

GUIDANCE 13

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURE/S OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

THE SACRAMENTAL SEAL

All suspicions, concerns and allegations of child abuse must be reported to the statutory authorities through the procedure as outlined in this document. There is one exception to this rule, which is of abuse which is disclosed during the Sacrament of Confession (also known as Reconciliation or Penance).

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 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law: '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. The Sacrament begins when the penitent starts conversation with the confessor and ends when the confessor has granted absolution and made the sign of the cross.

PROCEDURES FOR A PENITENT WHO DISCLOSES ABUSE DURING CONFESSION

If a penitent discloses abuse during the Sacrament of Confession, 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 for that person to report the abuse. If the penitent expresses a wish to discuss the issue outside the Sacrament, make it clear to them that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed regarding issues of child abuse once outside the Sacrament.

IN THE CASE OF AN ABUSED PENITENT WHO IS AN ADULT

1. Remind the penitent that whatever is disclosed in Confession, the confessor will not repeat outside of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
2. Strongly advise them to seek professional help (e.g., GP, counselling) and to go to the statutory authorities.
3. 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.

IN THE CASE OF AN ABUSED PENITENT WHO IS A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON

1. Sensitively reassure the child or young person that they were right to tell you
2. Remind them that whatever is disclosed in Confession will not be repeated outside the Sacrament of Confession by the confessor.
3. 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.
4. If the penitent expresses a wish to discuss the issue outside the Sacrament make it clear to them that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed regarding issues of child abuse once outside the Sacrament.

SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN DURING THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

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