



Q What can my child understand about sin and reconciliation at this young age?

A The Church prepares and welcomes children to First Penance and First Communion when they reach the age of reason. The Church teaches that at this age children can tell right from wrong and commit serious sin. Primary children are beginning to understand cause and effect, to be able to foresee and weigh the consequences of their actions, and to accept responsibility for their actions.

Primary-grade children are at just the right age to open themselves to what Jesus asks of his followers in the Sermon on the Mount—turn the other cheek, don't go to church angry, go the extra mile. They are at the right age to begin learning the commandments that make us God's people.

The Ten Commandments put us in relationship with God, who leads and loves us and who deserves our worship and thanks. The commandments call us to become people who respect each other's lives, reputations, marriages, and property. *Together in Jesus* stresses not only Jesus' call to holiness and God's

Questions Parents Ask About First Reconciliation



commandments, but God's forgiving love and Jesus' Gift of the Holy Spirit, which calls us to become a community of forgiving peacemakers. This program explores six themes that help young Catholics recognize that as members of the Church:

- I belong to a loving community (Lesson 1)
- We keep the Ten Commandments (Lesson 2)
- We can act like Jesus (Lesson 3)
- Jesus teaches us to forgive (Lesson 4)
- Jesus gives his followers the Holy Spirit (Lesson 5)
- We celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Lesson 6)



Q What is my part in preparing my child for First Reconciliation?

A Both the family and the parish have important roles in preparing children for First Reconciliation. Parishes expect parents to do all they can to connect their child's understanding of following Jesus' teachings with keeping family rules.

For example, children need to understand that doing their chores is a way of keeping the Fourth Commandment to honor parents. Not going to bed angry is a family rule that flows from Jesus' teaching in his Sermon on the Mount about not going to the Temple to worship without first making up with an angry friend.

Parents can also help their children by modeling a willingness to say "I'm sorry." They can acknowledge when they are wrong or misread a situation among their children. They can help their children develop practical peacemaking skills at home.

Parents can also help their children learn the Act of Contrition and the Lord's Prayer.

Q What help does *Together in Jesus* give me in my role as parent of a child preparing for First Reconciliation?

A *Together in Jesus* provides three sources of support and involvement for parents. This special parent handout answers questions parents frequently ask and seeks to update them on the theology of Reconciliation.

Second, *Together in Jesus* provides a special poster to display at home on your refrigerator or elsewhere and use as a focal point for family involvement in your child's First Reconciliation preparation. This poster features a parent/child activity for each of the six First Reconciliation lessons.

"Parent Notes" on the poster make additional suggestions about activities parents and their children can do together as part of the child's preparation. These notes integrate parent involvement with the children's lessons.

Third, the *Teaching Guide* contains short prayer celebrations on the reconciliation themes of each lesson in the *Together in Jesus* program. Parents can use these short prayer services at home during the weeks their children are preparing to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Q Is my child required to celebrate First Reconciliation before celebrating First Eucharist?

A The Church requires children to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving First Eucharist. Parishes prepare and celebrate this sacrament with children a significant length of time before they prepare children for First Eucharist, so children do not receive the impression they must go to Confession before they go to Communion each time.

Church law commands us to lead a sacramental life, to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. Church law requires Catholics to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation at least once a year minimally, although confession is obligatory only if serious sin is involved (See Appendix B, *Sharing the Light of Faith*, National Catechetical Directory).

Q Why should I prepare my child for Reconciliation?

A Your child is coming to the age when parishes prepare children for First Reconciliation offers parents a chance to update your own understanding of the sacrament. We recognize that every Eucharist includes penitential prayers. We begin

with a Penitential Rite in which we ask forgiveness and mercy for our sins. Every Gospel challenges us to deeper conversion. We also pray the *Our Father* at every Eucharist, asking to be forgiven our trespasses as we forgive others. We offer each other signs of peace before we receive Communion. However, only in sacramental confession is one ordinarily absolved from mortal or serious sins.



In the very early centuries of the Church, people regarded the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a second Baptism and received it only once in their lifetime. To receive the sacrament, people became public penitents for a period of time. Usually they did this only in the case of grave sin such as murder or adultery. Just as the waters of Baptism cleansed the Christian of original sin, so the tears of repentance washed away all personal sin. The practice of frequent confession grew in the Middle Ages to give people more help in transforming their lives.

Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) helps us to form our consciences, fight against temptations, be healed by Christ, and make progress in living as a follower of Christ (CCC, 1458).



What will my child learn about right and wrong from *Together in Jesus*?



Together in Jesus works at helping young children distinguish loving from unloving actions. The program teaches the children the Ten Commandments God gave to Israel and Jesus' teachings in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5—6. *Together in Jesus* provides an examination of conscience for children at the end of both lessons 2 and 3. After studying the commandments in lesson 2, the children ask, "Do I keep God's commandments?" The questions are put concretely and positively in children's terms.

1. Do I try to love God with my whole heart?
2. Do I use God's name for praying and not swear God's name for fun or in anger?
3. Do I worship God at Mass on Sunday?
4. Do I show respect for my parents and other adults who take care of me?
5. Have I been mean to anyone?
6. Have I done anything to hurt my own or someone else's body?
7. Have I taken or destroyed things that belong to others?
8. Do I tell the truth?
9. Have I been jealous of what others have?
10. Have I been jealous of another person's family or lifestyle?

After exploring Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in lesson 3, the children ask themselves, "Do I act like Jesus?" These questions, too, concretely and positively express in children's terms what Jesus asks.

1. Do I share with others?
2. Do I help when people ask me?
3. Do I forgive instead of trying to get even?
4. Do I ask lonely children to play?
5. Do I keep promises?
6. Do I treat other children fairly?
7. Do I obey my parents?
8. Do I treat other children with respect?

Children who complete the *Together in Jesus* First Penance program will not be finished learning right from wrong, but they will have heard the basic commandments of the New and Old Law in words they can understand. Instruction as children grow up includes a continuing call to conversion and learning of right and wrong appropriate to their age level.



Why do we call Confession Reconciliation?



Confessing our sins is only one of the four main actions in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The other three include sorrow for our sins, doing penance to make up for our wrongs and to make peace with those we have hurt, and absolution.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is another name for the Sacrament of Penance because the sacrament "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" (CCC, 1424).

The practice of calling this mystery the Sacrament of Reconciliation expresses the whole purpose of the Sacrament. It aims not only to forgive and take away sin but to heal our relations with God and with one another.



How is the Sacrament of Reconciliation celebrated?



Vatican II directed many changes in the rites of the sacraments. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is usually celebrated in one of two forms. In addition to private confession, there are also communal services with common prayer before individual confession.

Q Why is there an option for a communal celebration of the Sacrament of Penance?

A Communal celebrations of the sacrament express the reality that all Christians sin and need to open their hearts to conversion. At these services the Church calls us to stand together and hear the word of God in which is reechoed our basic Christian call to be holy as God is holy, to be forgiving as God forgives us, to be peacemakers as Jesus called us to be. The Holy Spirit, Jesus' gift to his followers on Easter evening, works in each of us and in all of us together to teach us ways of making peace.

At a communal celebration, a priest can develop a homily on the Scriptures that calls many people at once to conversion. We can recite a litany of sins together that acknowledges that many of our failures to love are the same and are part of our daily interaction with one another. In a communal setting, Catholics also confess serious, personal sins to a priest in private.

Parishes usually hold communal reconciliation services during Advent and Lent and enhance the celebrations with music and symbols of repentance. Communal celebrations tend to have great power to affect our hearts and renew our commitment to transformation in Christ.

Q Can my child understand what a mortal sin is?

A Once children reach the age of reason, they are capable of grave sin. Children clearly need to know the grave sins the Ten Commandments forbid. However, primary children are not always capable of the full knowledge, consent, and intent that constitutes a grave mortal sin.

Children will need help distinguishing between accidents and actions they intend as well as between serious or mortal sin and venial sin. Primary children's concrete thinking ability limits their ability to foresee consequences and put themselves in others' shoes.

Baptism calls all Christians to lifelong conversion, of which preparing for First Reconciliation is an initial step. The *Catechism* teaches that "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" (CCC, 1457).

Q What impact will *Together in Jesus* have on my child?

A The program aims to help children appreciate that God, who gifts them with life, loves them and lavishly forgives their mistakes and sins. The program presents Reconciliation as a sacrament that calls our priests to

continue Jesus' healing and forgiving ministry among us and our Church to be a peacemaking, reconciling community.

Q What if my child doesn't want to participate in First Reconciliation?

A In preparing children for this Sacrament of Healing, parents and catechists must pay attention to a child's own desires and feelings. Parents should talk over the plans with their children and alert the catechist if their child needs some special assurance or information.

Encourage your child to take part in preparation with the other children, so they know how to receive the sacrament. First Reconciliation programs make reconciliation services celebrations of God's love for the children. In all likelihood, your child's experience will be positive.

However, if your child still doesn't wish to receive First Reconciliation, accept his or her wishes for now. Talk with your pastor or parish director of faith formation about options for your child. Perhaps he or she can join in the program at a later date.

