The Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Purpose
‘...the ultimate purpose of Penance is that we should love God deeply and commit ourselves completely to him.’ Paul VI Paenitemini, 1966.
In the context of the RCIA the sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance supports and deepens the conversion of the Candidate and orientates them to full membership of the Church in the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist. It is one of the healing Sacraments of the Church, reaching the depths of the human spirit, restoring the person’s relationship with God and with others.

Who?
Candidates: These are people who have been baptised and are preparing for Confirmation and Eucharist. People who have not yet been baptised will celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation some time after their Baptism.

When does it take place?
The first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation takes place during the season of Lent for Candidates who are to be received at Easter. The Penitential Rite, usually celebrated on the Second Sunday in Lent, is part of the preparation for this sacrament so it is envisaged that it will take place some time between the second Sunday and Passion Sunday. If candidates are to be confirmed at other times, then some time in the weeks leading up to the sacrament is fine.

Where?
If there is a Reconciliation room in the church the sacrament could be celebrated there, or in any appropriate place where the sacramental meeting with the priest can take place in a more relaxed and open setting. The use of the confessional or confession box should be avoided.

What is Required
(i) Baptism.
(ii) Some maturity of faith and understanding which indicates readiness for fuller life in the community. This sacrament comes near the end of the preparation period.
What happens in the celebration of this sacrament?
This sacrament can take place privately or in the context of a communal celebration. The guidelines and suggestions here are for a private celebration. (The candidate may of course choose to celebrate the sacrament at a parish Reconciliation service.)
- Sign of the Cross.
- Short reading from the Word of God, chosen by the candidate or priest.
- Sharing of areas which are in need of reconciliation (confession). The dark areas where the light of God needs to shine.
- Penance (a prayer or service to help the person begin afresh). This may be related specifically to some area mentioned in the confession – e.g. prayer for a person who has hurt them.
- Psalm or act of contrition (a prayer to ask for forgiveness). The candidate can use their own words to express regret for their weakness and their desire with God's help to be a better person, more focused on God's love and constant support.
- Absolution (announcement of God’s forgiveness). In particular, the priest extending his hands over the candidate is a clear sign of healing and forgiveness.
- Praise and thanks to God. Go in Peace.

What do we need to organise?
- Appropriate preparation. During Lent this can be focussed on the Lenten scripture and the theme of conversion in Lent. The Penitential Rite celebrated with candidates on the Second Sunday will provide an opportunity to prepare for the sacrament. There are many different sorts of 'examination of conscience,' and these can be discussed in the light of the readings. The passage about love in 1 Corinthians 13 would also be a good basis.
- As well as the meaning of the sacrament it is important to go through the rite so that the candidate knows exactly what will happen, and what is expected of her/him.
- Candidates may like some help choosing a prayer for forgiveness or other prayers or texts.
- Ideally the priest celebrating the sacrament is known to the candidate already. He might like to be involved with preparation or it would be important to talk over with him the preparation which has taken place. If the candidate will celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation with another priest, it would be good, where possible to have some contact with him in advance. If not, the candidate should let the priest know that they are preparing for Confirmation and Eucharist and that this is their first time celebrating the sacrament.
The Sacrament of Reconciliation
(for individuals)

Example

Greeting and Sign of the Cross.

Invitation to trust
Priest: May the grace of the Holy Spirit
    fill your heart with light,
    that you may confess your sins with loving trust
    and come to know God who is merciful.

Penitent: Amen.

Life Context
If the candidate does not know the priest, he s/he can now let him know that s/he
is preparing for Confirmation/Eucharist and that this is the first time s/he has
celebrated the sacrament of Reconciliation. S/he may also share any other
relevant details, such as family, work or any particular areas s/he finds difficult
about the Christian life, which will help the priest understand the context of what
s/he is about to share.

Scripture reading
The priest or candidate reads a scripture passage on the theme of conversion.
This may be a passage which has particular meaning for the candidate, or may
be one agreed beforehand with the priest or as part of the preparation.

Priest: Let us listen to the Lord as he speaks:

Reading: e.g.
Jesus said,
`Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest.
Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and
you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light." (Mtt
11)

Confession of Sin and Penance
Candidate now indicates the areas of his/her life which need God’s forgiveness
and healing. A conversation may take place about these.

The priest will then propose a penance to build up the candidate to begin a new
life.
Prayer for forgiveness: e.g.
Candidate:

Have mercy on me God in your kindness,
In your compassion wipe away my faults.
Wash me clean of guilt
And cleanse me of my sin.

You love truth in the heart,
Then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom,
Create in me a pure heart O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Ps 51)

Absolution
The priest extends his hands over the penitent's head and says:

Priest:
God the Father of mercies
through the death and resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
Through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins
in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit +,

Candidate: Amen

Proclamation of Praise of God and dismissal e.g.

Priest: Give thanks to the Lord for he is good.
Candidate: His mercy endures forever.
Priest: The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.
Candidate: Thanks be to God.