

First Reconciliation

Session 3

Goals and Objectives for Session Three

The goal of Session three is to enable the children to become aware of and experience the importance of penance and reconciliation in their lives as Catholic Christians according to their age and ability.

The objectives for this session include:

- Understanding that penance is in relationship to contrition and confession
- Understanding why “actions” (penance) are as important as “words” (act of contrition)
- Seeing how penance leads us to change our lives
- Relating our understanding of penance to the living word of God
- Experiencing conversion in our lives.

Penance

Have you ever wondered why “saying” or “doing” a penance is so important when we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation? After all, we have already expressed sorrow for our sins through our act of contrition. What then is the purpose of “receiving” and “doing” a penance?

What Does the Church Teach?

The major focus of reconciliation is conversion. Through our awareness of God’s love for us, which leads us to name (confess) our sins, we are brought to a new way of living. We have been changed. Forgiveness of sins is intimately linked with a new way of living. It means that we will try to change our actions. This is how we express our “conversion.”

We “ritually” express this aspect of conversion through penance. The Rite of Penance states:

True conversion is completed by expiation for sins committed, by amendment of life, and also by rectifying injuries done. The kinds and extent of the expiation must be suited to the personal condition of penitents so that they may restore the order that they have upset and through the corresponding remedy be cured of the sickness from which they suffered. Therefore, it is necessary that the act of penance really be a remedy for sin and a help to renewal of life. Thus penitents, “forgetting the things that are behind” (Philippians 3:13) again become part of the mystery of salvation and press on toward the things that are to come. (Rite of Penance, 6)

What does this paragraph tell us about the purpose of penance? First, it proclaims that the whole goal of the sacrament of reconciliation is conversion. We celebrate the sacrament because it really enables us to change our lives. When we speak of “conversion” for those of us who have already been baptized, we mean that we experience a “change of heart.” Reconciliation calls us to change our hearts; to act differently as children of God. In fact, in the sacrament we believe that we become a new person! When we celebrate the Eucharist and are nourished on the body and blood of Christ, we receive more strength to continue in this new way of life.

Second, to experience true conversion it is not just sufficient to say, “I’m sorry” (contrition). We must also show by our actions that we have truly changed. Receiving a penance in the sacrament of reconciliation is the way we show by our actions that we try to make up for the sins we have committed. We show by doing that we are a changed person. It is the way we “ritually” express that we will change our lives. This ritual expression, however, must overflow into our daily living. We must show by our daily actions that we are a “changed” person, that our lives have been renewed!

Third, the penance we are given in the sacrament should “correspond” to the sin(s) we have committed. By our sin(s) we have upset the order of things. We have upset our relationship with God, others, and the Church. By doing our penance, this order is restored. Penance is a remedy for the sin(s) we have committed.

Thus, the penance we receive should be “authentic.” For some it may be praying certain prayers. Many times we have become so accustomed to praying “Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys” that we forget that these prayers are to lead us to a new way of living. In the sacrament we may receive a penance that directly corresponds to our sinful actions. For example, if we have failed against charity, our penance may be to do three deliberate acts of love/kindness each day for a week. For serious sins, our penance may be to avoid these actions and never do them again.

Through the act of penance we experience true conversion. We change our actions. We are helped to renew our lives. And as the paragraph above states we “again become part of the mystery of salvation and press on toward the things that are to come.”

(Source: Linda Gaupin, Embracing the Vision: Sacramental Catechesis for First Reconciliation and First Communion)