



The Diocese of
Southwark

Hearing confessions

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Hearing confessions

Objectives

- A better understanding of the sacrament of confession and its place in the life of the church
- Implications for children and adults at risk of harm

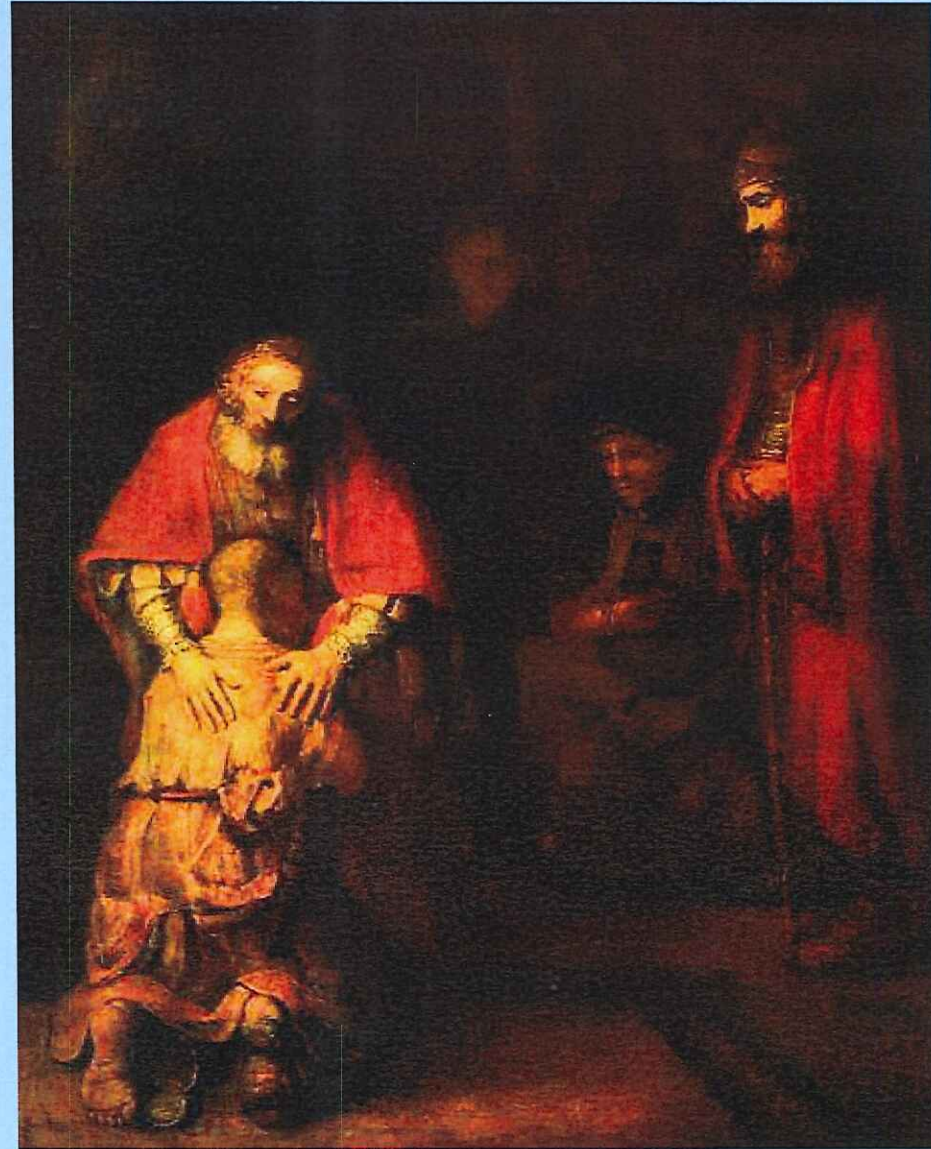
Content

- The theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- Ways to celebrate the sacrament
- The issue of confidentiality in relation to safeguarding issues.



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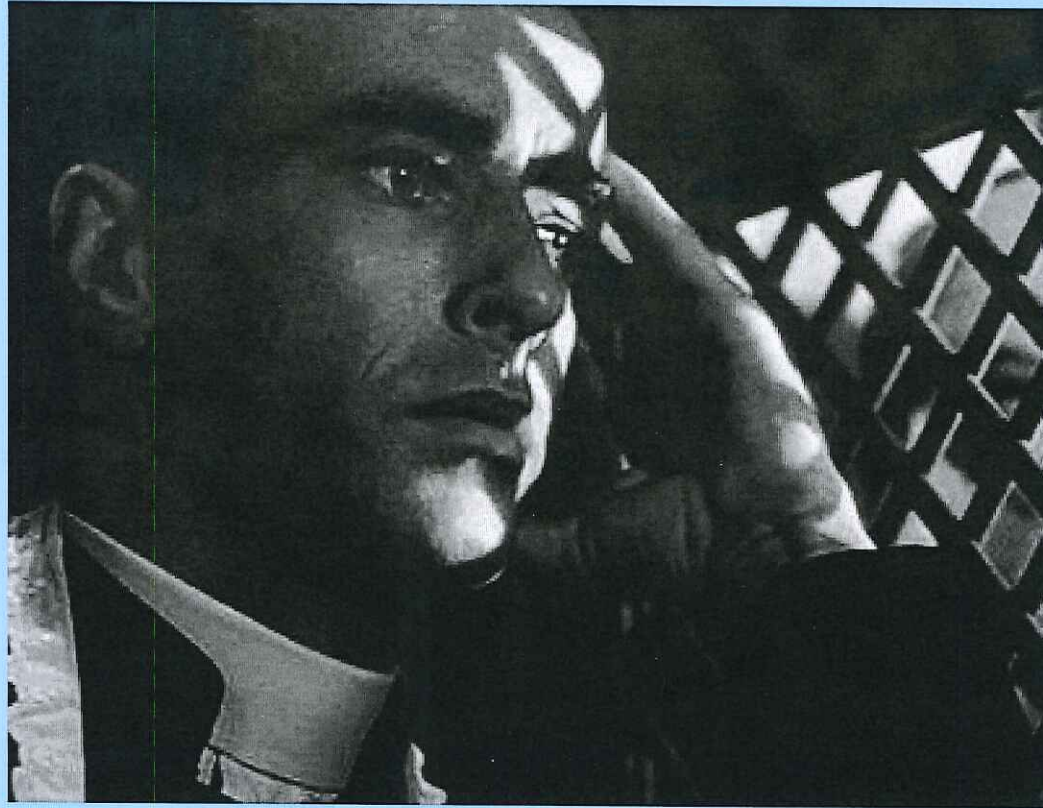
Scripture





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Tradition





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Practice





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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Diocesan policy [*A Safe Church, p 6-19*]

- Canon law constrains a priest from disclosing details of any crime or offence which is revealed in the course of formal sacramental confession
- There is some doubt as to whether this absolute privilege is consistent with the civil law



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Diocesan policy [*A Safe Church, p 6-19*]

- If a penitent discloses information about his or her own criminal or abusive behaviour, the priest should urge the person to report it to the police or social care services themselves
- The priest may judge it necessary to withhold absolution until this evidence of repentance has been demonstrated.



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Diocesan policy [*A Safe Church, p 6-19*]

- It is important to distinguish between what is heard in formal sacramental confession...and disclosures made in pastoral situations.
- It is helpful if sacramental confessions are normally heard at advertised times, and by other arrangement, or in some way differentiated from a general pastoral conversation or a meeting for spiritual direction.



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Church of England policy

[Protecting All God's Children 4th edition 2010, p 35]

- Exactly as above, and in addition:
- For formal confession, a stole might be worn and a liturgy should be used.
- When a penitent's own behaviour is at issue, the priest may consider it necessary to alert the bishop to his or her decision in order to safeguarding himself or herself, and seek advice on the issues, though the penitent's details would not be shared without their permission. The priest may also judge it appropriate to encourage the penitent to speak personally to the bishop.



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Confidentiality [A Safe Church p 6-17]

What is confidential information?

- Not already lawfully in the public domain
- Not useless or trivial
- Given in circumstances reasonably understood as confidential
- Breached when not authorised by the giver.



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

When can confidential information be shared?

- With consent
- Without consent if :
 - child or adult at risk of significant harm
 - prevention, detection and prosecution of serious crime is prejudiced
 - would lead to unjustified delay in making enquiries about allegations of significant harm
- Extended confidentiality, for advice
- If unsure, consult with DSA.



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Encountering Vulnerability

Information sharing

- Always seek to be honest and open about sharing information, unless where this may put someone at risk or undermine the prevention, detection or prosecution of a serious crime
- Respect confidentiality BUT remember that the law expects disclosure of confidential information when a child or vulnerable adult is at risk of significant harm



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Record keeping [*A Safe Church p 4-45*]

- Keep recording factual and accurate
- Avoid writing your opinion, or qualify as such
- Record all actions and decisions
- Record who knows about the information
- If the person about whom you have made a record is unaware of the record's existence, make it clear in your recording why you have not told them
- Always sign and date each hard copy of recording
- Retain records securely, identify and limit circulation on need to know basis.



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Hearing confessions and safeguarding

Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser

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Hearing Confessions and safeguarding

Case studies

- 1 You have prepared candidates for confirmation; as part of your preparation, candidates have the opportunity to make their first confession prior to confirmation. Jess, aged 13, has been a quiet and serious member of your confirmation group, eager to please. In her first formal confession, she discloses that her father comes to her bedroom and has sex with her, and she has not told her mother. This information is completely new to you.

How would you respond?

- 2 Stephen is one of your churchwardens. Encouraged by his wife, he makes a time to see you alone at your vicarage. After a lot of stumbling, he breaks down in tears and tells you that he has sexually abused his stepdaughter. Your church does not offer formal confession. The circumstances are reasonably assumed by Stephen to be confidential.

How would you respond?

- 3 Maeve finds your details from an internet search and emails you to ask if you will hear her confession. You arrange a time to meet in your church. There is no-one else in the building. You are uncomfortable about her apparent fixation on priests, her body language, and that in her confession she refers to a disciplinary action being taken against a priest in a neighbouring diocese.

Are their protection issues for clergy? – if so, how would you follow this up?

- 4 Belinda confesses in formal confession to beating her children aged 2 and 4 with a belt, because she can't control them, and refers to thoughts of driving off a cliff with them because she can't cope.

How would you respond?

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

Confidentiality and care during the session
Hopes for the session.

This is a clear and special priestly task.

In the BCP it was very clear in the ordinal of Priests that this was a defining feature of their ministry.

RECEIVE the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In the CW Ordination prayer it is less prominent but there

*May they declare your blessings to your people;
may they proclaim Christ's victory over the powers of darkness,
and absolve in Christ's name those who turn to him in faith;*

And in the preface to the Declarations

Formed by the word, they are to call their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins.

It is therefore a defining ministry which Christ has given to priests.

The theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

1. Baptism deals with sin – but the reality of sin.
2. The sacrament therefore deals with Post-baptismal sin – the sacrament of reconciliation therefore restores baptismal purity.

Scripture

There is a large amount of material in the New Testament around the issue of the forgiveness of sins.

1. often associated with healing - Mark 2.9 NB this has serious implications pastorally

2. is an element within the Lord's Prayer – Matthew 6.9-15
3. there is no limit to the number of times that forgiveness can and should be given - Matthew 18.22
4. the ministry of forgiveness is given to the apostles by Christ - John 20.23; Matthew 16.9
5. Paul says Christian ministry is that of reconciliation- 2 Corinthians 5.18-19

All this does not imply that reconciliation is a sacrament as all these texts may refer to baptism.

A second strand in the New Testament is confession before the rest of the community

1. must be post baptismal sins - James 5.16
2. dealing with sin in the community - Matthew 18.15-18 NB Matthew was writing when the church was beginning to exist in a recognisable form

Another factor that has to be taken into account is the delay in eschaton. This meant that Christians had to reassess living – sin would be inescapable.

Another factor in the early church was the introduction of infant baptism – sins would accumulate.

Finally, there was a distinguishing between the severity of sin - 1 John 5.17

Tradition

In an early document 'The shepherd' attributed to Hermas 2nd century it says that one act of repentance is allowed and that the bishop was the minister. This was in public and involved a penance NB penance does not earn the forgiveness but shows commitment. Penance was often done before absolution rather than after absolution.

Constantine was only baptised on his deathbed because he knew he would sin and so lose baptismal grace.

Confession became private – became routine.

At the Reformation:

1. Luther valued confession
2. In the Church of England The Book of Common Prayer provided for the sacrament of penance on special occasions. It was allowed in such a way that it could not become a habit.
3. The Oxford Movement led to the revival for Catholic Anglicans – but in the face of huge hostility and misunderstanding.
4. The Anglican position is best described as 'none must, all may, some should.'
5. There is also a problem because of the General Confession and Absolution as a norm in Anglican rites – grace on the cheap?

Common Worship

In Common Worship Reconciliation and Restoration are to be found in the *Christian Initiation* volume with the sub heading 'Recovering Baptism'.

There is a useful commentary on page 351-354.

From page 227 onwards there is material for use with groups and individuals.

The provision begins by picking up the early church tradition of corporate confession and then moves to the reconciliation of the individual penitent.

Seal of confession

We will be looking at the issue of the Seal of the Confessional and what this means in practice.

Ways to celebrate the sacrament

1. As a penitential service
2. With an individual

Practical advice

1. Prepare people to make their confession
2. Discernment and awareness of sin – Manuals
3. Choose your space
4. How will you be seated?
5. Will they be kneeling?
6. What will you be wearing?
7. What words will you use?
8. How will you decide on a penance?
9. What happens afterwards?