

# THE CATECHESIS OF RECONCILIATION

By CHRISTIANE BRUSSELMANS

**I**N THE RECENT theological discussions on the Sacrament of Penance, parents and school-teachers, as well as theologians, have been greatly exercised about the age of initiation into the sacrament; heat has been generated without much light. A brief look at history, remote and recent, goes a long way towards clearing up the confusion.

For the first twelve hundred years in the Church, we have no positive evidence that children were absolved before reaching puberty (generally, twelve years for girls and fourteen years for boys). However, young children, and for a long time even infants, were regularly received into full eucharistic communion. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that 'after reaching years of discretion' all the faithful were obliged to go to confession at least once a year and to receive communion at Easter. Though the age of seven was for a time accepted as this 'age of discretion', this interpretation was not maintained. Often a later age was proposed for reception of both sacraments. No matter what the age (generally from ten to fourteen years), there seemed to be a confusing connection between confession and communion, perhaps because Council had linked them together.

The Council of Trent did not treat directly of first confession. It did, however, clear up some of the confusion which had clouded the discussion; and, unlike the Fourth Lateran Council, it treated the two sacraments separately. It specified that confession was necessarily related to communion *only* when there was question of mortal sin. It made clear, without specifying the age of discretion or reason, that annual confession applied *only* in the case of mortal sin, and that venial sins could 'be atoned for in many ways'.

During the centuries after the Council of Trent, there was a variety of interpretations and practices. Most theologians opted for a later age as the age of reason: ten, eleven, or even twelve. A clear distinction was made between the age of discretion necessary for confession and that for communion. No-one was prepared to offer a

precise norm which would be applicable to all children. In most cases confession did precede communion. However, since communion was received at a later age than we are accustomed to, so was confession.

From the seventeenth century, jansenistic influences were at work in the Church. The heresy succeeded in imposing extraordinary preparation and 'purification' before receiving communion. The frequent result was the postponement of first communion to the age of fifteen, sixteen, or even twenty years of age. Though the extreme aspects of Jansenism were condemned, its influence persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Thus communion was generally postponed until the age of twelve years or older. Confession took place beforehand, but rarely for children under nine years of age. A striking example of this was that St Theresa of Lisieux had to be granted special permission by the pope to receive communion before the age of twelve.

In 1910, Pope Pius X promulgated the decree *Quam Singulari*, the intention of which was to put an end to the unwarranted postponement of first communion and the unwarranted refusal of sacramental absolution to children who had reached the age of reason. While Pius X's primary concern was that children should be able to approach the eucharistic table from the age of reason (described in the decree as 'approximately the age of seven years') and frequently thereafter, he was also concerned that they have sacramental absolution available to them from the same age. He did not, however, mean to abrogate the decision of the Council of Trent, that confession is obligatory only in the case of mortal sin. The decree emphasizes the primary role of parents, in communication with confessors and teachers, of determining when their children are ready for each sacrament.

From 1910 until the Second Vatican Council, the established custom, that confession should usually precede the reception of communion, held sway in countries such as the United States of America and Canada, even though communion was now received at an earlier age. In the decade since Vatican Council II, the evolution of sacramental theology, the findings of developmental and educational psychology, the experience of pastors, confessors, catechists, parents and children, have often persuaded bishops to permit what is now common practice: to delay confession until after first communion, usually for two or three years. Thus, for example, in nearly half the dioceses of the United States and Canada, the custom arose

of preparing children for communion at the age of seven to eight years, and for confession at the age of nine to twelve years.

In mid-1973, however, a declaration was issued by two roman congregations which seemed at first sight to censure this practice. But clarification followed very quickly. At their November 1973 meeting, the United States bishops accepted a report from their education committee on this matter, which stated:

Pastoral practice should include opportunities for an adequate catechesis for confession before first communion. Assistance to the parents, who should be involved in determining the readiness of their children, must be an ongoing practice in every parish.

The freedom necessary for participation in the sacrament of penance, as a response of faith, should be scrupulously protected. The long-standing teaching of the Church has stressed the freedom needed for access to the sacraments. Continuous assistance must be given in every parish to parents who should be involved in determining the readiness of children to receive the sacrament.

In recent times while encouraging frequent confession . . . the Church has nevertheless not obliged anyone to receive the sacrament unless he is conscious of grave sin.

This report insists upon respect for the rights and obligations of children as well as of parents. It seeks to assure for children access to sacramental absolution, but by no means forces the sacrament of penance upon them. It is primarily the responsibility of parents to determine the readiness of their children for this sacrament.

In response to questions put to them by the Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops in November 1973, the cardinals of the two Roman Congregations which had published the Declaration on first reception of the Eucharist and of Penance on May 24, 1973, stated:

The declaration does not aim at compelling or regimenting every child to receive first penance before first communion. Neither does the declaration desire to foster conditions which would prevent children from receiving the sacrament of Penance before their first communion. Our declaration is not intended to impose constraint, moral or otherwise.

The age of initiation into the sacrament of penance, and more precisely of introduction to individual confession, remains an open question. In the future it will probably vary from child to child,

according to the judgment parents make about their children.

*Adaptation of the new rite of penance*

In 1969, a Rite of Baptism adapted to the condition of infants and children was promulgated by the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship. Recently the same congregation issued a directory for children's masses, which is based on sound psychological and pedagogical principles, and reflects the actual pastoral experience of a great number of christian communities over the last ten years.

Since the new rite of penance is clearly intended for adults, we must hope that there will be a similar adaptation of this sacrament for children. No matter what the age at which a child is initiated, we must nonetheless re-examine the structure and form of the sacramental celebration of reconciliation, to determine whether it takes into account the 'age and condition' of children.

The major psychological difficulty when preparing young children is not encountered in the rite of absolution but in the rite of individual or auricular confession. Individual and detailed confession of sins requires a sense of sin in the context of the penitent's relationship to God, a sense of responsibility and of time, and a vocabulary sufficient to express personal sinfulness in the rite of individual confession.

The child of six or seven years old hardly possesses the necessary psychological and moral maturity for making a meaningful individual confession. Instead of emphasizing the individual confession of sins with young children, should we not instead give priority to the rite of absolution, which expresses God's willingness to forgive us? Would it not be possible then for the young child to receive individual absolution without requiring him to make a detailed private confession? What seems to be too often forgotten is that the tradition and the law of the Church requires individual auricular confession, that is, the individual confession of one's sins in a detailed and specific manner to the confessor, only in the case of serious sinfulness. Confessors would appear to be well within that tradition and law if they were to grant individual absolution to young children (six to nine-year olds), during a penitential celebration, without requiring the children to make an individual and detailed confession of their sins.

During the course of such celebration, young children could be invited to participate in a communal reflection on their daily lives (examination of conscience), and in a communal litany and prayer

of sorrow for their daily sins. Then each child would be asked to approach the celebrant in the sanctuary and ask him for God's forgiveness: 'Father, I ask God's forgiveness for the times when I did wrong'. The priest would then offer individual absolution to the child as an expression of God's forgiveness. He would then extend to the child a sign of peace, and invite the child to offer this sign to his parents, brothers and sisters and other members of the community, as an expression of brotherly forgiveness and reconciliation.

Such an arrangement would at once respect the tradition and the law of the Church as well as the psychological and moral development of young children: in a way which recognizes the child's right to receive sacramental absolution when his parents judge him ready for it. This is precisely the right emphasized by the decree of St Pius X.

If such a procedure were followed, it could of course be necessary to remind parents and catechists that, as the children develop and mature psychologically, they should be gradually introduced to individual confession between the age of nine and twelve. Parents should at this moment enrol themselves and their children into a more structured and deeper programme for initiation into the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and be given the necessary assistance to determine when their children are ready for this valuable experience, and whatever help they need in preparing their children for individual, auricular confession.

### *The initiation of children*

Over the last few decades, religious educators have become more and more aware of how children learn, and how they form and assimilate moral values and attitudes. The child learns not only through a process of formal education, but also through the day-to-day experience of living with adults and his peer-group. A young child's learning process is at least as much affective as conceptual. The young child builds his values and attitudes largely through a process of identification with those adults in his life who mean the most to him, normally his parents.

Therefore parents play a role in the development of the moral conscience and the penitential life of their own children which no other person, no matter how well qualified, can really perform. Parents should not be allowed to abdicate their responsibility; rather they need to be assisted and sustained in carrying it out. Exclusive reliance on the school to prepare the children for the

sacraments should be eradicated by degrees, while recognition of the role of the family in such preparation should correspondingly increase.

We shall therefore have to re-direct many of our sacramental programmes, which have been far too school- and child-centred. We still have to direct our pastoral efforts to the parents in order to offer them, through adult education, a means of deepening their own faith and understanding of the sacrament. We must also help them better to assist their children toward achieving christian maturity. The family and not the school is the most natural and influential milieu which will sustain and nurture the prayer and the sacramental life of the child. Our pastoral experience over the last fifteen years has given abundant evidence of the rich harvest which a family-orientated approach to the sacramental initiation of children produces. In most cases, the parents have shared actively in the preparation of their children. Such programmes have afforded some the opportunity of growing more deeply in God's love, for others of evangelization and true conversion, or a deeper appreciation of the renewed liturgy of the sacraments into which their children were being progressively introduced. We might even say that for most parents such programmes resemble the stages of a new catechuminate, which rightly puts the emphasis on the need for evangelization and initiation as a necessary foundation for full participation in the sacraments.

Today we are rediscovering the early Church's conviction and practice that the primary source of teaching about the sacraments is the experience of the liturgy itself. If we conceive of the preparation of children in terms of initiation, then an integral part of the sacramental initiation is a series of celebrations. Any initiation of children to the sacrament of reconciliation should therefore offer a number of penitential celebrations, whose aim is to promote more active and conscious participation of the child and of his family in the penitential life and liturgy of the christian community. Such participation is certainly the goal and hope of the revised Rite of Reconciliation, recently issued by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship (December 1973). These celebrations will be effective in so far as they express, through rites and symbols, the particular penitential theme which has been presented to the child during special class and home session.

While we are convinced of the inadequacy of an exclusively school-centred and child-centred preparation for the sacraments,

the school, through its dedicated teachers or parent-catechists, can most effectively assist the parents and the parish priests in fulfilling their primary and complementary responsibilities. They can share with parents the responsibility of teaching their children and assist them in the preparation of the home-session. They can also assist priests in preparing and conducting the penitential celebration.

Thus, to emphasize the role of the parents and of the parish in the sacramental initiation of children does not mean that the school should no longer consider itself concerned with such preparations. Schools can often provide the leadership to bring sacramental programmes into being.

#### *A structured catechesis*

It is in the home that the child first learns what security, love, self-appreciation and true freedom mean: where he first establishes loving and trusting relationships with his parents, brothers and sisters, and with other children and adults who are part of his environment. In that same environment he experiences forgiveness and reconciliation. In this sense the first stage of initiation of the child to the Sacrament of Reconciliation starts at home, from the very beginning of a child's life. Parents should be reminded that they are the first and most influential signs of the love, the mercy and the forgiveness of God, which will later on be manifested to the child in a privileged way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Those who have accepted the mission of religious education in the local Church – priests, religious education directors, catechists – already begin to fulfil their roles when they assist parents, even of small children, to develop in their families a spirit of mutual forgiveness and a will to be reconciled.

The formal catechesis of children in the Sacrament of Reconciliation should not be identified with private confession alone; it should begin when the child starts his formal religious education, generally around the age of six or seven years. Most of the contemporary religious education texts for the primary school years include lessons which highlight God's love and mercy, Jesus's moral teachings and various basic penitential themes. In addition to these lessons, provision should be made for the children's participation in penitential celebrations. During these years, religious educators should seek to help parents to understand more deeply how the moral conscience of their children develops step by step; they need criteria for making a better judgment concerning the moral maturity of their children.

If some parents judge their children ready for private confession before first communion at the age of six or seven, a period should be devoted to the specific preparation of first confession and first communion. A very simple catechesis on God's love, and his desire to forgive us when we have sinned, should be provided for these parents and their children.

During the years that follow, further instruction on moral and penitential themes should be, and often are, included in the religion curriculum, so that progress can be made from the simpler modes of preparation towards a fuller experience of the sacrament. It is within this context that we see the need for every parish to offer a formal programme of initiation, in which parents are invited to enrol their children and to participate actively themselves. This programme would also introduce those children who have already gone to confession to a deeper appreciation of the sacrament.

Thus, if we take the rights of the parents and their children seriously, we shall discover that in the future the age of the first confession of children will probably vary from child to child, according to the judgment parents make about their children's readiness. The general sacramental practice may even vary from diocese to diocese, from parish to parish, from family to family.

We shall have to keep this rather fluid situation in mind when developing a programme of formal initiation into the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Such programmes should be non-graded, that is, open to children whose parents now judge them ready, rather than for children in a specific age-group. These programmes should also be elaborated for use in the school, at home or in the neighbourhood, and offer celebrations for use in the parish.

The themes of the catechesis should be drawn from the Church's traditional ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. By way of conclusion, we offer a simple scheme.



*Emerging themes*

*Description of the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

God's call and man's response	[	—	[	The christian, who has sinned in failing to respond to his baptismal calling is awakened by the call of God in his Church.
Conversion to Jesus	[	—	[	He recognizes his sin and turns with confidence toward God in order to strive for fuller conversion. By avowal of sin and penitential effort, he places himself within the praying and penitential community to which he already belongs through baptism.
Forgiveness	[	—	[	He places himself under the pastoral direction of the priest, who, in the name of Jesus, brings about his full participation in the mystery of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, in which he already shares through baptism.
Reconciliation	[	—	[	Thus, he can become a dynamic member of the Church, an essentially Eucharistic community, and can be assured of salvation on the last day.

The themes to be presented to the children could be those which emerge from the above outline. It might be helpful to list here the themes which we developed this year for use in class and home sessions and in penitential celebrations.

Theological themes	Catechetical themes adapted to the child's language	Celebrations
God's call.	God calls us to be fully alive.	'God has made us in his own image and likeness'.
Response to God's call and Law.	Jesus calls us to follow him.	'Keep the word of the Lord and act upon it'.
Conversion to Jesus.	Jesus calls us to change our hearts.	'I have come to save those who are lost'.
Forgiveness of sin.	Jesus forgives those who ask forgiveness.	'You are forgiven, Go in peace'.
Reconciliation.	Jesus reconciles us with God and with one another.	'Rejoice, for my son was dead and now he is alive'.
On-going conversion.	The Spirit of Jesus lives within us.	'You have received New Life in the Spirit'.