Norms Governing the Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Spiritual Direction

In addition to the universal laws of the Catholic Church governing the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the following norms are to be observed by all priests, incardinated or otherwise present in the diocese of Lincoln. Failure to follow these norms may result in the loss of the faculty to hear confessions, either temporarily or habitually, depending upon the gravity of the offense, as well as other penalties established by universal law.

In iure:

1. C. 392
   a. §2. He (the diocesan bishop) is to exercise vigilance so that abuses do not creep into ecclesiastical discipline, especially regarding the ministry of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals, the worship of God and the veneration of the saints, and the administration of goods.

2. C. 277
   a. §2. Clerics are to behave with due prudence towards persons whose company can endanger their obligation to observe continence or give rise to scandal among the faithful.
   b. §3. The diocesan bishop is competent to establish more specific norms concerning this matter and to pass judgment in particular cases concerning the observance of this obligation.

3. C. 964
   a. §1. The proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church or oratory.
   b. §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.
   c. §3. Confessions are not to be heard outside a confessional without a just cause.

4. C. 978
   a. §2. In administering the sacrament, the confessor as a minister of the Church is to adhere faithfully to the doctrine of the magisterium and the norms issued by competent authority.

5. C. 979
   a. In posing questions, the priest is to proceed with prudence and discretion, attentive to the condition and age of the penitent, and is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice.
6. Complimentary Norms of the USCCB
   a. Provision must be made in each church or oratory for a sufficient number of places for sacramental confessions which are clearly visible, truly accessible, and which provide a fixed grille between the penitent and the confessor. Provision should also be made for penitents who wish to confess face-to-face, with due regard for the Authentic Interpretation of canon 964, §2 by the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, July 7, 1998 (AAS 90 [1998] 711)

7. Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, Responsio ad propositum dubium: de loco excipiendi sacramentales confessiones
   a. If, according to Canon 964, paragraph 2, of the Code of Canon Law, the minister of the sacrament, for a just cause and excluding cases of necessity, can legitimately decide, even in the eventuality that the penitent ask for the contrary, that sacramental confession be received in a confessional with a fixed grille-

Affirmative

8. C. 970
   a. The faculty to hear confessions is not to be granted except to presbyters who are found to be suitable through an examination or whose suitability is otherwise evident.

9. C. 974
   a. §1. The local ordinary and the competent superior are not to revoke the faculty to hear confessions habitually except for a grave cause.
   b. §2. When the faculty to hear confessions has been revoked by the local ordinary who granted it as mentioned in can. 967, §2, a presbyter loses the faculty everywhere. If some other local ordinary has revoked the faculty, the presbyter loses it only in the territory of the one who revokes it.

10. C. 1386
   a. §1. A confessor who directly violates the sacramental seal incurs a latae sententiae excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; he who does so only indirectly is to be punished according to the gravity of the offense.

Norms Governing Confession:

1. Priests are to be vested in cassock or alb when hearing confession unless prevented by a just cause.
2. Pastors and administrators of parishes as well as administrators of schools or other places in which confessions are regularly heard are to ensure that existing confessionals are modified so that physical contact between the priest and penitent is impossible.
   a. Any new confessionals built in the diocese must be constructed in the same manner.
   b. If necessity requires a priest to hear a confession outside a confessional, he is to take reasonable precautions, including hearing the confession in a visible place, so as to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing.
3. Priests are to take all reasonable precautions, including physical changes to the confessional, to ensure that neither their voice nor the voice of the penitent can be heard outside of the confessional.
   a. The use of white-noise machines or the playing of sacred music is permitted in churches to assist in fulfilling this norm.
4. Priests are not to have their cellphone, smart watches, or other similar devices in the confessional.
5. While asking questions to assist the penitent in making an integral confession is permitted, the age of the penitent must be taken into consideration and all due prudence must be exercised in the type and manner of questions asked so as to avoid even the appearance of undue interest or impropriety on the part of the priest.
6. Priests should never for any reason make any sort of physical contact with the penitent within the context of confession, even if the penitent should request it.
7. Pastors and Administrators are not to hear the confessions of their employees except in the case of necessity. Pastors and Administrators are to communicate this to their employees.

**Norms Governing Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Counselling**

Generally, spiritual direction is ongoing and aimed at discerning “Where is God in the experiences of my life?” in order to grow in communion with the Holy Trinity. In contrast, pastoral counseling is often short-term, focusing on a particular issue. While there may be some overlap, the two should not be confused. Often people will ask for spiritual direction but are really looking for pastoral counseling. Defining the nature of the relationship will help the priest better provide assistance to his people and avoid codependent behavior.

8. Clerics are to observe Professional Secrecy with regards to any information learned during spiritual direction or pastoral counseling sessions (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2491).
   a. Clerics are to inform directees that information gained in the course of meeting which is subject to mandatory reporting will be reported.
9. Clerics are not to serve as ongoing, long-term spiritual directors until they have been ordained at least three years.
10. Priests must maintain clear roles and boundaries when engaged in pastoral counseling or spiritual direction.
11. Priests are not to step beyond their competence in pastoral counseling situations and are to refer clients to other professionals when appropriate.
12. Clerics should not serve as spiritual directors for their employees.
13. Physical contact of any kind (i.e., touching, hugging, holding) before, during, or after spiritual direction is strictly forbidden, even if the directee requests it.
   a. The proper context for laying on of hands for the purpose of healing is in a group setting.
   b. When praying over a person who requests it clerics should only ever lay their hands on a person’s head or shoulder and only with their explicit permission.
14. Clerics should engage in spiritual direction and pastoral counseling at appropriate times and in appropriate settings.
   a. Appropriate times exclude late evening and night.
   b. Appropriate settings exclude private living quarters and any place that could cause confusion about the nature of the relationship.
   c. All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that spiritual direction or pastoral counselling sessions occur in visible spaces, such as rooms with a glass panel in the door or windows with the blinds open.
   d. Appropriate distance between the cleric and directee is to be maintained at all times.