

## Guidance on Child Safeguarding and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

### **The Sacramental Seal:**

All suspicions, concerns and allegations of child abuse must be reported to the statutory authorities through the diocesan reporting procedure. There is one exception to this rule, which is if abuse is disclosed during the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The maintenance of trust in the Sacrament of Reconciliation requires the guarantee of absolute confidentiality, allowing no exceptions. This is known as the Seal of Confession and guarantees to the penitent that anything revealed to the confessor will not be divulged to anyone else. This is outlined in **Canon 983**, as shown below:

*The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.*

### **Definition of Confession:**

Canon law provides a clear definition of what is deemed to be appropriate with regards to the hearing of Confession. This should be used as the definition to clarify when Confession has taken place:

#### **Canon 964:**

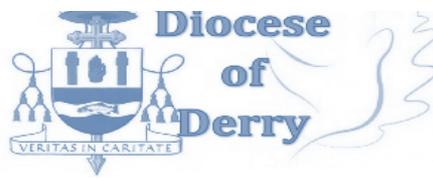
- §1: *The proper place to hear sacramental Confessions is a church or oratory.*  
§2: *The conference of bishops is to establish norms regarding the confessional; it is to take care, however, that there are always confessionals with a fixed grate between the penitent and the confessor in an open place, so that the faithful who wish to can use them freely.*  
§3: *Confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional without a just cause.*

### **Procedures for a penitent who discloses abuse during Confession:**

If a penitent discloses abuse during Confession, the confessor should:

#### **In the case of an abused penitent who is a child:**

- Sensitively reassure the child or young person that they were right to tell you
- Remind them that whatever is disclosed in Confession will not be repeated outside the confessional by the confessor.
- The confessor should encourage the child or young person to disclose the abuse to an adult they trust (e.g. a relative, teacher, friend) and to have that person report the abuse.
- If the penitent expresses a wish to discuss the issue outside the confessional, make it clear to them that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed regarding issues of child abuse once outside the confessional. After Confession the confessor should then follow the diocesan reporting procedure.



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### **In the case of an abused penitent who is an adult:**

- Remind the penitent that whatever is disclosed in Confession will not be repeated outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by the confessor.
- Strongly advise them to seek professional help (e.g. counselling, consultation with their GP) and to go to the statutory authorities.
- If the penitent expresses a wish to discuss this issue outside the confessional, make it clear to them that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed regarding issues of child abuse once outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After Confession the confessor should then follow the Diocesan reporting procedure.

### **In the case of an abusing penitent:**

- Remind the penitent that whatever is disclosed in Confession will not be repeated outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by the confessor.
- Strongly advise them to seek professional help (e.g. counselling, consultation with their GP) and to go to the statutory authorities.
- If the penitent expresses a wish to discuss this issue outside the confessional, make it clear to them that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed regarding issues of child abuse once outside the Sacrament of Reconciliation. After Confession the confessor should then follow the Diocesan reporting procedure.

### **Safeguarding Children during the Sacrament of Reconciliation:**

When children attend the Sacrament of Reconciliation, all efforts should be made to provide a safe and open environment, which maintains the sacramental seal.