

Sacrament of Reconciliation

Session Focus

This session focuses on the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. It explores what we say yes to, what we say Amen to, as we celebrate this sacrament individually or communally. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our soul and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick” (1421). Participants will look at this sacrament as a celebration of God’s forgiveness and an opportunity for conversion as they explore the Rite.

Learning Objectives

This session on Reconciliation guides learners of all ages to:

- comprehend reconciliation as a celebration of God’s forgiveness and a reunion with both God and the community
- value and appreciate the power of the sacrament in their own lives
- experience contrition and change of heart in their lives as they strive to live in love for God and others

Session Overview

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| Part 1. (10-15 minutes) | Gathering and Opening Prayer Service |
| Part 2. (20 minutes) | All Ages Learning Experience: God’s Forgiveness |
| Part 3. (80-90 minutes) | In Depth Learning Experience: Sacraments of Reconciliation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.• Option 2. Age Groups Format: Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults. |
| Part 4. (20-25 minutes) | Sharing Learning Experiences |
| Part 5. (10 minutes) | Closing Prayer Service |

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of catechists who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leader catechists to have one catechist work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing as the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for This Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, catechists and small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators and catechists to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while catechist move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service – copies for the leader and readers
- Large paper heart for each participant
- Pens and markers at each table
- Scissors and tape at each table
- Bible

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Handouts
- Pens for all participants

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- Supplies for learning activities (see activity descriptions to ascertain which supplies are needed for each activity)

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service—copy for the leader and musicians
- Bible

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering and Opening Prayer (10-15 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare a newsprint sheet or handout that lists the order of the activities or create a PowerPoint presentation that guides people through the session.

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide heart-shaped name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute the handouts participants will need for the session—you can also distribute handouts for the activities at the beginning of the activity.
- Invite people to share a meal. Depending on the time of day, the program may end with a meal. Some optional learning activities for use during the meal follow below. These may be used as the table waits for food or waits for other groups to be finished eating.

Meal Discussion

As participants share a meal, invite them into conversation about reconciliation.

- Ask older participants to share their stories of long lines, weekly or monthly “confession,” etc., which they experienced in the pre-Vatican II Church.
- Invite the children who’ve experienced First Reconciliation in the past few years to share what they most remember about receiving the sacrament for the first time.
- Challenge older children and teens to recall what their first experience was like and share the memories at their tables.
- Invite participants to name the movies they’ve seen (e.g., *Shawshank Redemption*) or books they’ve read (e.g., *Les Misérables*) which tell a story of forgiveness, redemption, or unconditional love.

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session using your own words or the words below:

This session explores the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We will examine what we say yes to, what we say Amen to, as we celebrate this sacrament. We will look at why it is a *celebration* of the limitless forgiveness and love of God. We will examine the vital stages which are part of the process of reconciliation: contrition, confession, and reparation. We will also look at the Rite, including Individual Confession and the Communal Rite.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3) organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults. See the session plans for adolescents and adults for more instructions on organizing groups.

For the Sharing Learning Experiences (Part 4) participants should rejoin their intergenerational groups from the All Ages Experience (Part 2).

Conduct an icebreaker or community building activity if you wish. A variety of activities are included on the CD-ROM. Customize the activities for your own purpose and timeframe.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Recruit a reader for the reading of Scripture.

Create a prayer space near the heart-shaped banner. On the table, display two hearts, one made of stone or stone-colored paper and the other made of a soft material, such as red felt or cloth. Place an open Bible and the Book of Rites on the table.

Place a chair next to the table with a priest's stole draped over it.

Have one pair of scissors and a paper heart (approximately 10" high) for each participant.

Materials Needed

- Bible
- Book of Rites
- Stone heart and soft heart
- Priest's stole
- Scissors and paper hearts for participants
- Instrumental music

Gather

One of the greatest gifts God gives us is second chances. God's unlimited forgiveness reminds us that we are always welcome back after turning away from God in sin. Scripture is filled with stories of God forgiving us when we don't deserve it. In the most incredible act of forgiveness, we hear Jesus—still suffering on the cross—forgiving those who crucified him. As we contemplate the God's awesome mercy, let us celebrate God's desire for us to change our hearts and turn back to him in love. And so we pray.

God of love and forgiveness, we come together in awe of your great love for us. Nothing we do—whether it is done out of weakness or greed, anger or hate—can stop your love for us. As we celebrate the gift of reconciliation which you extend to us, help us to be truly sorry for the times we've turned away from you. Give us the courage to face our sins and confess them honestly and sincerely. Help us to seek reparation for what we've done to make this world a little less loving. Change our hearts so that we can turn away from sin and allow your Spirit to turn our stony hearts into hearts of love. We ask this in the name of your Son, our loving Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Listen

Have a pre-appointed reader proclaim the following Scripture to the assembly: Ezekiel 36:25-30

Respond

Because we are sinners, we need the forgiveness of God and the courage of the Spirit to confront the sin in our hearts. Each of you has a heart on your table. Take your heart and do something to it—write a word or phrase on the heart, use the scissors on the table or your own hands, whatever is appropriate—to symbolize what sin does to *your* heart every time you turn away from God. As we move through this session and look at the steps which our Church offers us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we will return to our hearts to also symbolize what *love* and *forgiveness* do to heal our hearts wounded by sin.

Allow time for this, playing instrumental music in the background.:

Go Forth

I invite you to lift up your hearts, wounded by sin, to our loving God as we pray:

God of hope and second chances, we are all in need of your healing. We ask you to make us open to a change of heart, to a conversion, so that we can return to you. Take these stony hearts of ours and transform them by your love and forgiveness into hearts overflowing with love for you and for your people. We ask this humbly in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience (20 minutes)

The All Ages Learning Experience is designed to help the participants understand that the most important element in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. Two options are provided. **Option 1** is a dialogue between Peter and Judas to show what happens when one believes in and accepts God’s forgiveness and what happens when one doubts it. **Option 2** looks at the power of forgiveness through the life of Jean Valjean, the hero of the novel, Broadway musical, and movie *Les Miserables*, and applies his change of heart to our own lives.

Option 1. Celebrating or Rejecting God’s Forgiveness

Preparation

In advance of the session ask four people to play the parts of Peter, Judas, Bud and Nora. Give them the script on Handout#1: Dialogue Among Gospel Personalities. Encourage them to learn the part well enough so they don’t have to read it during the session. Give them permission to put the script into their own words. Provide robes and sandals for them to look the part.

Introduction

Share the following information in your own words or in the words below:

Father Tom Richstatter tells the following story in his Catholic Update, *Ten Tips for Better Confessions* (CU 0890):

“I have found that many Catholics have less than pleasant experiences with the Sacrament of Reconciliation because they miss the real point of the sacrament. I think the ‘real point’ can be

found in the story I once heard from a saintly and learned pastor, Father Bernard Haring: One Sunday afternoon in the 1930's in a little parish in Germany where he was pastor, Father Haring was leading the customary Sunday afternoon parish vesper service with religious instruction and Benediction. This particular Sunday he was talking about confession.

'What is the most important thing about confession?' he asked. A woman in the front pew responded: 'Telling your sins to the priest. That's why we call it *confession*.' Father Haring said, 'Confessing the sins is important, but it's not the most important thing.' A man towards the back called out: 'Contrition! Being sorry for your sins! The whole thing doesn't work without contrition.' Father Haring said, 'True, it doesn't 'work' without contrition; but I don't think contrition is *the most important thing*.' A man over on St. Joseph's side spoke up: 'It's the examination of conscience. Unless you examine your conscience, you don't know what you have to be sorry for and what to confess.' Father Haring still wasn't satisfied.

An uneasy silence fell over the church. Then a little girl in the second pew said: 'Father, I know what is most important. It's what Jesus does! *It's what Jesus does!* That's the most important thing, the thing we should focus upon. The examination of conscience, sorrow for sin, telling the sins to the priest—these are all important. But you will have a more positive experience of the sacrament if you focus on *what Jesus does*."

In this session, we are going to do exactly that—look at how our sins are forgiven because God loves us unconditionally. God wants to be reconciled with us always. When we celebrate the Sacrament, we show that we, too, seek reconciliation with him and with the community which we've hurt by our sin.

To explore how important God's forgiveness—and our acceptance of that forgiveness—is in the sacrament, let's listen to a dialogue between Peter and Judas in which they talk about their sin and their attitudes towards Jesus' forgiveness of what they did. Then we will listen to the stories of two other people whom Jesus touched with his healing forgiveness. Finally, we will examine our own lives in light of the unconditional forgiveness of God and the faith community.

Introduce Peter and Judas to the participants. The dialogue on Handout #1 follows:

Peter: Judas, what were you thinking? Why in God's name did you despair?

Judas: Look, man, I betrayed a friend, a good man who gave me nothing but love. He even trusted me with our money. And I set him up. I worked with those who hated him—not because he was bad, but because they were threatened by his goodness. I sold him out for thirty miserable pieces of silver.

Peter: OK, I admit that's a terrible sin. But look at me. Is betrayal any worse than denying you know someone who loves you? I don't think so. And to make matters worse, I didn't deny him once. I did it three times—after bragging to him that I would NEVER do anything to lose his trust. And I did it because I was scared. I was afraid they'd arrest me like they did him. Can you imagine how I felt when the cock crowed and I remembered Jesus' words that I would deny him? I felt so guilty, so sinful, so worthless.

Judas: But that just proves my point. I felt the same way—guilty and evil, which is why I killed myself. I didn't deserve his forgiveness. He would never have been able to forget what I'd done. Look at the suffering he went through—all because I betrayed him.

Peter: You just don't get it, do you? Let me tell you what happened when I was with Jesus after he rose from the dead. There we were on the beach. I'd already made an idiot of myself by jumping into the water when the guys told me Jesus was there. When he got me alone after we ate, I thought, "This is it. He's going to ream me for denying him." So when he asked me if I loved him, it was like an arrow through my heart. After all, I deserved the question. I hadn't acted in love when I told the crowd I'd never seen him before. But I answered in truth. I told Jesus that he knew I loved him. And you know what he said to me? He didn't yell or lay blame or tell me how rotten I was. He said, "Feed my lambs." And he did it THREE TIMES. I think he did it once for each time I denied him. And he made it all go away—all the anger and the self-hatred that I'd nursed since that Thursday night and dark Friday. Jesus loved me through it all. And he forgave me—no strings attached. He even asked me to take care of his sheep! So don't you see, Judas? Don't you know? You were forgiven the moment you betrayed him. You just needed to let his forgiveness touch your heart and change it.

Judas: I couldn't believe in that big a love, that He would have that big a heart. So I gave up, hardened my heart.

Peter: And I embraced his love and his forgiveness, let my heart soak up his love and grow bigger—and went on to lead his disciples into the future!

(Judas walks off-stage, and Peter turns to the assembly.)

Peter: And now let me introduce you to two other people who want to tell you how Jesus' forgiveness changed *their* hearts—not to mention their entire lives! This is Bud. You probably don't recognize him from the Gospel because when you read about him, he was lying on a mat most of the time. Bud, tell us your story!

Bud: It was the strangest thing. You see, I was paralyzed before I met Jesus. And if you think it's hard to live in a wheelchair, try living without one when your legs don't work for you. Wheelchairs weren't invented yet 2000 years ago. My life was so limited. But my friends had heard rumors about some guy who was curing people—doing miracles all over the place with blind people and lepers and crippled people like me. When they heard he was going to be in our neighborhood, they loaded me on a mat and off we went to meet this Jesus. But the problem was there were too many people. It's not easy to sneak to the front of a crowd when you are carrying a man on a mat. Jesus was in this house, but the door was blocked and people were standing three deep outside the door. Now my friends are nothing if not enterprising. So they decided—if we can't get him in through the door, let's try the roof. So they got me up there—no easy task, let me tell you—and lowered me down through the tiles. There I was, swinging from the ropes smack dab in the middle of the room, with all eyes on me. Embarrassing, you know? And this stranger, this beautiful, gentle, strong man, stopped talking and just looked at me. And he looked like he cared! His eyes were so loving. But here's the weird part. Before I could even ask him for the miracle, he said something strange. He said, "My friend, your sins are forgiven you."

Now let me tell you, that wasn't what I expected. And it certainly wasn't what the crowd expected, either. In fact, some of them were downright mad that this person would take it upon himself to forgive sins. After all, we Jews know—don't we?—that only God can forgive sins. But that's what this Jesus said, "...your sins are forgiven." And when he sensed the hostility, he turned to the critics and asked them, "Why do you harbor these thoughts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? In any case, to make it clear to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then turned to me and said, "I say to you, get up! Take your mat with you and return to your house." And I did. Oh, I did! And it was because I realized that he'd cured what really ailed me. I had thought it was my legs, but it really was *my heart*. I had never forgiven God—as if he were to blame—for my crippled legs. And over the years, I stopped praying and stopped caring and was a bitter, mean, self-centered man. When Jesus said, "My friend, your sins are forgiven you," he changed my heart. And I think the healing of my heart penetrated my whole being and I was able to walk because of it. And I've never looked back. My heart is whole now, and I LOVE people...because that's what he did, that Jesus, he loved people. Even me.

Peter: Thanks, Bud, for sharing your heart with us. Now, so I won't get accused of being sexist, I thought it was important that we hear a feminine perspective on this whole issue of redemption. But seriously, Nora has a powerful story to share with us today. Nora, would you please tell us what Jesus did in your life?

Nora: There was a time when I would have been too ashamed, too humiliated, to tell my story. I was almost at the point of despair, not that different from Judas. I had hit rock bottom. Sinner? That was me. Loved? Only for what I could give people, never for who I was. Because no one really knew me. I was shunned by the "good" women because I was so bad. I had no friends, no hope. Then I heard that Jesus was going to be at my neighbor Simon's house for dinner one night. I knew about Jesus, how he didn't just help people physically—although he did do that—but how he healed their hearts, too. And my heart was so wounded by sin and loneliness. I hadn't felt loved in so very long. I thought, "Why not? What have I got to lose?" So I went to Simon's house, where people either ignored me or tried to kick me out. But I persisted. And when I saw Jesus, I approached him on my knees, knelt at his feet, and just started to cry. Something in me was so sad and so sorry for the way I'd wasted my life. All the sorrow and regret just gushed out. So I wept, right there on his feet. And my tears washed away the dirt of the road. So I dried his feet with my hair.

Simon, of course, wasn't too happy about this. He challenged Jesus. But Jesus turned Simon's criticism upside down. He proposed this question to Simon: "Two men owed money to a certain money-lender; one owed a total of five hundred coins, the other fifty. Since neither was able to repay, he wrote off both debts. Which of them was more grateful to him?" Simon's answer was, "He, I presume, to whom he remitted the larger sum." And Jesus said to him, "You are right."

Then Jesus turned to me and said to Simon: "You see this woman? I came to your home and you provided me with no water for my feet. She has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. I tell you, that is why her many sins are forgiven—because of her great love. Little is forgiven those whose love is small." I could only cry more. How did he know that my heart, abused as it was, had such a great capacity for love?

Then Jesus said to me, "Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has been your salvation. Now go in peace." And I did!

Invite participants to share their insights into the following questions:

- What did Peter, the paralytic man and the woman who washed Jesus' feet have in common? What do you think happened to their hearts when they experienced Jesus' forgiveness? Why was Judas' heart so different?
- What was the greatest gift the paralyzed man received from Jesus?
- What does the question Jesus posed to Simon tell you about your own life?
- What other persons in Scripture can you name who were transformed by forgiveness? In history (someone like St. Augustine, St. Francis, or Dorothy Day)? In fiction (perhaps a character in the Harry Potter series)?
- How do you feel when God forgives you? When someone in your life forgives you?

Ask participants to take their paper hearts, which are marked by sin, and write, draw, or cut—to somehow symbolize—what the unconditional forgiveness of God does to their own sinful hearts.

Share the following in your own words or use the words below:

As we go deeper into the meaning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, let us remember that the most important element in the journey from sin to contrition to confession to restitution will always be God's love and forgiveness!

Option 2. Jean Valjean and the Power of Forgiveness

Preparation

Have the *Les Miserable* soundtrack queued up to the "Valjean Arrested/Valjean Forgiven" and "What Have I Done?" songs. Or show the appropriate section of the video *Les Miserables—The Dream Cast in Concert* (1998).

Have four volunteers prepared to mime the actions of the songs: one playing Valjean, two playing constables, and one playing the bishop. Props include candlesticks and large silver coins.

Have copies of Handout #2: Lyrics from *Les Miserables* and Handout#3: Forgiveness Transforms the Heart on each table.

Activity

Begin with the same introduction as that in Option 1, telling the story which Father Tom Richstatter relates about Father Bernard Haring.

Then share the following information in your own words or in the words below:

Let's look at one of the most meaningful examples in fiction of the power of forgiveness to transform someone's life. We will listen to two selections from the Broadway Musical version of Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserable*. The main character, Jean Valjean, had been imprisoned for a crime he committed out of desperation—stealing bread to feed his family. When he was released, he was forced to carry a card with him at all times which identified him as a convict. He became embittered when he realized that, because of the card, it would be almost impossible for him to

change his life and start fresh. So he stole from a bishop who offered him shelter. When caught by the police and brought in front of the bishop, Valjean was overwhelmed when the bishop covered for him, telling the police that he gave Valjean the silver. The bishop not only forgave Jean Valjean; he gave him a chance to make something good of his life. Listen to the lyrics in the songs.

Using a good sound or video system, play “Valjean Arrested/Valjean Forgiven” and “What Have I Done?” Participants can follow the words on Handout #2: Lyrics from *Les Miserables*. Two volunteers will mime the parts of Valjean, the constables, and the bishop as the music plays.

Valjean Arrested/Valjean Forgiven
Constables: Tell the Reverence your story.
Let us see if he’s impressed.
You were lodging here last night.
You were the honest Bishop’s guest.
And then, out of Christian goodness,
When he learned about your plight,
You maintain he made a present of this silver.

Bishop: That is right.
But my friend, you left so early
Surely something slipped your mind.
You forgot I gave these also
Would you leave the best behind?
So, Messieurs, you may release him
For this man has spoken true.
I commend you for your duty
And God’s blessing go with you.
But remember this, my brother.
See in this some higher plan.
You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man.
By the witness of the martyrs
By the Passion and the Blood
God has raised you out of darkness.
I have bought your soul for God!

What Have I Done?
Valjean: What have I done?
Sweet Jesus, what have I done?
Become a thief in the night!
Become a dog on the run!
And have I fallen so far
And is the hour so late
That nothing remains but the cry of my hate,
The cries in the dark that nobody hears
Here where I stand at the turning of the years?
If there’s another way to go
I missed it twenty long years ago.

My life was a war that could never be won.
They gave me a number and murdered Valjean
When they chained me and left me for dead
Just for stealing a mouthful of bread.
Yet why did I allow this man
To touch my soul and teach me love?
He treated me like any other.
He gave me his trust.
He called me Brother.
My life he claims for God above.
Can such things be?
For I had come to hate the world,
This world that always hated me!
Take an eye for an eye.
Turn your heart into stone.
This is all I have lived for.
This is all I have known.
One word from him and I'd be back
Beneath the lash, upon the rack.
Instead, he offers me my freedom.
I feel my shame inside me like a knife.
He told me that I have a soul.
How does he know?
What spirit comes to move my life?
Is there another way to go?
I am reaching, but I fall,
And the night is closing in,
And I stare into the void—
To the whirlpool of my sin.
I'll escape now from the world,
From the world of Jean Valjean.
Jean Valjean is nothing now.
Another story must begin!

Share the following:

Jean Valjean goes on to create a new identity. He becomes a good and generous man who tries to help all whom he meets. Before his death, he reflects that "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Invite participants to reflect on what the bishop's forgiveness did to the heart of Jean Valjean.

Using Handout #3, ask participants to turn to the Gospel to examine what forgiveness did for the people in these Gospel stories.

Invite table groups to read the two Scripture passages, one on the paralytic man and one on the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, then discuss the questions below.

Luke 5:17-26

- What happened to the heart of the man whose sins Jesus forgave?
- Was the ability to walk the greatest gift he was given?
- What happened to those who saw this story unfold? What does that tell you about the power of forgiveness in your own life?

Luke 7: 36-50

- What do you think happened to the heart of the woman to whom Jesus said, “Your faith has been your salvation”?
- What does the question Jesus posed to Simon tell you about your own life?
- Why is there a sense of joy in each of these two stories?
- What other persons in Scripture can you name who were transformed by forgiveness? In history (someone like St. Augustine, St. Francis, or Dorothy Day)? In fiction (perhaps a character in the Harry Potter series)?
- How do you feel when God forgives you? When someone in your life forgives you?

Ask participants to take their paper hearts, which are marked by sin, and write, draw, or cut—to somehow symbolize—what the unconditional forgiveness of God does to their own sinful hearts.

Conclude the All Ages Learning Experience by sharing the following in your own words:

As we go deeper into the meaning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, let us remember that the most important element in the journey from sin to reconciliation will always be God’s love and forgiveness!

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience (80-90 minutes)

Learning Experience One: Change of Heart (20 to 25 minutes)

Families with Children: Saying "I'm Sorry!"

This learning experience explores contrition, the first of three critical elements in the process of reconciliation: contrition, confession, and reparation.

Preparation

Prior to the session, print copies of Handout #4 for each family. Cut out the playing cards and put them in two stacks: Cards for Children and Cards for Parents.

Materials Needed

- Handout #4 "I'm Sorry"
- Cards for Children and Cards for Parents

Activity

Begin by communicating the following in your own words or the words below:

God always invites us to turn away from sin and come home to God. As we just saw from the stories of Jesus in the Gospel, God is always ready to welcome *us*. The question is, are we ready to return to God? Do we want things to be different? Are we truly *sorry* for the things we've done which move us away from God and each other? In order to be fully ready to fully celebrate God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we must first have a genuine change of heart.

Do you know the game "Sorry"? It's a board game in which each person has four markers which have to get from Start to Finish by rolling dice and moving forward. The twist in this game is that other players, by landing on a space occupied by your marker, can choose to send your marker all the way back to the Start position. The name of the game reflects the comment which may or may not accompany sending someone's marker back—SORRY!

Ask participants to raise their hands for each question to which they would say "Yes":

- Have you ever played the game "Sorry"?
- Are you good at it?
- Do you play to win? To just have fun?
- When you had the chance to send someone else back to home, did you ever not do it because you felt so bad?
- Did you ever do it and then feel bad?
- Did you really enjoy sending them back and not feel sorry AT ALL?
- Were you happier the closer to winning they were when you sent them back?

Continue:

Sorry is just a game. But “I’m sorry” are probably the 2 ½ hardest words in the English language for many people to say. Why is that? Is it because it is admitting we messed up and it’s always hard to admit that we’re not perfect? Is it too humbling—or humiliating? Is it because we’re not really sorry we did it—maybe just sorry we got caught or felt guilty?

What does it really mean to be sorry? At your tables, come up with as many synonyms for contrition as you can.

Ask participants to share answers at their tables. Then ask for examples (like regret or remorse) from the whole group. After a few ideas are shared, continue in your own words:

As disciples, we experience a change of heart when we see what our sin does—to our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the whole community—and we don’t like what we see. Let’s look deeper into the concept of contrition by playing our own version of Sorry.

Invite families to play the Sorry game by drawing a card each time it is the person’s turn, starting with the youngest and moving around the table several times until all have reached the “God” space. Parents draw from the Parent Cards, and children draw from the Children Cards.

See Handout #4 “I’m Sorry” for the children and parent cards.

Invite families to discuss the following questions at the conclusion of the game:

- How did you feel about playing this game?
- How do you feel when you do something wrong, feel bad, and say you’re sorry? Can you think of a story from your life when you said you were sorry and things changed for the better as a result?
- How do you feel when you don’t say you’re sorry?
- What did you do to get closer to God during the game? When do you get closer to God in real life?
- Did God ever move away from you during the game? What does that tell you about God?

Wrap up this learning experience by sharing in your own words or using the words below:

Just as John the Baptist called the Jewish people to repent and turn away from sin as a preparation for encountering the messiah, so too must we regret our sins. When we realize that our sins have moved us further away from the God who loves us unconditionally, and further away from God’s family, we are ready to confess and be reconciled.

Now take your hearts and draw a symbol or a word for feeling sorry, for contrition, on them. If time permits, share your symbols with each other.

Adolescents and Adults: Clues to Contrition

Materials Needed

- Handout #5 Clues to Contrition

Activity

Direct participants to use Handout #5 to explore several Scripture passages in which sinners are faced with the need to change their hearts. Have them work in pairs. Give each pair one of the Scripture passages. They must find clues that indicate whether or not the people in each story were genuinely sorry. Encourage them to look for the state of the individuals' hearts, the "why" behind the sorrow, and any actions the Biblical figures took to reveal a change of heart.

Once they've completed the reading of Scripture and the clues, invite them to share their insights with the rest of the people at their table.

If time permits, invite participants to discuss the following questions. Encourage them to base their responses on both Scripture and their own life experiences.

- Have you ever experienced an inner change of heart similar to those of the Gospel characters?
- In your experience, why is contrition necessary to seeking forgiveness?
- How does sin impact our relationship with God?

Wrap up this learning experience by sharing in your own words or using the words below:

Just as John the Baptist called the Jewish people to repent and turn away from sin as a preparation for encountering the messiah, so too must we regret our sins. When we realize that our sins have moved us further away from the God who loves us unconditionally, and further away from God's family, we are ready to confess and be reconciled.

Now take your hearts and draw a symbol or a word for feeling sorry, for contrition, on them. If time permits, share your symbols with each other.

Learning Experience 2. Examining Our Consciences (20 to 25 minutes) [All Ages]

Preparation

Have someone ready to proclaim the Scripture passage.

Materials Needed

- Candle
- Bible
- Handout #6: Have I Grown in Love? Examination of Conscience
- Song *Open My Eyes* by Jesse Manibusan

Activity

Share the following in your own words or in the words below:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines sin as “an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor...” (1849). Our sins always affect our relationship with God because they violate God’s law and are a choice against love, which is God’s very identity. But sins are also social in nature. They affect the people around us, even when we are not aware of it. Sin is like dropping a stone into a pond. The ripples spread out and out. How do we recognize when we are sinning, when we are turning away from God, and when we are hurting the community? An examination of conscience makes us aware of our sins.

What is an examination of conscience? It is stopping to look at your life—your thoughts, your words, the things you do—and figuring out what draws you closer to God and makes you a more loving person, and what moves you away from God, making you more self-centered and hard-hearted. In a way, an examination of conscience catches bad choices before they become patterns in your life. It is saying Amen to turning your life around, coming back to God, and choosing love over hate or indifference.

There are many different ways to examine your conscience. Some are based on the Great Commandment, the Ten Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount. We are going to experience a simple examination as a faith community. Let’s prepare ourselves for prayer.

Light a candle, quiet the group, and dim the lights if possible, to transition from learning to praying.

Share the following:

To truly examine our consciences, it is important to trust in God’s love, forgiveness, and invitation to change our hearts when we turn away from God in sin. So let us invite the Holy Spirit to help us be open to God’s mercy by singing *Open Our Hearts*.

Invite the community to sing “*Open Our Hearts*” (Jesse Manibusan, *Spirit and Song*).

Have the pre-selected participant proclaim the word of God.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to them, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).

Invite participants to follow along on Handout #6 as the Examination of Conscience is read. Play reflective music in the background.

Ask two people, a male and a female, to read each question slowly and reflectively, pausing after the questions to give participants the opportunity to search their own souls for the answers.

- Is God the most important person in my life? Do I let things like money, or what others think of me, or my possessions get in the way of my love for God?
- Do I talk to the Father, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis? Do I listen to God’s word in the Bible?
- Do I celebrate the Eucharist, especially on Sunday, to thank God for all the blessings in my life? Do I celebrate God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?
- Am I loving in my relationships with others? With my family? My colleagues or classmates? The most hurting people in my life?
- Do I live my life guided by the values of the Catholic Church? Do I respect the life and dignity of all people? Do I forgive others as God has forgiven me? Do I work for peace in my family, my community, and my world?
- Do I give of my time to serve those most in need? Do I share my God-given talents with others? Do I share what I have with those who have less than me?
- Do I make my decisions based on the moral principles which Jesus taught? Am I honest, generous, compassionate, and fair?
- Have my actions of the past weeks drawn me closer to God? Did I say Amen to love, or have I failed to love?

After a pause for reflection, invite the assembly to pray the following act of contrition together:

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy. Amen.

Share the following in your own words or use the words below:

When we are sorry for turning away from God, who loves us unconditionally, we say Amen to God’s forgiveness, Amen to changing our hearts, and Amen to being healed. We open ourselves to the healing power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Learning Experience 3. Immersion in the Rite (20-25 minutes) [All Ages]

Preparation

Have someone prepared to proclaim the Gospel story or get a group of people to act out the passage.

Materials Needed

- Handout #7: Celebration of Forgiveness
- Song “Holy Is His Name” by John Michael Talbot
- Bible

Activity

Communicate the following in your own words or the words below:

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a gift from God, who knew we needed to express our regret for failing to love and to hear his words of forgiveness. We can trace the sacrament back to Jesus telling Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19). At Pentecost, Peter lived out Jesus’ words when he declared, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

This sacrament is our opportunity to say Amen to God’s love and forgiveness by a true change of heart. In the sacrament, the priest represents God in absolving us from our sins; he also represents the community in extending forgiveness. To understand what we say Amen to whenever we celebrate this sacrament, we are going to pray the rite—the words and the gestures which celebrate the healing of our sinful hearts. We will use a penitential celebration modeled after the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents (*The Rites of the Catholic Church Volume One*, Chapter II, 549-559) to reveal the connection our sins and our need for forgiveness have to our relationship with God *and* our relationship with each other.

Direct participants to use Handout #7: Celebration of Forgiveness as a prayer aid. Tell them to be prepared to add symbols or words to their paper hearts as they move through the prayer.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20-25 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare copies of Handouts #8 and #9 for participants to take home.

Materials Needed

- Tape for each table group
- Handouts

Ask participants to gather in intergenerational groups to share what they have learned about forgiveness and the Sacrament and Reconciliation. Invite them to share the journey of their paper hearts through the various stages of contrition, confession, and reconciliation.

As a symbol of being reconciled with the community as well as with God, ask each table to connect its hearts, using the tape provided on the table.

Invite participants to look at Handouts #8 and #9. Handout #8 offers answers to questions people often ask about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Handout #9 is something they can pull out prior to, and following, their participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (10 minutes)

Preparation

Have the song prepped.

Gather

Loving God, thank you for reconciling us to you. Thank you for the gift of second chances. Thank you for taking our stony hearts and making them hearts for love. As we leave this gathering, we celebrate the joy which being reconciled to you brings to each of us. We celebrate, too, the joy being reconciled with our brothers and sisters which the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation—your son's gift to us—makes real. Amen.

Respond

It is Good News that God craves reconciliation with us, that God seeks us out when we stray, and that God wants us to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters as well. In response, let us take our hearts and unite them to the heart of Christ. As we sing "There is a Longing" have one person from each table bring the table hearts forward and tape them to the large heart.

Go Forth

Sing the song as people tape their hearts to the large heart.