

8. Celebrating the mercy of God: the place of Reconciliation [from Consecrated for Worship]

245 *Where sin has divided and scattered,
may your love make one again;
where sin had brought weakness,
may your power heal and strengthen;
where sin has brought death,
may your Spirit raise to new life*

Rite of Penance (RP), chapter 4, Opening Prayer no.6 (99)

246 *In the sacrament of Penance the faithful 'obtain from the mercy of God pardon from their sins against him; at the same time they are reconciled with the Church which they wounded by their sins and which works for their conversion by charity, example and prayer'.*

RP, Introduction, no.4

247 *Communal celebration shows more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance.*

RP, Introduction, no.22

Principles

248 In every church there should be a particular place designated for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance. This may be a separate reconciliation chapel or room or a more traditional confessional but this should be in an area which is open and visible [*Misericordia Dei* 28]. As well as individual confession and reconciliation according to Rite 1, the Church commends communal services of penance and reconciliation following Rite 2, especially during Advent and Lent. Such communal celebrations take place in the main body of the church with suitable spaces identified for individual confessions which should also be in visible areas but without the possibility of confessions being overheard. At least one of these spaces should give penitents an alternative to celebrating the sacrament other than face-to-face with the priest (see below). In addition, the requirements of the Review on Child Protection (Nolan Report) should be put into practice.

249 The Rite of Penance may be celebrated either face-to-face or with the penitent separated from the confessor by a curtain or grille. A proper reconciliation room or other space should be established for the celebration of the sacrament of penance which is suitable for both these options. The Nolan Report recommends that the setting for reconciliation of children should be in a place where both priest and child may be seen but not heard (Nolan 3.3.9 and Recommendation 25), and this arrangement is probably suitable for other penitents also. Access should be open to all, including those in wheelchairs and with hearing difficulties. The ancient option of celebrating this sacrament at the presider's chair might also be considered. Other possible solutions include:

- glass panels in the doors, or a window through which the priest and penitent may be seen (this is also useful for a parent who has to leave children outside)
- the provision of more than one door, so that neither priest nor penitent may be trapped inside

- the provision of a ‘panic button’ so that help may be summoned if necessary.
- 250 **Safety and security are both important considerations.** Those who celebrate the sacrament should be protected from allegations and even physical attacks; both priests and people can feel and sometimes are acutely vulnerable in this one-to-one situation. The arrangements should enable the rite to be celebrated in safety and integrity by both priest and penitent.
- 251 The reconciliation chapel is an important place for the Christian’s encounter with Christ. As a liturgical space, it should express what it means to encounter the mercy and love of God, to be reconciled with the community of the church even when not in use. It should be clearly visible within the church, although its location may be to some extent dictated by the architecture of an existing building.
- 252 Penitents are reconciled with the Church as well as with God; a way of encouraging people to make links between reconciliation and their life in the Church, may be to locate the reconciliation room close to the font (or vice versa), thus associating reconciliation with the baptismal water through which sins are also forgiven. Another option might be to make some spatial link between the reconciliation room and the altar table; a return to the Church’s primary celebration, the Eucharist.

Practicalities

- 253 When a penitent enters the reconciliation chapel he or she should not be faced with the priest at once; the choice of celebration belongs to the penitent. For face-to-face, there should be chairs for priest and penitent, a suitable distance apart, so that the priest can extend his hands over the head of the penitent (RP 19), but not so close that either feels in any way uneasy. It should be possible for the penitent to sit or kneel and to rise afterwards. A grille or curtain arrangement should also be provided with a kneeler or chair.
- 254 Other things to consider include:
- provision for the Scriptures to be read during the rite
 - soundproofing: a reconciliation chapel should be soundproofed for confidentiality; carpet will also contribute to the absorption of sound
 - the visibility of priest and penitent. Priest and penitent should, preferably, be positioned at right angles to the viewing window or door to prevent inadvertent lip-reading or embarrassing eye-contact with those outside.
 - easy access and provision for people with disabilities
 - the provision of natural light, if possible;
 - the conversion of a side chapel into a reconciliation room with existing or new stained glass might be considered
 - the use of good quality furnishings in natural materials, which give dignity and importance to the rite
 - suitable art: a crucifix or an icon, not set up as a shrine or altarpiece but as a focus for prayer or reflection
 - adequate ventilation and heating
 - an indicator of whether or not a penitent is with the priest; and a name board to identify the priest

- The reconciliation chapel should not be used for other things, such as storage.
- Where traditional confessionals are fine example of design and craftsmanship, their adaptation if needed will require particular care. In all such cases, the advice of the Diocesan Art and Architecture Committee should be sought, and in the case of listed churches a faculty must also be obtained from the Diocesan Historic Churches Committee.

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Celebrating the Mercy of God from *Consecrated for Worship* © 2003 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. *Consecrated for Worship — a Directory on Church Buildings* is being prepared for publication, This extract is included as one series of resources supporting the *Rite of Penance* prepared by the Liturgy Office.
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