

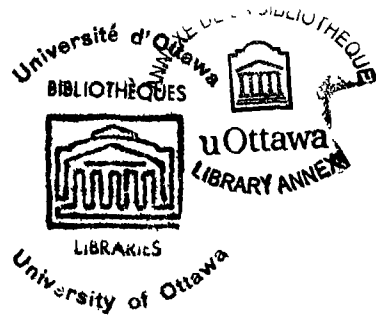
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FOR FRUITFUL CONFESSIONS OF YOUNG  
CHILDREN

by Sister Mary Noella MacEachern, C.S.M.

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

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## INTRODUCTION

The Popes of the twentieth century, by correcting Jansenistic abuses, by encouraging frequent reception of the Sacraments, by permitting afternoon and evening Masses, and by introducing the new mitigated legislation on the Eucharistic fast, have succeeded in bringing about a remarkable increase in the reception of the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. It seems reasonable to suppose that when larger numbers of people are fortified by the regular, frequent, reception of these Sacraments that confession of devotion will have a greater place in the lives of ordinary Catholics.

The Sacrament of Penance validly received always restores or increases grace but its fruitfulness can be increased according to the dispositions of the penitent. Greater knowledge and understanding of this Sacrament and the opportunities it offers for spiritual progress enable the penitent to make better use of it in the work of his sanctification.

The foundations of the spiritual life are laid in early childhood. Psychologists have come to realize the often unsuspected importance of the experiences and influences of the first few years of life. The religious instruction given at the dawn of reason, in preparation for the reception of the first Confession and Communion, is the groundwork on which an individual's religious life is built.

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Concepts, attitudes and habits acquired at this stage may persist, for better or for worse, throughout life; therefore it is important that priests, parents, and teachers who are charged with the education of these children or their spiritual direction should work with the utmost care. The understanding of young children, a sufficient theological knowledge to enable one to express essential truths in simple terms without distorting them, and the virtues of patience, charity, and zeal are the special qualifications for this apostolate.

While exercising care, in a negative way, to avoid giving rise to inaccurate concepts or undesirable attitudes and habits relating to the Sacrament of Penance, those who work with young children must not lose sight of the positive aspect of the work, that is, of the tremendous opportunities for the fostering of sanctity which are offered them. Dealing, as they are, with those who, for the most part, have never lost their first innocence, in whom grace is unimpeded by habits of sin, whose minds are relatively free from worldly distractions and ambition, whose love is pure and spontaneous, they can easily, with the right approach, inspire them with a noble love for virtue, for Christ, and for His Sacraments.

The child who learns, from the time of his first confession, to regard this Sacrament as a personal encounter

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with the loving, forgiving Christ, and who returns freely and frequently to it to remove progressively whatever comes between him and his Divine Friend, will probably continue to have regular and fruitful recourse to the Sacrament of Penance in adult life.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate educational and pastoral practices in so far as they facilitate the fruitful use of the Sacrament of Penance by children under twelve years of age. It will be assumed that the confessions of these children are merely devotional, since the commission of grave sin by them is highly improbable. Recent trends will be studied in the light of Church law, and papal and conciliar pronouncements as well as modern psychology.

Today there is an increasing recognition of the rights and duties of parents in the religious education of their children. Attention is therefore given to their chief tasks in preparing their children for confession and the means by which they may qualify themselves and accomplish this work.

The work of teachers is treated at greater length since the more complete sacramental instruction following First Communion is included here. 'Teachers' in this section includes parents and catechists.

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The confessor who understands the needs of his young penitents can do much towards the formation of a correct and certain conscience, positive attitudes towards the Sacrament and spiritual progress through its fruitful reception.

The pastor is responsible for organizing the spiritual program of the parish so that all, including the children, may enjoy the advantages of regular confession and spiritual direction. It is his duty to promote their intelligent use of the Sacrament by instructing them through explanations and appropriate liturgical celebrations.

## CHAPTER I

## THE OBLIGATION OF CONFESSION

## 1. Church Law

Canon 21 which is found in the decrees of Lateran Council<sup>1</sup> and also of the Council of Trent enjoins annual confession.

All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed . . . .<sup>2</sup>

This obligation is strictly binding only on those who have necessary matter, that is, mortal sin to confess. In the present discipline of the Church jurisdiction for the annual confession is not restricted to one's own pastor. The annual confession may be made to any priest who has faculties in the diocese, but those who fulfil this obligation and that of Paschal communion outside their own parish should notify their pastor that they have done so.

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<sup>1</sup>  
4th Lateran Council, Can. 21, ed. H. J. Schroeder, Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils, St. Louis, Herder, 1937, p.259.

<sup>2</sup>  
Council of Trent, Thirteenth Session, Can. 9, ed. H. J. Schroeder, Councils and Decrees of the Council of Trent, St. Louis, Herder, 1941, p.80.

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2

The law cited in the previous paragraph is the same in the new code, where it appears as Can. 859 S.I.<sup>3</sup>

The specific mention of "the age of discretion" in Canon 21 makes this Canon an exception to Canon 12 which states that Church laws begin to bind the individual at the age of reason. This was clearly indicated by the Pontifical Commission of the Code<sup>4</sup> in reply to the Bishop of Valleyfield who asked whether precocious children were bound by this precept before the age of seven. The reply was in the affirmative, for the reason that Canon 12 limits the obligation of ecclesiastical laws to those who have reached the age of seven only where the law does not expressly state otherwise, as it does in the precept above.

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3

Petro Gasparri, Codex Iuris Canonici Pii X Pontificis Maximi iussu, digestus Benedicti Papae XV auctoritate promulgatus, Romae, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanus, MCMXXXIII, p. 246.

4

Eduardus F. Regatillo, S.I., Interpretatio et Iurisprudentia Codicis Iuris, 3rd. ed., Santander, Sal Terrae, 1953, pp.19f.

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## 2. Age of Discretion

The determination of the age for first confession is not exclusively the problem of canonists and theologians. The latter have decided that confession is obligatory for those who are guilty of mortal sin, for which the use of reason is necessary. Canon Law makes provision for individual differences in the attainment of the use of reason. Easter duty is obligatory for all those (and only those) who have reached the age of discretion. The findings of modern psychology must now be taken into consideration, so that divine and ecclesiastical law may be applied to those who are actually subject to them.

The age of reason has been given various interpretations in the course of history. Until the sixth century it was not customary to go to confession except for the remission of serious sin, so young children would not ordinarily be involved.

During the reign of Pope St. Pius X, it had become customary to distinguish between two "ages of discretion", one for confession and one for holy communion. The reception of communion was commonly postponed until the age of twelve or even fourteen, although children were allowed to receive the Sacrament of Penance at an earlier age. However, younger children sometimes made their confession

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without being granted absolution. These practices were condemned by Pope Pius X.

The age of discretion for Confession is the time when one can distinguish right from wrong.

No less worthy of condemnation is the practice which prevails in many places of prohibiting from Sacramental Confession children who have not yet made their First Holy Communion, or of not giving them absolution. Thus it happens that they, perhaps having fallen into serious sin remain<sup>5</sup> in that very dangerous state for a long time.

"The Pope of little children" wrote the encyclical primarily for the purpose of condemning the refusal to admit to first communion those children whose use of reason was considered sufficient for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance. With the limited knowledge of psychology of his time St. Pius X identified the age of discretion for confession with that required for first communion. In the light of modern studies this identification has been called into question.

An eminent modern catechist goes beyond Pius X in his rejection of more stringent requirements for admission to holy communion than for confession. He states, with good reason, that

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Quam Singulari, Joseph Collins, trans., All Things in Christ, Vincent A. Yzermans, ed., Westminster, The Newman Press, 1954, p.247.

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The necessity of preparing the children for the Sacrament of Penance is perhaps the chief obstacle why many pastors find it hard to accept the idea of early first Communion. For it is certainly much more difficult to prepare the children to receive correctly the Sacrament of Penance in which the penitent's positive attitude is of the essence of the Sacrament - than it is to prepare them for Holy Communion, in which it is really only a question of reception. A seven-year-old child can readily receive the Eucharist with devotion, but to confess his sins contritely is more difficult for him. The difficulty grows if the pastor believes that he ought to acquaint the child with all the details of a good technique for confession or if he attempts to give him the complete teaching on penance. Such demands, however, cannot be reconciled with the church's regulations. If anywhere, then surely here ought to be applied the principle of the old Christian mystagogical teaching, that the Sacrament should first of all be actually received and only then explained in its essence and in all the details concerning its fulfillment.<sup>6</sup>

When one refers to the age of discretion as the time when "one can distinguish right from wrong", it must be kept in mind that this ability does not appear suddenly or in a fully developed form, nor is it exercised constantly or with certainty once it has appeared. The foundations for the formation of conscience are laid before the dawn of reason, and the work of developing moral judgment may continue well into adult life.

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 6

Joseph Andrea Jungmann, Handing On the Faith: A Manual of Catechetics, 1st ed., tr. A. M. Fuerst, Freiburg im B., Herder, 1959, p.300.

## THE OBLIGATION OF CONFESSION

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Again, "knowing right from wrong" is not identical with having a sense of sin. The cat that ate the canary may appear to know it has done wrong in the sense that it experiences an instinctive fear of punishment, but it is not conscious of moral guilt. Before attaining the use of reason, "goodness" means obedience to authority and rules. The gravity of an infraction is measured by its penalty or by the degree of displeasure shown by parents or other adults. Manifestations of guilty feelings for objectively sinful acts do not necessarily prove that such acts were apprehended as offenses against God. A child who does something "on purpose" in the sense that he intends the material object of an act, does not necessarily have that advertance to its moral malice which determines the sinfulness of an act.

Moreover, the exercise of reason is uncertain and inconstant for some time after its first awakening. A modern educator writes:

Every now and then a sudden gleam of inner light makes it seem as though the child had reached the knowledge of good and evil with regard to the will of God, as though the faculty of judgment were being exercised; but the night of ignorance settles down again.

7

André Boyer, "Primary Religious Education and Primary Teaching" in Shaping the Christian Message, ed. Gerard Sloyan, New York, MacMillan, 1959, p.167.

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The development of conscience is not the result of maturation alone, but of education as well. Excessive authoritarianism may retard the age of discretion by stifling the exercise of the newly awakened faculty of judgment. On the other hand, the exercise of this faculty can be improved by appropriate instruction, encouragement and the provision of opportunities for making moral decisions. Therefore the age of discretion is not determined by chronological age or even by the standardized mental age. This is an individual matter which can be decided only by those who know the child.

Ordinarily the parents and teachers would be in the best position to decide in this matter. The priest should be consulted but should not be asked for a decision until he is reasonably well acquainted with the child. It would require several informal interviews at least to overcome the natural reticence of the young child and to gain his confidence to the extent that he would reveal his true degree of maturity.

### 3. Recent Trends

Following the decree Quam Singulari it has become customary to introduce children to both Sacraments at about seven years of age. Recently however there is a tendency to distinguish once more between the age for

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confession and the age for communion; not, however, by setting a later age for communion, which the decree condemned, but by postponing confession to a more mature age. In some dioceses of Quebec it has been proposed that the Sacraments of initiation, Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist be received in this, their traditional order, and that the reception of the Sacrament of Penance be postponed until the end of the second grade. Children of a parish in Stafford, England, were admitted to first communion without previous confession on Pentecost in 1964.

A sacramental program radically different from current practice in North America has been prescribed for the diocese of Roermond, Holland. In a pastoral letter dated May 15, 1964, Bishop P. Moors addressed the faithful of his diocese as follows:

We decree that, starting in the school year 1964-1965 in our diocese the following rules will be introduced:

- 1) The responsibility for the religious education of children lies primarily with the parents. If the preparation for first communion and first confession is made in school, the parents should participate as much as possible. The parents should receive training and aid to enable them to see their task and possibilities in a better light, and to help them fulfill their duties as well as possible.
- 2) The first communion of children (when organized through the school) will take place in the second grade of the elementary school.

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3) The introduction to the Sacrament of Penance will best be done in gradual stages. In this way, the child's development can be considered so that he will really be making a confession based on an introspective searching of the heart. At the same time more emphasis may be laid on the social and religious aspects, that really belong to confession.

4) The preparation for the Sacrament of Penance, (when it is carried on through the school) starts in the grade following the one in which first communion takes place. In the third grade, a few times yearly, non-sacramental penitential exercises are held. In the fourth grade, the child receives, a few times, the Sacrament of Penance by way of a communal celebration during which he makes a personal accusation and receives absolution. Starting with fifth grade there will be place for 'private' confession besides the communal celebrations.<sup>8</sup>

The new policy was not undertaken lightly. The question of the best age for admission to the Sacraments had been raised at the Congregationes Pastorum in 1962, and the discussion had been carried further at the Pro-synodal meeting of October 3, 1962. The matter was referred to a committee appointed by the bishop and composed of priests, parents, and teachers, under the chairmanship of the Catholic Elementary School Inspector, Mr. J.A. Jansen. After the matter had been given serious study, a report was drawn up and presented on March 17, 1964, at the

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Published in Analecta: voor het bisdom Roermond, vol. 45, no. 3, June 1964, P. 77-78, tr. Nells Khandkar. (private translation).

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meeting of deans where it was discussed at length. Its recommendations were adopted and promulgated by the bishop as diocesan policy.

Reasons for the changes, based on theology as well as psychology, were amply explained in the report.<sup>9</sup> The postponement of first communion to the second grade was prompted by the difficulties experienced by children in their first year of school, which impede their receptivity to sacramental instruction.

It was hoped that the non-sacramental penitential exercises, to be held preferably during the weeks preceding the liturgical highlights, would foster the slow conditioning of the children for a responsible reception of the Sacrament. The reception of the Sacrament in the communal setting only in fourth grade, intended to emphasize the social and religious aspects of the Sacrament, that these might then influence daily life. Gradual increase of frequency of reception would be promoted by 'private' confession beginning in fifth grade.

Evaluation - The aim of Pius X was to remove the obstacles which hindered the free access of little children to Christ in His Sacraments. The new trends are, to a

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Studiecommissie en het bisdom Roermond, Kinderbiecht en Kindercommuni, in Analecta: voor het bisdom Roermond, pp. 85-95.

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large extent, inspired by his spirit, but because of advances in psychology, they go beyond his instruction. The abuse he condemned was the refusal of the Holy Eucharist to children who enjoyed some use of their reason. Although he stated that the obligation of receiving both Sacraments began at the same age, he did not require the previous reception of the Sacrament of Penance as a necessary condition for admission to first holy communion.

Church Law demands only a right intention and the state of grace, and the remission through sacramental confession of any mortal sins which may have been committed. There is no justification, then, for adding to the law where young children are concerned. Since the confessions of the very young are presumably devotional, moral pressure to receive it prematurely is regrettable.

On the negative side, the new policy in Holland seems to lend itself to a measure of regimentation. The committee argues, in its report, that the organization of the program according to grade levels determines admission to the Sacraments by mental age rather than chronological age. This would be true, however, only under ideal conditions of ability grouping. In practice, a wide range of mental ages is usually found in every grade of the ordinary school. It is true that there is provision for making exceptions for precocious children, recognized as

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such by the parents in consultation with the priest. However, the majority would probably conform to what was being done by their classmates, although many of these might otherwise be receiving the Sacrament fruitfully.

Since it is probable that children in the primary grades are capable of at least venial sin, and since it is not yet conclusively proved that they are all incapable of serious sin, it would be dangerous to exclude them en masse from sacramental confession simply because it is undesirable to compel them all to receive the Sacrament. It would be better to give young children the opportunity to receive sacramental absolution when they so desire, and to give them a simple preparation according to their capacity.

Many of the disadvantages connected with early confession, such as anxiety, false consciences, ritualism and untruthfulness, might be overcome by instruction which is better suited to the mentality of the young child.

Since there is question of merely devotional confession, there is no justification for urging excessive meticulousness in the examination of conscience. A contemporary writer<sup>10</sup> points out that the child is uncertain about right and wrong, so that confession should not be overemphasized.

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<sup>10</sup> Eve Lewis, *op.cit.*, p.187-189.

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She observes also that he has forgotten his individual faults and cannot understand why God should still hold them against him. If parents can forgive and forget right away, can God not do the same? Thus contrition may become a mere formality.

With their modern knowledge of the child's inability to pin-point specific sins, educators should be realistic and encourage children to confess only the sins they know they have committed and for which they are sincerely sorry. It is worse than useless to urge them to think of all their sins or to find sins when they are not conscious of any. Love, simplicity and freedom should characterize the confessions of these innocent children, for whom the Sacrament is a means to greater grace and purity.

The evaluation of the modern trends referred to above may be summarized as follows:

Criticism of some of the sacramental practices of the past is justified. Premature introduction of the concepts of grave sin, the necessity of confession and technical distinctions were worse than useless in the spiritual formation of young children. The custom of compelling children to go to confession before their first communion was not justified theologically, much less psychologically. The solution is not necessarily

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the prolonged postponement of Sacramental Confession. It lies rather, in the writer's opinion, in the adaptation of sacramental instruction to the capacity of the young children, and in greater respect for their individuality and freedom of conscience.

The simple instruction suitable for preparing the very young child for the fruitful use of the Sacrament of Penance is treated under "The Role of Parents". The more complete instruction by which the older child is trained in the use of this Sacrament for life is discussed under "The Role of Teachers". It is understood, however, that parents and teachers are to cooperate at all stages of the child's education.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ROLE OF PARENTS

#### 1. Formation of Conscience

The major responsibility of parents in the remote preparation of children for the fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Penance is the formation of conscience. This work requires insight, patience, and selfless devotion. In this area of Christian training errors are common, and the damage they do may be permanent.

The greatest danger to the success of conscience formation lies in the distortions which may exist in the conscience of the parents. Unless they themselves have a balanced moral sense they cannot develop this in their children. Catholics can in good faith be victims of legalism, laxity, rigourism or other errors. In particular, it may be noted that Jansenism has had a far-reaching influence on the Catholics of Britain and France, an influence that has not yet been completely eradicated in the descendants of the English and French colonists in North America.

On the positive side, there are increasing opportunities for modern parents to supply what may have been lacking in their own religious education. Modern insights into theology are being made available to the people in the Catholic press, periodicals, pamphlets and paper-backs.

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The Christian Family Movement and study clubs are organized in many parishes. New methods of seminary training and pastoral institutes will result, it is hoped, in improved preaching and teaching. By use of these means of re-education and by prayer for enlightenment, parents may qualify themselves for their important work.

A balanced view of the Christian life as a whole is necessary for those who would instruct children in any aspect of religion. Moral training must be based on a Christian awareness of God, His plan, and His relationship to all His creatures, especially His rational creatures. God-centred loving obedience does not degenerate into impersonal legalism or slavish submission.

From the earliest years the demands of God must be taught in the context of His merciful love if the individual is to be able to face his weakness honestly and seek forgiveness confidently. Every conscious moment brings an opportunity to respond to God. Even the consciousness of having sinned can be an occasion for returning to God with even greater love than before.

The morality centred in love for God and neighbour which parents attempt to develop in their children at the age of reason is normally based on the pre-rational loving relationship with the parents. 'Goodness' to the very young child means conduct which pleases the parents.

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Although no moral responsibility is attached to infantile behaviour, the patterns for the habits of later life may be traced to early childhood. Since parents are responsible for the standards unconsciously absorbed during these formative years, it is important that their reactions of pleasure or displeasure should be based on the relative goodness or malice of the behaviour of their children. It requires self-control to repress angry outbursts prompted by costly or annoying accidents, and to conceal amusement at misconduct which seems 'cute'.

As early as possible Christian motives should be proposed as the mainsprings of conduct. For the safety of the child corporal punishment is probably necessary to deter him from anything that endangers his life and health until he is ready to be guided by the dictates of his own reason. Even when a penalty is imposed, it should be accompanied by an explanation and an appeal to the child's love. This love and desire to please is at first directed towards the parents themselves. Under their guidance it can gradually be transferred to the heavenly Father and then to others for His sake.

This spiritualization of motives is a long-range project requiring prudence and delicacy. Well-meaning zeal in this work is in danger of defeating its own purpose.

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Purity of intention is based on the loving awareness of the presence of God. However, this presence, which should be a source of security and consolation, may be misconceived as a system of fool-proof espionage. A contemporary psychotherapist<sup>11</sup> warns against turning children against the Child Jesus by using Him as a deterrent from misconduct.

The same writer mentions other major pitfalls such as overseverity, which retards or prevents the dissolution of the primitive conscience (blind acceptance of rules from adult authority) and dualism which opposes soul to body as good to evil. She also points out the dangers inherent in the exhortation, "Try to save your soul". In her clinical experience she found that every case of scruples which she treated in children or adults could be traced to this seemingly innocent exhortation, which has the effect of splitting the individual into two parts, with the self in between, anxiously trying to protect the soul from stains. The author also cautions against teaching sin to the very young as a separation from God. It should rather be characterized as a temporary clouding of the intimacy between the child and God.

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Cf. Eve Lewis, Children and Their Religion, London, Sheed and Ward, 1962, p. 182-190.

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## 2. Examination of Conscience

The practice of regular examination of conscience may be introduced as part of the night prayers. Like all the spiritual practices of young children it must be extremely brief and uncomplicated. The parents may suggest a few simple questions, pausing briefly after each, and then say the Act of Contrition with the child. It is important that parents avoid suggesting answers to the questions proposed. It is probable that in many cases the subjective malice or gravity of misbehaviour observed in children does not correspond to its objective evil. Even after some evidence of the use of reason has appeared, it is not to be expected that its use will be henceforth constant and consistent. Ignorance, inexperience, excitement, precipitation or temporary displacement of reason by imagination may, in given instances, either excuse from sin or lessen its gravity. The concept of freedom must be present; "Did I do anything on purpose to offend God?" is the essential question of the child's examination of conscience, and the answer is his secret and God's.

Examination of conscience for confession is essentially the same as the nightly examination, except that it covers a longer period of time. Therefore, the habit of examination of conscience each evening should

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facilitate preparation for confession, which, although serious, should not be too prolonged or anxious.

## 3. The Virtue of Penance

The virtue of penance inclines one to turn away from sin to God and to make up for sin by good works and the willing acceptance of suffering. It is a probable opinion that penance is an infused moral virtue. In any case there is also the acquired virtue of penance which can be developed by practice. The fruitfulness of the Sacrament of Penance can be increased by a corresponding increase in the virtue of penance. The virtue intensifies one's contrition and increases the amount and fervour of the satisfaction made for sin.

Contrition, which is an essential to the virtue as it is to the Sacrament of Penance, should be an additional disposition of a Christian. Children should be encouraged to make an Act of Contrition as soon as they are aware of having committed a sin, when they face danger, and when they go to bed at night. The motive of love of God should be proposed to them as the chief reason for sorrow for sin, although the fear of God's chastisements may be present at the same time. A short simple Act of Contrition should be used, until the longer form is really meaningful.

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Reparation for sin in general and for individual sins in particular is a habit that even young children can develop. (The prayer Passio Domini, which follows sacramental absolution, suggests this practice as an extension of the influence of the Sacrament of Penance on the daily life of the penitent).

The story of some incident in Christ's Passion may be used to introduce the instruction on reparation. The thought of Christ's loving submission to the sufferings which we deserve for our sins should move children to desire to share in some small way in His work of satisfaction for them. The practice of making a specific act of atonement for every deliberate sin not only testifies to the sincerity of one's contrition but also serves to forestall a relapse into sin. Such an act might consist in a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of a prayer or ejaculation, or the giving up of some lawful pleasure, such as a motion picture or a sundae. Small acts performed willingly, lovingly, and consistently, outweigh more pretentious ones done grudgingly, ostentatiously or capriciously. If penance cannot be pleasant, it should nevertheless be joyful. It should also be hidden rather than spectacular as our Lord clearly indicates in the Gospel for Ash Wednesday.

#### 4. Immediate Preparation for First Confession

The ceremonies which serve to impress adults with the solemnity of the reception of a sacrament, merely create difficulty for young children. Their preoccupation with mastering formulae would distract them from the awareness of their encounter with God in the Sacrament. In keeping with Our Lord's injunction, "Suffer little children to come unto Me" (Lk.XVIII,16) it is fitting that no unnecessary obstacles should hinder their free access to Him.

Since there is question here of devotional confession only, all that is required of the penitent is the confession of some sin for which there is sincere sorrow, outwardly expressed. If the child has been trained in the examination of conscience and in the practice of the virtue of penance over a period of time, this should present no difficulty. As contrition is the most important element, parents may help to arouse this before confession, primarily by emphasizing the ingratitude to the good God involved in sin, but also by comparing the punishment of Purgatory to the sufferings experienced in this life.

Sorrow should be expressed outwardly by an Act of Contrition which is meaningful to the child. The long version, which is recommended because it contains all the elements of contrition according to theological standards,

contains little more than unintelligible phrases from a child's point of view. The absurd substitutions familiar to primary teachers prove this. The form which has 'because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell' is unsuitable for children who commit only venial sin. A short form taken from a First Communion catechism or a children's prayer book is preferable. Even an original expression of sorrow for having offended God, worded by parent or child, is acceptable.

The child may be instructed to go into the confession, kneel (or stand, if he is very small), make the Sign of the Cross, and say, "This is my First Confession" and then mention his sins. He should listen to what the priest says to him, especially when he imposes the penance.

Special attention should be given to the importance of the absolution so that the child will be somewhat aware of what is taking place and will remain in the confessional until the rite is completed. He should wait until the confessor dismisses him. He should also be informed that the priest is not allowed to repeat what he hears in Confession. It is desirable that the penance be performed soon after Confession, unless the child is told otherwise.

If the parents observe that a child is not yet capable of receiving the Sacrament of Penance, or if the child himself is unwilling to go to Confession, his

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admission to this Sacrament should be postponed. In parishes in which the child would thereby be refused Holy Communion, even if the minimum requirements for its reception were present, the parents could instruct him to enter the confessional and ask for a blessing. Such a procedure would be justified where excessive strictness interferes with liberty of conscience as regards the Sacraments.

## 5. Errors to be Avoided

Despite the best of intentions parents frequently make costly errors in the religious formation of their children. This is not surprising when one considers the formidable difficulties encountered in this work. Even those who have enjoyed the advantages of a superior education have many obstacles to overcome, for example, the difficulty of communicating with children, whose experience and power of expression is so limited. There is the further problem of ascertaining the effects of instruction, which are not immediately visible. A few of the more common errors may be mentioned here.

Demanding the Impossible - In preparing children for First Confession it is useless to urge them to try to recall all the sins of their life. The procedure for the general Confessions of adults has no counterpart in initial

sacramental instruction. The mention of some sin which he is sincerely sorry for, is sufficient. A psychotherapist warns against inducing children to conform externally to adult patterns which are not, as yet, meaningful for them.

It is very easy for an infant, whose life is so personal and so immediate, to become fixated in the externals of religious observance. He may be forming a pattern of only going through certain motions which, in view of his short memory and uncertainty, have no connection at all with what he thought and felt when he was right in a situation. The infant is an affectionate, spontaneous being. He lives from where he feels; and we must try not to overlay this feeling with a superficial pattern of religious behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

Using Confession as a means of discipline.- Because of the sacredness of Penance and its importance in the Christian life, it should never be treated as a mere means to secure family discipline. It is imprudent for parents, in reprimanding an offense, to say, "You'll have to tell that to Father when you go to Confession", yet the writer has known this to be done as early as a year before the First Confession. Apart from the theological fallacy of saying that he has to tell what is merely free matter, it should be obvious that the building up of fear and resentment towards the confessor could have a damaging effect on the spiritual life of the child.

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12

Eve Lewis, op.cit., p.189.

The table of sins. - If parents look in vain for the table of sins in their child's new prayer book, they should not regret its absence, nor should they find one elsewhere and go through it with him in preparation for Confession. It is generally recognized today that it is unwise to provide children with new sins to commit or even to confess.

More important, it is misleading to give the impression that the moral life is summarized negatively in a table of sins. The two great commandments, and their specific applications in the other commandments call for responses which vary from day to day in the life situation of each individual. It calls for more humility and sincere repentance, to make a personalized admission of one's failures to give God what He demanded in the various circumstances of every day, than to select a few impersonally labelled sins from a list. A well known contemporary liturgist says, on this subject,

Instead of seizing upon their sins in all their originality and uniqueness, people are content to recite a catalogue, or run through a collection of labels. They accuse themselves of being greedy, lazy, uncharitable: vague and impersonal admissions which have nothing really compromising about them, nothing humiliating, so that they can be retailed with indifference. The result is that contrition is weak; we feel that these sins hardly belong to us at all, we do not genuinely detest them, so that we can

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go on repeating them indefinitely. It is not that the sacrament is ineffectual, but that we cut down its effects by producing such soft, colourless and intangible matter for it to work upon.<sup>13</sup>

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A.M. Roguet, Christ Acts Through The Sacraments,  
tr. Carisbrooke Dominicans, Collegeville, Minnesota,  
Liturgical Press, 1954, p.98.

## CHAPTER III

## THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

## 1. Knowledge

The Sacraments can be understood only in their context in the economy of the Incarnation and Redemption. A desirable starting point for specific instruction on the Sacrament of Penance is the Scriptural account of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the apparition to the Eleven during which Christ conferred on the Apostles the power to forgive sins (Jn. XX, 19-23). Then it should be explained that Christ's victory over death and sin was not limited to His own century but was achieved once and for all and that He intervenes in the lives of Catholics of all ages when they contritely approach His representatives for forgiveness.

Subsequent instructions should include a simple explanation of the life of grace which is forfeited by serious disloyalty to God and which is hampered in its growth and activity by lesser offenses. Sin should be presented as something negative, a hindrance to the intimacy willed by God. The primacy of charity should be emphasized.

With regard to the Sacrament itself the child should be instructed as to the acts of the penitent, the nature of absolution, and the protection of the Sacramental seal.

The acts of the penitent which constitute the matter of the Sacrament are contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The necessity of these three elements in the return of a sinner to God is explained in the Roman Catechism.

Sins against God are committed by thought, by word, and by deed. It is, then but reasonable, that in recurring to the power of the keys we should endeavour to appease God's wrath, and obtain pardon for our sins by means of the very same things which we employed to offend His sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

Contrition - Contrition deserves the greatest attention, for if it is sufficiently intense it is in itself sufficient to obtain remission of sin even before approaching the Sacrament of Penance. Moreover sincere contrition implies the intention of going to confession and of making satisfaction.

Contrition means a detestation of sin, sorrow for having been guilty of it, and a firm purpose to avoid relapsing into it. Contrition is essentially in the will; therefore it exists independently of any sensible feeling of sorrow. The child can be trained to conceive contrition as regret for having committed sin precisely because it

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Catechism of the Council of Trent, translated and annotated by John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan, New York, Wagner, 1934, p.273.

is contrary to God's Will regardless of the immediate pleasurable or painful effects of the sin. If the sin brought with it a natural penalty, the penitent must take care that this penalty is not the only reason for his sorrow which must be supernatural. If, on the other hand, he succeeded by his sin in obtaining some pleasure or avoiding something distasteful, he must be convinced that it was not worth the terrible price he paid for it, that is, disloyalty to God. From this conviction there naturally flows a resolution not to repeat the infidelity whatever the allurements to do so may be.

The sorrow thus described is supreme and intense, and, if the penitent is at all consistent, it will be universal. One cannot be turned completely toward God and toward sin at the same time; therefore it is logically impossible to be moved by charity to contrition as regards one grave sin while clinging selfishly to another serious fault.

The distinction between contrition and attrition, although kept in mind by the teacher, need not be stressed in the early grades. The chief supernatural motive to be proposed is the love of God. The existence of hell and purgatory should also be included in the instructions. A comparison between a momentary pleasure or escape from

pain and the prolonged torment in purgatory or hell which may result from it, may be proposed as an effective deterrent from sin and as a motive for contrition. It is safe to teach an Act of Contrition that contains both motives, so that if the penitent fails to attain to the perfect motive of true love, the genuinely supernatural motive of fear of punishment after death will ensure the validity of the Sacrament.

One condition of contrition which is often overlooked in instructions on confession is forgiveness of injuries. The Roman Catechism says:

Again, not less necessary for contrition than the other chief conditions is a care that it will be accompanied by entire forgiveness of the injuries which we may have received from others. This Our Lord and Saviour admonishes when He declares: If you will forgive men their offenses your heavenly Father will forgive you also your offenses, but if you will not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive you your offenses (Mt. vi.14)<sup>15</sup>

Confession. - It is important to guard against a mechanistic concept of Penance, which makes of the Sacrament the religious counterpart of the minute car-wash. Similarly one must avoid a superstitious approach which moves the penitent to discover and enumerate his sins so that they will magically vanish. Perhaps the most

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Ibid., p. 279-280

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common distortion among Latin-rite Catholics is the legalistic view, which leads to the preparation of a list of infractions of the laws of God and of the Church, (with careful attention to note species, number and aggravating circumstances) to which the penitent pleads guilty and for which he accepts the penance as a fine. All these misconceptions of Confession rob it of its sacred character as an act of worship.

The instruction on Confession might be preceded by an explanation of the examination of conscience. It may be to their advantage in this connection that many children are unable to read the examinations of conscience sometimes found in devotional books. There is a danger that children may misunderstand the questions, or that they may confess sins found therein, of which they have not been guilty. It is better that the child be led to understand the meaning of goodness and malice so that he will more readily recognize the moral character of the actions which he may have occasion to perform.

The Gospels should be used freely in developing the knowledge of what God expects of His children. Beginning with Our Lord's statement: "If you love Me, keep My Commandments" (Jn.XIV. 15-21) the instruction should be centred on the two great commandments so that all other

obligations are shown to be an application of the one or the other. Against this background the distinction between the complete rejection of God's friendship and that lesser infidelity which offends God without extinguishing His life in us will be more readily understood.

Both the examination of conscience and Confession should be God-centred rather than self-centred. An approach to Confession inspired by faith, trust, and love is the best guarantee that it will possess the requisite qualities. Through the eyes of faith, the confessor is seen as the ambassador of the merciful Saviour Who already knows all. This faith will inspire in the penitent that truthfulness by which he is moved to reveal himself as God knows him to be, so that Christ, acting through the priest, will forgive and enrich him. With the truthfulness born of faith will be found the related qualities of simplicity and humility. One who acknowledges the truth that virtue and the avoidance of sin are to be attributed to God's grace, and that sin is the result of unfaithfulness to the graces offered by Him, has every reason to approach humbly to ask forgiveness for his offenses. When faith inspires the penitent to regard the confessor as Christ's representative, the resulting reverence should make him careful to avoid unsuitable language and details which would be out of place. (In connection with reverence,

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the instructor ought to warn children against indiscreet discussion with others of anything that the confessor may have said). Faith in God's omniscience and justice and a loving confidence in His goodness and merciful love will make the penitent careful to ask pardon for at least all the mortal sins of which he knows himself to be guilty.

The confession restricted to known mortal sins, the minimum for validity, does not occupy a very prominent place in the instruction of the early grades. Presumably, grave sin, if it is possible at all, is rare in those in whom reason has but lately begun to function. Moreover, even in later life Christians who live the life of grace energetically strive to keep altogether free from serious sin. Therefore it is of great practical importance both for the present and for the future that children be trained for the profitable use of Confession in the combat of venial sin. The opinion of Davis in this regard seems open to serious question.

Children should be particularly exhorted to tell every sin they remember, not to conceal any sin at all, even if a venial sin, for the habit of concealing sins may grow on them, and some children suffer mental anguish of a real sort intermittently for years owing to an imagined sacrilegious confession. The prudent confessor will, therefore, urge them to leave nothing out, and should usually ask them if there is anything else to confess. At the same time, children

should not be allowed to have an erroneous conscience, and to think, as they often do, that deliberate concealment of even a venial sin is a mortal sin.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to this opinion it might be objected that the correction of an erroneous conscience, which Davis recommends, should suffice to dispel the anxiety arising from an imaginary sacrilegious confession. As for the habit of concealing sins, this danger might be better counteracted by the development of a supernatural outlook which would move the penitent to seek forgiveness for every deliberate offence against a loving God. The plain truth that the wilful concealment of a mortal sin leaves the sinner in a far worse condition than if he had not gone to confession at all should be sufficient to deter any rational person from making a sacrilegious confession. On the other hand, excessive self-searching by the penitent followed by further questioning by the confessor might well be a factor contributing to the distaste for Confession which often develops in childhood and increases in adult life.

A contemporary writer warns against the danger of invalid Confession owing to insufficiency of matter. He says: "What seems to happen is that this pattern for

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Henry Davis, Moral and Pastoral Theology, vol. III London, Sheed and Ward, 1958, p.294f.

Confession continues in adult life, even to the point where vague, and possibly non-existent sins are confessed".<sup>17</sup>

The more profitable plan would be to confess those certain and wilful sins for which sorrow is most spontaneous and sincere. The purpose of amendment too, can be more practical when it concerns sins which are fully voluntary and therefore more subject to control. Also, those venial sins which are habitual, or which lead easily to mortal sin call for special attention.

The evil results which followed from a sin should not be confessed unless they were expected at the time of sinning. Unforeseen evil effects add nothing to the malice of the sin nor do any good effects which may accidentally be caused by an evil action diminish its malice.

Since the child is being trained (in the later primary grades) for his life-long practice in the use of the Sacrament of Penance, he must be taught the requirements for Confession of obligation. The examination of conscience in preparation for the latter demands attention to the species, number and aggravating circumstances of all serious sins.

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James J. Kilgallon, "Confession of Devotion; Is It Understood?", Homiletic and Pastoral Review, Vol.62, No.3, Dec., 1961, p.236.

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The moral species of a sin is determined by the virtue or the commandment which it violates, and is further distinguished by the manner in which it is opposed to the virtue or the commandment. If one and the same act comprises two or more species of sin, each of these must be confessed. For example, if one were to steal a chalice, he would be obliged to accuse himself of theft and sacrilege.

The theological species is determined by its gravity, i.e. whether it is mortal or venial. The number of times each mortal sin has been committed must be mentioned to the best of the penitent's knowledge. In the case of a habit of sin it may be impossible to do more than mention the length of time the habit has been indulged in and the number of times a day or a week the sin has been committed.

Aggravating circumstances are those conditions which affect the gravity of the sin or involve a new moral or theological species of sin. For example, the circumstance that the victim of a murder is the murderer's brother changes the sin from simple homicide to fratricide. All circumstances which change the moral or theological species of the sin should be mentioned. Those which merely aggravate one's guilt may be told, but this is not of strict obligation. Irrelevant details should be omitted.

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It should be noted that attention to the precise species and number (and relevant circumstances) is obligatory only with regard to necessary matter. However, it is helpful even in devotional Confession to mention these things in order to give the confessor a more accurate picture of the soul.

In teaching these principles to children, the teacher must take care not to give the impression that mortal sin is an everyday occurrence in the lives of children or even of good adult Christians. Jungmann points out that, "Mortal sin is something more than an aggravated venial sin. Mortal sin is committed when the sinner knows that if he commits a certain action he breaks with God".<sup>18</sup>

Proper emphasis on the distinction between mortal and venial sin in the intermediate grades need not lead to laxity. On the contrary, it should lead to an attitude which would rule out of one's life anything that would seriously threaten the life of grace. Mortal sin should not be approached from the "How far can I go?" point of view. Rather, it should be realistically presented as spiritual suicide, the destruction of true life and happiness in oneself and a damaging blow against the whole Church.

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<sup>18</sup>Op. cit., p. 309.

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It should be understood that the commission of mortal sin involves a complete reversal of direction in one who ordinarily strives to live the Christian life.

Satisfaction. - The analogy of reparation to human authorities for damage to school property or for neglect of duties, even after the offense has been forgiven, may be used to explain the function of satisfaction, i.e., the sacramental penance. The transition from this analogy to the higher concept of acts of religion imposed by the confessor as compensation for offenses against God, may be made by means of the Scriptural accounts of Peter's threefold denial and his threefold declaration of love after the resurrection (Jn. XVIII, 12-27 and Jn. XXI, 15-17). The children should be made to understand that of themselves they are utterly incapable of repairing the harm done by sin, but that the sacramental penance derives its efficacy from the satisfaction made by Christ in His Passion. It should be pointed out that the penance imposed by the confessor is a more effective means of reparation for sin and of healing and strengthening the soul than similar or greater works undertaken independently, for it is an integral part of the Sacrament in which the power of Christ's Passion is applied to the individual.

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The ecclesial dimensions of satisfaction should not be overlooked. The teacher may appeal to the generosity of children to inspire them to perform works of satisfaction not only for the sins they themselves have committed, caused, or failed to prevent, but also for the sins of all men. Conversely, the children may be assured that they are not left alone to expiate their own sins, but they can expect the help of Christians everywhere. The privilege of drawing on the spiritual treasury of the Church in order to apply the merits of Christ, Our Lady, and the saints for the remission of temporal punishment should be explained simply. Even though their understanding of indulgences may be imperfect, children are capable of gaining them for themselves and for the souls in purgatory.

The importance of the acceptance and fulfillment of the penance must be emphasized. The penitent must observe any conditions concerning the time and manner of performing the penance that may have been attached to it and offer it for the intention indicated, if the confessor has specified any.

Absolution. - As in other sections of the instruction on Penance, Holy Scripture may profitably be used to introduce the study of absolution. One of the incidents in

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which Christ forgave sin, such as the story of the paralytic in Luke V, 17-26, should be selected. Having emphasized Christ's merciful goodness shown towards the sinner in the Bible story, the teacher may proceed to show His continued and even greater mercy towards those who live under the New Law. Not only a few fortunate individuals, but all Catholics who approach the Sacrament of Penance with the required dispositions, can confidently expect to receive the favour of divine forgiveness and the infusion or increase of the life of grace. The sacred sign of Penance is their assurance that their sins are truly remitted.

Absolution, which is the form of the Sacrament of Penance, is God's response to the acts of the penitent which constitute its proximate matter. Although more time may have to be spent in teaching the latter, great care must be taken to develop an appreciation of the former. Man's work must not be emphasized to the neglect of God's action.

The fairly common mistake of leaving the confessional before absolution has been given may be accounted for at times by thoughtlessness, nervousness, or the like. However a confessor experienced in working with young children fears that in many cases this is an indication of faulty instruction regarding this Sacrament. He writes:

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As long as they have loyally examined their conscience, told their sins well, with contrition and the firm purpose of amendment, they go away light-hearted. The pardon of the good God comes as a matter of course. The inward conversion of penance is their work . . . An altogether human pedagogy of righteousness which makes conscience into the voice of self-mastery, has replaced the concept of the sacrament as the meeting of a sinner with merciful Love. The free generosity of divine love has vanished . . . <sup>19</sup>

The penitent should excite himself to sorrow and express it by the Act of Contrition before entering the confessional. Inside the confessional he should listen attentively to the absolution prayer and preferably say "Amen" at its conclusion.

## 2. Attitudes

The development of attitudes is accomplished indirectly to a great extent. The sentiments of fear, reluctance, and dislike which Catholics sometimes develop are not surprising in view of the pride, laziness and inordinate attachment to creatures inherent in human nature since the fall of our first parents. But Christians, though still human, are capable when healed, enlightened, and strengthened by grace, of approaching the Sacraments

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Jean Rimaud, "Confession et direction spirituelle des petits enfants", Christus, vol. 7 no. 25, Jan. 1960, p.113, tr. mine.

with such faith, love, and confidence that little room is left for the negative attitudes referred to above. Faith in the merciful intervention of God acting through the Sacrament of Penance, confidence in His willingness to forgive, and a grateful, loving response to the divine love which has given us this means of reconciliation are attitudes which can be fostered by the type of instruction recommended above under "Knowledge".

An important attitude relative to Penance is the sense of personal responsibility. While teaching the child what is objectively right and wrong, while training him to make moral judgments, teachers must guard against judging his culpability in any given instance, since the subjective morality of an action depends in large manner on interior factors which cannot be known to others. The penitent must confess his sins as he understood them at the time of committing them even if he has since learned that he was mistaken in his judgment at that time. Therefore grown-ups must never dictate his confession to a child, but rather respect the personal nature of conscience, however inexperienced it may be.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. Jean Rimaud, Op.cit., p.111

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## 3. Habits

The Exercise of Moral Judgment. - The chief interior habits to be developed in preparation for receiving the Sacrament of Penance are the exercise of moral judgment (without which examination of conscience is impossible) and the virtue of penance. As to the exterior, practice in the correct manner of making one's confession is part of the preparatory instruction.

Examination of conscience calls for the ability to make moral judgments. A modern writer<sup>21</sup> points out that at the age of six or seven, and sometimes earlier, the desire for power and distinction leads the child to imitate those whose conduct wins for them social approval. The moral judgment develops gradually with the awakening sense of right and wrong. It is at this age that he recommends training in self-evaluation of conduct, and in the examination of conscience.

What has been said above (in the discussion of examination of conscience for Confession) applies a fortiori to the long-range training in examination of conscience. However, in the beginning, real-life incidents, concrete situations in the child's own life must be the starting point. Abstract principles will be useful at a later stage.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. "La Conscience a l'Age de Raison", l'Anneau d'Or, 97, Louis Périn, Jan.-Feb., Paris 1961, p.69

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Educators know that correction or encouragement for a child's action should normally follow the action before any notable lapse of time, in order that the child may see the connection between the act and its consequences. But children must be corrected for many things that are not sins. They are being trained in etiquette, hygiene, safety and economy at the same time as they are being trained in the Christian virtues, and often the same penalties are imposed for failings in all these areas. Since Christian educators do not hold the pragmatic concept of morality as mere conformity to socially accepted standards, they must help children to distinguish between mere social errors, such as passing an object with the left hand, or bad habits in the natural order, such as biting the fingernails, and sin, which consists in a decision to offend God. When forbidding any act, one should indicate why it is to be avoided. "It is not polite". "It is not good for you". "It is a rule of this school". "God does not want us to do that". Such simple explanations as these are much more helpful in training the child than the disconcerting "Because I said so!" in response to his "Why?".

Great self-control and wisdom should be exercised in correcting misdemeanors, in order that consistent use of sanctions proportionate to the offense may give the child a

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sense of the relative gravity of the failings to which he is subject. The strongest reactions of disapproval should be reserved for behaviour that truly offends God such as uncharitableness or dishonesty. The greatest moderation must be used when there is question of something very annoying, expensive, or inconvenient for the teacher, which, however, may have little or no moral guilt attached to it. It demands considerable virtue to forgive that carelessness which results in the forgetting of an important errand or the breaking of a treasured article and to reprimand a polite lie or the repetition of some damaging gossip, but such virtue is the price educators must pay for the moral judgment they hope to develop in their charges.

The teacher who enjoys the child's confidence is in a favourable position to guide him. In informal talks during quiet moments, incidents of the day may be talked over in such a way as to help the child understand them in so far as they affect the Christian life. In instances where, blinded perhaps by self-interest, he cannot see why some action of his was wrong, the situation may be objectified by making it the plot of a story in which children with fictitious names act similarly to the real children in the situation under consideration. The story might be followed with a discussion of the principles involved. The device is an old one (Cf. 2 Kings 12:1-14).

Although there is a place for righteous wrath in the training of children, it is not desirable that it should be a child's chief standard for measuring the moral evil of an action. As soon as possible, the moral values involved in the ordinary events of the child's life should be drawn to his attention during moments of calm and confidential discussion.

An experienced confessor of young children<sup>22</sup> points out that in the beginning, moral values in the child's mind are reduced to obedience and disobedience. This idea is correct as far as it goes. The difficulty is that the child is apt to identify everything discouraged by adults with sin. Therefore, since he hears "Don't do this!" and "Don't do that !" from morning till night he may easily conclude that disobedience, and hence sin, is as inevitable as breathing. Against this background, horror of sin, heartfelt sorrow, and firm purpose of amendment seem almost impossible psychologically. To counteract this danger, the confessor referred to above recommends a concept of goodness which is centered in charity. Although God loves clean, well-behaved children, He especially loves those who are generous, unselfish

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<sup>22</sup>Cf. Jean Rimaud, Op.cit., p.112.

and thoughtful. The virtues can be taught in their proper hierarchy if they are grouped under one or the other of the two great commandments. Then all sin can be shown as a rejection or negation of love.

The virtue of penance has been discussed under "The Role of Parents" above.

The Manner of Making One's Confession. - Regarding the manner of receiving the Sacrament itself, correct habits should be developed from the beginning. The child should be taught to apply himself seriously to preparing to receive the Sacrament, without paying any attention to other children who may be waiting their turn. (It is preferable that young children be taken to Confession at an hour when there are not too many penitents, for their attention and devotion might easily be lost during a long tiresome period of waiting). Ten minutes or less should be sufficient time in which to pray for help, thank God for favours received, examine one's conscience, make practical resolutions and say the Act of Contrition.

It seems advisable in teaching children to make their confession to allow them to practice in the confessional when the priest is not there. The practice of having small children stand in the confessional because of their size should be avoided if possible, since the kneeling

posture is among the rites of the Sacrament which should at once express and foster suitable interior dispositions. The children should be shown the slide, opened and closed, and be instructed to wait until it is opened. The audible, but not too audible, voice should be demonstrated.

One priest objects to time-consuming formulae which contribute nothing to the intelligent understanding of the Sacrament. He writes:

We priests are trained to give a blessing to the penitent as soon as the slide is opened. Why then must the penitent utter the useless request: "Bless me Father, for I have sinned"? This introduction could be dropped. Next, the useless statement "I confess to Almighty God and to you Father" could also be dropped. If the penitent does not intend to confess to God and to the priest he should not even enter the confessional. It is indeed necessary to let the priest know the elapsed time since the last confession and this should be the first thing mentioned. The subsequent statement "I said my penance and received Holy Communion" is not necessary. If someone deliberately refused or neglected to say the penance for the last confession, then this must be mentioned, but such things are rare.<sup>23</sup>

Since the sacramental sign, in the broad sense, includes all the sacramentals and ceremonies surrounding the reception of the Sacrament, it is not desirable to cut down the rites of administration to the minimum matter

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Harry S. Smith, "Confessions Simplified", The Priest, vol.20, no.7, July 1964, p.630.

and form required for validity. However, the ceremonies retained should be those which help the recipient to understand the Sacrament.

On the subject of children's Confessions Jungmann suggests:

As introduction it is enough to say:  
"Humbly and sorrowfully I confess my sins".  
at the end: "For these and all my other sins  
I am heartily sorry and beg pardon and absolution"  
would suffice. Sometimes it is customary to say finally:  
"My Jesus, Mercy", but this would appear to be less appropriate  
because it might often sound affected. If a diocesan prayer book  
or the catechism offers definite formulas, the catechist should keep to these.<sup>24</sup>

Even these simple opening and closing sentences contain vocabulary which is too difficult for many children. In such cases, it should be sufficient to say "It is \_\_\_ since my last Confession. These are my sins".

Parents and catechists must guard against making overly explicit suggestions about how to make the accusation, in case the child would merely repeat their words. It is better to let him express himself very imperfectly, than to lead him to make a "good Confession" that is not his own.

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<sup>24</sup>

Op cit., p.313.

Another writer<sup>25</sup> objects to the seemingly useless sentence commonly used to conclude the accusation: "I am sorry for all the sins I cannot remember". If the accusation has contained no real sin, then it is necessary that some sin, at least venial, for which one is sincerely sorry be mentioned, otherwise the Sacrament cannot be valid. If past sins are confessed it is sufficient to say: "I am sorry for all my past sins against this or that virtue or commandment". If validity is thus ensured, then any unconfessed sins omitted inculpably will be remitted indirectly, provided the penitent is sorry for them.

After completing his confession the child should listen to the priest's instruction and answer his questions. He must pay attention to the penance imposed. Before leaving he should stop and listen to make sure the priest is finished giving absolution.

The habit of saying prayer penances before leaving the church, if convenient, is to be recommended. A prayer of thanksgiving for the graces received, and a prayer for the confessor would also be appropriate at this time.

The external rites of Confession should be explained meaningfully so that they will foster the inner dispositions which they express. Kneeling signifies both worship and

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Cf. James Kilgallon, op.cit., p.236

humility. The exterior reverence, the lowered head and clasped hands of the penitent express sentiments like those of the publican who "went away justified" (Luke XVIII. 9-14).

#### 4. The Sacramental Mentality

Sacraments are symbols chosen by Christ to be bearers of His grace. Through these signs He enters into the life of the Christian to share His own life with him ever more intimately. The symbolism of the Sacraments and their mode of operation are receiving considerable attention in the present-day renewal of theological studies. The one-sided concentration on their ex opere operato effects emphasized by the Council of Trent is now being counter-balanced by a stress on their character as signs of faith and personal encounters with Christ.

Comparative religion has had its contribution to make to the new sacramental studies. Understanding of the role of symbols in the universal religious expression of mankind enriches our appreciation of sacramental symbolism. Depth psychology has shed further light on its meaning.

There appears to be some resemblance between the thought patterns of primitives and those of children. One point of similarity is the propensity to magic. The

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practice of magic aims at the infallible attainment of the desired result through the completion of some ritual. A witch-doctor, for example, does not entreat the gods for a cure; rather he attempts to exercise the power of healing by his own magical incantations and rites.

A similar mentality is observed in children. They are seen to skip over the cracks in the sidewalk, chanting, "Step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back". When two children walk on opposite sides of an object, they say "Bread and butter" to avert a fight. Their wish on the first star is made in the form of a rhyming incantation.

An experiment designed to measure the effect of this magical mentality on the sacramental concepts of children was conducted in Brussels. Three groups of children, aged 8, 11 and 14, were asked to respond to questions intended to provoke answers indicative of the degree of magic mentality. The same questions were used with a group of theologically trained adults, for purposes of comparison. The 8 year old group was characterized by replies which revealed a high degree of the magic mentality. There was no notable correlation between this mentality and intelligence. The authors of this experiment report:

The group of eight-year-olds remains very compact. On the contrary, the group of eleven-year-olds is widely scattered (from 24 points to 1): the transition seems most marked at this age between the two mentalities. From the age of fourteen half the subjects have attained the scores characteristic of the adults who, let us remember, are in this instance specialists in the religious sciences.<sup>26</sup>

It is a challenge to teachers of the primary grades to foster the development of a true sacramental mentality. All sacramental instruction should have a sound theological, biblical, and liturgical basis. Everything which tends to the expectation of automatic results should be avoided, especially in dealing with children of this age group, which is so strongly inclined to the magic mentality.

Two priests, interested in the pilot project in religious education in Quebec, conceive the development of a sacramental mentality, through initiation into the world of symbols, as the appropriate background for admission to the Sacraments.

The Sacraments always present themselves in the form of signs, of things and symbolic actions. The child will have to be sensitized little by little to the mysterious import of these signs before having access to them.

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André Godin et Soeur Marthe, "Mentalité magique et vie sacramentelle chez les enfants de 8 à 14 ans," Lumen Vitae, vol. 15, no. 2, Apr.-Jun. 1960, p.279., tr.mine.

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The whole method employed by the new catechism will result in the acclimatizing of the child to the universe of signs and symbols. From the First Grade he will be taught to live in the light of God the events of his family, school, and parish life, in the same way as he lives in the created world around him. In the Second Grade, then, the child will be more apt to grasp clearly the meaning of the symbols and gestures which constitute Confirmation, the Eucharist and Penance.<sup>27</sup>

Emphasis on the rendering of worship to God as well as on the reception of spiritual favours in the celebration of the Sacraments may help to foster a sacramental mentality.

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Marcel Cormier et Alcide Clément, "Les sacraments en deuxième année, pourquoi?" *Communauté Chrétienne*, vol.3, no. 15, May-June, 1964, p.219. - translation mine.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE ROLE OF THE CONFESSOR

## 1. To Judge Maturity

It is the duty of the confessor to judge whether or not the child enjoys the use of reason, not only for the purpose of admitting him to First Communion but also for deciding whether or not he is to be absolved. A child's behaviour as well as his words may be taken as an indication of his maturity. Cappello says:

If, therefore, even in the confessional they look around at their companions, play with their fingers or their cap or with the grating, and do similar things, generally there is a strong presumption against their having the perfect use of reason, so much so that unless there is evidence otherwise of the use of reason, apart from necessity (that is, if they accuse themselves of any mortal sin) or the danger of death, ordinarily they are not to be absolved, for this would expose the Sacrament without cause to certain nullity. Meanwhile, however, they can be absolved under the condition, si est capax<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Si enim in ipso confessionali circumspiciant ad socios, si digitis vel pileo aut clathris ludant similiaque agant, generatim magna praesumptio est contra perfectum usum rationis, adeo ut, nisi aliunde constet de rationis usu, extra necessitatem v.g. si accusaverint aliquod peccatum mortale) vel mortis periculum regulariter absolvendi non sint; sacramentum enim fere certae nullitati sine causa exponitur. Interdum tamen absolvi possunt sub conditione, si es capax.

Felix M. Cappello, De Sacramentis, vol. 2, 5th ed., Roma, Marietti, 1947, p.563, tr. mine.

As Cappello implies, these signs of immaturity hinder the priest from absolving only those who do not otherwise give evidence of the use of reason. The nature of such evidence to the contrary is suggested by Tanqueray:

They are thought to enjoy the use of reason relative to confession when they explain their sins distinctly, reply intelligently to the questions proposed by the confessor, and understand that grave faults are punished by eternal banishment . . . .<sup>29</sup>

In practice, any one of these indications of the use of reason would justify the presumption that the child is capable of receiving absolution. The limitations of the child's vocabulary must be considered if his maturity is to be judged by his distinct explanation of his sins or his replies to the questions of the confessor. With regard to the latter, the inability to reply might easily be the result of timidity or nervousness in the confessional as well as unfamiliarity with the priest's terminology. A child might know that God rewards and punishes without understanding such expressions as "eternal banishment".

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"Usu rationis relate ad confessionem gaudere consentur, quando peccata sua distincte explicient, quaestionibus a confessario propositis apte respondent, et intelligunt gravia delicta aeternis puniri suppliciis . . ."

Ad. Tanqueray, *Synopsis Moralis*, vol. 1, 2nd ed., Paris, Desclée, 1925, p. 282, tr. mine.

## 2. To Judge Sufficiency of Matter

Sufficient matter for valid absolution is anything subjectively sinful. The confessor must reject as invalid matter, therefore, anything for which the penitent is evidently not to blame, such as an accident, or a duty inadvertently forgotten. Apart from this case, the faults which a child confesses may be accepted as sins, unless the confessor suspects that the penitent has merely repeated a confession given him by someone else. A modern theologian<sup>30</sup> advises that even when something not objectively sinful is confessed, the confessor may assume that it was subjectively wrong, since the child submits it as a sin. However, he should correct the erroneous conscience of the young penitent.

## 3. To Give Spiritual Direction

There is an unfortunate tendency, on the part of a great number of confessors, to hurry through the children's confessions. Their obvious haste may well be a contributing cause of some of the 'thing-ism' deplored by the advocates of the new personalized approach to the Sacraments. In

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Cf. John Canon McCarthy, Problems in Theology, vol. 1, Newman, Westminster, Maryland, 1956, pp. 205f.

their zeal for the lost sheep (cf. Lk. XV, 7 ) priests tend to forget that Christ said "Feed My lambs" (Jn. XXI, 15-16).

Understanding and guidance are necessary for those very young penitents who are still so uncertain and confused in their ideas of right and wrong. Moreover, those who are still innocent, generous, and loving, are very promising material for spiritual formation.

Confessors as well as parents and teachers have an important role to play in the formation of conscience. Experience and understanding are necessary in order to ascertain the stage of development of the young penitent. One priest observes,

The experienced confessor can notice that a child does not yet distinguish between what is "not done" and "what offends God". He can notice that the confession the child makes is not his own, that he has not yet developed a personal conscience.<sup>31</sup>

The same author, in another work<sup>32</sup> considers it the duty of the confessor to relieve the uncertainties of young penitents and to correct the errors which the parents may have made in their instructions. He should also treat sins

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Jean Rimaud - "La première Communion des petits enfants", l'Anneau d'or, 97, Jan.-Fev., Paris, 1961, p. 62. tr. mine.

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Jean Rimaud - Au milieu des enfants et des adolescents, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1952, pp. 94-97.

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as offenses against God, rather than as things, and he should present Confession not as a ritual bath but as an encounter between the little sinner and the forgiving God.

When the child has developed some judgment in moral matters he is ready for a new type of direction, adapted to the correction of faults and to progress in virtue. To enjoy the advantages of this type of spiritual guidance, the child should confess regularly to a priest in whom he has confidence. The confessor can help to build up this confidence, not by chatting about irrelevant matters, but by kindly encouragement in the life of virtue.

Concrete examples of dialogue between priest and child penitent are given by one priest author.<sup>33</sup> He advocates concentration on some specific practice which should be followed up from week to week. Points which he chooses for emphasis include prayer, mortification and the duties of the penitent's state in life. In the beginning a very simple resolution is recommended. The confessor and penitent build gradually but effectively on the ground gained from week to week.

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E. Poppe, La direction spirituelle des enfants, Averbode, France, Bonne Presse, 1936, pp.45-75.

A moral theologian summarizes the task involved in the spiritual direction of children as follows:

The confessor will choose one particular sin confessed, such as disobedience, lying or stealing, and concentrate the child's particular purpose of amendment on that one, pointing out the special sinfulness of the sin, explaining the reasons why God forbids it and the need for special care to avoid it. The highest motives may be suggested to children even of tender years, for the gift of faith and divine grace make them susceptible to the highest ideals, but the motives should be proposed in clear and simple language.<sup>34</sup>

The serious efforts made by the child with the encouragement of the confessor may be rewarded by the elimination of exterior faults, such as those mentioned by this author, in a relatively short time. The director's task is not then completed. The child's high idealism may then be directed towards the cultivation of all virtues as practical expressions of charity.

#### 4. To Impose a Penance

The penance is an integral part of the Sacrament. Its purpose is to make some reparation for the sins committed. In addition, it may sometimes serve to impress the penitent with the seriousness of his sin and deter him from relapsing into it. However, the light penances which are favoured at present seldom serve more than the primary purpose of the sacramental penance.

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<sup>34</sup>Henry Davis, *op.cit.* p.294.

In the case of the very young, the confessor is extremely limited in the penances he may impose. The Our Father and the Hail Mary are the only prayers he can safely assume to be known by them. Older children may be given a penance which is more or less proportionate to the matter which they submit for absolution, at least if there is anything serious, or if there is a habit of venial sin which may easily lead to mortal sin. Unusual penances which the child is unlikely to remember or perform should be avoided.

#### 5. To Absolve the Penitent

It is the duty of the confessor to take care that the penitent be well disposed. He should instruct him on how to overcome the sins (or at least one of the sins) which he has confessed, and propose motives for sincere sorrow for them.

Because of the tendency of too many penitents to attach more importance to their own acts in this Sacrament than to the absolution, it has been recommended that the confessor carry out this rite with all possible solemnity, even pausing before it to explain what he is about to do.<sup>35</sup>

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Cf. Jean Rimaud "Confession et Direction Spirituelle des Petits Enfants" p.113

In all these dealings with his very young penitents, the confessor must act with great kindness. Cappello, among others, insists on this point. He has stated:

The confessor should receive children with the greatest kindness and affection and he would be gravely at fault if he were to deter them from confession by treating them in an unpleasant or severe manner.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, if in this first experience of sacramental forgiveness the child encounters a priest who truly resembles the Christ, Whose instrument he is, the impression made by his First Confession may be of lasting spiritual benefit to the child.

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<sup>36</sup>  
 "Confessarius summo affectu et maxima benignitate pueros excepere debet, et graviter profecte delinqueret, si moroso et aspero modo tractandi eos a confessione deterreret."

Op. cit. p.564.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ROLE OF THE PASTOR

#### 1. Communal Celebrations of Penance

It is the pastor who is responsible for the organization of the spiritual life of the parish. The provision of services which promote the instruction and sanctification of the people is his duty. The pastor who is alert to the needs of all classes of parishioners will not neglect to provide, when possible, opportunities for the children to receive spiritual direction from a confessor of their choice. The communal celebrations which are being introduced today may be arranged at least occasionally, but the children's liberty of conscience will be respected to the extent that they will be free to approach the Sacrament of Penance when they wish.

There is a growing awareness today of the social aspects of the Sacraments. The privacy of auricular Confession has, in the past, been overemphasized to the neglect of a sense of the ecclesial dimensions of the Sacrament.

Even the most secret sin injures the whole Church. If Christians realized their solidarity in sin, uncharitable criticism and false superiority would give way to humble repentance and mutual help. If there is rejoicing

in heaven over the return of one sinner (cf. Lk. XV, 7) then the members of the Communion of Saints on earth should be genuinely involved in the reconciliation of any penitent to the full sacramental life of the Church. Reparation, too, should be a united effort on the part of the whole people of God.

The liturgical movement offers much to offset the spiritual individualism of the recent past. Restored rites provide for a maximum of participation. There is increased emphasis, also, on the Sacraments as acts of worship.

In regard to the Sacrament of Penance, the aspects of worship, participation, and social consciousness have found liturgical expression in the practice of communal celebrations of Penance.

In these services, the people listen to the Word of God, (a selection from Scripture bearing on God's mercy towards sinners), examine their conscience under the guidance of the officiating priest, approach one of the many confessors available for the service, in order to confess their sins and receive absolution, and then unite with their brethren in the performance of the penance. In this way, fervent dispositions are aroused, moral judgment is developed, and unity is fostered.

This pattern has been adapted for young children by a contemporary catechetical writer.<sup>37</sup> His plan includes a dramatic recalling of Baptism, dialogue between the children and the priest, an entrance procession, a parable, a penitential chant, sacramental confession, (during which an assistant prays aloud for the benefit of those children who are waiting or who have completed their Confession) and a closing hymn of thanksgiving. Ceremonies of this kind might be arranged a few times a year, for example, during the Ember days. The readings and hymns should then harmonize with the current liturgical season.

## 2. Providing for Choice of Confessor

Despite the advantages of occasional Confession in the communal setting, there must be provision for private approach to the Sacrament according to the spiritual needs or personal devotion of the individual. Although all duly appointed confessors have the power to absolve validly so that the effects ex opere operato are received by the penitent, all are not equally qualified to give that spiritual direction which most Catholics receive only in the confessional.

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P. Ranwez, . . . et al, "Ensemble vers le Seigneur, La formation religieuse en famille," Brussels, Lumen Vitae, 1959, pp. 97-103.

Still fewer have the knowledge of young children which enable them to present the spiritual life to them in language they can understand and reduce to practice. Even when there is question only of well qualified confessors a personal element enters in; individuals relate better to some confessors than to others.

Although Penance is the Sacrament of humiliation, the "laborious Baptism" of the Fathers, it should be approached willingly. Everything which is likely to engender fear and distaste instead of reverence for the Sacraments should be avoided. Allowance must be made for the timidity which keeps some children distant from adults who have not gained their confidence. A gruff exterior or some other personal characteristic of a priest may be enough to repel a sensitive child. Past experience with the uncontrolled anger of adults which had been aroused by childish misdemeanours may be a cause of unreasonable fear of admitting some fault in Confession, unless the child can approach a confessor whom he knows to be understanding.

Where there are several priests in a parish, the children should be free to choose the confessor they wish. A child who expresses unwillingness to confess to a certain priest should not be compelled to do so, even if he must go to a neighbouring parish to find another. Traumatic

experiences of early childhood often result in lifelong psychological difficulties. A permanent aversion to Confession would constitute a serious handicap in the spiritual life.

The question of freedom in the choice of a confessor leads to a consideration of the problem of regimentation in Catholic schools.

### 3. Regimentation vs. Responsibility

It has been common practice in Catholic schools to schedule a time for the children's Confessions during school hours once a month. The children are taken in ranks to the Church under the supervision of the teacher. This procedure is justified on the grounds that many of the children would seldom receive the Sacraments if they were left to do so on their own initiative.

Apart from the fact that Catholic schools invite criticism when they interrupt the academic program in this way, the value of such a practice is debatable from the point of view of religious formation. The short attention span of young children is a factor that must be considered. During the period of waiting, which to them seems endless, they misbehave or remain outwardly reverent only because of the watchful eye of the teacher.

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The deadening effect of routine and formalism claims the attention of religious educators today. If the approach to the Sacraments is to be sincere and fervent, it seems advisable to leave room for personal initiative. A priest writer cites an example in support of provision for personal responsibility on the part of the school children. Referring to a priest whose apostolate among the very young had been blessed with marked success, he writes:

He abolished the special time for their Confession, and he would not hear of their being heard in droves. His aim was to eliminate school discipline and class-room rules from their monthly Communion so that its regularity should not depend on their school life, and that the practice of monthly Communion might survive their school days. Thus the child was taught to choose its own confessor and to go itself at the ordinary time when confessions were heard without being sent. When the plan was first tried it was a sad failure compared with the automatic regularity obtained when the children were sent by their teachers to Confession, but even such a failure gives pause for thought. If it is a failure now to leave children their freedom and try to teach them to use it wisely, may it not be a failure hereafter when they have left school and are entirely free? Train them now for their days of freedom, and if we fail at first we can at least renew our efforts in the school and try with patience to win them to better things.<sup>38</sup>

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James Keatinge, The Priest: His Character and His Work, 2nd ed., London, Kegan Paul, 1935, p.277.

#### 4. Time Allowed

A work as important as the sanctification of young Christians deserves sufficient time for its successful execution. The haste of many confessors is probably owing not to lack of zeal or even lack of time, but rather to lack of knowledge of the spiritual needs of the very young. One moral theologian attributes the desire for haste to the young penitents as well as the confessor.

He writes:

The haste of a confessor in despatching penitents is apt to scandalize and to reduce the Sacrament to a formality. Boys especially are to be prevented from making hasty confessions. No confessor, we believe, should hear the confessions of more than forty children in the hour, and would do well to diminish that number rather than augment it. He does well enough if he hears about thirty adults in an hour in cases of normal and not complicated confessions. But care in dealing with penitents will prompt him to give all the help he can to each penitent, not thinking of numbers but of the one penitent he is engaged with.<sup>39</sup>

The regimented programs referred to above may lead to irreverent haste in hearing the school children's Confessions. On the other hand, if the children have no opportunity other than those provided for adults, they may again find that there is no time for the confessor

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Henry Davis, op.cit. p.251.

to give them any special attention. The problem was met successfully in one American parish.<sup>40</sup>

The assistants in the parish heard confessions four days a week during the religion periods scheduled in the parish school. Each day the pupils of certain grades were given the opportunity to go to Confession if they wished. The classes were not interrupted, but those who wished to go to Confession were free to go to the Church on the day set aside for their class. Thus ample time was provided for those who needed it. Tiresome waiting and undesirable compulsion were thus eliminated. (The upper grades were not included in the schedule. They were considered mature enough to avail themselves of the opportunities provided for adult parishioners).

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J.P. Donovan, "Two Priests Solve Children's Confession Problem", Homiletic and Pastoral Review, vol.27, Jan., 1947, pp. 301-306.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Frequent Confession and Communion are invaluable aids to spiritual progress. The fruitfulness of these Sacraments can be increased by improvement of one's dispositions. The knowledge, attitudes, and habits, acquired in early childhood may have life-long influence. The foundation of the spiritual life which is laid during the period of early sacramental instruction is of incalculable importance.

Church law imposes the obligation of annual Confession, if needed, and Communion at the age of discretion. This age, which cannot be determined by chronological age, has been variously interpreted throughout the centuries. In Quam Singulari, Pope St. Pius X condemned the practice of demanding a more mature age for Communion than for Confession. Today there is a trend, based on modern psychology, towards postponing the First Confession to a later state of development than that required for First Communion. There is a growing recognition of the fact that when very young children are introduced to the Sacrament of Penance, their instruction must be adapted to their mentality.

Parents have a very important role in the remote preparation of children for the Sacraments. The foundations

for the formation of conscience are laid before the dawn of reason. The work of developing the moral sense of children is gradual and delicate. The practice of the virtue of penance (which is necessary for the fruitful reception of the Sacrament of Penance) must also be fostered in the home. Training in the examination of conscience is also a responsibility of the parents. The parents of today have many more opportunities than parents in the past to qualify themselves for this important work.

As children mature, the simple instruction on Penance which they were given in preparation for first Confession must be amplified. The preliminary notions imparted by the parents should be supplemented in the school by systematic instruction in those matters which all Catholics should know about the Sacrament.

Besides having a rudimentary understanding of the truths necessary for salvation and some knowledge and appreciation of grace, children should be given instruction on the Sacraments they are preparing to receive. For the reception of the Sacrament of Penance it is necessary to have correct concepts of all that is included in the matter and the form of the Sacrament.

Accurate notions of sin and of virtue can be developed only gradually. Enlightened educators, whose disciplinary methods are based on a clear understanding

of the Christian moral life, can contribute much to the formation of a correct conscience.

The acts of the penitent, contrition, confession and satisfaction, constitute the proximate matter of the Sacrament and must be carefully explained. Care should be taken to impress the children with the importance of absolution, which is the form of the Sacrament.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Penance includes not only the imparting of knowledge, but also the development of good attitudes and habits. Attitudes are fostered by verbal instruction, but also, and especially by example. The habits of examination of conscience and the practice of penance are developed at the cost of considerable time and care. The habit of making one's Confession in the proper manner is developed through detailed instruction and sufficient practice.

Even with their intimate knowledge of their children, parents must respect the personal nature of conscience. It is to the confessor that the child reveals himself. It is the responsibility of the priest to form judgment concerning the child's maturity and the sufficiency of the matter he submits for absolution. He must distinguish in the child's accusation, between that which is in no way culpable, that which is sinful only subjectively, and that which is both subjectively and objectively sinful.

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His direction of the young penitent should contribute to the development of a correct and certain conscience. He should arouse in the penitent deep sorrow and firm purpose of amendment. All his dealings with the children should be characterized by fatherly kindness, for he acts in the name of Christ who commanded: "Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them" (Mk.X.14).

It is the pastor who is responsible for the organization of the spiritual life of the parish. The provision of services which promote the instruction and sanctification of the people is his duty. The pastor who is alert to the needs of all classes of parishioners will not neglect to provide, when possible, opportunities for the children to approach a confessor of their choice. Ample time should be provided for the reverent administration of the Sacrament, and the spiritual direction of the children.

The communal celebrations which are being introduced today may be arranged at least occasionally, but the children's liberty of conscience will be respected to the extent that they will be free to approach the Sacrament of Penance when they wish. The dangers of "sociological religion" are recognized today. Children who have practiced their religion out of mere conformity are unprepared to meet the temptations of an irreligious milieu

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in later life. Personal initiative, therefore, is preferable to regimentation in the arrangements made for school children's Confessions.

If all those who have charge of the spiritual formation of children, namely, parents, guardians, teachers, confessors and pastors, zealously apply the principles of theology, psychology and education, to their important work, the cause of increasingly fruitful use of Confession by young children will be admirably served.

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This well documented article makes considerable use of the work of psychologists to show the importance of the formative influences of early childhood and the inconstancy of the exercise of reason in young children.

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Cappello, Felix M., De Sacramentis, vol. 2, 5th ed.,  
Rome, Marietti, 1947, xi-783 p.

This text contains practical advice for the confessor on how to judge the maturity of young penitents, how to deal with children who seem to lack the use of reason or who have an erroneous conscience, how to instruct children and arouse them to requisite dispositions, and what the confessor's habitual approach to children should be.

Davis, Henry, Moral and Pastoral Theology, vol. 3, 7th ed.,  
New York, Sheed & Ward, 1958, xviii-504 p.

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Jungmann, Joseph Andrea, Handing on the Faith: A Manual of Catechetics, 1st ed., tr., A.M. Fuerst,  
Freiburg, im B., Herder, 1959, xiv-445 p.

This work contains a practical outline of the chief objectives of moral training. The author offers two plans of instruction for First Confession. The first is short, designed to meet the minimum requirements for early Confession. The longer course is intended for those who will receive the Sacrament in the Second Grade.

Keatinge, James, The Priest, His Character, and His Work,  
8th ed., London, Kegan Paul, 1935, viii-333 p.

The author describes a plan by which one pastor has successfully provided for the spiritual needs of very young penitents. He also treats of the problem of regimentation as opposed to training in the right use of freedom in approaching the Sacraments.

Lewis, Eve, Children and Their Religion, London, Sheed  
and Ward, 1962, 316 p.

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#### Periodicals

Clément, Alcide, and Marcel Cormier, "Les Sacraments en deuxième année: pourquoi?" Communauté Chrétienne, vol. 3, no. 13, Jan-Feb., 1964, p.45-49.

A justification of the proposed postponement of the reception of Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, and Penance (in this order) to the Second Grade. The reasons are based on theology, psychology, and the experience of

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teachers involved in the recent pilot project in Quebec. A theologically questionable feature of the plan is the development of the sense of God in the First Grade and the teaching of the life and mystery of Christ in the Second. This does not seem to follow God's plan of revealing Himself through His Son.

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\_\_\_\_\_ "La première Communion des petits enfants",  
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 pp. 56-66.

An article on First Communion which incidentally refers to First Confession.

Smith, Harry S., "Confessions Simplified", The Priest,  
 vol. 20, no. 7, July 19, 1964, p. 630.

A letter to the editor advocating simplification of formulae used by penitents.

#### Other Sources

Moors, P., Bishop of Roermond, Pastoral Letter, in Analecta: voor net bisdon Roermond, vol. 45, no. 3, June 1964, pp. 77-78, tr. Nells Khandkar.

An official statement of the inauguration of a diocesan policy of admitting children to first Communion in the Second Grade, to non-sacramental celebrations of Penance in the Third Grade, to sacramental Confession in the communal setting in the Fourth Grade, and private Confession beginning in the Fifth Grade.

Studiecommissie en het bisdon Roermond, Kinderbiecht en kindercommuni, in Analecta: voor het bisdon Roermond, pp. 85-95.

A fairly lengthy report of the committee which recommended the new sacramental policy of the Roermond diocese, justifying it theologically and psychologically, and discussing the rights and duties of parents in the religious education of their children and their admission to the Sacraments.

## APPENDIX

RULES CONCERNING CHILDREN'S CONFESSION AND COMMUNION<sup>40</sup>

At the Congregationes Pastorum of 1962 a question was raised dealing with the First Confession and First Communion of children, the relation between both, and the most opportune time for the reception of these Sacraments. The reports of these discussions were dealt with at the Prosynodal meeting of October 3, 1962. The Prosynodal meeting referred the case to a specially appointed study commission.

The report of the committee is published in this same issue of Analecta. In the introduction, the composition of this committee is given. At the meeting of deans of March 17, 1964, the report was introduced by a few members of the committee and it was discussed at length. As a conclusion of this discussion, the meeting has accepted the concrete suggestions of this report.

Therefore, we decree, that starting with the school year 1964-1965 in our diocese, the following rules will be introduced.

1. The responsibility of the religious education of children lies primarily with the parents. If preparation for First Confession and First Communion is carried on in the school, then the parents should participate as much as possible. The parents should receive training and aid to enable them to see their task and possibilities in a better light and to make them fulfill their duties as well as possible.
2. The First Communion of children (when organized through the school) will take place in the second grade of the elementary school.
3. The introduction of the Sacrament of Penance will best be given in gradual stages. In this way, the child's development can be considered so that he will really be making a Confession based on an introspective searching of his heart. At the same time more emphasis may be laid on the social and religious aspects, that really belong to the Sacrament of Penance.

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4. The preparation for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance, (when carried on through the school) starts in the grade following the one in which first Communion was received. In the Third Grade, a few times a year, non-sacramental penitential exercises are held. In the Fourth Grade, the child receives the Sacrament of Penance a few times by way of a communal celebration during which he makes a personal accusation and receives absolution. Beginning with the Fifth Grade there will be place for 'private' Confession besides the communal celebration.

For the motives and responsibility of these rules we refer priests to the original text.

We will inform both teachers and parents by means of a separate publication, as they are particularly concerned with the implementation of these rules. At the same time we will explain the background and motives of these rules.

We hope that with the indispensable cooperation of our clergy, the pastoral guidance, as expressed in these rules, may contribute to a conscious acceptance of the Sacraments as acts of personal belief. A patient education of the child, adapted to his age, and a continuous contact are of essential importance.

Roermond, May 15, 1964

+ P. Moors  
Bishop of Roermond

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The committee consisted of persons closely involved in the problem: parents, clergy, and teachers. Chairman of the committee, appointed by the bishop, was Mr. J. A. Jansen, Catholic elementary school Inspector.

1. The responsibility for the education of children lies primarily with the parents.

This applies to the religious, moral, civic, intellectual, and physical aspects. The Church, being 'mater omnium fidelium' has a real duty and right to educate. It is the task of the hierarchy to supervise the entire religious life and to direct in a pastoral way the manner in which the faithful lead their Christian lives. The Church will exercise this supervision if she stimulates the parents especially to see to the religious and moral education of their children and also if she gives guide lines regarding the instruction in this field at school.

Concerning the relation between parents and school, it should be mentioned that the school has to consider the reasonable demands of the parents, and vice versa. The clergy and teachers should think about the possibilities of involving the parents more than previously in the preparation for Confession and Communion and in their celebration. The parents relegate their responsibility too easily to Church and school.

To achieve more cooperation with parents, evenings should be arranged for parents of children preparing for First Communion and Confession. The concrete possibilities for cooperation should be discussed. Parents should be given instruction to enable them to develop a healthy personal conscience in their children.

Later on the committee will suggest certain changes in relation to the age for First Confession. Attention should be given to clarifying this to parents, so that they will be able to understand why these changes are justified and healthy. In addition the right of the parents should be honoured to present their children at an earlier or later

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In Analecta, p.85-95, translated and condensed by Nells Khandkar.

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age for the reception of the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist than is generally followed in their parish. We do not wish to say that the priest has to accept these suggestions of the parents off-hand, but he must be ready to discuss them, maintaining a flexible attitude, so that exceptions can easily be made possible.

2. First Communion

(A) Suggestion. The commission advises that First Communion be no later than Second Grade. For pedagogical and practical reasons, the committee regards the Second Grade a better time than First Grade.

(B) Clarification. The child needs at least a year before he becomes used to the teacher's way of expressing herself, and before he is able to read at least a little. In the Second Grade the teacher will be more able to get through to the child, and a possible overloading in the First Grade will be avoided. The exposure to the school environment is quite a step for a child, and the introduction to a new stage of religious development should fall in a situation of rest, and not one of confusion and change.

3. First Confession

(A) Suggestion. The committee advises that preparation for the Sacrament of Penance be begun in the year following first Communion, and in such a way that in that year, Third Grade, a few times yearly (or preferably in the weeks preceding the liturgical highlights: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension Day, Whitsunday) for a small group of children (probably of the same school and grade) non-sacramental penitential exercises are held, so that slowly the dispositions for a responsible reception of the Sacrament can be realised.

Furthermore, the committee advises that a year later, in the Fourth Grade the children receive the Sacrament a few times yearly: for example, once a semester, or again, during the weeks preceding the liturgical highlights. This should be done as a communal celebration in which only the actual confession and eventually absolution will take place separately for each child. By emphasizing the communal celebration, the Christian may learn to discover better the essential social and religious aspects of Confession and integrate these into his life.

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Finally, the committee advises that a year later, the Fifth Grade, besides the communal celebrations there should be opportunity for 'private' Confession as well. In this way an opportunity will be given for everybody to attain to a gradual increase in frequency of Confession, while at the same time, a one-sided emphasis on either the communal or the private celebration will be avoided.

(B) Clarification. We have to consider that the knowledge of good and evil is still very limited in a young child. His conscience shows a clearly heteronomous character. As long as a child is still captivated by an imaginative realism (from approximately 5½ to 7 years) it seems very undesirable to confront him so soon with Confession, especially because of the probability that a certain disassociation and objectivity regarding his acts is scarcely present.

In the phase of naive realism (the period from approximately 7 to 9 years) the child has more stability in distinguishing between good and evil, but this knowledge depends mainly on conventions. The child is very much bound by authority and very sensitive to generally accepted norms. In principle we could regulate the child's life and call his actions 'sinful' and 'not sinful' but in reality it would be wiser to be very careful, so that his conscience will not be permanently blocked in its autonomous development.

At about 9-10 years his critical realism breaks through. The child sees connections, turns himself independently and purposefully towards the outside world. There is a beginning of critical disassociation in relation to his own and other people's achievements. His magic mentality begins to give way to causal thinking. Inner motives begin to claim his explicit attention.

Moreover, a child's way of expression becomes, after his 9th year more fluent and descriptive. He uses more qualitative expressions while before he used only action expressions. To formulate a Confession that is more than just a repetition of a few sentences taught by the teacher, we definitely have to wait until the child is 9 or 10 years old. A real Confession has to express a conversion,

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a metanoia, and an inner change. Not only the knowledge of being guilty in one or another case; it must be a basic attitude, a change of heart. If we continue to introduce Confession at an age where there is no real insight into the motives of the acts, then there is a danger that we encourage an "actualistic" attitude towards sin. Nobody will deny that a young person has a certain knowledge of good and evil; but that does not mean that the young child is capable of committing those sins that demand reconciliation through Confession.

For many centuries it was accepted by the Church that less serious sins should be forgiven primarily by means of prayer to God and fraternal charity. Since the introduction of devotional Confession, spiritual guidance and moral help have been rightly emphasized. It is doubtful, however, that the young child is sufficiently mature to make personal spiritual guidance really justified. The actual practice of children's Confessions have indicated that this maturity has been lacking.

A communal celebration of Penance makes it possible to demonstrate from the beginning the social character of the Sacrament; it must always be a sign of reconciliation between people which is mutual, and not a private affair between God and this person.

During the non-sacramental exercises no private confession of sins should take place, not because the child cannot do wrong (he definitely can do wrong in his own childish way) but because the ability to reflect is of such a nature that a detailed confession is difficult to achieve. It is more important to let the children discover, through story and prayer, where the nucleus of sin is situated, how sin and guilt condition each other, and how a reconciliation therefore is possible.

There is nothing in Church Law contrary to a celebration as proposed above. According to Canon 906 the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are obliged to confess at least once a year. It has been shown by moral theology that Canon 906 requires only "peccata mortalia" as "materia necessaria" for the Sacrament of Penance. Undoubtedly then, the obligation of Canon 906

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has to be understood as follows: the Christian is obliged to confess his mortal sins at least once a year.

According to Canon 856 a person who is aware of having sinned seriously cannot receive Holy Communion, without confession first "magna reverentia et sanctitas". (Can.880-893 Trent), that means at least the "status gratiae" que (after a serious sin) confessione acquirendus est.

In the decree Quam Singulari the conditions for Confession and Communion are considered the same, the conditions for Communion are reduced to the demands for intellectual development required for admission to Confession.

When a person reaches the age of discretion, the duty arises to receive Confession and Communion. From the complete context (of Quam Singulari) it may be seen that 'the age of discretion' should not be put hastily at 7 years. The decree says, "circa septimum"; it speaks about a "gustus" for the Sacrament. This shows that even according to the Church Law we should not work too much with definite ages.

The science of psychology, too, emphasizes this; there too the conviction is present that entrance to a phase of life (e.g. the age of discretion) is determined to a large extent by the individual personality of each one, and this means that one child reaches the 'age of discretion' at 6½ and another, perhaps, at 8. Moreover, we have to consider a not to be neglected fact, before we decide that there is a necessary connection between first Confession and first Communion. Before Quam Singulari, it was generally accepted that children went to Confession at about 7 years of age, (in accordance with the then accepted opinion about human sinfulness). This decree, therefore, primarily, makes a statement about the fact that we cannot make a higher demand for the reception of the Eucharist than we do for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance. It approaches the problem therefore from the opposite direction than we want to do at the moment.

This same decree says that it would be an abuse never to let children go to Confession, if they have already reached the 'age of discretion'. Of course we want to

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honour this statement. But we do not want to interpret it to mean that first Confession must necessarily be preceded by first Communion. We would be in opposition to the decree were we to refuse the Sacrament of Penance, without reason, to children whose parents have sufficiently prepared them for it.

Finally, Can.854: s.4, says that the decision about the required dispositions to receive the Holy Eucharist belongs to the priest-confessor and the parents of the child.

Roermond, Oct. 16, 1963.

FOR FRUITFUL CONFESSIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

ABSTRACT

The foundation of the spiritual life is laid in early childhood. The fruitful reception of frequent Confession and Communion in later life can be increased by the sacramental instruction received during this period.

Annual Confession and Communion are required by Church law at the age of discretion. The meaning of 'age of discretion' has been variously interpreted throughout the centuries. At one time a more mature age was required for Communion than for Confession. The practice was condemned by Pope St. Pius X. At present there is a trend in the opposite direction. Confession is considered by some to require a greater use of reason than reception of the Holy Eucharist. In any case, when very young children are admitted to the reception of the Sacrament of Penance, their preparatory instruction must be simplified and adapted to their mentality.

The rights and duties of parents in regard to the sacramental instruction and initiation of their children are receiving increasing recognition today. The remote preparation for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance, namely, the formation of conscience and training in the virtue of penance and examination of conscience, is the responsibility of the parents. It would be fitting that

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they prepare their children for First Confession also.

The preliminary notions imparted by the parents must be amplified by systematic sacramental instruction in the elementary school. Correct concepts of all that is included in the matter and form of the Sacrament should be developed. The Christian moral life should be presented in terms which may be readily understood and applied in practice. Instruction for the Sacrament of Penance includes not only knowledge, but the development of wholesome attitudes and good habits.

It is the responsibility of the confessor to form judgments concerning the young penitent's maturity and the sufficiency of the matter he submits for absolution. His direction should contribute to the development of a correct and certain conscience. He should try to arouse sincere sorrow and purpose of amendment.

The pastor is responsible for organizing the spiritual program in the parish to meet the needs of all, children included. The latter should have the opportunity to approach the confessor of their choice. Ample time should be allowed for spiritual direction and the reverent administration of the Sacrament. Communal celebrations of penance, which emphasize the ecclesial dimensions of the Sacrament, may be arranged by him, at least a few times a year. Personal initiative is preferable to regimentation.