



How can we offer non churchgoing Catholics authentic paths to reconciliation and conversion?

A practical idea from one parish in the Archdiocese of Birmingham (shared with kind permission with Maryvale Institute by ex students from the Maryvale Catechist course).

Note from the catechists:

Over the years we have been called to prepare children from the parish for the Sacrament of First Reconciliation and Holy Communion. Our group consists of the children who do not go to the Catholic school. Each year the bulk of the group is non churchgoing Catholics and their non churchgoing parents. They bring the children to Baptism and then do not return to the Church again until it is time for the children to take these sacraments. These parents come for a number of reasons, some with a genuine desire to start afresh in the faith, but the most common reasons are:

- † A grandparent reminds them it is time for the child's First Holy Communion
- † The parent wishes their child to go to the Catholic middle and high schools and they want to both get their child into the school and to be assured of a place on the school coach

In the past the children were dropped off by the parents once a week for an hour for six to eight weeks. They often did not come to mass during this period and did not come to the church after receiving the sacraments.

We decided, following our own development in our faith while undergoing the Maryvale Catechist Course, to devise a programme which lasted six months and which included the parents as key participants in the programme.

The parents were told that the programme was for one or both of them as well as their child. They were also told they would be required to bring their children to Mass each week and make themselves know to the priest. It has to be said that this 'telling' was done very gently and in a variety of appropriate ways which at no point was judgmental or even suggesting that they didn't come to Mass. Each parent was treated with the utmost respect.

Format of the sessions:

- † All meet, have refreshments & socialise together
- † Opening prayer together, including a piece of music (e.g. CJM, Matt Maher, Praise and Worship style)
- † Children go to another room for their session
- † Adults have their own session
- † All join together at the end. Catechist explains what the children have done & the task for the week to be done by both parent and child at home (these can be reading, an art project, an act of service...)
- † Closing prayer

The catechist for the parents ran a **pre evangelisation & evangelisation** programme. These have been anything from using appropriate CaFE DVD's to the current group which is using the new Anchor programme. The parents are told that their part of the programme is six weeks in length and will help them to be able to answer any questions their children may have. Catechists emphasise the parents' fundamental role in bringing their children up as Catholics (*Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II).

At the end of the six weeks the parents were given **the option** to just drop their children off or to continue meeting weekly for a programme of catechesis. ***Each year all the parents asked to be able to stay on for catechesis.***

At the end of the whole process a group retreat was held and all the parents without fail remarked that they wanted to continue meeting both as a group and also to join other parish groups for personal ongoing faith formation.

Reconciliation as a turning point

There are other elements not mentioned here, such as the content of the parents and children's programmes as well as the retreat, but what in particular has proved the turning point for all the groups has been the evening of the children's sacrament of first reconciliation.

Below is a copy of one example of the children's penitential service used, and the parents are told the children will have the Rite of Reconciliation on laminated cards, and that after the children have received the sacrament, the parents are welcome to use this opportunity to go too (*this always happens in **Lent** so they at no time are made to feel the catechists may think they do not frequent this sacrament, indeed, the catechists simply say it will be quicker than going for the Lenten penitential service!*).

However, the catechists ask the parent to go up with the children's sheets 'so that the children do not feel embarrassed that they do not know or might forget the order of the rite and the right words. This means that the *parents who are worried they do not remember the order of the Rite, or the words to use* (such a common reason for people not coming back to the sacrament) all have this opportunity without embarrassment, worry or fear. The catechists will also go to Confession **as a witness to the children.**

Each year, without fail, **all the parents have gone to confession in this way** and all have then ***excitedly*** talked in the following parents session how ***wonderful*** it was and admit (without being asked at all!) that it has been 20 or more years since they last went!

Windows of Opportunity

In our parish, we feel there are windows of opportunity to engage with non churchgoing Catholics and evangelise and catechise them. Acknowledging our sin and realising this makes us no different from anyone else is ***liberating*** and ***healing***. To be able to receive the ***grace*** personally which flows through the sacraments has proven ***transformational*** not just for them as families, as individuals, but also as a whole community within the wider Church.

Penitential Service for the Sacrament of First
Reconciliation for Children.

Introductory Rite



Opening Hymn e.g. Take O Take me as I am

Sign of the Cross

Greeting

Priest: Grace and peace be with you
from God the Father
and from the Lord Jesus Christ
who laid down his life for our sins.

All: And also with you,

Opening Prayer

Father of mercies
and God of all consolation,
you do not wish the sinner to die
but to be converted and live.
Come to the aid of your people,
that they may turn from their sins
and live for you alone.
May we be attentive to your word,
confess our sins, receive your forgiveness,
and be always grateful for your loving kindness.
Help us to live the truth in love
and grow into the fullness of Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

All: Amen.

Celebration of the Word of God

A reading taken from the gospel of Luke Chapter 15 verses 11-24

¹¹Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'
²⁰So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'^[a]

²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Homily

Short period of silence

Catechist: I'd like you all to close your eyes and sit very quietly. As we look inside ourselves I want you to think of the sins you have committed.

Have I forgotten to pray?

Have I been impatient?

Have I hurt anyone by my own actions?

Have I told lies?

Have I been disobedient to my parents?

Have I played unfairly at school, at games?

Do I argue?

The Rite of Reconciliation

When the priest is ready, the first child will go up.



You may like to put on some quiet reflective music during this time. For example an instrumental version of Ubi Caritas or other Taize music works well with children and their parents in creating a prayerful and respectful atmosphere.

Concluding Prayer of Thanksgiving

Priest God and Father of us all,
 you have forgiven our sins
 and sent us your peace.
 Help us to forgive each other
 and to work together to establish peace in the world.
 We ask this...

Dismissal

Priest: The Lord has freed you from your sins.
Go in peace

All: Thanks be to God.



Concluding Song

e.g. God forgave my sin in Jesus' name

Used and adapted by the catechists from a parish in Birmingham

Adult Examination of Conscience.

These will vary depending on the group in question and their life stages.

For people who have been away from the church for a long time, **it is crucial to make them feel welcome and to celebrate their return.** When catechising, encourage the person to examine their conscience at the end of each day.

To help them, suggest they think through the Ten Commandments and see how they have measured up to them in that day.

Please note: *In the following examination of conscience, there are many examples given for each commandment. **It is not intended that a person would be given all of this!** The person doing the outreach, evangelisation and catechesis will judge which examples would be most helpful for each person they know. This is purely an example of a wide variety of things which could be included. There are many books and websites which can give many ideas both of what to include in such an examination or how to prepare a group examination of conscience prior to the sacrament of reconciliation.*

First Commandment

I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.

Have I:

Loved something more than God
Rejected the Catholic faith?
Rejected God
Not stood up for Christ?

Second Commandment

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have I...

- Used the name of God as a swear word?
- Spoken about the Faith, the Church, the saints, or sacred things in a bad way?
- Used vulgar, suggestive or obscene language?
- Belittled others in my speech?

Third Commandment

Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.

Have I...

- Set time aside each day for personal prayer to God?
- Missed Mass on Sunday or Holy Days (through own fault)
- Not taken my children to Mass?
- Eaten or drunk within one hour of receiving Communion (other than medical need)? * *this is also a good way to catechise on the sacredness of the Holy Eucharist*

Fourth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother.

Have I...

- Neglected the needs of my parents in their old age?
- Neglected to give my children proper food, clothing, shelter, education, discipline and care?
- Provided for the religious education and formation of my children?
- Provided my children with a positive education in the Catholic teaching on human sexuality?
- Been to my children a good example of how to live the Catholic Faith?
- Prayed with and for my children?

Fifth Commandment

You shall not kill.

Have I...

- Verbally or emotionally abused another person?
- Purposely provoked another by teasing?
- Recklessly endangered my life or health?
- Driven recklessly or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs?
- Abused alcohol or other drugs?
- Sold or given drugs to others?
- Refused to control my temper?
- Been mean to, quarreled with, or willfully hurt someone?
- Been unforgiving to others?
- Sought revenge or hoped something bad would happen to someone?
- Delighted to see someone else get hurt or suffer?
- Treated animals cruelly, causing them to suffer or die needlessly?

- Unjustly and intentionally killed a human being?
- Been involved in an abortion, directly or indirectly (through advice, etc.)?
- Seriously considered or attempted suicide?
- Supported, promoted or encouraged the practice of assisted suicide or mercy killing?
- Deliberately desired to kill an innocent human being?
- Unjustly inflicted bodily harm on another person?
- Unjustly threatened another person with bodily harm?

Sixth & Ninth Commandments

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

Have I...

- Practiced the virtue of chastity?
- Given in to lust?
- Used an artificial means of birth control?
- Refused to be open to conception, without just cause? (*Catechism*, 2368)
- Claimed my own marital right without concern for my spouse?
- Purchased, viewed, or made use of pornography?
- Watched movies and television that involve sex and nudity?
- Listened to music or jokes that are harmful to purity?
- Committed adultery?
- Purposely dressed immodestly?

Seventh & Tenth Commandments

You shall not steal.

You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

Have I...

- Stolen?
- Envied others on account of their possessions?
- Given generously to others in need?
- Considered that God has provided me with money so that I might use it to benefit others, as well as for my own legitimate needs?
- Deliberately defaced, destroyed or lost another's property?
- Cheated on a test, taxes, sports, games, or in business?
- Make a false claim to an insurance company?
- Paid my employees a living wage, or failed to give a full day's work for a full day's pay?
- Misused natural resources?

Eighth Commandment

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Have I...

- Lied?
- Knowingly and willfully deceived another?
- Gossiped?
- Betrayed another's confidence through speech?

