, use of the second form detailed in the *Rite of Penance*, seems to be the exception, rather than the rule. Many Catholics would undoubtedly be unaware that the rite offers three forms, or ways of celebrating, the sacrament: the Rite of Reconciliation of Individual Penitents (first form), the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution (second form), and the Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with General Confession and Absolution (third form). In practice, the first form seems to be the one used most frequently in parochial settings while the second form seems to be used more sparingly, despite its emphasis on a communal liturgical experience. The third form was intended for use in more limited circumstances, and therefore is not used regularly.

THE ECCLESIAL NATURE OF PENANCE

Since "communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance,"¹ it is very appropriate for parishes to regularly celebrate the second form, particularly during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, even though it also can be celebrated any time of the year.² The second form could be used during parish missions or retreats or when young people celebrate the Sacrament of Penance as part of their faith formation or youth ministry experience. Sometimes, the title "communal

penance service” has been used to describe this type of celebration. However, use of this somewhat ambiguous title has led to confusion among those who might think that the confession of their sins will happen in a public forum or that absolution will be given to everyone at once, as is done in the third form. The full title of the second form, Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution, clarifies that both confession and absolution will be done individually. The other ritual elements, though, are communal. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council emphasized the communal nature of the rites when they wrote:

It is to be stressed that whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 27)

Advent is both a joyful and penitential season of preparation for the Lord’s coming. While there is a certain sobriety and restraint associated with Advent, and while John the Baptist calls us to repentance, it is not a time of sadness. As the *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* states, “it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight” (39). That joy ought to be infused in all our liturgical celebrations, not just on Gaudete Sunday. Generous use of the *Rite of Penance*, particularly its second form, would emphasize the connection between mercy and joy in the season of Advent.

Lent is also a joyful season, and while it may be characterized as serious, it is not a time for sadness. Preface I of Lent states: “For by your gracious gift each year / your faithful await the sacred paschal feasts / with the joy of minds made pure, / so that, more eagerly intent on prayer / and on the works of charity, / and participating in the mysteries / by which they have been reborn, / they may be led to the fullness of grace / that you bestow on your sons and daughters.” This is quite a contrast to some predisposed notions about Lent that make it seem like a six-week extended passiontide rather than a joyful season of conversion and turning toward the Gospel. Parishes must be sure to include opportunities for prayer that emphasize the two pillars of Lent, both repentance and Baptism. Form II of the Rite of Penance is a wonderful expression of these two pillars as it reminds us that that this sacrament “is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly” (7).

During the communal celebration of the Rite of Penance, the Church gathers in prayer with people blessed with varied gifts who lead, shape, and serve the ritual action. The ministers who exercise leadership throughout the ritual include a presider, a homilist, a number of confessors, a deacon, one or more read-



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The cantor leads the singing of the Responsorial Psalm and Acclamation before the Gospel, and, if it is sung, the Litany of Repentance.

ers, servers, ushers, a sacristan, a cantor, and an organist or other accompanist or instrumentalists. Following general liturgical norms, each minister should only perform the tasks that are designated for the particular ministry to which they are assigned and not perform more than one ministry in any given liturgical service.³ The fullest expression of the liturgy and manifestation of the ecclesial nature of the Church occurs when the bishop presides in his cathedral, surrounded by the priests, deacons, and laity of the diocese who take a full and active part in the celebration. Cathedral parishes ought to model good celebrations of form II of the Rite of Penance.

Undoubtedly, one of the most important ministries of the Rite of Penance is the ministry of the assembly, the baptized members of the Church who exercise their baptismal priesthood when they gather to pray for the forgiveness of their sins. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, “Christ Jesus, High Priest of the new and eternal covenant . . . continues his priestly work through the agency of his Church, which is unceasingly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the whole world” (83). A number of paragraphs later, the Constitution points out the need to pray for sinners: “[I]t is important to impress on the minds of the faithful not only social consequences of sin but also that essence of the virtue of penance which leads to the detestation of sin as an offense against God; the role of the Church in penitential practices is not to be passed over, and the people must be exhorted to pray for sinners.”⁴ Pope Francis emphasized the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the Jubilee of Mercy, directing that the initiative “24 Hours for the Lord” occur in every diocese, sending out missionaries of mercy to hear confessions and telling bishops “to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with their people so that the time of grace made possible by the Jubilee year makes it possible for many of God’s sons and daughters to take up once again the journey to the Father’s house” (MV, 18).

Participants in the Rite of Penance are present both as members of the Body of Christ and as penitents who seek God’s grace in the sacrament by confessing their sins. As they

open their contrite hearts, penitents “con-celebrate in an act of worship that expresses his or her place in the ecclesial community.”⁵ “In this way the faithful, even as they experience and proclaim the mercy of God in their own life, are with the priest celebrating the liturgy of the Church’s continual self-renewal.”⁶

Pope Francis reminds priest confessors of their important role in the Rite of Penance:

I will never tire of insisting that confessors be authentic signs of the Father’s mercy. We do not become good confessors automatically. We become good confessors when, above all, we allow ourselves to be penitents in search of his mercy. Let us never forget that to be confessors means to participate in the very mission of Jesus to be a concrete sign of the constancy of divine love that pardons and saves.⁷



In the second form of the Rite of Penance, the deacon may lead the examination of conscience and preach the homily.

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specifies the parts of the rite where music is needed⁹ and describes the role of the musicians. A cantor ought to be assigned to lead the singing of the Responsorial Psalm and Acclamation before the Gospel, and, if it is sung, the Litany of Repentance. An organist or other instrumentalist would accompany and lead any part of the ritual that is sung.

The liturgical environment for the Rite of Penance is an important consideration. Before and during the celebration, lighting may be subdued to set a reflective tone. Candles lit at the ambo underscore the importance of the proclamation of God’s Word in the ritual. Incense burning in a brazier, perhaps near the Advent wreath, can symbolize the prayers of the Church rising up on behalf of all those confessing their sins. Even the place where confessions will be heard should be considered. “By its design, furnishings, and location within the church building, the place for reconciliation can assist penitents on

the path to contrition and sorrow for sin and to proclaim their reconciliation with God and the community of faith.”¹⁰

THE ARS CELEBRANDI

The presiding priest sets the tone for the Rite of Penance. Whether he is the pastor of the parish, the parochial vicar, or a visitor, he should be carefully prepared for leading the assembly in prayer and have a good sense of the *ars celebrandi*, the art of properly celebrating the rites of the Church. The presider would ordinarily wear an alb or cassock and surplice with a violet stole, although a violet cope could be worn on occasions of greater solemnity. Confessors would ordinarily wear an alb or cassock and surplice with a violet stole.

During the second form of the Rite of Penance, the deacon plays an important role as he proclaims the Gospel. He also may preach the homily, lead the examination of conscience, lead the general formula for confession, and pronounce the dismissal.⁸ The deacon would ordinarily wear an alb or cassock and surplice with a violet stole, although if the presiding priest wears a cope, it would be appropriate for the deacon to wear a violet dalmatic.

One or more readers could be assigned to proclaim the reading(s), to read the examination of conscience and to lead the Litany of Repentance if the deacon is not present or if the cantor is not singing it. Servers may carry incense, candles, and cross in the opening and closing processions and can hold the ritual book or liturgical binder for the presider during the Collect and other orations. If it is the custom that servers vest in albs for Sunday Mass, then they should vest similarly for the Rite of Penance. The possibility of penitents coming from other parishes underscores the need to have ushers, greeters, or ministers of hospitality available, not only to hand out worship aids, but also to make guests feel welcome and at ease in an unfamiliar space.

Music has an important role in the celebration of the second form of the Rite of Penance, as it does in all communal liturgical celebrations. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*

ORDER OF SERVICE

Outline of the Rite

- Introductory Rites
- Song
- Greeting
- Opening Prayer
- Celebration of the Word of God
(number of readings may vary)
- First Reading
- Responsorial Psalm
- Second Reading
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel
- Homily
- Examination of Conscience
- Rite of Reconciliation
- General Confession of Sins
- Our Father
- Individual Confession and Absolution
- Proclamation of Praise for God’s Mercy
- Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving
- Concluding Rite
- Solemn Blessing
- Dismissal

The Introductory Rites allow the assembly to gather and, while rather brief, set the tone for the liturgy. “When the faithful have assembled,”¹¹ a suitable song may be sung. The song may be seasonal in nature, particularly during Advent or Lent, or with a

general theme of reconciliation or mercy. The rite does not mention nor describe an entrance procession, but it is appropriate to include one. For the sake of simplicity, the presiding priest alone or the presider and preacher can take part in the entrance procession while the other priest confessors take their seats in advance either in the sanctuary or in a reserved section of the church. Or the ministers make take their places before the celebration begins without any procession.

The ritual includes a greeting. Note that the current edition of the *Rite of Penance* was promulgated long before the third edition of *The Roman Missal*. The dialogues between the presider and the assembly during the ritual should use the wording of the Missal—that is, “and with your spirit” rather than “and also with you.” After the greeting, the presider or deacon may make introductory comments.

Each of the three options for the Opening Prayer or Collect emphasizes a different aspect of God’s mercy. The Collect ends with the usual Trinitarian conclusion.

The Celebration of the Word of God is arranged similarly to the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass. One or more Scripture passages may be read; however, if only one passage is read, preference would be for it to be the Gospel. The rite offers several options for Scriptures both within the rite itself and also in chapter 4. If more than one reading will be proclaimed, a Responsorial Psalm should be sung or a period of silence should follow the First Reading. If the *Book of the Gospels* was carried in the entrance procession and placed on the altar, it could be carried in procession with candles and incense to the ambo. Note that the *Book of the Gospels* only contains the Gospels for Sundays and solemnities. If the presider or homilist has chosen a Gospel that is not included in the Book of the Gospels, a copy of the text can be carefully affixed inside the book. Be careful to make sure the page cannot be seen and that it does not fall out during the procession.

The *Rite of Penance* envisions both a homily and an examination of conscience; however, it also allows an examination of conscience to take the place of a homily. The decision to omit the homily should not be based solely on the desire to shorten the service. The homily “should lead the penitents to examine their consciences and to turn away from sin and toward God.”¹² It need not be a lengthy exhortation but rather can be an opportunity to connect the Scriptures with the lives of the people gathered.

The rite does not elaborate on how the examination of conscience takes place. The deacon or other minister could read some brief statements or lead the examination in the form of a litany found in the rite itself or in appendix 3. If the examination of conscience is printed in the worship aid, the assembly can be asked to reflect on it in silence.

The General Confession of Sins begins the Rite of Reconciliation. After an invitation from the deacon or other minister to kneel or bow their heads, the assembly prays the Confiteor or one of the other two forms of the Penitential Act from Mass. “Then they stand, if this seems useful, and join in a litany or suitable song to express confession of sins, heartfelt contrition, prayer for forgiveness, and trust in God’s mercy.”¹³ This litany, which proclaims God’s mercy, is led by the deacon, cantor, or other suitable minister. The entire litany could be sung



A communal penance service can be a way for people to find their way back to the Church.

or just the response. The format of this litany is similar to the Universal Prayer at Mass.

The Lord’s Prayer, without the embolism (“Deliver us, Lord, . . .”) and doxology (For the Kingdom . . .) is sung or said by all, followed by a concluding prayer by the priest.

At this point, stations for confessors should be announced by the presider, or deacon, unless they are noted in the worship aid. Priests might stand or sit in isolated areas around the main body of the church to receive penitents, or they might use the confessionals. The penitents now approach the confessors for individual confession. After suitable counsel and the giving of a penance, the confessor absolves the penitent with the words of absolution as he extends his hands or at least his right hand over the penitent’s head. “Singing or soft instrumental music may be used during the time of individual confessions, especially when a large number of people is present for the celebration.”¹⁴ It may also be beneficial for there to be silence during the individual confessions and absolution.

When the individual confessions are over, the entire assembly stands to offer a Proclamation of Praise for God’s Mercy and Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving. The rite suggests either Psalm 136 or the Canticle of Mary from Luke 1:46–55. The latter would be particularly appropriate during Advent. If another hymn is chosen, it should reflect a spirit of joy and thanksgiving for God’s great mercy.

The Concluding Prayer is followed by a three-part blessing. The assembly responds “Amen” after each invocation, similar to the way they respond to the Solemn Blessing that often occurs at Mass. There is also something to be said for concluding the ritual with the words of the dismissal: “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.”¹⁵ If the deacon assists, he announces the dismissal, but the ritual allows another minister to do it if there is no deacon. Instrumental music could mark the end of the liturgy; however, during Lent the organ and other instruments are only used to support the singing, except on Gaudete Sunday and the Solemnities of St. Joseph and the Annunciation. The ritual does not call for a closing hymn, although one may be sung since it is customary for most parishes to sing a hymn at the end of Mass even though the rubrics do not require it.

PREPARING A LITURGY THAT WELCOMES AND EVANGELIZES

Twice each year, before Advent and again before Lent, the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions publishes a Liturgy Preparation Aid that includes a full presider text for a Rite of Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution along with suggested readings and music and sample examinations of conscience and penances. This resource, available in English and in Spanish, is an invaluable tool for presiders, musicians, and anyone involved in the preparation of the *Rite of Penance*. Most Catholic hymnals also include a sample penance service. The appendix in the back of the hymnals lists appropriate music.

Some people are inclined to attend a penance service in a neighboring parish where the priest confessors may not know or recognize them. With this in mind, it would be beneficial for parishes within a deanery or region to work together to schedule and publicize penance services, not only for the benefit of those attending but also for the benefit of parishes with only one or two priests in residence. Especially during the seasons of Advent and Lent, the diocese can help publicize these services.

Since the *Rite of Penance* has unique ritual moments with special musical acclamations and responses, a prepared worship aid would greatly facilitate assembly participation and assist in liturgical catechesis, not only for the regular members of the parish in which the rituals take place but for guests. Providing a worship aid is a gesture of hospitality, welcome, and evangelizing catechesis. Parishes and musicians have an ethical and moral responsibility to respect copyright laws when reprinting texts and music in worship aids. There are no hard and fast rules about how worship aids are to be created nor what they should contain; however, pastoral practice suggests that the following items could be included:

- headings for each of the ritual moments and a general outline of the rite
- any directions that are needed
- a one-line synopsis or summary of the reading
- musical acclamations and responses belonging to the people, particularly if they are not found in the parish's hymnal
- all the music, if possible, to eliminate the need for announcements
- clip art or graphics carefully placed to draw attention to the various ritual moments
- copyright acknowledgments and license number(s)
- the names of the presider and homilist
- liturgical catechesis or summaries
- translations of texts if multiple languages will be used

It is not necessary to include the full texts of the readings unless the readings will be proclaimed in another language. It is also not necessary to include prayers that the presider alone sings or recites. Worship aids are tools to help the assembly par-

ticipate fully in the ritual and, as such, are not scripts and do not need to include every word of the liturgy.

If your parish does not utilize form 2 of the Rite of Penance, perhaps this Advent is the time to consider it. Hearing John the Baptist's call to repentance might just be the impetus for an inactive Catholic to prepare the way of the Lord by reconciling with God and the Church. A prayerful and beautiful celebration of this sacramental and liturgical act becomes a graced moment of evangelization. With such evangelization, Pope Francis' words will resonate in parishes:

So many people, including young people, are returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation; through this experience they are rediscovering a path back to the Lord, living a moment of intense prayer and finding meaning in their lives. Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the center once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace.¹⁶

Notes

1. *Rite of Penance* (RP), 22.
2. RP, 13.
3. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (CSL), 28.
4. CSL, 109b.
5. J. Philip Horrigan, *Guide for Celebrating Reconciliation*. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2018), 33.
6. RP, 11.
7. MV, 17.
8. RP, 53, 54, 59.
9. *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (STL), 229.
10. *Built of Living Stones*, 104.
11. RP, 48.
12. RP, 25.
13. RP, 27.
14. STL, 229.
15. RP, 59.
16. MV, 17.

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