



# First Reconciliation for Seven Year Olds? Definitely!

by Christopher Weber

Delaying  
reception  
of the  
sacrament  
does no  
favors for  
anyone.

"It is too scary for them to do right now."

"They don't know what sin is."

"They don't know what a sacrament is."

"They simply aren't ready at this age."

These are four reasons that I have heard for delaying the celebration of First Reconciliation. With a recent reiteration

of the longstanding Archdiocesan policy, questions and concerns about the practice have surfaced. Apart from what the regulations demand (which is best addressed by reading the regulations themselves), I would like to offer some very concrete reasons why we as Church must maintain this practice of celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation with young children.

## **"It is too scary for them."**

I believe that this objection is rooted in the "baggage" that some of us adults carry from our own experiences of First Penance. There is, on the whole, no reason why celebrating the sacrament has to be a scary experience. Certainly, young people will get anxious about confessing their sins to the priest. However, I would argue that any anxiety over the experience has the potential of multiplying and growing

as the child gets older. The longer you delay the first celebration, the longer a child who is developing more sophisticated thinking processes will brood over it! There is much that catechetical leaders can do to ease anxiety over the first celebration of reconciliation. Many hold rehearsals which include a walk through the rite of the sacrament, perhaps even a role play by "actors". When I was a DRE, the celebration itself was always festive and joyful, including fun and refreshments afterwards. More times than not, kids found that "it wasn't that bad", or that "Father was nice", and the actual experience was reassuring and peaceful.

## **"They don't know what sin is."**

This assertion doesn't make any sense to me! Now, it is true that a seven year old will often need help distinguishing between a sin and a



mistake. They also usually don't have any heavy duty sins to confess. What better time to celebrate the sacrament? They might not have all of their distinctions clear, but they DO have a sense of what is right and what is wrong. Assuming that these kids actually have reached the age of discretion, they know when they have done something wrong deliberately. Even if the finer distinctions are blurry, this is enough to bring to Reconciliation.

For goodness' sake, let's celebrate the sacrament when kids are experiencing the "lighter" side of sin! What better time to reassure them that, no matter what, God forgives them and calls them back into relationship? A great celebration now may perhaps help them to come forward later when they are burdened by the struggles of adolescence and adulthood.

**"They don't know what a sacrament is."**  
Who among us has plumbed the depths of the sacraments, and has a profound understanding of how they work, what they mean, and how God is present to us through them? In the sacraments, we ultimately encounter, not a concept or idea, but our mysterious God, pouring self out to us. What we must understand about the sacraments is that they are, ultimately, God's gifts to us.

The Archdiocesan guidelines for Reconciliation outline various criteria for readiness to receive the sacrament, and they include some knowledge of the sacramental rites. However, they do not demand that the candidate be a sacramental rocket scientist! Let's take these criteria seriously.

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Any of the objections mentioned here may indeed be true for an individual child. However, I would argue that most seven year olds are ready. For the celebration of this sacrament, we must defer to Canon Law. I strongly believe that if your child has reached the age of discretion, he or she is ready to receive the Sacrament of Penance, barring some significant circumstance in his/her life that would warrant a delay.

Parents are, of course, the key players in discerning these circumstances, and must carefully consider the criteria for readiness. There is no substitute for that part of the process.

### **A New Way of Thinking?**

For years, Catholic adults have regarded the Sacrament of Reconciliation with wariness and dread. What can we do to change this perspective? What can parish leaders do to present this sacrament to candidates not as an obligation, but as a gift of grace from God? How can we as parents make forgiveness and reconciliation a more natural part of our lives?

I suggest that we leave our own baggage at the door, and start with the presumption that our youngsters **are** ready to partake of this gift of God's love. Let's remember that God is eager to share this gift with them!

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