



Renewed

Your Journey to First Reconciliation

FIRST RECONCILIATION RETREAT

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Introduction

We are very excited to share this retreat resource with you as part of your students' overall preparation for their first Reconciliation. A retreat is an occasion to step away from the busyness of our everyday lives so that we can focus on the voice of God stirring in our hearts. Some retreats can be lengthy—like the standard thirty-day version of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Don't panic though—this one is closer to three hours. It is designed for little souls with big energy to provide a way for them to connect more deeply with Jesus as they prepare to receive his forgiveness and mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This retreat features rotating stations, with a larger gathering at the beginning and end of the retreat. This structure is similar to the way many groups run vacation Bible school. The different stations allow for a more focused and interactive experience, with plenty of movement and activity to keep your young students engaged. Here we are providing a menu of options and suggestions so that you can tailor the retreat to the particular needs and resources of your parish.

The five stations are:

- Crafts
- Games and interactive activities
- Snack time
- Practice
- Prayer

Larger groups may find it helpful to duplicate some stations and station leaders. Larger groups may also wish to have a small group leader for each group of students. Smaller groups may opt to simplify the schedule to keep the students in one group and run through the morning station by station.

This retreat guide will give you several options for each of the stations and is written with a range of parishes in mind. We know that, especially with interactive activities that have moving parts, there isn't always a one-size-fits-all solution. Feel free to pick what works best for your parish, your team, and your available space.

These retreats can be experienced by the students alone or by students with one or both parents. The size and culture of programs will vary, but the retreats are designed with both options in mind.

Check In

Roll out the red carpet and make the check-in experience upbeat and welcoming. Consider having some music playing and have your team ready to go with smiles, clear directions, and a welcoming tone. Even if your group is smaller and they are familiar with one another, consider using name tags that indicate which group each student will be part of.

If you are going to include parents in the retreat, plan hospitality. Consider providing coffee, tea, baked goods, and healthy snacks. This can be set up by your team, or you can create a sign-up form for parents to bring something. Having a hospitality spread can make a big difference in establishing a welcoming tone that draws parents into active participation. Students should be familiar with one another, but this may be one of the first times that parents are meeting. To help with community building, plan for name tags and ensure that parents know where to go. You could have a printed list of questions available at the tables to encourage conversation.

Greeting

Take some time to set the tone for the day. Note how exciting it is to prepare for First Reconciliation. Tell your students that today is a day to take some time away to really focus and prepare. Ask them to put away all distractions and thoughts about what might happen later so that they can make room for Jesus in their hearts.

At this point, or during check-in, you may want to hand out a retreat schedule. This will be especially helpful if you are including parents, to give them a sense of the order of events and let them know what is available for them to take part in. You can also include things like the opening prayer and retreat rules.

Opening Prayer

Setting a prayerful tone that connects with your very active group is important. Here is a sample opening prayer:

**Lord Jesus, we offer this day to you.
We remember that you are faithful.
Help us to enter into this retreat.
Teach us new things that open our minds and
hearts to your mercy and forgiveness.
Help us to put aside all distractions, and fill our souls
with a deep and profound sense of your unfailing love.
Amen.**

Retreat Rules

Clear rules, boundaries, and consequences are vital to a smooth retreat. These should be delivered in a way that flows from hospitality, reminding the children that rules protect us all and ensure that we all get the most out of the day.

Sample Rules:

TALK

Treat others with respect.

Ask for help when you need it.

Listen to the leaders.

Keep an open mind and heart.

Retreat Schedule

Check in	15 MIN.
Welcome	15 MIN.
<i>Move to first station</i>	5 MIN.
First rotation	20 MIN.
<i>Rotate</i>	5 MIN.
Second rotation	20 MIN.
<i>Rotate</i>	5 MIN.
Third rotation	20 MIN.
<i>Rotate</i>	5 MIN.
Fourth rotation	20 MIN.
<i>Rotate</i>	5 MIN.
Fifth rotation	20 MIN.
<i>Return to main gathering area</i>	5 MIN.
Closing	15 MIN.

Station 1: Crafts

The craft station is always a favorite. The crafts we make help us teach and model sacramentality—how invisible things are seen through visible signs. Crafts are also signs of how God invites us into his own creativity!

We have detailed a number of possibilities for the craft station. While this isn't an exhaustive list, these are some tried and true favorites. The key is for the craft to be a special take-away for your children. Here are some things to consider, no matter which craft you pick:

- Have a catechist construct the craft ahead of time and talk about it before the activity begins. This can be a chance to share their own experience with Reconciliation and will also serve as a general introduction to the craft.
- Consider praying over the crafts once they are finished. You can do this each time students visit the station, or you can pray over all the crafts when you hand them out at the end of the retreat.
- Be sure to label the crafts so they don't get mixed up. Preprinted labels can be really helpful.
- Have extra helpers at this station, if possible, and remember that your students have a range of abilities. Some might need some extra attention and special care to put their craft together, while others will be very independent.

If you need extra volunteers at this station, it might be helpful to have each parent work on the craft with their child. There are a few tricky steps that parents could be very helpful with if you do not have enough volunteers or if you do not have adequate time to prepare the craft materials.

Alternatively, if you feel it would be better for the leaders and more beneficial for parents, you can have a separate session for parents to attend. For this first session, talk to your priest ahead of time about offering parents an opportunity for Adoration and Confession. Otherwise, consider giving parents a list of questions to reflect on, perhaps including these:

- How has preparing your child for the Sacrament of Reconciliation opened your mind to the benefits and rewards of the sacrament?
- Once your child receives Reconciliation for the first time, is there anything you can do at home to ensure this will become a lifelong habit?
- Think about the way Jesus views your child. Consider what he wants them to feel when they receive First Reconciliation. How can you ensure that your child is focused on the loving gaze of Jesus instead of worrying about what the priest will think of their sins.

Adoration and Confession can be helpful to set the tone for the day, as they settle the minds and hearts of the parents who just rushed to the retreat and are just happy that they made it on time. Adoration and Confession can last 20 minutes to correspond to the students' first session or 40 minutes to run throughout the first two sessions.

Option 1: Confession at Your Fingertips

Theme: This lesson will review with students the steps to making a good confession and can help them to feel prepared for the actual process. Students are often afraid that they will forget what to say when they go before the priest. It can be helpful to remind them that the priest has heard many confessions and will help them if they forget what to say.

Steps can be adjusted, and more steps can be added to fit your needs.

Prepare: Each student will need a piece of construction paper, scissors, a pencil, markers, and crayons. Glue and decorative art gems are optional.

Direct: Ask students to trace their hand onto the construction paper and cut it out. Tell students to write a step of Confession on each finger. If you need more than five steps, students can use the front and back of the hand. Alternatively, they can write the steps of Reconciliation on the front of the hand and the rewards of Reconciliation on the back.

Rewards: Sins are forgiven, experience the love and mercy of God, strength to resist temptation, experience peace, conversion of heart.

If parents are being included, ask them to trace their child's hands and guide their child in using the scissors.

	SAMPLE 1	SAMPLE 2
Thumb	Sit or kneel	Make the Sign of the Cross
Index finger	Name your sins	Name your sins
Middle finger	Receive your penance	Receive your penance
Ring finger	Receive your absolution	Say an Act of Contrition
Little finger	Dismissal	Receive absolution
Palm	Rejoice!	Say or do your penance

	SAMPLE 3	
	FRONT	BACK
Thumb	Sit or kneel	Say an Act of Contrition
Index finger	Say "Hello, Father"	Receive your penance
Middle finger	Make the Sign of the Cross	Receive absolution
Ring finger	Say "Bless me, Father"	Say "Thank you, Father"
Little finger	Name your sins	Say or do your penance
Palm	Say "I am sorry for my sins"	Rejoice!

Option 2: Let His Light Shine

Theme: Tell the students that when we sin, our souls are darkened, and we need the Sacrament of Reconciliation to wipe away the sin and allow God's love and mercy to shine through. This suncatcher heart will hang in their window at home. Whenever they see the sunlight shining through the tissue paper, they will remember God's love and mercy shining through them when they receive Reconciliation.

Materials: For this craft, you will need colored tissue paper, colored paper or card stock (8½ x 11 inches), contact paper, ribbon (thin), scissors, a hole punch, and a heart stencil made of card stock, which you can make using a cookie cutter or an online image. Cut tissue paper into small pieces (approximately 1 inch squares).

Prepare: Take one sheet of colored paper, fold it in half horizontally, and cut on the fold line. Using the half sheet of paper, place the heart stencil in the center and trace around it using a pencil. Using scissors, cut out the heart you just traced, leaving about a half-inch border around all sides. Cut from the center to avoid separating the edge of the paper. When you are finished, cut out the shape of the heart and keep the frame. Now cut two pieces of contact paper that are slightly larger than the heart you just drew. Once the student places tissue paper squares on the contact paper, use the second piece of contact paper to cover the back of the heart.

Direct: Tell students to stick the pieces of tissue paper onto the sticky part of the contact paper over the heart. When students are finished, place another piece of contact on top of the heart and trim any remaining contact paper off the sides of the heart. Punch a hole in the heart at the top and thread it with ribbon for hanging.

If parents are helping with the craft, direct them to guide their child in using the scissors and cutting out the outline of the heart.

Station 2: Games and Interactive Activities

This station is a chance to interact, teach, review, and have fun. We learn, grow, and experience reality through our senses. The activities suggested here will engage your students on different levels—through sight, imagination, and movement. We recommend that you pick the suggestion that is most suited to the needs of your group.

Once again, if parents are involved, they can be helpful with crowd control during these activities. If you have enough volunteers and don't need extra help, consider extending the time of Adoration and Confession to cover the crafts station and this station. Another option is to use this time to have parents write their child a letter for them to read on the day of their first Reconciliation. Below is a sample letter. This can be handed out to parents as a guide, to get them started. Be sure to have stationary or plain paper available, as well as pens, pencils, and markers too (for the more creative parents).

Dear _____ ,

Congratulations on making your first Reconciliation. We are so proud of you and of how hard you have been working this year to prepare for your sacraments. Jesus is also very proud of you and loves you very much. Always remember that Reconciliation is available to you throughout your life. Never be afraid to turn back to him when you have messed up or done something wrong, no matter how big or bad it seems. He will always welcome you back and wrap you into his loving arms.

Love,

Mom and Dad

Option 1: DISAPPEARING SIN

Theme: Just as plants need sunlight to survive, our souls need the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When we sin, our souls are darkened, and it is hard for us to see and accept God's love and mercy. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Jesus' love and mercy take our sins away and bring us back into the light.

Prepare: You will need the *Renewed* 5.2 video ("Light and Dark") or if video equipment is not available, the session teaching below. You will also need three clear plastic cups, iodine, bleach, water, masking tape or stickers, and a marker to label the cups.

This activity can be done in one large group or adapted for small groups. Make sure each leader has the appropriate materials and a safe surface to work on. All liquids for the experiment should be handled by the retreat leaders or adult volunteers, not by the children.

Experiment Preparation: Take one cup, and label it "OUR SOULS," and fill it about halfway with water. Take a second cup, label it "SIN," and fill it halfway with iodine. Finally, take the third cup, label it "JESUS," and fill it halfway with bleach.

Session Teaching

The Science of Plants

- Start by asking the children a question: What do plants need to grow and survive?
- Explain that plants need water, air, soil, and sunlight to survive.
- Ask children if they have any plants or flowers at home and where they keep these in the house.
- Explain that most plants are kept on a windowsill or other place where they can get enough sunlight. Explain to students that if we put our plants in a dark cabinet or closet, they will start to wither and die.

The Science of Souls

- Explain to children that just as plants need sunlight to survive, our souls need the light of God's love and mercy.
- When we sin, our wills become weak, and our minds are darkened. The darkness of sin hurts our souls. Sin separates us from God, so it becomes easier for us to sin again. We start to wither and fade, like a plant without sunlight.
- In Reconciliation, the light of God's love and mercy shines on us again. Our sins are washed away, our wills are made stronger, and we can clearly see the love and mercy of God.
- We are brought back to the light that feeds our souls so we can live.
- The light of God's mercy is always waiting for us in Reconciliation, just as the sun will always shine on us.
- Tell the students that we are going to do a little experiment to help us see just how much we need God's light. If you are going to watch the *Renewed* 5.2 video, tell the students that we are going to do the same experiment that Felicity did with her family.

The Experiment

- First, show the students the three labeled cups: "OUR SOULS," "SIN," and "JESUS."
- Using a flashlight, point it at the cup "OUR SOULS" and explain that God's love and mercy are always shining on us.
- Carefully pour the cup labeled "SIN" into the cup labeled "OUR SOULS." Shine the flashlight through the dark cup. Explain to students that when we sin, our souls are darkened, and it can be hard for us to see God's love and mercy shining on us.
- Now carefully pour the cup labeled "JESUS" into the now darkened "OUR SOULS" cup. Explain to students that in Reconciliation, Jesus takes away our sins and his love and mercy shine through us again.

Discussion Questions

These can be done as a large group or in small groups. You may wish to consider teaching and discussing in one big group but using smaller groups for the experiment portion.

1. What happens when a plant is kept in the dark? What happens when our soul is kept in the darkness of sin?
2. What happens when a plant is put in the sunlight? What happens when our soul returns to God?

Video Discussion Question

If you are also watching the video, add this question to the two above:

3. What was Felicity's dad explaining with the flashlight and the glass of ink? What does this have to do with our souls, our sins, and Jesus?

Option 2: THE WEIGHT OF SIN

Theme: Instead of trusting God, we sometimes choose to do as we please and disobey God. We do this on purpose even though we know it is wrong. When we sin, we go against God's will. We offend him, and we hurt other people. This can cause us to feel heavy inside and weighed down. In Reconciliation, Jesus takes this weight off us. By dying on the Cross, he took all of our sins on himself.

Prepare: You can have students view the *Renewed* 5.1 video ("Theo's Confession") and answer the discussion questions, or if video equipment is not available, you can opt to use the session teaching below. You will also need a large space where the children can run around. Fill two trash bags with "trash," like old clothes, light books, foam bricks, cardboard boxes, and containers. Students can help with this: write down examples of a sin on each item and toss it into the bag. (You can also throw in a few items with mistakes and see if students recognize that they are not sins.)

Session Teaching

Taking Out the Trash

Have your two trash bags visible front and center to stoke interest and attention. Even consider miming and being playful about the situation to suggest that the trash is smelly, that the bags are too heavy, or even that the floor around the trash is slippery. (Hopefully none of this is actually the case!) Then begin the lesson by asking students a question:

- What happens when we don't take the trash out? They will likely give a wide range of answers like:
 - » "A smell starts to spread."
 - » "The bag gets really full and heavy."
 - » "The bag sometimes leaks and overflows."

- » “Bugs start to get into the trash.”
- » A specific story about something that happened in their family

Allow for several answers, but don't get stuck!

- Explain to children that when we forget to take out the trash, the bag can become stinky, and it gets heavy and weighed down.
- We may try to hide the smell by spraying something that smells good. We may hide the trash so that it is not out in the open, and we forget about it.
- We may even blame someone else for not taking out the trash sooner.
- Do your best to paint a picture in the minds of your students, and keep the connection to sin in mind.

Taking Out the Sins

- Explain to students that what happens when we don't take out the trash is similar to what happens when we don't confess our sins.
- When we do not confess a sin, it weighs us down. It makes us uncomfortable and unhappy. We may try to get rid of it by ourselves. Other times we may stuff it in a closet, under a bed, or somewhere out of sight and out of mind.
 - » Sometimes we try to forget what we did. Sometimes we tell ourselves that what we did was not really a sin. Everything gets complicated.
- After a while, we start to feel weighed down by our sins. We may feel angry inside and sad. It may feel like we are lugging around a big bag of trash.
- We need the Sacrament of Reconciliation to help us take out our sins.
- In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Jesus forgives our sins and washes them away. In other words, he takes out the trash.
- By dying on the Cross for us, Jesus took on the punishment for our sins. Jesus took our bags of sins on his shoulders.
- In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we confess our sins to Jesus, who forgives us and gives us his love and mercy.

Relay Race: Have students line up parallel to each other in two lines. One team will run with the trash bags; the other will run without them. The first person in the trash-bag line holds the bag filled with “sins.” Now the students will compete in a relay race. Each runner on the trash team runs with the bag and then passes it to the next runner, while the other team runs free. When they've finished, have them switch and run the relay race a second time, so the team that was holding the trash bag before runs without it, and vice versa.

This activity is best done in a whole group setting, but it can be adapted for small groups by having students try to do any fun activity while holding the full trash bag, such as jumping jacks, pushups, thumb war, or squats.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you notice while you were running with the trash bag?
2. Was it easier to run with the trash bag or without it?
3. How do you think you will feel after receiving Reconciliation?

Video Discussion Questions

1. How did Theo's sins affect him? What changed in Theo after he confessed his sins?
2. While Theo was waiting in line, he looked at one of the Stations of the Cross. What was happening in that image? Who was in the image and what was he doing?
3. What happens to Theo's sins after he takes them to Reconciliation?

Option 3: Soaked in Mercy

Theme: This lesson will remind students that Jesus washes our sins away in Reconciliation. We are completely free of our sins, and ready to start fresh. Students are encouraged to reflect on the absolution step of Reconciliation. When the priest gives us absolution, our sins are forgiven and completely gone.

Materials: Paper towels (one for each student), permanent markers, different colored washable markers, a large bowl filled with water (or several for a large group).

Prepare: Leaders will draw a heart the size of their hand on each paper towel using a permanent marker. This should be done before the session for a large group. For a small group, it can be done at the start of the session.

Direct: Explain to the students that this heart represents their heart after Baptism, when Original Sin was taken away. It is completely clean and white. Direct students to color the heart, scribbling back and forth. Their scribbling will represent the sin that fills our hearts over time. Sin is messy and makes a mess in our hearts. Tell the students that they don't need to stay in the lines, and they are not going to keep this drawing. Students will need to color gently so as not to tear the paper towel.

Once the heart has been colored in, explain to students that the color represents the darkness of our sins. Over time we sin, and our hearts gets darkened. We need God's love and mercy. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, when we receive absolution, our heart is cleaned and our sins are washed away.

Direct each student to place their heart into the bowl of water, one at a time. The water represents God's mercy. Watch carefully as the color (sin) is removed from the heart and it is left completely white.

Note: The color will disappear in 30 seconds to a minute. You may need to shake the towel around a few times for the color to completely drain.

Station 3: Snack Time

Take a break now and enjoy a tasty treat. The best thing about these snacks is that they come with a lesson that will help students taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Before beginning the snack station, you may want to plan a bathroom or hand-washing break, or have hand sanitizer available. For bathroom breaks, it's best to take the children in small groups.

Note: Survey for allergies prior to the retreat.

If parents are present, perhaps have a separate meeting room with coffee and donuts for them to take a break and talk to one another. Check with your priest ahead of time to see if he would be willing to come and talk to the parents during this time. If not, it might also be a nice time for parents to ask questions about the rest of the year. They may have questions about what time to arrive on the day of their child's first Reconciliation, where to go, and what their child should wear.

Be sure someone—yourself or a catechist or teacher—is available to answer parents' questions. You could also provide some specific questions for parents to answer from the *Renewed* Parent Certification Course, such as:

What do you think your family's unique mission is in the Church? What are some practical ways you can discover and foster that mission in your family day-to-day?

If you wish to take this further, perhaps distribute pens and paper to participants and have them write their own Family Mission Statement. Here is an example:

Our family is focused first on the person of Christ. It is his love that radiates through the words and actions of each member. We are witnesses of the love and mercy of Jesus Christ to one another, and through the Holy Spirit we are witnesses of this same love and mercy to the world.

Option 1: Separated and Put Back Together – Sandwich Cookies

Theme: When we sin, we are separated from God and from other people, and we are in conflict with ourselves. In Reconciliation, we are made whole again and brought back into communion with God, others, and ourselves. Even though separation happens, there is always hope for everything to come back together again. Using cookies, you can make this simple point while your students enjoy a snack.

Materials: Sandwich cookies—2 or 3 per student. This snack activity is that simple!

Prepare: Get some sandwich cookies that have enough filling to be taken apart and put back together easily. You can use your judgment, but it might not be a bad idea to think about something in the “double stuffed” category. You may want to experiment with taking the cookies apart and putting them back together before the retreat. To save time, you might opt to have cookies set up in the seating area for when students arrive.

Session Teaching

- When your students arrive, you will need to remind them right away that they should not touch the cookies until they are told to do so.
- Once they are seated, tell them that sandwich cookies are the perfect symbol of Reconciliation. Say, “When we sin, we are separated from God. [Pull the cookie apart and tell students to do the same.] But when we go to Reconciliation, we are forgiven, made whole again, and brought back to God. [Put the cookie back together, and tell students to do the same.] ENJOY!”

Option 2: Healed and Covered – Make Your Own Snack

Theme: Reconciliation is a Sacrament of Healing. When we get a paper cut or skin our knee, we put a bandage on it to protect it from bacteria, allow it to heal, and prevent us from hurting it even more. Confession covers and protects our soul with Jesus’s love and mercy. However, in Confession, Jesus doesn’t just put a bandage over our sins. He washes our sins away completely and covers us with his mercy.

Materials: Graham crackers or wafer cookies, vanilla icing, small ketchup cups or bowls for icing, and spoons. Optional: red candy (like licorice), chocolate candies, or jelly.

Direct: Give each student half a graham cracker or two wafer cookies. Direct the students to spread a square of vanilla icing in the center of the graham cracker or a circle on the wafers using a spoon. (The cookie and icing will look like an adhesive bandage.) Then allow the students to place a piece of candy or dot of jelly on top of the icing.

Ask, “What does it look like, what you just made?”

Ask, “Why do you think we made a bandage? What does this have to do with Reconciliation?”

Say, “Reconciliation is a Sacrament of Healing. Bandages help cuts heal by covering them so that no bacteria get inside. In Reconciliation, Jesus heals our souls and covers them with his mercy.”

Station 4: Practice

Active practice and demonstration are a must. It is important that students feel prepared and confident to receive Reconciliation. Even if you have another time carved out in the program for practicing the sacrament, taking time to demonstrate reverent participation and reception of Reconciliation should also be part of the retreat.

Because practice is so important, we recommend that parents join their child for the Reconciliation practice. Not only can this be helpful with crowd control, but parents can be helpful in role-playing with their child. You may want to give both the parent and the students a First Reconciliation script so they can alternate roles.

Inviting the parents to attend the practice is also a nice way for them to know what they should focus on at home before the big day.

Option 1: Confidence in Confession

Theme: The purpose of this activity is to help students feel confident on the day of their first Reconciliation. The goal is to explain the steps of Confession piece by piece and allow the students to either practice themselves or see a leader or volunteer classmate practice.

Materials: Bowl, “practice” sins written on individual folded slips of paper. Audio-visual equipment, if playing video.

Prepare: You can have students view the *Renewed* 6.1 video (“Felicity’s First Reconciliation”) and answer the discussion questions, or you can opt to use the session teaching below if video equipment is not available.

You will need a large bowl and the list of sins for practice confession (see page 20). Cut out each of the sample sins. Fold them up and put them in the bowl. When it is time for students to name their sins in the practice confession, they will pull a piece of paper out of the bowl.

Direct: If this is being done in a large group, use volunteers to help act out a few mock confessions. After a few volunteers practice, you may want to invite students to practice. Volunteers can pick a sin out of the bucket for the practice confession.

If your group is small, allow students to take turns practicing one at a time while the leader takes the role of priest.

Session Teaching

- Tell the students that they are going to review all the steps of Reconciliation. If there are enough time and volunteers, tell students that they will be able to practice going to Confession if they would like. If you are doing this as a large group, have volunteers practice first in front of students, then offer students a chance to practice.
- Tell the students that the first step of going to Reconciliation is to greet the priest. We always want to make sure that we say “Good morning,” “Good evening,” or just a friendly “Hello” before starting our confession.
- Tell students that they will make the Sign of the Cross with the priest to begin their Confession. You may need to review with the students how to make the Sign of the Cross.

Some students get confused about which shoulder to touch first. You may wish to use this tip. Tell them that when they say “Holy Spirit,” they cross their arm over their whole body.

- Next, review the words at the start of Confession with the students: “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first Confession, and these are my sins.”

Reminders for Students

- In the future, after their first Confession, they will tell the priest when they last received Confession—for example, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been three months since my last Confession.”
- It is good to confess about five sins. They don’t need to list three hundred (and hopefully they don’t have that many). They should not leave out on purpose any sins that they remember.

- After students confess their sins, they need to say, “I am sorry for all my sins.” This lets the priest know they are finished and that they will be forgiven for any sins they forgot to confess.
- Next, tell students that the priest will talk to them for a few moments. He may ask them a few questions or want to know more about something they said. He may give them a few words of wisdom, and then he will give them their penance. Here are some examples of penances:
 - » Hug your mom and dad.
 - » Say sorry to a friend.
 - » Say a Hail Mary or an Our Father.
 - » Help out with a chore around the house.
 - » Do something nice for someone.
- Review the Act of Contrition with the students.

Note: If you are creating a handout, include the Act of Contrition (see page 25). It also might be good to have copies of the Act of Contrition in the confessional on the day of First Reconciliation for students to refer to if they forget what to say.

- Review with the students the words of absolution that the priest will say over them.
- Remind them to bow their heads and listen for the words “I absolve you from your sins.” Tell students that when they hear these words, their sins are washed away. When the priest blesses them, they will cross themselves and say the words of the Sign of the Cross with the priest.
- Review the last words of the sacrament. The priest will say, “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good,” and the student responds, “His mercy endures forever.” Then the priest will then say, “Go in peace,” and the student responds, “Thank you, Father.”
- Remind students that it is a good idea to go back to their seat and complete their penance right away, so they don’t forget it.
- Finally, give students a chance to ask questions. Here are some questions to be prepared for:

1. What if I forget to confess a sin?

Try your best not to forget a sin, but if you do that’s okay. When the priest gave you absolution, all your sins were forgiven.

2. What if I leave out a sin on purpose?

You don’t want to leave any sins out on purpose. If you do, then none of your sins are forgiven. Remember that the priest has heard many confessions and he is not there to judge you. He is acting *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. It is really Jesus who hears and forgives your sins. And remember, the priest is under the seal of Confession. He cannot tell anyone your sins, not even your parents!

3. What if I forget what to say?

If you forget what to say, the priest will help you. He knows that this is your first time and that you are probably nervous.

Discussion Questions

1. Is there anything you are worried or nervous about when you think about your own first Reconciliation?
2. How do you think Jesus will feel at your first Reconciliation?
3. What do you think you will feel like as the words of absolution are said over you and your sins are washed away?

Video Discussion Questions

1. Why was Felicity worried before her Reconciliation? Was she worried at the end? Why not? Why shouldn't we be worried about Reconciliation?
2. How did Jesus feel about Felicity's confession? Can you relate to any of the sins Felicity confessed? How do you think Jesus will feel about your confession?
3. What happened when Father said the words of absolution over Felicity?

Sample Reconciliation Script

Priest: Hello!

Student: Hello, Father!

Priest and Student: (Make the Sign of the Cross) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Student: Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first Confession, and these are my sins. (Student chooses one sin from the bucket or bowl of sample sins and confesses it to the priest.)

Student: I am sorry for all my sins.

Priest: Thank you for your first Confession. Know that Jesus loves you and is happy that you have come to him to tell him your sins, ask for forgiveness, and try to do better. For your penance, say two Hail Marys. And you may now say your Act of Contrition.

Student: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his Name, my God, have mercy. Amen.

Priest: (Raises his right hand over student's head)

"God, the Father of mercies, through the Death and Resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God grant you pardon and peace. And I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Priest blesses student.)

Student with the Priest: Amen. (Student makes the Sign of the Cross.)

Priest: Give thanks to Lord for he is good.

Student: His mercy endures forever.

Priest: Go in peace.

Student: Thank you, Father!

Sample Sins for Practice Confession

I hit my brother when we got in a fight.

I talked back to my mom when she asked me to set the table for dinner.

I played video games instead of doing my homework like I was supposed to.

I stole a pack of gum from the grocery store when my mom wasn't looking.

I lost my temper with a friend at school and called him a mean name.

I was mean to my sister when she accidentally sat on the remote and changed the channel.

I asked a friend if I could borrow one of his cool pencils, but I wasn't going to give it back.

I lied to my mom when she asked if I cleaned my room.

I didn't walk my dog when my dad asked.

I pushed a player from the other team on the soccer field when he scored a goal.

I told a classmate he couldn't sit with me and my friends at lunch.

I watched a TV show I knew I wasn't supposed to watch while my babysitter was watching me.

When I saw Bobby shoot chocolate milk out his nose, I said "Oh my God."

I didn't say my prayers at night.

When my friend was at my house, I lost the game we were playing, and I was mean to my friend the rest of the time he was over.

I cheated on my math test when I didn't know the answers.

I fooled around with my friend in the school hallway when the teacher asked us to be quiet.

Option 2: Q and A with the Priest, and Confessional Tour

Theme: The purpose of this activity is to allow students to get more comfortable speaking with the priest before their first Reconciliation. Some families may not go to Mass every Sunday, and this makes it hard for students to understand that the priest is a normal person who is not going to judge them or get angry at their sins. Students also may not have seen the inside of the confessional before. Give them a chance to look inside or even kneel or sit inside to get a sense of what it will be like on the actual day.

Prepare: A few months in advance, ask a priest from your parish if he would be willing to talk to the students about Reconciliation and answer their questions. These are some questions the students may have:

- What if I forget to confess a sin?
- What if I leave out a sin on purpose?
- What if I forget what to say?
- Do you remember my sins?
- Are you allowed to tell anyone my sins?

Direct: Once the priest has talked to the students, he may wish to practice with a few of them. Select volunteers to practice with him in front of the group. They may wish to bring the “Helpful Hand” they made at craft time with the steps of Reconciliation (see page 8). Some students may not be comfortable practicing in front of everyone. Only call on students who are willing and ready to practice with the priest.

Station 5: Prayer

Engaging the students in a meaningful time of prayer is central to the retreat—that is what makes it a retreat after all. We know that second graders can pray, can experience Jesus, and can connect. We also know that they are very active, and will have a variety of experiences with settling into prayer. It takes patience to help them settle into prayer. Here are two ways to lead them into a prayerful encounter with Jesus.

If parents are present for the retreat, consider having them make a Confession care package for their child to go with the letter they wrote for their child's first Reconciliation day. Have plastic bags for parents to fill. Separate the items into different piles on a table so parents can form a line and fill their kits with an item from each pile. Consider having ribbon available for them to tie the kit together when they are finished. Have markers for them to label the kit and pens to write on the index card what each item means.

Here are some sample objects for parents to include in their care package. Most of these items can be purchased at a dollar store or in bulk quantities:

- Index card—My Child's Reconciliation Reminders (list what each one means)
- Bandage—Jesus' love heals us
- Eraser—Jesus erases our sins
- Cotton ball—Jesus makes us as white as snow
- Piece of tape—Jesus puts us back together
- Cut-out of a heart—Jesus give us his love
- A sour candy and a sweet candy—Jesus' mercy takes us from sour to sweet
- A sponge or piece of a sponge—Jesus washes away our sins

Option 1: Prodigal Son Imaginative Prayer Session

Theme: This imaginative prayer session is meant to help students quiet their hearts and reflect on God's mercy and love for them. Imagination is important in prayer, and in a screen-saturated world, giving your young students a chance to stretch the legs of their imaginations is a worthy pursuit. Spiritual masters in the history of the Church, like St. Ignatius of Loyola, recommend that we imagine ourselves in the gospel stories—that we consider imaginately what the scenes of Sacred Scripture might look, smell, feel, sound, and even taste like. Here we invite our students to put themselves into one of Jesus' imaginatively rich parables. We want to help them to experience the Father's mercy and to grow in mercy themselves as they prepare to receive the Sacrament of Mercy.

Materials: You will need a Catholic Bible (for example, the Revised Standard Version–Second Catholic Edition or the New American Bible), and the following props:

- Something that looks like a bag of money
- A bowl filled with something that can pass for pig slop
- A ring and a pair of sandals
- Party hats

Prepare: Read Luke 15:11–32 out loud to your students.

Direct: For your students to really enter into the story, they will need to be seated and focused. We recommend spacing them out, if possible, and even having some soft, gentle music playing as they enter. Lighting can also help—not so dark as to suggest sleeping but softer than usual. The presence of electric candles and even sacred symbols can signal that this will be a time for prayer. Tell them that this activity will invite them into the parable of the Prodigal Son so that they can really understand what Jesus is teaching us about the Father’s love.

Tell them that it is important to be quiet enough to listen with the ears of their hearts. Invite them to settle down by taking deep breaths, sitting still, and listening into the music:

- Tell the students that they will be praying with a story that is so important because it’s how Jesus himself taught about God the Father’s mercy and love for us.
- Admit to them that sometimes it is hard for us to listen into God’s Word, because we are so used to watching stories rather than hearing them. Remind them that God has given each of them an imagination and that they really can picture and even enter into the Scriptures.
- Tell them that it is really important to be quiet and still so that they can hear God’s voice and so that they don’t distract their neighbors around them.
- Make the Sign of the Cross.
- Have your props handy for added emphasis and strategic pauses during the telling of the parable.
- As you read through the story, beginning at Luke 15:11, pause to hold up the props—specifically,
 - The money bag at Luke 15:12
 - The bowl of pig slop at Luke 15:16
 - The ring and the sandals at Luke 15:22
 - The party hat at Luke 15:32 (which might cause a small reaction, but that’s okay!)
- When you’ve finished reading, invite your students to think for just a few moments about what God is saying to them in the parable.

Discussion Questions

1. When you heard the story, how did you picture the Father?
2. Which of the sons do you relate to more?
3. Raise your hand if you have ever made a bad choice and been scared that your parents would be mad.

4. Raise your hand if you've ever been forgiven.
5. Let's all pray this together. Repeat after me:

Father, I know that sometimes I run far from you,
but I know that you love me and want me to come back to you.

Help me to run to you!

Help me to trust you!

I'm sorry for my sins and I just want to be yours.

I trust your love.

Amen.

Option 2: Guided Examination of Conscience

Theme: Making a good examination of conscience is a necessary for a good Confession. This is true for penitents of any age, and it is especially true for your young students. This is why, in the book *Renewed with Love: Your Guide to Reconciliation*, we developed a few different tools for your students to use. This is a chance for them to use their Reconciliation guides during the retreat.

Materials: *Renewed with Love: Your Guide to Reconciliation*

Prepare: Plan for your students to have their books available at this station. If they received them earlier in the program, have them collected and ready. As an alternative, this station may be where they receive their books so that they can take them home, work with them, and use them as they prepare for the big day.

To help your students examine their consciences, they will need to be seated, settled, and focused. A quiet and prayerful environment is helpful, with soft lighting and even gentle music in the background.

Direct:

1. Have your students spread out with books in hand, and take some time to ensure that they are settled.
2. Remind your students what an examination of conscience is. (See page 22 of *Renewed by Jesus*.)
3. Read through the directions for making an examination of conscience on page 50 of *Renewed by Jesus*.
4. Choose an examination of conscience in the book—from the Ten Commandments (starting on page 51), from the Beatitudes (page 61), or from the seven deadly sins (page 71)—and slowly read through the process.
5. Give them time to reflect. When time is up, remind them that the Holy Spirit helps us see our sins so that we can be healed. The time they've spent will help them make a good confession so that Jesus can heal them and help them live happy and holy lives.



Closing

After the students are together again in the main gathering area, thank them for their time and attention during the day. Affirm everything that you can about their participation.

If parents joined them, affirm the parents' commitment and role as the primary catechists of their children. If parents were not with the students during the retreat, perhaps they could join you for this brief closing session.

You can quickly recap as follows: "Today, we had a chance to prepare our hearts to take a big step in our Catholic Faith. We made things, we played, we learned, we prayed, and we even practiced. We hope that you got to know each other better too, since we are all one faith family in our parish." Then ask a few questions:

- Can anyone tell me what their favorite part of the day was?
- Can anyone tell me one thing that surprised them today?
- Can anyone tell me what they are most looking forward to?
- What is one thing that you are going to do after today to prepare for the big day?

After this, make announcements and provide needed information about the day of First Reconciliation.

Then invite your students to settle in for a closing prayer. Tell them, "We will be praying the Act of Contrition together," and begin with the Sign of the Cross:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his Name, my God, have mercy. Amen.

If a priest or deacon is present, they can lead the prayer and conclude the event with a blessing. As an alternative, conclude simply with the Sign of the Cross:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.