

In the majority of cases, the 2nd Rite is used for children's first celebration of the Sacrament, though in a few parishes the 1st Rite is used. A few priests believed the 3rd Rite is the most suitable for introducing young children to the Sacrament and encouraging renewed participation in the Sacrament by their families.

Generally the priests were pleased with the processes used by the PSTs in the preparation of the children and the participation of some, though not all the parents. Both the priests and the PSTs thought that much more needs to be done to acquaint parents with the current understanding and practice of the Sacrament.

Difficulties encountered by PSTs

- * Parents' fear of the Sacrament and the negative impact their fear/attitudes can have on their children.
- * Problems associated with getting to sessions e.g. organising care for smaller children;
- * Concern about the lack of awareness in some children of what they are doing;
- * The difficulty of developing a sense of responsibility in children for their own choices;
- * The availability of priests for the celebration of the Second Rite;
- * The detrimental effects of the long wait during the Second Rite.

Specific suggestions made by PSTs

- * Raise the age for Reconciliation to 3rd class with First Holy Communion the following year.
- * Have follow-up sessions in later years to build on the knowledge gained.
- * Make Christian formation for parents a priority.

Reflections of the Working Party

The Working Party recognises that many people have taken advantage of the survey to record accounts of past hurts associated with the Sacrament of Penance. These have coloured their approach to the Sacrament over many years. For many people, today's communal Rites are far less threatening and confronting and are therefore favoured. Many mentioned the support experienced through participation in the communal Rites, noting the sense of unity and solidarity they provide. A minority view was that the Second Rite was a "soft option".

The findings reveal that the Sacrament of Penance is fast fading from Catholic practice except where opportunities are offered for the 3rd Rite and to a lesser extent the 2nd Rite. Church leadership needs to hear what the majority of people are saying if the Sacrament of Penance is not to be lost to the coming generations.

The surveys called repeatedly for more education and explanation of the Sacrament. Formation to develop a more mature understanding and appreciation of the Sacrament of Penance in the adult community is a priority. How to do this is the question. One possibility could be to make the Sacrament of Penance the theme for next year's Lenten programmes throughout the diocese.

Currently the trend in our parishes is to prepare parents to prepare children for the Sacraments. The surveys show that this approach is leading us to prepare children for 'one-off' Sacraments rather than initiate them into a family/communal faith that is an ongoing way of life. The Young Adults survey showed that for many their First Reconciliation was their one and only Reconciliation. This is a cause for regret.

Many respondents noted the difficulty concerning the availability of priests for the communal Rites. This leads the Working Party to recommend that parishes become familiar with the Penitential Services that are offered in the Ritual for Penance and consider their regular use during the year and also to explore all possibilities for using the 3rd Rite.



**DIOCESE OF MAITLAND - NEWCASTLE
SACRAMENT OF PENANCE WORKING PARTY**



Why This Survey?

It happened as a result of **Recommendation 5.1** following the 2004/05 Diocesan Assembly.

It said, in part: "the Diocesan Pastoral Council is to establish a working party to **assist the community to develop its understanding of the Sacrament of Penance**, its place in the life of individuals and the community and the way it and other penitential services are celebrated."

It also stated that the working party **review the practice** of the introduction of the Sacrament of Reconciliation to children – in our diocese and in other dioceses in Australia /Overseas.

Develop a diocesan policy statement regarding the introduction of the Sacrament of Reconciliation that aligns with the Sacraments of Initiation policy.

Develop a discussion paper that allows people to discuss contemporary issues.

Promote a broader understanding of God's forgiveness.



Different survey forms were distributed to four particular groups across the community: **General Parishioners, Parish Sacramental Teams, Young Adults and Diocesan Clergy.** Each survey asked questions specific to the age or ministry of those being surveyed, plus questions that were common to all surveys.

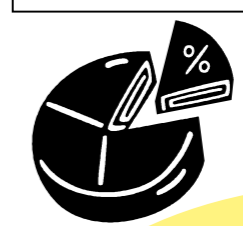
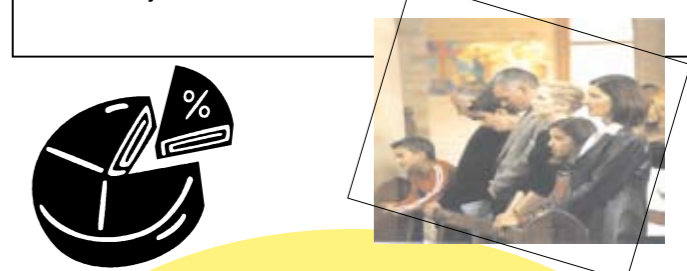
The survey findings are not usually offered in the form of statistical record. Rather, they seek to give broad feedback on the actual state of the Sacrament of Penance in the life of the Catholic community of the Maitland-Newcastle diocese at this time.

2006 SURVEYS FINDINGS

Last year all members of the Diocesan community were invited to participate in a survey about their present understanding and experience of the Sacrament of Penance. Respondents were also invited to offer suggestions for enhancing the celebration of this Sacrament.

The survey was an initiative of the **Sacrament of Penance Working Party** which was formed by the **Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC)** to begin addressing the significant issues addressed in Recommendation 5.1. These concerned children's introduction to the Sacrament of Penance and the loss of the Third Rite of Reconciliation.

After considerable discussion, the Working Party became convinced that concerns about children's celebration of the Sacrament of Penance could not be addressed in isolation from, or in disregard of, pressing issues related to the present practice of this Sacrament by adult Catholics. The Working Party therefore decided to survey diocesan members in the hope of raising awareness of these issues so all in the community can face them.



Who Responded ?

523 people responded to one of the 4 survey forms. This represents only a very small fraction of those Catholics who actively worship in the community and an even smaller percentage of the wider Catholic community of 150,000 Catholics.

Does the fact that so few parishioners completed the surveys reflect a loss of value of this Sacrament in the lives of Catholics today?

Parishioners Survey : 264 respondents

Most were over 60 and female;
 only 4% were aged between 21 and 40;
 responses ranged from as many as 40 in one parish to a single digit return from a number of parishes.
 No responses were received from a number of parishes.

Young Adults survey : 235 respondents

These were sent to the diocesan high schools for Year 12 students, to Antioch groups and to parishes.
 4 schools provided 213 returns, about one quarter of which evidenced serious consideration.
 A further 22 responses were received from 7 parish and Antioch groups.

Diocesan Clergy survey :
16 priests responded to a very detailed questionnaire

Sacramental Teams survey :
25 team members responded from 13 parishes.

Re attendance: Typical response from clergy for 1st Rite: "almost too small to measure"; for 2nd Rite as low as 5% & no higher than 35% of regular practising Catholics.

WHY the Decline in the use of the Sacrament of Penance

Despite the survey's limitations, given the relatively small number of respondents, there is general recognition in the returns that the Sacrament of Penance, or rather its celebration, is in decline. As one priest said, *Most parishioners 'ignore the Sacrament and do not place value on it', except in cases of serious sin, or after they have been away from the church for many years. There are many and varied reasons for this development, including:*

- A number of responses evidenced distressing memories of the Sacrament;
- Many commented on the lack of availability and opportunity to celebrate the Sacrament because of unsuitable times and/or the unavailability of priests especially for the Second Rite;
- Experiences of the need for reconciling in human living and relating were not seen as having anything to do with the Church.
- The reality that most people do not participate in the Sacrament could mean that they have grown more confident in God's love and forgiveness, but it could also mean that people have become anaesthetised to discussions of sin and a sense of sin. (Clergy response)

What People Believe

The responses from across the four surveys showed a similarity in their key beliefs about the sacrament. Respondents believed that the Sacrament of Penance was about

- being sorry for sin, receiving God's forgiveness, being healed;
- making a new start, re-directing one's life and repairing relationships;
- being relieved of worries and freedom from guilt;
- becoming close to a compassionate God;
- fostering a sense of belonging in the community especially in the 2nd Rite where people together experienced forgiveness;
- enabling the Church to address the notion of communal sin.

A small number said that:

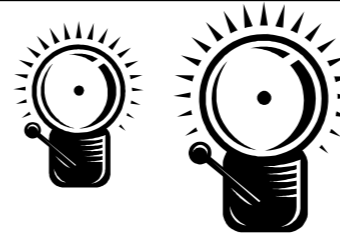
- the Sacrament is necessary before receiving Holy Communion;
- personal prayer is sufficient so why is there need for a mediator in the person of the priest?
- The sacrament has very little benefit for the community



Past experiences: Often described as unpleasant, frightening (especially the confessional box) and at times, damaging.

Current experiences, especially of the Second Rite were described as welcoming, less confronting, putting more emphasis on God's love and forgiveness. They were more encouraging, and built on the positives.

While many praised the priests for their kindness and understanding, others said that the recent scandals concerning priests have lessened trust in their confessors. There was a call across all four surveys for more education and explanation of the Sacrament so people can see it in a more positive light and move beyond childhood understandings and practices that still influence many adults today.



Large numbers of parishioners favoured the Second Rite, with some people saying that they do not frequent the Sacrament at all because the Second Rite is not offered in their area. Others would use the Third Rite if it were available, believing it to be more meaningful and joyful. A number favoured the First Rite saying it provided an opportunity for more time to discuss problems and seek direction.

Rites of Reconciliation

Most priests seem regretful, but not unduly alarmed, at the under-utilisation of the First Rite. They are clearly concerned about the low level of participation in the Second Rite especially by younger members. Most believe the Rite does have potential to be a valuable experience of Christ's healing, but they have many concerns, especially the present difficulty in trying to secure sufficient priests to conduct Second Rite liturgies, a difficulty which can only be expected to worsen. Some respondents also called attention to the impoverishment and trivialisation of the Sacramental experience in superficial liturgies.

Half of the priests who responded to the survey were very much in favour of the Third Rite, most noting that they were impressed by the number of Catholics who participate in the Sacrament of Penance through this Rite. The other half of the respondents was well disposed to using the Third Rite, under certain conditions. These included the agreement of the bishop for such practice and the provision of sound formation in the diocese before the general use of the Rite.

Children and the Sacrament

Parish sacramental team (PST) members pointed out that, as the preparation proceeded, children's understanding of the Sacrament grew in proportion to their age. Most children's understanding included some of the following:

- The notion that wrong choices can hurt others;
- Their need to: tell God they are sorry for hurting others; ask Jesus to help them to be better; be forgiven for the wrong things they have done;
- It is good to make up and be friends again when they have hurt others.

To quote some PST members, "Some children understand but most don't know what sin is and they want to know *how* and *why* and *what* they have to confess." This comment was echoed in some responses from the young adult survey. Some of them spoke of their being *made* to participate in the Sacrament, usually implying their regret at the situation; as something that they *had* to do and also the confessing of trivial matters simply because they had to *say something*. It raises the question of sin and how to approach it with children.