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A STUDY PAPER FOR FIRST CONFESSION

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A Study Paper
For
First Confession

Prepared by the
DIVISION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION—CCD;
UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

1973

Publications Office
UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

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A STUDY PAPER FOR FIRST CONFESSION

FOREWORD

A new stage in sacramental, catechetical and pastoral practice has begun, relative to the first reception of Penance and Eucharist by young children, with the recent joint Declaration of the Roman Congregations for the Sacraments and for the Clergy. This new stage is characterized by *connecting* the practice of reception of first Confession before first Communion (affirmed by the Addendum to the *General Catechetical Directory* and the joint Declaration) with the positive and legitimate developments gained from the recent experience of delaying first Confession.

It is important that the Declaration should not be interpreted as an order to return to an older practice. It is best seen rather as a gradual development characterized by these three stages:

1. The practice affirmed in *Quam singulari* (1910) of placing the reception of Confession and first Communion at the age of discretion, i.e., about the seventh year, more or less.

2. The practice, since the early sixties, of postponing first Confession until some time after first Communion, usually until the ninth or tenth year or the fourth grade, in many places in the United States and in other countries.

3. The present situation of forging a new sacramental practice based on:

- (a) the practice of putting reception of first Confession ahead of first Communion (cf. Addendum, no. 5);

(b) the positive catechetical knowledge and advantages learned from the first Confession after first Communion experiences;

(c) the continuing study and research into the questions raised by early first reception of Penance, such as that of the age of reason:

It is praiseworthy to study by research in pastoral psychology and to describe this age which develops gradually, is subject to various conditions, and which presents a peculiar nature in every child (Addendum to the *General Catechetical Directory*, no. 1).

In pastoral care, appropriate use must be made not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology. Thus the faithful can be brought to live the faith in a more thorough and mature way (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 62).

A return to every detail of the practice of seven or eight years ago in regard to first reception of Penance and Eucharist is neither possible nor desirable. Careful planning of liturgical practice with an accompanying catechesis adapted to the needs of the present situation is called for. Catechesis especially must be coordinated with overall pastoral activity (cf. *GCD*, no. 129). Hence, study, planning and evaluation must be undertaken at both parish and diocesan levels. This work should engage individuals and groups who share the various aspects of pastoral responsibility for first reception of Penance and Eucharist.

The following paper, prepared with the assistance of liturgists and canonists, is intended merely as an aid to assist study. It attempts neither to state guidelines nor to reflect official positions. Its aim, rather, is to foster the efforts of those responsible for a more effective pastoral practice in a new stage of liturgical and catechetical development. Thus will be kept alive the spirit of devoted service which has already prompted new efforts to bring children to a fruitful and healthy spiritual life nurtured by the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist.

This study aid also encourages the planning of a liturgical and catechetical practice wherein the child will be not only “gently led to the sacrament of Penance” (Addendum, no. 5) but also toward catechetical preparation of a first Confession that is “kind and prudential” (Addendum, no. 4). Finally, the study aid calls attention to fullest respect for the rights of the child who must neither be obliged to confess if he is not truly ready, nor denied Communion solely on the basis of not being ready for Confession.

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BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS: HISTORICAL AND CANONICAL

Before practical suggestions can be made concerning catechesis for Confession and forms of celebration of the sacrament, it is important to provide background information. It may be that the strictly disciplinary considerations are of secondary significance, but the whole issue of the sequence of the two sacraments of Penance and Eucharist has involved questions of usage and norm. It is essential also to understand the twentieth-century development in this matter and to know precisely what is said in the relevant documents.

Introduction

On May 24, 1973, two Congregations of the Apostolic See, the Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments and the Congregation for the Clergy, issued a joint Declaration concerning the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist by children, bringing an end to the practice by which preparation for Penance was put off until after first Communion. In effect, this Declaration seeks universal observance of the judgment expressed in the *General Catechetical Directory* of April 11, 1971: “. . . the Holy See judges it fitting that the practice now in force in the Church of putting Confession ahead of first Communion should be retained” (Addendum, no. 5).

Such a declaration is not a decree or a law of the Church, any more than is the admonition just quoted from the 1971 Directory. So far as the general church order of the Latin Church is concerned, it is rather easy to distinguish the formal precepts (conciliar decrees, canons of the Code of Canon Law, norms in apostolic constitutions and letters issued by the pope, general decrees issued by congregations by papal authority) from the explanatory, doctrinal, interpretative, and hortatory

statements which frequently accompany such precepts and from the many other forms of ecclesiastical pronouncement (instructions, declarations, directories, notifications, etc.). The latter explain how the formal discipline (the canon law) should be observed; they do not constitute new precepts or supersede existing discipline.

Nevertheless the importance of such documents in church life should not be underestimated, any more than the custom and usage of the Christian community which may well be more significant than the formal written precepts themselves, as suggested below.

Since the practice of postponing the preparation for first Confession until one, two, or three years after first Communion is very widespread in the United States, the development of a catechesis which will permit and encourage access to Confession prior to first Communion must be done with pastoral prudence and serious catechetical reflection. This reflection is the purpose of these background notes just as much as the more specific catechetical and liturgical suggestions. Moreover, the postponement of first Confession was welcomed by the majority of parents who helped in the preparation of their children for Communion and, later, Penance. Its success, as attested by the formal vote of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to continue the experiment (November, 1972), makes it imperative that a fresh approach to early catechesis for Penance, in accord with the joint Declaration, sacrifice as little as possible of the insights and spiritual benefits already experienced.

The reasons prompting the postponement of the first reception of Penance were summarized by the Apostolic See even in its original decision to urge the retention of the older practice: "So that the Communion of children may be appropriately received early, so that psychological disturbances in the future Christian life which can result from too early a use of Confession may be avoided, and so that better education for the spirit of Penance and a more valid catechetical preparation for Confession itself may be fostered, it has seemed to some that children should be admitted to first Communion without first receiving the sacrament of Penance"

(Addendum, no. 4). These purposes prompted catechists and other teachers and especially parents to welcome the change during the past decade. Although the contrary reasons have now prevailed, none of these purposes should be neglected or minimized.

Since there is no question of change in the age now customary for first Communion, the considerations below are primarily concerned with the usage of the first Confession and, in particular, with the implications of the sequence which places first Confession before first Communion: this is the direct object of the joint Declaration of May 24, 1973, as it was of the Addendum of the *General Catechetical Directory* of 1971.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The question of the sequence of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist did not arise for most of the Church's history—certainly not during the many centuries when infants and very young children regularly received the Eucharist, as is still the legitimate and praiseworthy usage of the Eastern Churches. Similarly, it did not arise directly in the modern period when first Communion was itself postponed until the age of ten to fourteen years, since the child might have received the sacrament of Penance for several years.

In most recent times, the sequence of these sacraments was not touched by the Second Vatican Council. Although the Council was concerned with the sacrament of Penance, its stress was on the ecclesial reconciliation effected by the sacrament (see *Constitution on the Church*, no. 11; *Constitution on the Liturgy*, nos. 27, 73). With regard to the relation of the sacraments, the Second Vatican Council sought rather to restore the sequence of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist (see *Constitution on the Liturgy*, no. 71; *Roman Ritual*, General Introduction to Christian Initiation, no. 2).

The sequence of the sacraments in the titles of the unrevised *Roman Ritual* (baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist) is perhaps evidence of actual usage in the Church in modern times. Without prescribing the first reception of the sacrament of Penance prior to first Communion, the ritual seemed to take this for granted (except in the case of neophytes). The

same is true of the canonical sources, specifically the decree *Quam singulari* of 1910 and the 1917 Code of Canon Law. These sources do not directly prescribe the sequence but assume it to be the existing usage of the Latin Church. The background and context of the decree and the Code are important as leading to the formal consideration of the matter in the *General Catechetical Directory* of 1971.

Quam Singulari

Quam singulari, the 1910 decree of the Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments, is related to the earlier decree of the Congregation for the Council, *Sacra Tridentina Synodus* (December 20, 1905) on the restoration of frequent and daily Communion. Although the primary purpose of *Quam singulari* was to vindicate the right of young children to receive the Eucharist after reaching the age of discretion, it does make reference in several places to Confession.

The decree is principally concerned with the reprobation of a number of abuses: the requirement of a greater age for first Communion than for first Confession, the postponement of first Communion to the age of ten to fourteen or even more years of age, denial to young children of the remedial effects of Communion on Jansenistic grounds of a required "extraordinary preparation," denial of the sacrament of Penance to children before admission to Communion or refusal of absolution to such children, denial of the Eucharist as viaticum to young children, and burial of such children as infants without the usual suffrages of the Church.

The explanatory section of the decree, besides reciting these abuses, gives a summary history of the question of first Communion. It mentions (a) the Western usage of communicating infants immediately after baptism and regularly thereafter ("as was prescribed in almost all of the ancient rituals until the thirteenth century"), (b) the conciliar enactments (IV Lateran, canon 21; Trent, session XXI, on Communion, c. 4; session XII, on the Eucharist, c. 8, canon 9), and (c) the teaching of theologians. The decree then has a dispositive section of eight formal norms, quoted below.

The norms of *Quam singulari* refer always to Confession and Communion in that order, insisting that the same age of dis-

cretion is required for both and assuming that Confession is a preparation for first Communion. There is, however, no norm or requirement that first Confession must precede first Communion.

Code of Canon Law

In 1918 the Code of Canon Law for the Latin Church, which had been promulgated in 1917 by Pope Benedict XV, went into effect. With some exceptions, the Code replaced the entire corpus of preceding ecclesiastical disciplinary legislation. As a codification, however, it repeated—the form of canons and by the formal authority of Benedict XV—the old law, with whatever modifications seemed necessary. This was the case with the norms of the decree *Quam singulari*, and the canons derived from or related to the decree are quoted below.

It should be explained that the norms of *Quam singulari* which were introduced into the Code have canonical authority from the Code rather than from their original enactment. On the other hand, except to the extent modified, the respective canons must be understood as in the earlier decree.

The canons of the Code do not allude directly to the sequence of first Confession-first Communion. Only in the context of those who have sinned gravely is sacramental Confession prescribed before Communion (canon 856). The treatment of the sacraments follows the traditional order; baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance (an order which safeguards the relationship and sequence of the three sacraments of Christian initiation).

The Code of Canon Law thus does not impose any obligation of first Confession prior to first Communion, any more than did *Quam singulari*. If such a disciplinary precept had been found in the earlier decree, it would have been abrogated by the very fact of its omission from the Code (canon 6, no. 6).

General Catechetical Directory

It was only in the 1960's that, for a variety of reasons, the question of somewhat postponing first Confession was seriously raised. And, although the usage of first Confession-first Communion was long since established, it could not be said nor

can it now be said that a child who is not in grave sin is obliged to confess his sins and receive sacramental absolution. The reasons for the pastoral and catechetical change were summarized and analyzed in the five sections of the Addendum to the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory*. (For text and commentary, see Berard L. Marthaler, *Catechetics in Context*, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, Indiana, 1973, pp. 260-281.)

In the Addendum a negative decision was reached in principle and *per se* on the postponement of first Confession until after first Communion. The possible continuance of the newer practice was contemplated: bishops were urged not to depart from the practice in force "without having first entered into communication with the Holy See in a spirit of hierarchical communion," and episcopal conferences were asked to submit experiments with new practices to a new examination. The continuance of such existing practices was made contingent upon having "first communicated with the Holy See. . . ." As of the end of the school year 1972-1973 even this possibility was foreclosed by the joint Declaration of May 24, 1973.

ECCLESIASTICAL DOCUMENTS

Although the eight norms of the 1910 decree *Quam singulari* were formally replaced by the new language of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, they are reprinted below in their entirety with the corresponding canons printed next to them. The 1910 norms and the present canons should be examined with the following in mind:

(a) After each of the canons the reference in the footnotes of the Code is given. These footnotes, prepared by Gasparri, indicate the sources employed in each canon. Sometimes very little remains of the original or the relationship of the original and the canons is very tenuous.

(b) Anything omitted in the Code is abrogated (for example, the norm of general Communion in no. 5) in virtue of canon 6, no. 6. Similarly, the formal reprobation of various abuses does not appear in the canons. In case of discrepancy the discipline of the canons prevails (canon 6, no. 3). But the interpretation of the canons is to be derived, as far as possible, from *Quam singulari* (canon 6, no. 2).

Quam singulari (1910)

1. The age of discretion both for Confession and for Holy Communion, is the time when a child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on the obligation of fulfilling the precept of both Confession and Communion begins.

2. A full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary either for first Confession or for first Communion. Afterwards, however, the child will be obliged to learn gradually the entire catechism according to his ability.

3. The knowledge of religion which is required in a child in order to be properly prepared to receive first Communion is such that he will understand according to his capacity those mysteries of faith which are necessary as a means of salvation (*necessitate medii*) and that he can distinguish between the bread of the Eucharist and ordinary, material bread and thus receive Holy Communion with a devotion becoming his age.

Code of Canon Law (1917)

859, § 1. Everyone of the faithful of both sexes is bound, after he has reached the years of discretion, that is, the use of reason, to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist once a year, at least at Easter, unless it happens with the counsel of his own priest, for a reasonable cause, he is convinced that he should temporarily abstain from receiving it [*Quam singulari*, no. 1].

906. Everyone of the faithful of both sexes is bound after he has reached the years of discretion, that is, the use of reason, to confess faithfully all his sins at least once a year [*Quam singulari*, nos. 1, 4].

854, § 1. The Eucharist shall not be administered to children who, because of the deficiency of age, do not have the knowledge or the intention required for the reception of this sacrament [*Quam singulari*, no. 3].

854, § 3. Outside the danger of death a more thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine and a more detailed preparation are properly required, namely, that by which they may know, in the degree in which they are able, at least the mysteries of faith, the knowledge of which is necessary for salvation by necessity of means and by which they may approach the Holy Eucharist with the devotion that is appropriate to their age [*Quam singulari*, nos. 2, 3].

4. The obligation of the precept of Confession and Communion which binds the child principally affects those who have charge of the child, namely, parents, confessors, teachers, and the pastor. It belongs to the father, or the person taking his place, and to the confessor, according to the Roman catechism, to admit a child to his first Communion.

854, § 4. The decision regarding the sufficient disposition of children for first Communion belongs to their confessor and to their parents or those who take the place of their parents [*Quam singulari*, no. 4].

854, § 5. It is the duty of the pastor to be on guard, and he may require an examination if he prudently judges it called for, lest children be admitted to Holy Communion before they have obtained the use of reason or without sufficient preparation and at the same time to see that those who have attained the use of reason and who are sufficiently prepared shall be refreshed as soon as possible with this divine food [not referred to in *Quam singulari*].

860. The obligation of the precept of receiving Holy Communion binding on children under the age of puberty affects also and principally those who are charged with their care, that is, their parents, guardians, confessors, teachers, and pastors [*Quam singulari*, no. 4].

5. The pastor should announce and hold a general Communion of the children once a year or more often, and he should on these occasions admit not only the first communicants but also others who have already approached the holy table with the above mentioned consent of their parents or confessor. Some days of instruction and preparation should be previously given to both classes of children.

863. The faithful should be urged that they refresh themselves frequently, even daily, with the Eucharistic bread in accord with the norms laid down in the decrees of the Apostolic See and that those who assist at Mass receive Communion not only by a spiritual desire but also by the sacramental reception of the Holy Eucharist [*Quam singulari*, nos. 5, 6].

6. Those who have charge of the children should zealously see to it that after their first Communion these children frequently approach the holy table, even daily if possible, as Jesus Christ and Mother Church desire, and let this be done with a devotion becoming their age. They must also bear in mind that very grave duty which obliges them to have the children attend public catechism classes; if this is not done they must supply religious instruction in some other way.

7. The custom of not admitting children to Confession or of not giving them absolution when they have already attained the use of reason must be entirely abandoned. Local ordinaries shall therefore take care that it is entirely abolished, even by using canonical punishments.

8. The practice of not administering the viaticum and extreme unction to children who have attained the use of reason and of burying them with the rite used for infants is a most intolerable abuse. Local ordinaries shall proceed severely against those who do not abandon this custom.

As is evident, the first reception of Penance *prior* to first Communion is not a matter of formal legislation in the decree *Quam singulari*. It is referred to explicitly, however, in the explanatory part of the decree, where it is presupposed or taken for granted as a matter of ordinary usage:

1330. A pastor is obliged:

1° to prepare children at fixed times for the proper reception of the sacraments of Penance and confirmation by a series of instructions lasting several days;

2° to train them even more carefully for the first reception of Holy Communion, especially during Lent, if nothing prevents this.

1331. Besides this instruction of children (canon 1330), the pastor shall not fail to train more fully and thoroughly in the catechism those children who have recently received first Communion.

892, § 1. Pastors and others to whom the care of souls is committed in virtue of their office are bound by the serious obligations of justice to hear, personally or through others, the confessions of the faithful entrusted to them, whenever the latter reasonably request to be heard [*Quam singulari*, no. 7].

854, § 2. In danger of death, to permit and oblige the minister to give the Holy Eucharist to children, it suffices that they should have the knowledge to distinguish the body of Christ from ordinary food and reverently to adore it [*Quam singulari*, no. 8].

Even though a more thorough preparation and an accurate sacramental Confession should precede first Holy Communion, which does not happen everywhere, yet the loss of first innocence is always to be deplored and might have been avoided by receiving the Holy Eucharist in more tender years.

Not less to be condemned is that custom, which exists in many places, whereby children are not allowed to receive the sacrament of Penance before they are admitted to Communion; or else absolution is not given to them.

In addition, the explanatory section of *Quam singulari* is significant as an interpretation of the law which:

(a) speaks of "one and the same age for [the precept concerning] both sacraments" (IV Lateran, canon 21; canons 859, § 1, and 906 of the Code of Canon Law); but also

(b) employs somewhat different language to describe the requirements in the individual communicant. Thus, *Quam singulari* explains:

The Lateran Council requires one and the same age for both sacraments, since it imposes a joint obligation of Penance and Communion. Therefore, since the age of discretion required for Penance is that at which right can be distinguished from wrong, namely, when one comes to the use of reason, so also for Holy Communion that age is required which can distinguish the Eucharistic bread from the common, which age indeed is that at which the child attains the use of reason.

Still more important, in understanding the precept of Confession, is canon 901. This makes it clear—in accord with constant moral and canonical teaching—that the precept of annual Confession (canon 906) applies only in the case of grave sin:

One who has committed grave sins after baptism which have not yet been directly remitted by the power of the keys of the Church must confess all the sins of which he is conscious after diligent self-examination and explain in confession the circumstances which change the species of the sin.

General Catechetical Directory, Addendum (April 11, 1971)

The following is the pertinent text from the Addendum of the *General Catechetical Directory*:

Among the tasks of catechesis, the preparation of children for the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist is of great importance. With regard to this, it is held opportune to recall certain principles and to make some observations about certain experiments that have been taking place very recently in some regions or places of the Church.

The Age of Discretion

1. The suitable age for the first reception of these sacraments is deemed to be that which in documents of the Church is called the age of reason or of discretion. This age "both for Confession and for Communion is that at which the child begins to reason, that is, about the seventh year, more or less. From that time on the obligation of fulfilling the precepts of Confession and Communion begins" (Decree *Quam singulari*, 1, AAS 1910, p. 582). It is praiseworthy to study by research in pastoral psychology and to describe this age which develops gradually, is subject to various conditions, and which presents a peculiar nature in every child. One should, however, be on guard not to extend beyond the above-mentioned limits, which are not rigid, the time at which the precept of Confession begins to oblige *per se*.

Formation and Growth of the Moral Conscience of Children

2. While the capacity to reason is evolving gradually in a child, his moral conscience too is being trained, that is, the faculty of judging his acts in relation to a norm of morality. A number of varying elements and circumstances come together in forming this moral conscience of a child: the character and discipline of his family, which is one of the most important educative factors during the first years of a child's life, his associations with others, and the activities and the witness of the ecclesial community. Catechesis, while carrying out its task of instructing and forming in the Christian faith, puts order into these various factors of education, promotes them, and works in conjunction with them. Only

in this way will catechesis be able to give to the child timely direction toward the heavenly Father and correct any goings astray or incorrect orientations of life that can occur. Without doubt children at this age should be told in the simplest possible way about God as our Lord and Father, about his love for us, about Jesus, the Son of God, who was made man for us, and who died and rose again. By thinking about the love of God, the child will be able gradually to perceive the malice of sin, which always offends God the Father and Jesus, and which is opposed to the charity with which we must love our neighbor and ourselves.

Importance of Explaining the Sacrament of Penance to Children

3. When a child begins to offend God by sin, he also begins to have the desire of receiving pardon, not only from parents or relatives, but also from God. Catechesis helps him by nourishing this desire wholesomely, and it instills a holy aversion to sin, an awareness of the need for amendment, and especially love for God. The special task of catechesis here is to explain in a suitable way that sacramental Confession is a means offered children of the Church to obtain pardon for sin, and furthermore that it is even necessary *per se* if one has fallen into serious sin. To be sure, Christian parents and religious educators ought to teach the child in such a way that above all he will strive to advance to a more intimate love of the Lord Jesus and to genuine love of neighbor. The doctrine on the sacrament of Penance is to be presented in a broad framework of attaining purification and spiritual growth with great confidence in the mercy and love of God. In this way, children not only can little by little acquire a delicate understanding of conscience, but do not lose heart when they fall into some lesser fault.

The Eucharist is the summit and center of the entire Christian life. In addition to the required state of grace, great purity of soul is clearly fitting for the reception of Communion. One must be very careful, however, that the children do not get the impression that Confession is necessary before receiving the Eucharist even when one sincerely loves God and has not departed from the path of God's commandments in a serious way.

Certain New Experiments

4. In very recent times in certain regions of the Church experiments relative to the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist have been made. These have given rise to doubt and confusion.

So that the Communion of children may be appropriately received early, and so that psychological disturbances in the future Christian life which can result from a too early use of Confession may be avoided, and so that better education for the spirit of Penance and a more valid catechetical preparation for Confession itself may be fostered, it has seemed to some that children should be admitted to first Communion without first receiving the sacrament of Penance.

In fact, however, going to the sacrament of Penance from the beginning of the use of reason does not in itself harm the minds of children, provided it is preceded, as it should be, by a kind and prudent catechetical preparation. The spirit of Penance can be developed more fully by continuing catechetical instruction after first Communion; likewise, there can be growth in knowledge and appreciation of the great gift that Christ has given to sinful men in the sacrament of the pardon they will receive and of reconciliation with the Church (cf. LG, 11).

These things have not prevented the introduction in certain places of a practice in which some years regularly elapse between first Communion and first Confession. In other places, however, the innovations made have been more cautious, either because first Confession was not so much delayed, or because consideration is given to judgment of the parents who prefer to have their children go to the sacrament of Penance before first Communion.

The Common Practice in Force Must be Highly Esteemed

5. The Supreme Pontiff, Pius X, declared, "The custom of not admitting children to Confession or of never giving them absolution, when they have arrived at the use of reason, must be wholly condemned" (Decree *Quam singulari*, VII, AAS, 1910, p. 583). One can scarcely have regard for the right that baptized children have of confessing their sins, if

at the beginning of the age of discretion they are not prepared and gently led to the sacrament of Penance.

One should also keep in mind the usefulness of Confession, which retains its efficacy even when only venial sins are in question, and which gives an increase of grace and of charity, increases the child's good dispositions for receiving the Eucharist, and also helps to perfect the Christian life. Hence, it appears the usefulness of Confession cannot be dismissed in favor of those forms of Penance or those ministries of the word, by which the virtue of Penance is aptly fostered in children, and which can be fruitfully practiced together with the sacrament of Penance, when a suitable catechetical preparation has been made. The pastoral experience of the Church, which is illustrated by many examples even in our day, teaches her how much the so-called age of discretion is suited for effecting that the children's baptismal grace, by means of a well-prepared reception of the sacraments of Penance and of the Eucharist, shows forth its first fruits which are certainly to be augmented afterwards by means of a continued catechesis.

Having weighed all these points, and keeping in mind the common and general practice which *per se* cannot be derogated without the approval of the Apostolic See, and also having heard the Conferences of Bishops, the Holy See judges it fitting that the practice now in force in the Church of putting Confession ahead of first Communion should be retained. This in no way prevents this custom from being carried out in various ways, as, for instance, by having a communal penitential celebration precede or follow the reception of the sacrament of Penance.

Since the Addendum in no way departs from the earlier discipline and does not itself constitute new ecclesiastical law, it is important to stress that there is no precept obliging children to first Confession prior to first Communion. The misconception that such a precept exists or has been newly established is perhaps at the root of both extremes of reaction to the Addendum and the more recent Declaration: it is equally erroneous to employ the documents as authority to compel children to receive the sacrament of Penance and to reject the

documents as if they interfered with the freedom of children, parents, teachers, confessor, and pastor.

It may be unfortunate that the direct purpose of the Addendum and Declaration remains only implicit in the ecclesiastical law, but it is easy to arrive at what is intended: since the child may be obliged to annual Confession at an early age and since the child should be free to receive the sacrament of Penance as soon as he or she is able, adequate preparation for the opportunity or access to the sacrament should not be delayed. Needless to say, this expression of intent of the Church documents leaves open many questions of catechetical practice and indeed the specific question whether the individual child does or does not receive the sacrament of Penance prior to first Communion.

CUSTOM AND DISPENSATION

The *General Catechetical Directory* is properly concerned as much or more with the values in customary church usage (see no. 106). This is somewhat complicated in the case of the priority of Confession to first Communion because the received usage arose or was confirmed in a period when first Communion was erroneously postponed—and the correction of this custom took place without apparent advertence to other elements in the sequence of Penance and Communion: as mentioned above, this sequence was assumed, early in this century, to be usual or traditional, and it is this custom which has continued.

It might be worthwhile, however, to point out the great value of custom in the discipline of the church community. In some circumstances the custom of the people may abrogate the canon law after a long period of time (canon 27); the usage or actual practice of the people is understood to be the best interpreter of the canon law (canon 29). In this broad sense, the greatest attention should be paid to accepted and long-standing usage, although this, too, like other ecclesiastical law, is subject to subsequent reappraisal and change.

The question with regard to any customary precept of Confession prior to first Communion is somewhat different. Briefly, it may not be asserted that such an obligation has grown

up from practice. The present canon law demands that, for the church community to bring about a new precept, it is necessary that it act "knowingly and with the intention of obliging itself" (canon 28) over a lengthy period of time. This is the critical element: it can hardly be said that the Christian community, having been free of any written law—including the law of IV Lateran Council continued in canon 901—obliging Confession except in the case of grave sin, has at any time consciously acted to create such an obligation.

Another question, again canonical in nature, is that of dispensation from ecclesiastical law (or legal custom, which is the equivalent in force of written church law). This question does not directly arise in the matter treated above, namely, the absence of any law or custom requiring Confession before first Communion—apart from the case of the person, including the child, conscious of grave sin. In many other aspects of the catechetical and pastoral discipline of Confession and Communion, however, it should be clear that the diocesan bishop has the right to dispense from general ecclesiastical law (and, by analogy, from law deriving from custom) in particular cases.

That this authority resides in the local church or diocese, to be exercised by the bishop, was made clear by Vatican Council II, which overturned a contrary norm of the Code of Canon Law:

Individual diocesan bishops have the faculty to dispense from the general law of the Church in a particular case the faithful for whom they exercise authority according to law, when they judge that this will be for their spiritual good, unless a special reservation shall have been made by the supreme authority of the Church (Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, no. 8b).

Matters of the kind covered by the quoted canons on Communion and Confession have not been specially reserved or withdrawn from the dispensing authority of the diocesan bishops either by the ecumenical council or by the pope. (A list of some twenty such reservations, none of them affecting the present matter, was published by Pope Paul VI on June 15, 1966: *motu proprio De Episcoporum muneribus*.)

While the bishop may not use this authority to dispense from general church law so as to abrogate the latter completely or permanently—dispensation is considered to be a relaxation of the law for a cause—it is within his discretion to use it as broadly or as frequently as he “judges will be for the spiritual good” of the faithful.

PASTORAL DISCIPLINE

The preceding treatment should remove any obstacles of a canonical kind to the proper development of pastoral and catechetical practice. What follows is by way of conclusions to be drawn from the basic dimensions of the above: the need to develop catechesis and a practice of complete and early access to the sacrament of Penance, without sacrificing elements of recent experience.

It is not possible to do more than call attention to the complex questions of pastoral practice. Parents, catechists, and priests should be particularly aware of the flexible limits of the age of reason and discretion.

Marthaler treats this with great precision and in a spirit which should remove any inclination to rigidity of practice:

With respect to the Addendum, the chief question is whether in codifying the norms of *Quam singulari*, canon law interpreted the age for first Confession and first Communion in the same way. In 1920 the Commission for the Code was asked: “Is the use of reason mentioned in canon 854, No. 2, 3, and 5; c. 859, No. 1; and 906 that required for a mortal sin or that sufficient for the commission of only a venial sin?” The Commission replied: “The use of reason for Holy Communion is that clearly indicated in canon 854, No. 2 and 3; for the precept of annual Confession it is that indicated in canon 906.”

Frank Buckley of the University of San Francisco, who has made an extensive study of the problem, writes:

By this reply, a clear distinction was made between the age for receiving the Eucharist (an age sufficient to distinguish the Body of Christ from ordinary bread and adore

it, and to know the principal mysteries of faith necessary for salvation) and the age at which a child can commit sin.

The Addendum, based as it is on *Quam singulari*, does not distinguish. It simply emphasizes that the limits when "the precept of Confession and Communion begins to oblige *per se*" are "not rigid." Cardinal Wright, prefect of the congregation responsible for the Directory, in a widely disseminated essay, "The New Catechetical Directory and Initiation of the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist," speaks of seven to eight years old when referring to the age of first Confession and first Communion. He leaves some leeway. The seventh year dates from a child's sixth birthday (for many years it was usual in the U. S. for a child to make his first Communion in first grade). The cardinal extends the upward limits to the eighth and ninth years. Although *Quam singulari*, the Code, the Addendum and the commentators agree that the age of discretion of individual children must be judged case to case, the general norms of church law allow a moderate degree of tolerance. "About the seventh year, more or less," conceivably spans the time in a child's life when he is five to eight years old, a period of three, possibly four years (*Catechetics in Context*, pp. 267-269).

In addition, the following observations may be helpful.

Presentation of the Practice

The practice of Confession—catechesis and access to the sacrament—prior to first Communion should now be presented positively. Those who have held differing positions in recent years should scrupulously avoid any polemics which would confuse children, parents, and the Catholic community.

In many places first Confession has not been postponed. Parents, catechists, and priests should now learn from the profound insights of the recent experience with the postponement. The present hope is to retain all that has been learned, for example, by separating the two sacraments, while enlarging the period of catechesis for Penance. Those who have not shared in the experience should now benefit from it and employ its catechetical methods and insights.

Distinction of the Sacraments

The sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist must remain clearly distinct, and this should be one goal of catechesis. On this point the Addendum to the *General Catechetical Directory* is most explicit: "One must be very careful, however, that the children do not get the impression that Confession is necessary before receiving the Eucharist even when one sincerely loves God and has not departed from the path of God's commandments in a serious way" (no. 3). Such a misconception has been gradually and providentially rooted out since 1905 (the time of the decree of the Congregation of the Council on frequent Communion). It would be tragic if it should reassert itself.

Related to this concern for keeping the Eucharist and Penance distinct is the recent norm of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "The celebration of this rite [generally sacramental absolution] is to be kept quite distinct from the celebration of Mass" (June 16, 1972, no. X). Only by maintaining the distinction between Eucharist and Penance can the reconciling effects of the Eucharist itself be properly appreciated. These effects are expressed, for example, in the location of the Lord's Prayer in the Communion rite.

The catechetical preparation for the two sacraments should thus be separated to the extent possible. It will also be helpful to separate the first reception of the two sacraments by a sufficient interval to provide this emphasis.

The interval must not be so long that the child who does receive the sacrament of Penance first will be delayed in approaching the Eucharist for a long period. Nor should the interval be so long as to conflict with the Easter Communion: every child should receive Communion at Easter or at least during the Easter season immediately following the attainment of the "age of discretion."

Rights and Freedom of the Child

A prominent motive for catechesis on Confession prior to first Communion is the respect due to the child's right to have access to the sacrament of Penance. The *General Catechetical Directory* makes this point strongly:

One can scarcely have regard for the right that baptized children have of confessing their sins, if at the beginning of the age of discretion they are not prepared and gently led to the sacrament of Penance (Addendum, no. 5).

In fact, together with the positive desire to provide for early Confession (and the underlying concern over the decline in the use of the sacrament), this insistence on the child's right to the sacrament seems to be one of the most striking reasons for the 1971 Addendum and the 1973 joint Declaration.

This right must be protected, certainly to the extent of providing catechesis and opportunity for first Confession. As a practical matter, it proposes that first Confession prior to first Communion will become the ordinary usage.

Nevertheless, the freedom of the child who is not conscious of grave sin not to confess must also be scrupulously respected. The ecclesiastical precept of annual Confession does not bind such a child (or adult) and, however necessary the catechesis and however spiritually profitable the sacrament, no child should be placed in erroneous conscience about the precept: the child's freedom of decision should be maintained.

In most cases this need create no difficulty. Parents, however, who have been deeply engaged in the catechesis of their children and who are truly convinced that first Confession should be postponed may well feel that the freedom of their children is at issue. It may thus happen that a child in fact does not confess; such a child may never be denied the Eucharist, since such denial would be an even graver violation of the right of the baptized.

The official documents of the past have been drawn somewhat differently concerning the rights of parents and priests (pastor or confessor). The parental right nevertheless has primacy and should be respected. It would be in altogether extraordinary circumstances that the priest should deny the Eucharist to the child whose parents judge to be ready—and the fact that the child has not yet been absolved is not ground for denial of the Eucharist. At the same time the pastor and others should afford both catechetical help to parents in preparing children for Confession and every opportunity of access to the sacrament.

Similarly, it may be the priest's decision—confessor or even pastor—that in individual cases a child who cannot be prepared for first Confession or who is unable to confess may nonetheless be admitted to first Communion. While such a condition is readily verified in the case of retarded or exceptional children, it may exist also in other cases, for example, if the confessor, according to accepted principles, is unable to absolve, in the absence of contrition for personal sin. There should be no hesitation about the first Communion of children in such cases, provided the minimal knowledge and intention required by the discipline of the Latin Church are present.

It may be that the possibility of making rather different judgments concerning readiness for the two sacraments (either by the parents or by the catechists, confessor, pastor) may resolve many problem cases. See above, where Marthaler is quoted on the broad flexibility in the accepted "age of discretion."

CATECHESIS

There is no intention here of repeating or summarizing the elements of catechesis prior to first Confession (or first Communion) in which significant and beneficial progress has been made in the past decade (see below) or the importance, now almost universally recognized, of full parental participation in such catechesis. When Confession precedes first Communion, however, the following points should be carefully considered.

When very young children are prepared for Penance, a balanced presentation should be sought. The element of Confession should not be overemphasized at the expense of ecclesial reconciliation or absolution and satisfaction; the latter should be expressed positively in terms of acts of Christian love and witness.

Diversity of Usage

The longstanding practice in the Latin Church of first Confession before first Communion should never be presented as the single Catholic practice or as the authentic tradition of the Church. In fact, the more venerable tradition is the reception of first Communion prior to the age of discretion; it remains the discipline in the Eastern Churches, both Catholic and non-

Catholic, to give Communion to the newly baptized (and confirmed) infant.

The current usage of the Latin Church, now reaffirmed by the Apostolic See, should instead be presented as a custom of lengthy duration with its own sacramental insights and dimensions, in particular, the reconciling role of the sacrament of Penance. In this way it may be possible to avoid a common error of the past, namely, of teaching a contemporary discipline as if it were an unchangeable absolute with later serious consequences when the discipline changes.

Ecclesial Reconciliation

The conciliar concern for the meaning of Penance as reconciliation with the Church should be prominent in catechesis, in accord with the *Constitution on the Church*:

Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from the mercy of God for offenses committed against him. They are at the same time reconciled with the Church, which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, example and prayer seeks their conversion (no. 11).

This element of reconciliation with the Church is of course one of the reasons for encouraging communal celebration (below). It is related also to a proper catechesis concerning the role of the minister of the sacrament. The action of the church community in the celebration of Penance may be manifested to a greater or lesser degree, but is always present through the ministry of the ordained priest.

“Devotional Confession”

There may seem to be a certain conflict arising from the conviction that most children are not bound in practice by the ecclesiastical precept of annual Confession when they reach the age of discretion (use of reason), since it obliges only those conscious of grave sin. Either such children are incapable of grave sin, as many hold, or they do not in fact sin gravely, as almost all would hold.

The legitimate conclusion is clear: children are not bound to confess upon reaching the age of discretion, except in the most unlikely circumstances that they are certainly guilty of grave sin.

(It is quite different to insist that children may confess at this age, that they should be prepared for the sacrament at this age, and that access to the sacrament should not be denied them.)

Each child should be instructed that he or she is bound to confess only when conscious of grave sin. The precept of annual Confession should always be explained in this way, accommodating to the capacity of the child (or the adult) the terminology of canons 901 and 906. Any other explanation is erroneous and can place children (and adults) in bad conscience.

On the other hand, children who have reached the age of discretion (use of reason) are properly instructed to confess just as adults have traditionally been urged to confess although not conscious of grave sin. Perhaps the resolution of the apparent conflict is to apply to the confessions of young children some elements of the traditional pastoral principles of "confessions of devotion." This practice has been stressed recently by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its June 16, 1972, pastoral norms on Penance:

Priests should be careful not to discourage the faithful from frequent or devotional Confession. On the contrary, let them draw attention to its fruitfulness for Christian living (see Pius XII, encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*: AAS 35 [1943] 235) and always display readiness to hear such a confession whenever a reasonable request is made. It must be absolutely prevented that individual Confession be reserved for serious sins only, for this would deprive the faithful of the great benefit of Confession and would injure the good name of those who approach the sacrament singly (no. XII).

The text of the encyclical on the *Mystical Body of Christ* is as follows:

It is true that venial sins may be expiated in many ways which are to be highly commended. But to hasten daily progress along the path of virtue we wish the pious practice of frequent Confession to be earnestly advocated. Not without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was this practice introduced into the Church. By it a genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility is developed, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are countered, the conscience

is purified, the will is strengthened, salutary self-control is obtained, and an increase of grace is secured by the very fact that the sacrament is received (cf. no. 88).

The terminology of this pronouncement must of course be accommodated to the circumstances and psychology of young children. The proposal is only that their confessions should be treated (and prepared for) as devotional confessions.

This application is also the burden of the following statement in the *General Catechetical Directory*:

One should also keep in mind the usefulness of Confession, which retains its efficacy even when only venial sins are in question and which gives an increase of grace and of charity, increases the child's good dispositions for receiving the Eucharist, and also helps to perfect the Christian life (Addendum, no. 5).

In view of the judgment of many, grave offenses are most unlikely to occur in the first few years after the "use of reason." Therefore the catechesis on first reception of Penance should be almost exclusively in terms of the traditional devotional Confession. Under no circumstances should it be suggested that children in fact regularly commit grave sins at the earlier age. Much less should children be placed in false conscience about lesser offenses or imbued with feelings of psychological as opposed to genuine moral guilt.

LITURGICAL CELEBRATION

The Second Vatican Council enacted the following norm of preference for communal celebration of the liturgy:

It is to be stressed that whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provisions for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private. This applied with special force to the celebration of Mass, even though every Mass has of itself a public and social nature, and to the administration of the sacraments (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, no. 27).

The communal forms of celebration are therefore to be encouraged in every way, including the occasion of the first reception of Communion. Nevertheless, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has imposed a limitation upon communal absolution after individual Confession, while otherwise fostering such celebrations:

The faithful are careful to be taught that liturgical celebrations and community rites of Penance are of great usefulness for the preparation of a more fruitful confession of sins and amendment of life. Care must be taken, however, that such celebrations or rites are not confused with sacramental Confession and absolution. If in the course of such celebrations the penitents make an individual Confession, each is to receive absolution singly from the confessor to whom he goes (Pastoral Norms, June 16, 1972, no. X).

A similar point has been made earlier in the Addendum on "The First Reception of the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist":

This in no way prevents the custom [of putting Confession ahead of first Communion] from being carried out in various ways, as, for instance, by having a communal penitential celebration precede or follow the reception of the sacrament of Penance (no. 5).

There are various ways in which—while respecting the pastoral norms quoted above—the priest can celebrate the sacrament of Penance with young children. In addition to the outline of the elements of communal celebration given in a separate section below, the following general principles may be suggested:

1. The ordinary elements of penitential service (singing, readings, preaching, prayer) should be accommodated to the age of the children and should be extremely simple and indeed brief. In addition to the sacramental rite of Penance (below), it is appropriate to include ritual and symbolic actions, such as the exchange of a sign of peace and reconciliation.

2. The individual confessions (with absolution) should take the form of a simple dialogue of the priest and the child, in

which the priest accommodates himself to the child's way of thinking and any unnecessary formalism is avoided. Nothing should be done or said to arouse hesitation, much less fear, in the child. The elements of greater reconciliation and closer unity with God and the Church should be stressed, again in a manner suitable to children.

3. It is preferable that the individual confessions not take place in the enclosed confessional, but in another place designated by the confessor. It can be a matter of simple explanation and later practice that the privacy of the enclosed confessional is available. On the occasion of first Confession the proper privacy may be had by the priest hearing the child's confession at a distance from the congregation or community. It may be done at the altar or in the sanctuary area or even near the Church door (so that there is a sign of reconciliation and reunion with the Church).

4. The unrevised Roman Ritual speaks of the laying on of hands in sacramental absolution in a somewhat attenuated way (because of the use of the confessional screen): "with his right hand elevated toward the penitent." In the first Confession of children (and on other occasions, as possible and appropriate), the priest should make this an authentic laying on of hands, either by stretching his right hand over the child or by the physical imposition of the hand.

5. The actual text and other context of a penitential celebration are not prescribed, apart from the prayers and formulas of individual Confession. Like other services in which such freedom of choice is allowed, this service should be carefully prepared by the priest in consultation with parents, catechists, and the children themselves.

II

CATECHETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: SUGGESTIONS FOR PLANNING A FIRST CONFESSION CATECHESIS

The document of the U. S. bishops *Basic Teachings for Catholic Religious Education*, quoting from the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church*, no. 14, calls for careful attention on the part of teachers to levels of maturity and understanding:

In this instruction a proper sequence should be observed, as well as a method appropriate to the matter that is being treated and to the natural disposition, ability, age and circumstances of life of the listener (Introduction).

Penance catechesis directed to the first Confession of the young child has two stages:

1. Before first Confession: what is necessary for valid and fruitful reception of the sacrament of Penance.
2. After first Confession: continuation of what has been begun; gradual development during the normal course of catechesis.

The catechesis should genuinely provide for the child's right to go to Confession; it should be very simple and in keeping with what is required for the first Confession of young children, for example:

1. Ability to distinguish between right and wrong.
2. Awareness of need of forgiveness and trust in Jesus' forgiving love.
3. Ability to express sorrow.
4. Ability of the child to describe wrongdoing in his or her own words.

Catechesis, as the *General Catechetical Directory* points out, has many modes: "In a word, catechetical activity can take on forms and structures that are quite varied, that is to say, it can be systematic or occasional, for individuals or for communities, organized or spontaneous, and so on" (19). Planning of the catechesis should make use of these various ways to provide a simple approach.

Accordingly, catechesis for first Confession must not only take into consideration the level of understanding of the child but also carefully adapt the instruction of his actual condition.

Catechesis should be careful to preserve, incorporate and evaluate the many positive and legitimate developments that have occurred in recent years of delaying first Confession. Some of these developments are:

1. Pastoral advantages have been found in extending the preparation to allow the child to grow and to develop. The child's first encounter with sacramental Confession will be a more meaningful and lasting experience if preceded by a sufficiently spaced preparation. The catechesis itself for first Confession could be quite simple, because later, when the child will demonstrate greater ability to grasp the meaning of sacramental Confession and to develop a stronger capacity for those penitential attitudes which are of the essence of the sacrament of Penance, a more complete catechesis can be provided.

2. The experience of delayed first Confession has created a stronger focus on the Eucharist as the primary sacrament, which in turn has fostered a catechetical emphasis upon the positive aspects of God's love in relation to sin and forgiveness.

3. With a time interval separating first reception of Eucharist and Penance, children have been directly and immediately prepared for each sacrament, assisted by a distinct catechesis. Since it is much easier and more effective to prepare children for one sacrament at a time, parental involvement in the catechesis has been much more substantive and direct than before.

4. Wherever first Communion took precedence, parents have become more involved in preparing children for this sacrament and in coming to judgment about their children's readiness. When the more difficult task of preparing children for first Confession is allotted to another time, a better catechesis for first Communion has been possible. Such parental involvement, it has been asserted, has led the parents to deeper personal Eucharistic devotion from which the children also have benefitted.

5. Paraliturgical forms have now been developed and are aimed to prepare children for first Confession. Where utilized, experience shows that children have been generally better prepared for first Confession, since they demonstrate a better understanding both of personal guilt and of the harmful effects sinfulness has upon others.

The following matters, therefore, need to be considered relative to any plan providing catechesis for first Confession before first Communion. Each item needs to be examined in the context of the local situation.

1. The legitimate and positive developments of the first Confession after first Communion experience should be preserved, incorporated, developed.

2. The respective roles of parents, confessor, teacher, pastor, should be identified in:

- (a) the decision to lead the child to first Confession;
- (b) the catechesis preparatory to first Confession;
- (c) the liturgical initiation into the act of first Confession;
- (d) the catechesis following first Confession.

3. The catechetical program for children of the first and second grade should be reviewed to determine what should be changed or supplemented. Specifically, two matters could be investigated:

- (a) Whether a catechesis of forgiveness and sinfulness adequate for first Confession is already present in the curriculum and other elements of the catechetical program for grades 1 and 2.

(b) Whether this catechesis prior to first Confession could include the children's participation in paraliturgical services and their presence at communal Penance services of the parish community as the basic preparation for first reception of this sacrament.

4. An interval adequate for a distinct catechetical preparation for first Confession and first Communion should be determined.

5. Catechesis should be planned so that progression can take place from the simpler modes of preparation, as well as first Confession itself, toward that fuller experience of Penance possible at later ages.

III

LITURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: SUGGESTIONS FOR PLANNING THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE WITH YOUNGER CHILDREN

Introduction

In view of the recent Declaration from the Roman Congregations, the practice of putting Confession ahead of first Communion is expected to be the ordinary usage of the Church. Planning and practice must be reconsidered; now programs must be developed to replace ones that hardly had time to prove themselves. What can be done to make Confession, the sacrament of reconciliation, a meaningful and fruitful sacramental experience for the younger grade school children?

Parish Developmental Approach

A process of initiation and catechesis has already been developed in this country whereby a child is gradually led to an understanding of the elements of reconciliation. In time the child is moved to present himself (herself) before the priest for sacramental reconciliation. This is a gradual process, a developmental approach. American dioceses have initiated programs of this nature.

Such a program begins in the home, is reinforced at school and celebrated in the Church (in the community of the faithful).

The home and school aspects of this developmental approach are not considered here. They are, however, important presuppositions. The liturgical celebration of Penance must be grounded in the vital home-school life experience of the child.

STAGES OF LITURGICAL CELEBRATION

It is possible to envision stages of celebration through which a child might pass on his way to a regular celebration of Pen-

ance. The first stage is the paraliturgical. The second is the participation in communal Penance celebrations in preparation for personal sacramental Confession. Full participation (actual sacramental forgiveness) marks stage three. All subsequent communal or individual celebrations of the sacrament would constitute the final stage.

A. Stage One: Paraliturgical Celebrations

On all levels of education the abstract concepts of wrongdoing and forgiveness must be given concrete form in some ritualized word and action. Through a planned program, younger children can be gradually led to a sufficient understanding of sin and forgiveness to the point where freely and voluntarily the child will seek sacramental absolution.

There are numerous ways, on the paraliturgical level, that this can be brought about. Prior to first Confession (that occasion when the child does in fact offer himself freely for the forgiving mercy of God in the sacrament), the child could be exposed to types of paraliturgical services that help him to become aware of the realities of sin and forgiveness. In designing such services there are several items that might be incorporated into the paraliturgical prayer:

1. Biblical and nonbiblical storytelling;
2. Picture drawing and explaining;
3. The use of films and/or slides;
4. Simulation or role-playing in sin-forgiveness situations.

Source material for these services can be found in current religion manuals and catechetical periodicals. (cf. also: *Children's Liturgies*, Virginia Sloyan, ed., Liturgical Conference: Washington, D. C. 1970).

B. Stage Two: The Communal Celebration of Penance — Opportunities for Learning Experience

The Advent period is a time of preparation for the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's birth and manifestation. Lent is traditionally a period of penance during which the Christian community is prepared to participate fully in the paschal mys-

tery. It is therefore advisable that during these seasons some type of communal penance service be prepared for the parish community. Those children who have not made their first Confession would also be present at this celebration. Experiencing the Church's plea for forgiveness and witnessing the actual submission of the individual church members to sacramental absolution will be a learning experience for the children. The form and structure of such communal penance services are already well known and they are easily constructed.

Recent pastoral norms from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while opposing communal or collective absolution, do encourage communal penitential services at which, for those who wish, there is individual Confession and absolution.

After such a celebration, a suitable time should be set aside and spent with the children explaining the service as well as anything that might have raised questions. Thus, the experience is clarified and becomes part of the learning process.

C. Stage Three: Full Participation in Communal Celebration of Penance — First Confession

Communal penance celebrations during Advent and then again during Lent might be enough of an immediate catechetical introduction for a second grader to ask freely to receive sacramental absolution. The child might be, in fact, at that point in understanding where the parents and pastor should positively encourage him to do so. Obviously, no child should be forced.

When it is judged opportune, a communal celebration might be prepared at which those children who so desire might receive sacramental Confession—absolution. In preparing the form and content of the celebration, these children should be kept in mind, although adults should be encouraged to participate as well.

It is therefore possible that during the communal celebration of the parish, the children will make their first Confession. Subsequently, communal celebrations might be prepared for a specific group or class of children.

It would seem appropriate to plan first Confession celebration during a communal penance service in which adults also

participate. If, indeed, the celebration is communal everyone present will participate—children, young adults, adults. Whatever is done, the child should learn that Confession is an act in which adults participate. Such learning is important for impressing upon the child that Confession is a lifelong act.

D. Stage Four: Communal Penance — Individual Confession

Once the child has made his first Confession he should be encouraged to continue the reception of the sacrament. This might be either within or outside a communal celebration. Provision should be made for both. As a transition, however, a brief period of preparation and thanksgiving might be made in common before individual Confession. Such continued reception of sacramental Penance should be directly related to the much deeper catechesis of later grades.

In the celebration of the sacrament of Penance, as a group or individually, the role of the celebrant is of great importance. His personality must be such that he is able to communicate on a human level. This is especially true with very young children. The celebrant must express personal warmth and kindness without condoning wrong. He must radiate God's forgiveness and joy at the return of the wrongdoer. The entire celebration, as a sacrament of grace, is to be a prayer, reestablishing and/or strengthening man's relationship with God. This is done through human instruments: words and signs in a celebration of God's love and mercy.

PREPARING A PENANCE CELEBRATION

Many suitable and varied examples of penance celebration can be cited. The following material is offered for further consideration. The "Communal Celebration: General Structure" was outlined for the full parish community and should be used flexibly. The presence of children should be kept in mind and necessary adaptations should be made.

A. Communal Celebration: General Structure

1. *Opening Song.* As the priest and assisting ministers enter the church, it is fitting that all sing a psalm or an appropriate song, Psalm 85 (especially verses 1-6, 11-12, 15) with its response, "Lord our God, patient and full of mercy,"

is most fitting, or Psalm 102 (especially 1-5, 8-14, 15-18) with its response, "As a father has mercy on his sons, so the Lord has mercy on those who fear him."

2. *Initial Greeting.* As in the Eucharist celebration, the president greets those present with a fitting scriptural greeting. Two are suggested: "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Christ Jesus our Lord be with you all" (I Tim. 1:2); "Grace and peace from God the Father and from Christ Jesus our savior" (Titus 1:4). A brief admonition is then made, providing the reason for this celebration and the way in which it will be celebrated.
3. *Opening Prayer.* The celebrant invites all present to pray in these or similar words: "Let us pray my brothers that God who calls us to conversion may grant us a true and faithful celebration of Penance." The deacon then adds, "Let us kneel" or "Bow down your heads to the Lord." After a short period of silent reflection the celebrant continues with an opening oration.
4. *Scripture Readings.* The number of readings should be selected ahead of time, suitable to the occasion. If there is only one reading it should be from the gospels. If more than one reading is used, then a psalm, song or silence should be placed between them in the way of a communal response. Non-scriptural readings should not replace the scriptures.
5. *Homily.* The homily, taking its thrust from the scripture readings, should help to lead the people into an examination of their conscience, to a displeasure for sin which is the rejection of God's love and grace, to a horror for everything that works contrary to the Church and to all that is good, to an awareness of one's need of forgiveness and a trust in the mercy of God who forgives in the sacrament. It should also include the ecclesial dimension of reconciliation in accord with the conciliar teaching: pardon and peace with the Church.
6. *Silent Reflection.* Time should be included for a period of self-examination. On occasion it might be good that the silence be punctuated with short sentences or phrases to

help in the examination of conscience. These may be voiced by the priest or deacon. They could take the form of a litany.

7. *Confession Absolution — Penance.* The individual confessions of sin may take place in public, that is with the confessors seated before the community and the penitents approaching them for private individual Confession. The priest should always include the gesture of reconciliation by extending his hand over the penitent. (This is the usage of the current Roman Ritual.) Absolution is given individually. Penance could be fulfilled individually or in common. At this point a community exchange of a sign of peace might be judged important. Opportunity for a more private meeting with a confessor might be provided as well (e.g., in the confessional).
8. *Confession of Praise and Thanksgiving to God.* Once the individual confessions have been completed, it is fitting that all present sing a hymn expressing their belief in the power and mercy of God. Psalm 117 (verses 1-9, 13-19, 28-29) and Psalm 135 (verses 1-9, 13-14, 16, 25-26) are suggested.
9. *Concluding Prayer.* The concluding prayer, as with the prayer after Communion, would be a recognition of the graces received while at the same time a prayer of God's continued assistance.
10. *Final Blessing.* The final blessing might take the form of the solemn blessing found in the forthcoming translation of the newly revised Roman Missal.

B. *Individual Confession: General Structure*

Note: According to the "Introduction To Penance" of the unrevised Roman Ritual, "the subjective dispositions of the recipient play a more significant part in Penance than they do in the other sacraments." The following suggestions are presented as ideas whereby individual Confession—outside the communal celebration—might increase the fruitful participation of the penitent. They are based broadly on the norms of the Roman Ritual flexibly adapted to current needs.

1. *Place.* Provision should be made for Confession outside the confessional. In fact, the use of an appropriate room or setting where the confessor and penitent may dialogue face to face is recommended. Provision should be made that the penitent may kneel or sit.
2. *Greeting.* The initial greeting that the celebrant gives to the penitent should be one that is warm and friendly, instilling peace and confidence in the penitent. An example is:

May God, who enlightens our hearts,
give you the strength
to confess your sins
and proclaim his mercy.

Response: Amen.

3. *Opening Prayer.* At this point a prayer is said in common, petitioning for God's grace and assistance.
4. *Scripture.* As in the communal celebration of Penance, so also during private individual Confession, it is suggested that an appropriate passage from scripture be read and reflected upon. If a scripture reading is not possible, it is suggested that at least a short scriptural quotation be used, such as:

God does not wish the death of a sinner
but that he be converted and live.
Have faith in him.

OR

Our Lord Jesus did not come to call the just
but to call the sinner.
Have faith in him.

5. *Response.* In response to the readings, a penitential psalm might be recited in common.
6. *Confession of Sins.* After the above period of preparation, the individual then proceeds to confess his sins according to common practice.

7. *Admonition — Counsel.* It is at this point that the confessor is able to assist the individual penitent in his personal growth in holiness. The admonition should be pertinent to the individual and his needs.
8. *The Lord's Prayer.* Prior to the administration of absolution, the confessor suggests that together they address the Father, the Lord of mercy, with the prayer that Christ taught. He does so in these or similar words:

We ask God our Father
to have mercy on us sinners,
saying the prayer that Christ himself taught us.
9. *Absolution.* The confessor, with hand extended over the head of the penitent, prays the formula of absolution. Penance is assigned according to common practice.
10. *Prayer of Thanksgiving.* As the occasion demands, some type of prayer of thanksgiving might at this point be said in common. It might be a spontaneous prayer or one recited together from some predetermined text.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- I. Discussion Questions for Background Considerations: Historical and Canonical.
 1. What is the importance of a declaration of the Holy See in the life of the Church?
 2. How do *Quam singulari* and the Code of Canon Law relate to one another? In the context of these and other related documents, what is to be said about Penance and Eucharist regarding the:
 - (a) sequence of the sacraments?
 - (b) decision concerning readiness for first reception of each sacrament?
 - (c) obligation of receiving the sacraments?
 - (d) role of parents, confessors, pastors, guardians, teachers?
 3. What do the Addendum to the *GCD* and the joint Declaration say in regard to the first reception of Penance?
 4. What is the value of custom in the discipline of the church community and what is its significance in the specific matter of early reception of Penance?
 5. Each diocesan bishop has a certain right to dispense from general ecclesiastical law. Does this have any relationship in your diocese/parish in regard to the pastoral practice pertaining to the implementation of the joint Declaration?
 6. What practical considerations should be kept in mind in regard to a pastoral practice through which Confession prior to first Communion will become the ordinary usage?
 7. What rights of access to the sacraments of the Eucharist does the child possess? to the sacrament of Penance?

8. How can the principles of the devotional Confession aid the development of the catechesis for the Confession of younger children?
 9. How can the obligation pertaining to Confession be best explained to children?
 10. What general principles can be kept in mind while planning the celebration of Penance with younger children?
- II. Discussion Questions for Catechetical Considerations: Suggestions for Planning a First Confession Catechesis.
1. At what age should Penance catechesis begin?
 2. Over how long a period of time should a catechesis preparatory to first Confession extend?
 3. Given the need for simplicity and the fact that at a later age the child will demonstrate a greater ability to grasp the meaning of sacramental Confession, what elements should a catechesis for first Confession include?
 4. How can catechesis for first Confession be planned so that emphasis during the second grade—pertaining to first reception of sacraments—can focus on Eucharist as primary sacrament?
 5. How can catechesis preparatory to first Confession draw upon the occasional, communal and spontaneous modes pointed out by the *GCD*?
 6. How can catechesis be planned so that there is distinct emphasis upon preparation for one sacrament at a time?
 7. What can we learn from the successful involvement of parents in the catechesis for first Communion during recent years that might aid their participation in catechesis for first Confession?
 8. What catechetical safeguards need to be taken to assure a child's participation in the sacrament of Penance freely and without coercion?

9. How can paraliturgical services be utilized as catechetical preparation for first Confession? Could these be held in pre-school years?
 10. How can the concluding five items be developed in the plan relative to providing catechesis for first Confession before first Communion?
- III. Discussion Questions for Liturgical Considerations: Suggestions for Planning the Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance with Younger Children.
1. What is the purpose of paraliturgical services in relation to first Confession?
 2. How can the ecclesial and social dimensions of the sacrament be expressed in the celebration of Penance?
 3. What values are present in having children witness and participate in communal penance services?
 4. How should the Confession of sins and the bestowal of absolution take place in a communal penance service?
 5. Why is the reading of the scriptures an element included in a well-planned penance service?
 6. Why is the role of the confessor or celebrant important in the celebration of the sacrament of Penance?
 7. What significance does the gesture of the confessor's hand extended over the penitent have in the sacrament of Penance?
 8. What are the advantages of individual Confession? While current documents encourage communal forms, how can individual Confession outside communal services be fostered?
 9. May a parish prepare its own penitential service or must it rigidly follow some pre-existing structure?
 10. In what way can a communal celebration help one to have a deeper experience of God's mercy and forgiveness?

