

SCHEDULE

Panel 4.2: The Sacrament of Reconciliation

To what extent has the operation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions or affected the institutional response to this abuse?

It seems to me that it is almost impossible to answer this question – for two principal reasons:

1. Apart from anecdotal evidence there is no evidence empirically verifiable concerning the connection between the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the occurrence of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions. This is primarily due to the traditional understanding of the “seal” of confession as it has been practised in the Catholic Church.
2. It is my understanding that “true” pedophiles have no awareness of the evil of their actions. They are fundamentally amoral and do not see they have anything to confess to a priest and so would be unlikely to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To my knowledge use of the confessional to present cases of sexual abuse where the penitent is either a perpetrator or a victim is relatively rare.

For these reasons I believe the Sacrament of Reconciliation has not contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions or affected the institutional response to this abuse. Factors operating in the church outside the sacrament are more significant.

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Key Understandings regarding Sacrament of Reconciliation

- The sacramental seal is inviolable (Canon 983, 1)
- The “confession of sins” in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is distinct from and should be separated from “spiritual direction” and “counselling”.

Pastoral Practice and Protocols

- The Sacrament of Reconciliation is normally celebrated in the place designated in the local church (the “confessional”).
- When approached in the presbytery to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation the priest, where possible, will direct the penitent to the church and will vest in alb and stole for the celebration of the sacrament.
- To clearly distinguish the celebration of the sacrament the use of the ritual should make clear when the sacramental celebration begins and concludes. This establishes and ensures that the exchange between penitent and confessor is under the seal.

- Where sins of sexual abuse are divulged in the course of the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation the confessor should withhold and/or postpone absolution urging the penitent (whether perpetrator or victim) to bring the sins of abuse into the external forum where further action can be taken.

Laurence J. McNamara