November 27, 1988
The First Sunday of Advent

To the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Dioceses of Illinois:

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

One of the chief signs of authentic love is its willingness to forgive. So great is Jesus’ love for us that He has given us a special sacrament in which we can receive His mercy and forgiveness. We experience conversion and renewal in many ways. It is in the Sacrament of Penance, however, that we personally share with the Lord the light and shadows of our lives as individuals and members of the faith community, express sorrow for our sins and imperfections, and, through the mediation of the priest, hear His consoling words: I forgive you.

In recent years the Sacrament of Penance has not played the important role in the lives of many people which Jesus intended. Whatever the reasons for this might be (and there are many), it is sad that the forgiving and healing power of the sacrament is not appreciated and utilized today as much as it should be.

This reality is of great concern to all of us. Together we must seek ways to make the sacrament better understood and appreciated for what it is — a special source of Jesus’ forgiving and healing love in today’s broken world. Currently, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops is conducting a broadly-based study of the sacrament. When completed, the results of this research will provide the basis for many pastoral recommendations.

In the meantime, we thought it opportune to update the guidelines published by the various dioceses of Illinois shortly after the new Rite of Penance was promulgated fifteen years ago. We have done this in light of the revised Code of Canon Law (1983), the postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance (1984); and recent determinations made by the NCCB (1988). This updating has been done on a provincial basis to ensure a more consistent pastoral practice among our dioceses. We ask that you familiarize yourselves with these guidelines, which go into effect immediately, and make whatever adjustments may be necessary to bring your own pastoral practice into accord with them.
We pray that the publication of these guidelines will be an occasion for reflection, prayer, and discussion about the vital importance of this sacrament in our spiritual lives.

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

Archbishop of Chicago
for the
Bishops of the Dioceses of Illinois

Most Reverend Alfred L. Abramowicz
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago

Most Reverend John R. Gorman
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago

Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory
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Most Reverend Joseph L. Imesch
Bishop of Joliet

Most Reverend Thad Jakubowski
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago

Most Reverend Roger Kaffer
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Most Reverend James P. Keleher
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Most Reverend Timothy J. Lyne
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Most Reverend John J. Myers
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Most Reverend Arthur J. O’Neill
Bishop of Rockford

Most Reverend Edward W. O’Rourke
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Most Reverend Placido Rodriguez, C.M.F.
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago

Most Reverend Daniel L. Ryan
Bishop of Springfield

Most Reverend Raymond J. Vonesh
Auxiliary Bishop of Joliet
1. Following the directives of the Second Vatican Council, a new Rite of Penance was officially promulgated on the First Sunday of Advent 1973. At that time programs of preparation were initiated in the dioceses of Illinois to help both the clergy and the laity understand and appreciate the new Rites of Reconciliation. Various dioceses published guidelines for implementing the New Rite of Penance.

2. Several principles helped to shape these guidelines:
   - External changes in pastoral practice must be grounded in a thorough catechesis of the faithful.
   - Central to that catechesis should be a shift in emphasis from a mere telling of past sins to a liturgical proclamation of the healing power of Christ.
   - There is a need to be sensitive to the readiness of the individual to participate in the new Rites; "options" should not be forced or imposed upon the faithful.
   - The legitimate options provided by universal law and diocesan policy are to be made available to all.
   - Finally, the guidelines themselves are to be followed in their entirety. The unique value of one form should not be sacrificed or compromised for the sake of emphasizing the values of another form.

3. It is now fifteen years since the promulgation of the New Rite of Penance. In that time the Sacrament has been the subject of much reflection and discussion. The pivotal place of reconciliation within the Christian life and the importance of its sacramental celebration by the Church in the liturgical prayer of the Sacrament of Penance was emphasized by the 1983 Synod of Bishops whose theme was "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church."

   Discussion and reflection have clarified Church thinking and discipline. However, on the pastoral level, both Church ministers and the laity continue to have questions and difficulties with regard to the celebration of the sacrament. As a community of faith, we must continue to address these realities. A pastoral practice should be developed that will assist in the formation of all Catholics in the virtue of penance and provide meaningful liturgical celebrations of God’s reconciling love. The sacramental celebrations must be true acts of worship through which God’s people and their ministers offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father of mercies who, through the death and resurrection of Christ, has reconciled the world to Himself.

4. Pastoral practice must follow Church teaching and discipline, even though it develops in a specific cultural context. Accordingly, particular attention should be given to the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, to the “Instruction” introducing the New Rite of Penance, and to the pertinent canons of the revised Code of Canon Law (cc. 956-999). This teaching and discipline provide the foundation for the development of an appropriate pastoral practice.

   Central to all these documents is the teaching which states that individual and integral celebration of the Sacrament of Penance constitutes the only ordinary way by which one who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God and with the Church (c. 960). He or she is obliged to confess in kind and number all serious sins at least once a year (cc. 988, §1; 989).

   In light of this clear teaching, it is evident that both the first and second forms of the Rites of Reconciliation fulfill these conditions. The third form — reconciliation of a number of penitents with general confession and absolution — is exceptional in character and is regulated by a special discipline.

5. Finally, in order to provide a proper context in which to develop a vital pastoral practice with regard to this sacrament, these Provincial Guidelines have been established in accord with current Church teaching and discipline. The Guidelines include a section relating to special pastoral questions.
RECONCILIATION OF INDIVIDUAL PENITENTS

6. The first form of the sacrament is a one-to-one experience involving a penitent and the priest-minister. It readily allows for adaptation to the needs of the individual penitent and a more personal expression of the sacrament. It is especially appropriate when a penitent is guilty of serious sin and for confessions of personal devotion. It should be used according to the rhythms and needs of the individual’s cycle of life in relationship to God and the Christian community. It is especially recommended for those seeking spiritual discernment of the movements of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Frequent and careful celebration of the Sacrament of Penance is very useful. (Intro. to the Rite of Penance, 7.B.).

7. Ordinarily, this form is used either in a reconciliation room or a confessional. The place for celebrating the sacrament with an individual penitent should be adjacent to the worship area to make it clear that it is a liturgical prayer. Confectionals or other suitable arrangements which ensure the anonymity of the penitent are to be provided. Every parish church and place of worship also must make provision for at least one reconciliation room. Such a room is, by definition, a physical setting which provides the penitent with all the options of the Rite. It should be of appropriate size and provide a table for the Scriptures and a kneeler and screen, as well as a chair for face-to-face confession. Attention should be given to proper lighting, ventilation, acoustics and liturgical symbols. It is not to be used for any purpose other than the celebration of the sacrament. (Cf. Environment and Art, 81) The confessor may follow the custom common in the United States of wearing a stole over a cassock or clerical suit. The ideal of alb or surplice and stole, as reflected in the ritual, should not be too easily dismissed.

8. The confessor should manifest the compassion of Christ as he welcomes the penitent. Every effort should be made to make the penitent feel at ease. The penitent should sense in the priest a humanly attractive manner, expressive of the merciful presence of the Holy Spirit. While maintaining the propriety appropriate to his spiritual role in this sacrament, the confessor’s style should be conducive to interpersonal dialogue.

9. So that this form may be clearly understood as an experience of ecclesial and liturgical prayer, the Word of God should be included in the individual form of the sacrament. The confessor should be familiar at least with those Scripture passages which pertain to the penance experience. If the penitent has not prepared for the sacrament by selecting a Scripture passage in advance, the confessor may offer a selection either prior to the telling of the sins or later in the Rite. The power of God’s Word in this sacramental setting helps confessor and penitent to focus on the presence of the Lord and moves the human spirit to prayer, conversion and healing peace.

10. Church law requires penitents to mention all serious sins, both number and kind, of which they are aware and which have not yet been submitted for individual absolution. Respecting the personal style in which penitents choose to speak of their sins and discern the movements of the Spirit in their lives, the confessor should assist them to make a complete confession (Intro., 17). A variety of confessional styles is possible. Many practicing Catholics of deep faith wish to focus upon the areas of their lives which especially need the Lord’s spiritual healing and forgiveness. The Church’s understanding of the sacrament allows for such variations, particularly in confessions of personal devotion.

The confessor, aware of his own sinfulness and the disorders in human life, may occasionally assist the penitent in identifying the Lord’s call to personal growth, without unnecessary probing. The confessor should strive to help the penitent in the formation of a Christian conscience and alert him or her to the interior movements of the Holy Spirit. It is more important that a confessor listen intently than speak a great deal. The conversation should not consist of psychological counseling that could take place more effectively outside the sacramental encounter. The conversation should focus on the saving acts of Christ in the life of the penitent. If a natural, conversational mode has been established, this will help the confessor to avoid mini-sermons. This section of the Rite in many instances need not take more than a few minutes. It should not occupy a major portion of the time of the sacramental encounter.

11. The penance assigned by the priest or mutually agreed upon by confessor and penitent should be appropriate for the individual. The penance should be understood as a practical, concrete way in which the penitent begins to translate into external behavior the insight derived from the sacrament. This is a way in which the penitent begins the actual conversion process to which the Lord is calling him or her. Even though prayer and self-denial may be more appropriate penances on occasion, an especially appropriate penance could be an exercise in a work of mercy and service to one’s neighbor. The penance should be proportionate to the gravity of the sins confessed.

12. The prayer of the penitent (cf. Rite of Penance, 45) allows many possibilities. It should be a genuine expression of the penitent’s sorrow and desire for Christ’s healing and resolution to begin a new life. (Intro., 19)
A card or sheet with appropriate prayers for this moment can be made available in some settings. Some penitents might prefer to pray a traditional formula; some to pray spontaneously in their own words. In some instances, shared prayer with the confessor may be appropriate. At all times, the way the penitent chooses to pray should be ascertained and respected.

13. A confessor may preface the words of absolution with his own spontaneous prayer; if he decides to do so, his prayer should articulate praise of God for what is happening in the life of the penitent and ask for the healing which the penitent seeks. The Church's official words of absolution, as found in the Rite (cf. Rite, 46), must always be said. As or after he reflectively prays the words of absolution, the confessor should extend his hands whenever physically feasible; if the penitent is behind a screen or in an awkward position for a dignified imposition of hands, the confessor should at least raise his hand toward the penitent. As he says the second part of the prayer ("I absolve you..."), he should make the sign of the cross over the penitent. For absolution, the penitent may be either kneeling, sitting or standing.

14. The confessor lovingly concludes the celebration by a brief proclamation of praise in which the penitent may join him. This may be a praise formula such as “Praised be Jesus Christ/May He always be praised,” the “Glory be to the Father...,” or one of the formulas found in the new Rite, or it may be in the confessor’s or penitent’s own words.

15. Every parish should offer ample opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in the individual form. Celebrating the sacrament while a Mass is being celebrated in the same place is not appropriate. Various times other than just prior to the Saturday evening Mass should also be explored.

**RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION**

16. The Second Vatican Council taught that there is value in communal celebrations which involve the presence and active participation of the faithful. Similarly, the Rite of Penance says that communal celebrations of the sacrament “show more clearly the ecclesial nature of penance” (Intro., 22). It is in this context of the value of communal celebration that one approaches the second form provided in the Rite of Penance.

17. The second form of the Sacrament of Penance is an integral liturgical service, for use with several penitents when it is possible to provide an opportunity for individual confession and absolution. Its use presumes the presence of a sufficient number of confessors, in proportion to the number of penitents present, so that individual confession and absolution can be provided according to the Guidelines, in pars. 6-14 above. With the possible exception of par. 9 (regarding the Word of God), the options and values outlined for a proper implementation of individual confession and absolution according to the Rite are to be respected when the Second Form is used. The communal preparation and thanksgiving which frame the moment of individual confession give clear expression to the liturgical and ecclesial nature of this sacrament.

The Second Form can be an appropriate mode of celebrating reconciliation according to the rhythms and life-cycle of the faith community. It is particularly fitting during the seasons of Advent and Lent when the numbers present are not extraordinarily large. It can also be used effectively with small groups of people; for example, in retreat situations, for staff days in parishes, groups of teachers and/or children in schools. It should not be used when the numbers present are extremely large or when the participants are not particularly disposed to a communal celebration of this sacrament but have only come for the sake of individual confession and absolution. Consequently, it should not be used during Holy Week or during the final week before Christmas if the numbers would be too large to celebrate the Second Form properly. On the other hand, the Second Form is one of the legitimate options of the Rite of Penance which should be afforded to all the faithful on occasion. The Second Form should not be reserved exclusively for children or special groups, but is designed for use with adult members of the Christian community. If it were provided frequently enough at the parish level, it could indeed become a welcome option for all.

18. The Second Form demands proper and thorough liturgical planning. The basic format in the Rite should be followed. Considerable variety is possible in terms of texts, themes, visual and other specific components of the liturgical action. The Rite of Penance, with its Appendices should be used as a resource book. A proclamation of the Word of God is always to be included. Any type of communal examination of conscience should include social sins and disorders which need the healing of Christ Jesus, and not exclusively personal faults. Communal prayer and singing are integral components of this form.

19. When the Second Form is used, a pastoral judgment may have to be made in a given situation about the feasibility of following the format exactly as found in the Rite, if this would involve detaining participants an
undue length of time in order to provide properly for individual confession and absolution. By way of exception, pastoral prudence might occasionally suggest adapting the sacrament so that the service is left open-ended once the individual confessions have begun, e.g., someone concludes the communal prayer after a specified length of time while individual confessions continue to be heard. However, this is a significant departure from what is intended in the Second Form.

20. During the communal liturgy, there should be the usual distribution of liturgical roles. The confessors, because of their visible role in the liturgical celebration, should be vested in surplice or alb and stole.

21. The physical arrangements should provide for the individuals to approach the confessors either face-to-face or anonymously. In addition to utilizing the usual reconciliation rooms and confessional, temporary arrangements can also be made for confessional stations around the body of the church or sanctuary. Attention must be given to the acoustics in this case, so as to maintain privacy. The visibility of those confessing individually can provide inspiration to the others present. It is a praiseworthy custom that those waiting to approach a confessor be engaged in communal prayer for the others, provided this does not create too great a distraction for the individuals who are confessing. Soft instrumental music can be a more appropriate way of maintaining a prayerful atmosphere. When using the Second Form, absolution is always to be given individually to maintain the integrity of the First Form when incorporated into this communal setting.

RECONCILIATION OF SEVERAL PENITENTS
WITH GENERAL CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

22. The Rite of Penance provides a form for a communal and integral liturgical service for the reconciliation of many penitents when it is not possible to have individual confession and absolution. This provision goes beyond the granting of general absolution in an emergency situation where there is immediate and genuine danger of death. In that case there would be no time for the liturgical rite provided in the ritual. This communal and integral liturgical service is intended, rather, for those rare situations in which penitents would be forced “to be deprived of sacramental grace or holy communion for a long period of time through no fault of their own.”

23. The revised Code of Canon Law specifies the conditions under which general absolution may be imparted in Canon 961, §1, 1°, 2°:

§1. Absolution cannot be imparted in a general manner to a number of penitents at once without previous individual confession unless:

1° the danger of death is imminent and there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;

2° a serious necessity exists, that is, when in light of the number of penitents a supply of confessors is not readily available rightly to hear the confessions of individuals within a suitable time so that the penitents are forced to be deprived of sacramental grace or holy communion for a long time through no fault of their own; it is not considered a sufficient necessity if confessors cannot be readily available only because of the great number of penitents as can occur on the occasion of some great feast or pilgrimage.

24. It is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to determine whether general cases of such necessity exist in the diocese in the light of criteria agreed upon with other members of the conference of bishops (c. 961, §2).

25. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops has determined that the word du ("for a long time") in c. 961, §2 should be understood as “a month.” This is a criterion by which the diocesan bishop judges whether and when the conditions of grave necessity for general absolution are verified in his diocese.

26. In the dioceses of Illinois, at the present time there are no generally accepted cases in which the conditions warranting the imparting of general absolution would be foreseen to exist. Should a confessor believe that such conditions exist in individual cases, he is required to obtain prior permission of the diocesan bishop. Moreover for a penitent validly to receive general sacramental absolution, he or she must be suitably disposed and intend in due time to confess serious sins individually (c. 962, §1)

27. Just as the Second Form highlights the communal nature of the Sacrament, so does the Third Form. After proper permission has been obtained from the diocesan bishop, this Third Form should be celebrated as an integral liturgical action with the usual distribution of liturgical roles. The priest should be vested in surplice or alb and stole. The Third Form always includes: opening song, greeting in prayer, reading from the Word of God, homily, catechetical instruction before the prescribed rituals for general confession, contritittal gesture and general absolution, final song in praise of God, blessing and dismissal. Consequently, it should never be attached
as a prelude or appendage to another liturgical service, such as the Eucharistic liturgy, celebration of another sacrament, etc. General absolution apart from the setting of such an integral liturgical prayer service is never permitted, except for the situation of immediate danger of death when absolution alone suffices. Further, those participating in this celebration of the sacrament are to be instructed about their obligation to make an individual confession of serious sins before again having recourse to general absolution unless a just cause intervenes. (c. 963)

NON-SACRAMENTAL PENCEANCE SERVICES

28. In addition to three sacramental forms of reconciliation, the Rite of Penance also recommends non-sacramental, communal penceance services. These are further options which should be afforded to the faithful several times during the years, but particularly during the seasons of Advent and Lent. Although such services are very beneficial with children and special groups, they are primarily intended for use with adult members of the parish at large. Pastorally, these non-sacramental penceance services are most appropriate for large gatherings of the faithful when the Second Form would be practically impossible, but when a communal penceance service is called for because of the liturgical season, the vigil of a significant event or feast, a tragedy on the local or larger world scene, etc. In this instance, it is presumed that the faithful would be able to avail themselves of the sacrament individually in the near future. Two possible benefits of such communal penceance services are: (a) they dispose participants spiritually for a subsequent reception of the sacrament, and (b) they offer a catechetical opportunity to heighten a community's awareness of the social aspects of sin and reconciliation.

29. The appendices of the Rite of Penance should be used as a resource book in planning such penceance services. They should be carefully prepared according to the principles and sensitivities of the conciliar liturgical reform, and always be in harmony with the focus of the current liturgical season. The theme and ritual action selected should help the community focus on the mystery of God's forgiving love. In planning, publicizing and celebrating such non-sacramental services, the faithful should never be misled into expecting or understanding them as an opportunity for reception of the sacrament. Rather, they are to be instructed in the liturgical and ecclesiastical value of such non-sacramental devotions or paraliturgies in enhancing their prayer life as a faith community and in nourishing their spiritual lives personally.

30. Since these communal penceance services are not an officially recognized sacramental prayer of the universal Church, they may take place in any appropriate setting (and not necessarily in a church or place of worship). If an ordained minister is not present, a non-ordained minister may preside at such non-sacramental services, thus significantly increasing the opportunities when they may be used. In this broader variety of occasions and circumstances, however, the basic spirit of the renewed liturgy should be in evidence, e.g., in the distribution of the various roles, in the use of proper liturgical symbols, in the interplay of word and ritual action, etc. Despite the wide array of possibilities in format and content, the basic thrust of these communal penceance services should be aimed always at involving the participants more fully in God's mystery of reconciliation at work among us.

SPECIAL PASTORAL SITUATIONS

Returning Catholics

31. When men and women return to the Church after a long absence, seeking to be reconciled, pastoral ministers are to be very sensitive to their personal history and unique spiritual needs. They should be warmly received and given an opportunity to engage in a conversion process that will culminate in the Sacrament of Penance. This process may parallel the basic structure of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Ordinarily, these penitents should not be included in the catechumenate with the unbaptized or with Christians seeking full communion with the Church.

32. Men and women returning to the full practice of the faith after a considerable absence usually need catechetical updating. More importantly, they may need an opportunity to hear the Gospel proclaimed anew and help in integrating their personal experience with the faith of the Church. This does not imply the designing of a new parish program so much as it calls for new, creative pastoral approaches and further reflection on how we can best serve the spiritual needs of returning Catholics.

Children and First Confession

33. Throughout their catechetical formation, children should be helped to understand the mystery of reconciliation that is at the heart of the Church's identity and mission. Within this broader perspective children
should be led to understand and appreciate the place of the Sacrament of Penance in their lives. “Catechesis for children must always respect the natural disposition, ability, age, and circumstances of individuals. It seeks, first, to make clear the relationship of the sacrament to the child’s life; second, to help the child recognize moral good and evil, repent of wrongdoing, and turn for forgiveness to Christ and the Church; third, to encourage the child to see that, in this sacrament, faith is expressed by being forgiven and forgiving; fourth, to encourage the child to approach the sacrament freely and regularly.” (Sharing the Light of Faith, National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States, 126).

34. Directives for Children’s First Confession:

A. The Sacrament of Penance should be celebrated prior to the child’s first reception of the Eucharist (c. 914; NCD, 126)

B. Formal instruction for the Sacrament must be separate and distinct from preparation for the first reception of Eucharist so that the integrity of each sacrament is maintained. This formal instruction should begin by the first grade and continue throughout the child’s school years. Prior to their first experience of the Sacrament of Penance, children should communally celebrate on various occasions throughout the year the Father’s willingness to forgive.

C. It would be well if the child’s first experience with the Sacrament of Penance occurred within a communal setting. All celebrations of reconciliation with children should be well planned and respect the liturgical integrity of the rite. As with adults, children have the right to celebrate the sacrament face-to-face or from behind a screen. Children should always be free to choose their own confessor.

D. The parent’s right and responsibility to direct the religious formation of their children must be safeguarded and enhanced. For this reason, preparation for first reception of the sacrament should involve the parents and provide guidance to them is helping prepare their children.

E. Implementation of the norm requires that children be offered a genuine opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance prior to the celebration of the Eucharist. It is the responsibility of the pastor and his staff to explain to the parents the Church’s discipline in regard to first confession before first Communion and the catechetical reasons for it. Such an explanation should help the parents understand the values underlying the norm. It is important that both parents and children correctly understand the nature of sin and forgiveness. The sacrament is not intended to be an experience of a judgment that condemns but of a love that pardons.

F. In those cases in which a child, because of exceptional reasons and under the guidance of his or her parents, chooses not to receive the Sacrament of Penance, he or she should not be deprived of the right to make First Holy Communion. It is important that the child be encouraged to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance later so that he or she will not be deprived of it altogether.