

# Children at Confession<sup>1</sup>

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We all know that the essential element for a good confession is sorrow for sin, and it is a striking thought that 'sorrow, in the Sacrament of Penance is as indispensable for the Sacrament as water is for Baptism, or as bread is for the Holy Eucharist'.<sup>2</sup> We all connect baptism with water, but does the word 'sorrow' spring to our minds as easily when we speak of the sacrament of penance? It would seem not, for we speak of going to confession and of stressing the telling of the tale of our sins, yet without this interior attitude of sorrow and repentance there is no sacrament; the words of absolution are pronounced, but without sorrow they are not efficacious; no venial sin can be forgiven without repentance, no bishop, no pope can help. Even Christ himself cannot help us if we reject his offer. In this sacrament, therefore, it is the right attitude of repentance that is so important. The problem is how are we to get this attitude across to small children before their first confession. The actual confession of sins is, or should be, extremely easy for them; they have no serious sins to confess, for they are not capable of serious sins, and they are never asked for the number of times when confessing venial sins; the difficulty lies in securing the spirit of repentance. We must convey to them the idea of sin being a great act of ingratitude to our loving Father in heaven, a turning away from him, and we must somehow make them realise the importance of returning to that state of loving attention to our Father's will. And all this must be done without overburdening the child with unnecessary material, and in a language suitable to their age.

The spirit of repentance is one of our basic attitudes. When the fulness of time came, and God sent his Son into the world to bring the joyful tidings of salvation, and to announce that he was ready to show mercy to disobedient mankind, and to offer to all the riches of his kingdom, we find that the first words that our Lord used in his preaching were: 'Repent and believe'. This repentance is a turning back to God, as our Lord said to St Paul: 'Thou shalt open their eyes, and turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, so that they

<sup>1</sup>Based on a paper given at the same conference as the previous article.

<sup>2</sup>A. M. Roguet, *The Sacraments*.

may receive through faith in me the remission of their sins and an inheritance among the saints'. (Acts 26. 18).

Looking at children of seven years it might be hard to regard them as sinners needing repentance, but even at this early age it seems good to try to make them realise the human tendency to make a wrong choice—to choose something contrary to the desires of God, our loving Father—and the constant need for turning back to God who is ever waiting for us. It is a case of always being ready to begin again.

The saints seem to us to make a great display of their sinfulness, when perhaps we can see nothing much wrong, but they have a much greater sense of sin, and a much grander idea of the holiness and goodness and greatness of God than we have. This revelation and mystery of the godhead is a good subject for our lessons, for it is this knowledge and reverence for God that we need to impress upon and deepen in the minds of children. This is of course an easy thing to speak about, but a difficult thing to accomplish. Happy indeed is the teacher who, groping through the mists and seeing only as through a glass and in a very dark manner, has nevertheless been able to penetrate into the mind of the child and lead it to that contact with God that we speak of as prayer. This contact is not taught by teaching them to say prayers, to learn the words of the prayers. When we have done this, we have not finished—we have hardly begun.

In the same way, with the sacrament of penance, we have to teach them how to express their sins and the form of confession, but when we have done this we have not finished—unless we have striven to cultivate the interior spirit we have left the essential undone. How are we to instil this sense of sorrow for sin, this sense of giving up what we have wrongly chosen and this choice of God once again—in a word, how are we to give them the spirit of repentance?

'A sense of the holiness of God, and at the same time confidence in His mercy constitute what we call the virtue of Penance',<sup>3</sup> and from this virtue springs sorrow for sin. Two things we must inculcate—infinite respect and tender confidence—infinite respect for God, and loving confidence in Jesus the Son of God, sent down to earth to be the bridge, the only way to the Father.

Our response to the holiness of God is adoration, and this adoration is a most important part of our prayer. One of our deepest needs is to worship. Adults may do this in various ways, in particular by the use of the psalms in Christian worship, but what of children? Words are

<sup>3</sup>op. cit.

often a great difficulty to children. We think we are being very simple when we say in telling the story of Adam and Eve, 'God drove them out of the garden', and don't at first realise that the child is thinking of Adam and Eve sitting all disconsolately in the back seat of a fabulous car, and God at the wheel is driving the divine Rolls Royce out of the garden of Paradise. Of course this is one way of getting out of the garden, but it isn't exactly what we meant to convey—all this from the word 'drove'. Or you hear a child recounting to her companions the story of a saint who cured a little girl's sore eyes, and you are amazed to hear her say: 'She took a piece of tracing paper and put it on the little girl's eyes and she was cured'. Trying to fathom the medicinal value of tracing paper, you discover that the book, ostensibly written for children, reads: 'She traced a sign of the cross etc.'. Sometimes children try to make the wrong word fit into the pattern of things, as did the little girl whose mother asked her what she had learnt after her first day at school (I must confess that this story was told to me by a person of over seventy) and she responded by chanting the Catechism answer 'When I say that my soul is a bottle, I mean that my soul can never die!' And when the mother tried to tell the child that her soul was *not* a bottle, the child insisted that it was saying that she had a neck and was the shape of a bottle. Sometimes we find out the wrong impressions created, but how much oftener we do not do so, and after a little experience begin to believe that there must be some other way to help in getting the ideas across. If this is the case in our ordinary work, one might indeed wonder how are we to convey the holiness of God.

We have to use words of course, but sometimes instead of a multiplicity of words we might try the use of silence and the use of gesture. Speaking of silence, I quote from *On our Way* series Bk 2: 'Silence is an indispensable element for good learning; it is a precious tool in teaching, and its value in the Religious lesson cannot be over-emphasised. However its meaning must be clearly understood, and its practice carefully balanced. Silence may be classified as a part of discipline; but considered as an element in learning and as a teaching technique, it goes deeper than the mere suppression of noise. Its value is positive. Silence makes for greater concentration in thought and control of the imagination, so that for a brief moment, the mind and heart can absorb and relish the truth that has been imparted'. There is not time, nor is this the place to go deeply into this point, except in passing to advocate in general a quiet approach, which will have a calming effect upon the

class, and bring the right atmosphere to the religion lesson, without however detracting from the spirit of joy essential to one who is the herald of the joyful tidings. Then not to be too eager to pass on, not forcing the pace too much, not disturbing the children unduly, but allowing them after an explanation a few seconds of silence to ponder, as Mary did in her heart, in this way cultivating that spirit of meditation, that restfulness in the Lord. Music can be a great help here. Whilst remaining in our proper position as creatures, we are still able to offer homage to God; it may be just sitting on the ground lost in loving wonderment; or perhaps feeling the urge of the music to work to a climax, stretching to full height with arms upraised, in a supreme effort to convey to God delight and thanksgiving that he will reign for ever and ever, or sinking to the ground in lowly adoration, all according to individual needs and thoughts. Praying like this as a community and in some way rendering public worship to God, provides a relaxation and relieves tension, and gives the satisfying feeling that something more worthy is being given to God than individual prayer could attain.

We might speak for a moment now of gestures. A priest who had visited Jerusalem once told us how impressed he had been, on looking out of the window when he heard the bell from the tower of the minaret calling all Moslems to prayer, to see the immediate response. Wherever they were and whatever they were doing, they spread their little mat and bowed down to the very ground in adoration, appearing to be completely oblivious to all external things, so lost were they in prayer. Movement and gesture appeared to help them to be concentrated. We all know that the priest uses gestures in the highest form of prayer, the mass; he bends down, he strikes his breast, he stands, he genuflects, he kisses the altar, he raises the offering to heaven, he signs his forehead, lips and heart, he lifts his arms and hands in intercession.

In connection with the use of gesture, we might think first of all of the symbolism of many of our ordinary actions, such as kneeling, standing, genuflecting, bowing the head, joining the hands. These are all familiar everyday attitudes taken by the children. With explanatory teaching they can become full of meaning, so that actions may even speak louder than words. We stretch out our hands, it may be in pleading and supplication: 'Do thou O Lord, have mercy on us. When I call on thy Name, listen to me O God, have pity on me now, and hear my prayer'. It may be in offering and submission, or in rendering whole-hearted surrender, conveying to God in this way, admiration, devotion

and desire to be with him. Glory be to the Father, glory to this wonderful God, who made the earth and seas and sky, who has power over everything that lives and moves and breathes; all the earth is full of his glory; this in effect is what we are saying.

Or we may kneel as suppliants before a king, and by kneeling acknowledge our unworthiness and ask for pardon: 'Lord, have mercy on us, Christ, have mercy on us. Christ the Son of the living God, have mercy on us'. Again we may stand in respect, and in standing, let our heart soar up in worship and praise of the God who made us, just as the priest stands to offer sacrifice, just as Mary stood at the foot of the cross. We may bow the head, or even the body, as an act of adoration to the three divine persons dwelling within; with the body low in adoration there is a chance that the mind too may prostrate itself before the all holy, all glorious God, before whom only the proud of this world stand erect. 'O holy God, O holy strong God, O holy immortal God, have mercy on us'. By this act of reverence we call God to witness that we are not as the stiff-necked race of men, proud in their own conceits, but are rather glad and willing to acknowledge the supremacy of God, our loving Father, willing and glad to be as his children. 'Before the Lord's presence let the whole world bow in reverence', says the psalmist, and this is the first point in our contrition—the proud sinner must admit the authority of God. We genuflect as an act of homage to the divine majesty since the whole world's homage is his due, and thus we admit God's justice—the second point in contrition—we are in his presence like a child who deserves punishment. We admit that we were wrong—always a hard thing to do. Since to join our hands they must be empty, we let go the toys of this world, so that we may join our hands in complete dedication. This could be the symbol of the third point of our contrition—we give up what we have wrongly chosen in preference to him, we loose ourselves from the things of this world and its attractions, we stand before him empty handed, we plead for his mercy, we are ready to do his will. We sign ourselves with the sign of the cross, because the cross is the emblem, the banner, the symbol of our faith.

From a great teacher you expect knowledge. No one had so perfect a knowledge of God as our Lord, but when he came down from heaven, he did not address us in the language of the angels. He was sent to us by his heavenly Father, and loved us with the love of his heavenly Father, and because of his great love for us, he adapted his message to our understanding, just as a good mother, because she has

a deep and motherly love, knows instinctively the language to use when speaking to her children. Love makes us able and willing to adapt ourselves. Small children cannot always have understood the full meaning of their gestures, but it is good for us to strive to have such things deeply in our hearts, for we have to imitate the divine teacher and strive to be his instrument, his mouthpiece, trying to adapt ourselves fully to give his message in such a way that Christ our Lord will come alive into the classroom. Our presentation must be such that what happened in life to the apostles must happen to the children, the cry must come from their hearts, as it came from Peter's: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'.

As well as a sense of the holiness of God, we need confidence in his mercy. The Bible is full of examples depicting this mercy of God. There is for instance the story of the prodigal son, of which a film strip has been made by *Vita and Pax Liturgical Art Work*, for children of five to eight. This filmstrip is most helpful; I quote from the explanatory leaflet.

Experience has shown that a young child lives, thinks and speaks in the present, and that consequently he is not ready for the historical element. In these filmstrips, therefore, the gospel teaching has been removed from its historical setting and given a form which a young child can more readily understand and assimilate.

In the report issued by the Tavistock Clinic in 1950 on the reactions of children to certain films, we find that 'a measure of identification with screen characters takes place between younger children in the audience and teenagers on the screen. Young children admire and identify themselves with the sort of character they would wish to be'.

In order to enable this identification to take place to its fullest extent, the design of these film strips has been specially adapted, taking the child's natural development into consideration. The apostles and other sympathetic characters are, for instance, depicted as children slightly older than the audience; the children are then able to identify themselves more fully with the characters in the story which becomes, for them, living reality. It is only when this intimate identification takes place that the story has a positive and lasting effect upon the child and is able to nourish his spiritual life.<sup>4</sup>

The sacrament of penance is part of the joyful tidings that our Lord

<sup>4</sup>At this point the film-strip, *The Prodigal Son* was shown and commented on.

came to bring to the world, and it must be stressed that this sacrament is a sacrament of peace and love bringing the peace of our Lord's triumph when he came on Easter Sunday to his grieved and bewildered apostles and changed their sorrow into joy. The stress in teaching is the need for deep sorrow, but at the same time the children must be trained in the practical points, so we might now speak of some of these.

The formation of conscience is always a delicate matter, and here wherever possible we might seek the help of the parents. I am tempted to tell you here, though it may be counted as a digression, of the little girl I once had who was waiting with me for the arrival of her Daddy who was to take her home after her second day at school. She was standing in my office, and seeing a picture on the wall of a lovely little girl in a garden said: 'Is that your little girl?' I said: 'No, it isn't'. She stared at me for a bit, and then added: 'Have you any little girls?', and not to be outdone, I regret to tell you that I said 'Yes'. And with the persistence of the infant she continued: 'How many?', and again, not to be outdone, I said 'Oh, about 300'. 'Good gracious', she said aghast, 'My mother only has one'. And that is just the problem—how much better for our work it would be, not to have so many children to deal with at once, and how much easier it would also be if all parents had the right approach. Parents who sometimes scold their children and make a great fuss about things that are not essentially wrong, but perhaps are very inconvenient, may be responsible for the beginnings of a malformation of conscience, and it takes some time to eradicate the idea that an accident is not, in itself, a sin. And this no matter how valuable or precious the thing is that has been accidentally destroyed. It is a great opportunity, and one not to be missed, when there has been an accident, to point out that it is comparatively easy to buy another teapot, or statue, or whatever it is, but it would be really serious and much worse if they lied about the matter or blamed someone else. It is quite a common occurrence for children to plead when discovered in wrong doing, 'I didn't *mean* to do it', and this cry is often taken up by parents who will declare forgiveness, because, as they say, the child never meant to do it. But this reason for forgiveness, this kind of excusing, is not God's way of acting with us. The marvellous and stupendous thing is that God forgives our most deliberate turning away from him and even bestows the grace to be sorry. If little children are forgiven because they didn't mean to do it, how are they going to react in late life when they know that their sins are fully deliberate? Will they realise that *even so* God forgives them? Isn't it better not to excuse

them right at the beginning but to teach them the wonders of God's merciful love, a love so generous that he can love the sinner even while hating the sin:

Where the practice of family first communion is in vogue, as it is in many places today, there is an opportunity to speak to and train the parents in this matter. They are the ones who should help their children with their examination of conscience before going to bed at night. This is something which should be taught even before the actual preparation for first confession, as being the thing that every good child of God tries to do each day, so that when the time comes for first confession, the child is already prepared in that respect. Examination of conscience does not only imply finding out our sins, but in order to develop true sorrow we must also recognise and be grateful for all the good things given to us each day by God. We cannot use the Ten Commandments with children, and it might be a good idea to use headings such as Family, School, Play, Church.

It is some years now since I prepared children for their first confession and looking back on it, I think that I would not now lay so much stress on the recitation of sins. I do not mean that I allowed the children to recite their sins to me, but that I spent a lot of valuable time ascertaining that they could express themselves—this on the priest's account really. I have the fear that being word perfect, so to say, for their first confession, may lead to mechanical confessions, where the children repeat the tale they had learnt off for their first confession almost into adult life. It would be better for them not to be so slick at first. Most priests think that children are well prepared for the first time they approach the sacrament, but progressive formation is very necessary here, and instructions suitable to the age of the child should be given regularly. It is a great mistake to think children are sufficiently prepared when they have made their first confession.

The external aspects of going to confession must also be dealt with—this in order to prevent any fear. Children should be taken to visit the confessional; they should be allowed to go inside and see the little door that opens and closes, and also the crucifix over it. They might kneel in the right place to see if they are big enough, and if not, be told to stand until they have grown a little bigger; they might also speak to the teacher from the other side in a low voice, but not, of course, repeat their sins. Familiarity with these things will create confidence and allow more time and concentration on the more important aspects of the sacrament.



In the sacrament of penance we have a very special kind of presence of our Lord. We need with the visible priest to see the invisible High Priest. Over the door of the confessional is written the name of the priest—Father so and so. What should really be there is the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We see our Lord as the Good Shepherd, who loses one of his hundred sheep, and leaves the other ninety-nine to search for the one that is lost. When he has found the sheep he lays it on his shoulders and takes it back home again. The Good Shepherd shows no anger towards the disobedient sheep, only love and joy at its recovery, and the child is quick to apply this to God, and his loving attitude to sinners. This parable helps to strengthen the child's love for God, as he realises that God, the Good Shepherd, loves him personally so dearly, that he actually goes to look for him when he has gone astray, and rejoices greatly at finding the lost one again.

## Women in the Church

ELISABETH WANGERMANN

There is a characteristic attitude towards women in the Church which expresses itself in certain customs and regulations. I have tried to find out something about the assumptions behind this attitude and have thought it worth reporting and commenting on what I found, because I suspect that much of it will be as surprising to others as it was to me.

The customs which set apart the sexes in the Church begin to impinge very early in life. The little girl sees her brothers having fun serving on the altar, initiated and 'in the know', while she has to stay in her pew, bored, an outsider. The boys usually have precedence at first communion and confirmation, and even on her wedding day, the only day in her life when a woman is allowed in the sanctuary, she comes second throughout the ceremony. Now that lay people are sometimes asked to read the epistle and gospel to the congregation, it is always a man who is