

## **YOUR CHILD'S FIRST CONFESSION**

The Church recognizes parents as the primary educators of their children as they are the first teachers in their children's lives. According to the United States bishops, parents have the "right and duty" to be intimately involved in the sacramental preparation of their children. This obligation springs from the commitment made by the parents at the child's baptism to form them in the Catholic faith.

### **How do you feel about the Sacrament of Reconciliation?**

We all have different ideas, images, and experiences of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession, Penance). These may be based upon what we have seen or heard, what we have read, either as truth or fiction, or they may be pictures conjured up in our own minds about what really goes on in the Sacrament of Reconciliation - especially other people's confessions!

If you are a Catholic you will have your own memories of your First Reconciliation. You may have had good experiences and maybe some bad experiences too. You may go regularly to Reconciliation **or** you may have given up going - either for a specific reason or simply because you have gotten out of the habit.

If you are not a Catholic, your picture of Reconciliation will inevitably be second-hand. You will probably have seen people going to Reconciliation either in a Catholic church, in films, or on TV. You may find it a rather difficult activity to understand. There can be something unnerving, frightening, or embarrassing about the idea of telling someone, perhaps a stranger, about all the bad things you have done. It is especially difficult to understand if that all takes place in a little dark room in whispered voices. In fact, you may feel deeply concerned about what you are about to subject your child to in the name of being a Christian.

Before you prepare for your child's First Reconciliation, then, it is important to clarify a number of points for yourself and for yourself and your spouse.

Take some time to think about the following questions and then share your ideas on the subject:

1. How do you feel about Reconciliation?
2. Have you been to Reconciliation yourself? If so, how was it for you? If not, what do you think it would be like for you?
3. What is your best image/experience of Reconciliation?
4. What is your worst image/experience of Reconciliation?
5. How often do you go to Reconciliation yourself - Regularly...Annually...Never...?
6. If you go regularly or annually, can you say why?
7. If you never go to Reconciliation yourself, can you say why?

### **Memories about the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

We can have a very precious memory of Confession that has given us a touchstone on which to base our whole relationship with God and with our faith.

We can have a very painful memory of Confession that has clouded our vision and our understanding of the value of this sacrament and of the nature of God.

For many years we have centered this sacrament on confession, the confession of our sins. This can give a false picture because the focus in this sacrament is not what we do or say. In fact this sacrament has very little to do with the listing of sins but everything to do with being reconciled to God and to our Christian community when we have moved away from both.

Memories are powerful. They linger in our hearts and minds long after the event but they rarely tell the whole story, rarely offer the full picture. Why not use this opportunity of your child's First Reconciliation to renew and refresh and develop your own understanding of the true nature of this sacrament as Jesus Christ initiated it?

### **What is Reconciliation?**

In reconciliation we receive God's love and become close to God in a renewed way. It is a way of answering Jesus' call to return to our Father, and to become both fully human and fully alive.

To understand what it is to be fully human, we need to look at Jesus Christ. Jesus was truly God; he was the Son who lived among us as a fully human person. He was exactly the same as us in all things. He ate like us, he laughed and cried like us, he loved like us and he suffered like us.

The only difference between Jesus' humanity and ours is that sin played no part in his life. He did not sin. And the reason he did not sin was because he was fully human exactly as God had intended every man and woman to be. Jesus shows us what it is to **be** a true and complete human being.

### **Sin**

Sin enters our lives when we are being less than fully human. Every time we think, say, or do something that is not a reflection of Jesus' humanity, we sin. But sin does not stop there because so much of what we do or fail to do affects other people. The domino effect of damaging relationships, isolation, and breakdowns in communication, all serve to cut us off from others and so distort and damage people. We even say in extreme cases, "He/she is like an animal!" What we are saying when we say that is in a sense true - that person is less than fully human, but then so are those who caused that distortion or damage - that isolation. It is easy to see that sin damages not only individuals but also whole communities.

### **Division**

Throughout his life Jesus worked and preached endlessly among all sorts of people to bring down the barriers that divided them. He emphasized over and over again that we are all God's children, God's family, God's Chosen People. Following his Resurrection, Jesus' followers gathered together and became a community. They were united in listening to the words of Jesus and experiencing his active love in the work of his Spirit in their lives. They knew what it was to be fully human but they were also still very weak and easily discouraged.

## **Becoming fully human**

Even in the first accounts of the early Church we can read about tensions, disagreements, and rejection within this community of believers. Clearly, in spite of all that they had experienced, they remained fragile and many of them carried within them the damage caused by sin from past years.

No one becomes fully human overnight or even in a year or two. It takes time. And while we are growing towards full humanity we need help. As we have seen, during his life on earth, Jesus recognized this and constantly offered healing and reconciliation to the people he met.

## **Peace and reconciliation**

Following his Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples, his followers, and offered them first of all his peace. As they were gathered together, full of shame about the way they had deserted him, full of fear about their future and full of questions about who he really was, Christ came to them. And his first word was “Peace.” The overwhelming love of God washed over them all. Everything else could wait, the words of regret, sorrow, and shame. The most important point Jesus wanted to make was that he loved them, he understood them and he wanted to restore any damage to their relationship with him. Jesus then continued: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” After saying this he breathed on them and said: “Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.”

He asked his followers to continue his work. To enable them to do this he promised the gift of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would be with them to guide them, heal them, and infuse them with Christ’s spirit of reconciliation.

## **Parents and reconciliation**

God’s forgiving, healing love is not to be kept as a personal “keep clean” kit, but it is to grow, spread and develop amongst all his followers. In loving, forgiving, and healing one another, we build the body of Christ, the Church, in the world in every time and in every place. Christians make Christ present in their lives by their words and actions of love and reconciliation and peacemaking.

As a Christian parent, you are laying the foundations of your child’s life. You are called to place, at the heart of your parenting, Christ’s Spirit of unconditional love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. As your child experiences this in your care, he or she will begin to glimpse the true nature of the love of God and the promise of lasting peace and happiness, which is God’s promise to us.

## **How did Jesus receive sinners?**

### **The woman caught in adultery**

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do

you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:3-11)

As her self-righteous accusers walk away, the woman stands in silence before Christ. She makes no confession, offers no excuses, she stands exposed and vulnerable. Her sinfulness and her failure are clear for all to see.

Jesus, reflecting the love of an all-knowing, all-seeing Father, reassures her that he does not condemn her. He simply says, “Do not sin again.” In other words, he invites her to a conversion to a new way of living. Jesus says effectively, “Do not turn away from your heavenly Father any more. Come, be united with your loving God who heals you, forgives you and cares for you.”

### **The wayward and selfish son**

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

Jesus tells this story to illustrate clearly the nature of his Father’s forgiveness and his compassionate love for us. The younger son has squandered every gift his father ever gave him. He has wasted even his life and now he “feels the pinch,” he trails home to Dad. Even the most casual onlooker can see that this lad is not overcome with grief and sorrow at his failures and wastefulness. He simply recognizes that there’s no future in the way he is going.

The welcome he gets exceeds all expectations. His father holds him close and restores him to complete unity as his beloved child in his home. That is the way God welcomes us the minute we make the first move.

### **Jesus meets a notorious sinner**

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)

This is a very human story. Everyone present knows what kind of a woman this is. Everyone knows she is bad news, a hopeless case, and not the sort of person to be seen with if you value your reputation. She knows it too, and is overcome with sadness, despair and grief. She has no pride left, only a desperate longing to make peace, to get in touch once again with goodness and wholeness.

Self-righteousness blinds the others, but Jesus knows the desire in her heart for reconciliation. He sees her tears of repentance and her faith in his healing love. Again, there are no recriminations, no picking over her failures. Forgiveness and reconciliation are hers even before the words are said because of the faith she displays in Christ's ability to heal her. As Jesus says, "Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love."

### **The paralyzed man**

And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Then some of the scribes

said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And he stood up and went to his home. (Matthew 9:2-7)

This man’s movement is so restricted that he cannot get to Jesus on his own. His friends carry him to Jesus. Once again, we see onlookers who criticize and judge. When we recall that, traditionally, sickness was seen as God's punishment for sin committed either by the sufferer or his or her parents, this healing is especially significant. Jesus’ words, “Your sins are forgiven you,” stun the onlookers because Jesus is concerned with wholeness of mind and body. He proves that he is the Son of God by showing his power to forgive sin in a way that the onlookers will understand - by healing the man. Again, it is the faith that the sinner and his friends have in Jesus that brings them to seek the forgiveness and reconciliation that unite them to Christ.

The ancient Greek and Hebrew words for forgiveness mean “to let go,” “to set free,” “to cover,” “to pardon;” to reestablish what was intact before. And throughout the Gospels we see Jesus revealing, in a real and very human way, a God of forgiveness and pardon. Far from seeking revenge, all God asks is that people turn back to him. And in turning to the Lord, in accepting his gift of forgiveness and reconciliation, the true healing of mind, soul, and body takes place.

It is interesting that Christ imposes no punishment or condemnation. He offers simple, unconditional love for the sinner. There is acceptance of the value and worth of the individual regardless of their sin. There is belief too, in the sincerity of the sinner, however poor their track record may be. Every act of God’s forgiveness is a new beginning. Once such a relationship, such a love is accepted (and that can be difficult, as we see from the reactions of the scribes and Pharisees), true freedom is found.

It is a freedom from the slavery of sin and a solution to meeting our needs and weaknesses. It is a freedom to live as a warmly accepted friend of Jesus Christ, a freedom to live in trust and hope as a result of our confidence in the gift of God's unconditional love.

### **What happens at Confession?**

People who are not Catholics often wonder what happens at Confession and even Catholics can lose sight of the true nature of this sacrament. Now that you are helping your child prepare for his or her first celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it is good to refresh your memory or get to know exactly what your child will be celebrating.

There’s a saying that “a leopard cannot change its spots.” If we start off as a failure we will end up as a failure; if we begin life badly we are bound to finish life badly. Jesus Christ came to destroy this idea. He came to prove that we can change and can transform the failures and sinfulness that disfigure us so as to start living again with fresh hope.

With God there are no “hopeless cases.” Even after living with Christ, hearing his words and witnessing his actions, the apostles let Jesus down by their betrayals and their failure to understand

him and the kind of healing love he offered. Yet Jesus reappeared to them after his resurrection to offer them peace. “Peace be with you,” he said. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus raised them up and encouraged them to start again.

And Jesus continues to encourage and to help us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many people still think of this sacrament as a “put down” - as the occasion when we try to remember our sins (every single one of them!) and receive a penance as a punishment for our past life. This is not at all how Christ himself saw and instituted this sacrament. For him it was an opportunity to give us new hope for the future and to lift us up to God’s level.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation there are no set words to be learned although your child may be given some simple prayers as an initial introduction to the sacrament, but there are five key points to the sacrament. If you understand these points and can explain them to your child in ways that can be easily understood, your child will have a sound foundation in their understanding of this celebration of God’s love for them.

### **Reflection**

The starting point for reconciliation is not thinking about our own life but thinking about the words of Jesus. It is Jesus’ life and words that give meaning to our own. So it’s a good idea before receiving the sacrament to spend some time thinking about Christ: the kind of person he was, the things he did, and the way he treated people. It is helpful, too, to remind ourselves of his death and resurrection and what those events mean for us today.

### **Examination**

In the light of Christ’s life we can then turn to our own life. It is not very helpful to try to remember everything - some people spend hours before they go to Confession trying to recall every fault and failing. Or sometimes we spend ages trying to think of the best way of expressing our sins so as not to appear worse than we really are. God is not interested in how good a memory we have or how many failings we can discover in ourselves. God is interested only in restoring us and in being reconciled with us in love and healing, so God wants only our sorrow. When the prodigal son decided to return to his father, he prepared a little speech of apology. But before he could deliver it the father was showering him with kisses of forgiveness and joy at his return. That is how it is with our heavenly Father and us in this sacrament.

### **Confession**

When we go to a priest, we can let him be our guide. It is customary to let him know how long it is since our last confession and any particular things about the circumstances of our life that may be helpful for him to know. When we confess our sins there is no “right” or “wrong” way of doing so, it is entirely up to the individual, for what is important is not what we say but what Christ says.

## **Forgiveness**

The priest, after giving a penance, speaks Christ's words of forgiveness. People often question why we need to go to another human being to receive forgiveness and not go to God directly. The fact is that we are flesh-and-blood human beings and God communicates with us through human beings - beginning with Jesus Christ and then down the centuries through his ministers and our community of believers, the Church. Through the priest, God allows us to hear that our sins are forgiven.

## **Sharing**

God forgives us. But the sacrament is complete only when we return to our family and friends and share the forgiveness we have received. Too many of us are like the wicked steward in the gospel who was forgiven a fortune by his master and then bumped into a man who owed him only a few pence yet the steward insisted on repayment. The steward had totally failed to understand what had been given to him. It made no difference at all in his life. And it is the same with us. God's love and forgiveness make all the difference to us. It makes it possible for us to start afresh in the confident knowledge that God loves us very much and enables us to start again by offering his forgiveness to others.

## **The history of the Sacrament of Reconciliation**

### **Jesus**

Jesus teaches his disciples about forgiveness and reconciliation through his encounters with people during his lifetime, in his parables and in his words to them following the resurrection: "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."

After saying this he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:22-23)

### **The First Christians**

Guided by the teachings of Christ and through his Holy Spirit, the first Christians practiced forgiveness and reconciliation among themselves, guiding, strengthening, and advising one another as brothers and sisters of Christ through their common baptism. St. Paul wrote:

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 5:26; 6:1-2)



## **The Early Church**

While the followers of Christ supported one another in spiritual guidance and reconciliation in their day-to-day lives, the early Church used baptism - and to a lesser extent, anointing of the sick - as the main channels of forgiveness. Converts at that time accepted the faith knowing full well that it might mean death. To fall away from such a deliberate commitment to Christ was unthinkable. But some did subsequently deny their faith in Jesus Christ (“apostasy”) or commit a serious sin that brought scandal upon the Christian community.

Afterwards many were sorry and wished to be readmitted to the Church. They could not be baptized again, so a public ceremony of forgiveness came into practice. Only one confession was allowed in a lifetime (none for priests).

It usually involved the following:

1. Public confession of sin to the Bishop - there were only three official, or recognized sins against the community: murder, apostasy, and adultery.
2. Long and severe public penance (fasting, sackcloth and ashes).
3. Only after all the above was absolution received from the Bishop by the laying on of hands.

## **The Fourth Century**

In the fourth century, St. Augustine urged young people not to receive the sacrament because it made ordinary life afterwards impossible. Very many people put it off until their deathbed for this reason and also because the whole thing was so harsh. It became very clear who was a sinner and who was a penitent. Penance became not healing and reconciling but punishing. As a result, the sacrament almost died out. Well-intentioned zeal had eclipsed the Spirit of the Christ of the gospels.

## **The Early Middle Ages**

Christians, however, still felt the need to draw closer to God and to renew and reconcile their lives to Christ. By the early Middle Ages Irish missionary monks and nuns began to see Christians individually and in private to offer spiritual guidance.

They helped them with their examination of conscience and in making their peace with God in the privacy of a one-to-one encounter. These monks and nuns offered guidance and suggested ways in which a sinner could do penance and “make up” to God for their sins. This form of confession became very popular although it was at first condemned by the bishops as a permissive novelty. Finally, popularity overcame ecclesiastical reservations and it was officially accepted. There were three main differences from earlier practice:

1. Private confession of sin to a priest (not just bishops as before).
2. Confessions became more frequent and included a wider range of less serious sins.
3. A penance was given to be performed after absolution was given.

Penance was now respectable, but a sort of tariff of penances for different sins became usual. For example:

- For murder - three years' exile on bread and water plus three more years as a servant to the victim's family.
- For drunkenness - three weeks on just bread and water.

After the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Norman soldiers got one year's penance for each man they had killed and forty days for those they wounded!

### **The Late Middle Ages**

In the late Middle Ages, the sacraments were more strictly defined in name and number. Penance now had three essential elements: contrition (sorrow), confession, and satisfaction. Of course, we cannot "satisfy" God for sin, but our penance is a token of our desire to make up. The custom of penance began to take the form of giving prayers instead of physical penance, then of offering a fee for a priest to say Mass, then of giving money to the Church instead (Battle Abbey was built on the proceeds of the almsgiving of soldiers). And then the rich began paying others to do their penances for them! For instance, a man with a penance of seven years' bread and water could pay twelve men to fast three days and one hundred and twenty men to do three days seven times:  $12 \times 3 + 120 \times 7 \times 3 = 2,556$  days = 7 years! This sort of abuse and the related question of Indulgences was one of the causes of the Reformation.

Great emphasis was placed on the seal of secrecy on the part of the confessor. In the sixteenth century, St. Charles Borromeo invented the confessional box. The Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century established the current practice of Confession that lasted for four hundred years and more.

### **Second Vatican Council**

In the early 1960s the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) took a fresh look at the way the sacraments are celebrated, learning from the mistakes of history and from our growing understanding of human psychology, behavioral sciences and the growing knowledge about the life of Christ and his earliest followers. The Church, both the people and the institution, had moved a long way from the way Christ received sinners in the Gospel.

Vatican II renewed the Church in many fundamental ways, often reconciling modern practice of the Christian life with that of the New Testament and the first Christians. It did not simply suggest yet another new way of going to Confession but urged us to think about our attitudes to sin, forgiveness, guilt, reconciliation, and repentance. We are called continually to repent. Repentance does not just mean being sorry, it means changing.

Confession had become a very private affair. Each person became responsible for keeping themselves as squeaky-clean and sin-free as possible in order to gain merit in the eyes of God and to be assured of eternal life. The community aspect of sin was lost. Today, the Church is rediscovering the full richness and love offered by Christ to his followers in this healing and

encouraging sacrament, through the restoration of the emphasis on reconciliation rather than simply confessing sins.

### **Reconciliation then and now**

We convey our faith most clearly in the way we live life. How do you react in times of stress and trouble? How do you respond to good times and happy experiences? Does your child “feel” the warmth of a living faith reflected in you and your partner? There may be some areas of life or relationships that you or your partner find difficult because of past experiences or your own upbringing. The following questions may help you to clarify some topics that have become difficult or perhaps even no-go areas for you. Talk about your reactions together, or with a friend, or your child’s catechist. This will help you find the right ways forward for you to express your faith and your own feelings about reconciliation to your child.

#### **Early days**

- How were conflicts resolved in your family as a child? Did this reflect a Christian element of forgiveness and reconciliation?
- How able are you to say “sorry”:
  - a) Very easily
  - b) Only after some thought
  - c) I find it very difficult, even impossible at times
- How much do you think your answer to the above question is influenced by your childhood experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation?

#### **Learning through sharing**

- How easy is it for you to share yourself with other people?
- If you find it fairly easy can you say why?
- If you find it difficult can you say why?
- Think of a relationship that is important to you but which went wrong. Can you see the mistakes that were made by the other person? Can you see the mistakes you made?
- Are you close to anyone who has a very different vocation from you? If so, can you identify ways in which that helps you with your own vocation as a parent?
- Is there a relationship in your life that needs some attention? What can you do to begin to build a bridge?

#### **The prison of sin**

- Can you identify what you consider to be the most serious area of sinfulness in yourself? When did this become a problem for you? Can you focus on the beginning of it?
- In what ways have you tried to deal with this problem: through Confession, talking to a close friend or seeking others’ advice?

- Have you put it from your mind or by other forms of self-discipline resigned yourself to living with it?
- Have you ever tried not trying anything but simply handing the problem to God and asking for God's help?

### **The part prayer plays in our life**

- Was there prayer in your family life as a child?
- How has that influenced your prayer life today?
- Do you follow a similar pattern or pray in a very different way or not at all?
- When did you last try a new way of prayer or listen to another person's thoughts and experiences of prayer?
- When did you last mention your own prayer life to your spouse, or to anyone?
- How comfortable do you feel with your present prayer life? Is it a valuable part of your day, slightly boring, non-existent, or a chore?
- What time will you set aside today to sit with God and say how you feel?

### **The different kinds of prison**

- What is your relationship with God like? Are you angry with God? Are you afraid of God? Are you happy and fulfilled in your relationship with God?
- What is your relationship like to those nearest to you? Do you find them difficult to deal with? Can you say why? What fault do they find in you?
- Do you despise certain groups of people? Can you say why?
- What do you most value in life in material terms? Are you too fond of this?
- What contribution do you make to the life of your Christian community?
- What kind of an example do you set your children/young people/your partner?

### **Identifying our needs and the possible healing needed**

- When did you first learn about what was right and what was wrong?
- Looking back, was that introduction helpful or unhelpful? Jot down your reactions.
- What was the attitude of significant adults in your life towards accepting personal responsibility for their actions?
- What was their attitude towards forgiveness? Was it warm and generous or harsh and restrictive?
- How have these experiences affected your attitudes to your own weaknesses and responsibilities?
- Sin can often be a symptom of some more serious difficulty in our life. It can therefore be a mistake to try to deal with the sin instead of the underlying cause. Have you a recurring problem that you think may be a symptom of something deeper?

### **Questions and answers**

**As a child, I was very frightened by going into the confessional box. How will my child**

### **receive the sacrament?**

An important element of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is ensuring that there is genuine and comfortable communication between penitent and priest. In most parishes now there is provision for the sacrament to be celebrated in a comfortable setting, face to face. For those who prefer anonymity, a screen confessional is sometimes also provided. Your child is free to choose how he or she celebrates the sacrament.

### **My husband says he does not believe in God any more. How can I convince him?**

You cannot. You can only convince him that you believe in God. This is far more likely to help him than any direct attempt to change his mind. Very few people are non-believers for purely intellectual reasons. Nor will they be convinced by purely intellectual arguments. Most sincere non-believers reject God either because they see God as irrelevant to the world or because they cannot reconcile God with the fact of so much suffering. Your husband will be helped, then, by a faith that he sees to be relevant to your life, helping you to happiness; and a faith that he sees helps you to face your own sufferings with patience.

### **My divorce and remarriage prevents me from receiving the sacraments. How can I explain this to my daughter and yet encourage her to receive them?**

First of all are you really sure that you cannot go to Holy Communion? Have you had your original marriage situation checked by a specialist in Marriage Tribunal work? Many Catholics, even today, believe that they cannot go to Holy Communion for various reasons simply because they have been told that they cannot by friends, relatives or even a priest or nun who has given a brief answer to their inquiry without knowing all the facts.

If, as you say, you are unable to receive Holy Communion then you must be honest with your daughter. Tell her about the love and teaching of Jesus Christ for all men and women and that this is the basis of the laws of the Church. Do not be afraid to tell her of your present situation, children can be very sympathetic and understanding when it comes to feeling uncomfortable or vulnerable. Explain that you have to wait before receiving Communion. Make your personal love of God very clear to her and this will demonstrate why it matters whether or not she receives the sacraments. The most important aspect of passing the faith on to your daughter is how you pray. If your prayer is natural and true, your faith will make a lasting impression on your little girl. Your own private prayer and your prayers with her can be a real sharing in the life of the Church.

### **The faith my son is learning seems different from the one I learned as a child. This has made it much more difficult to answer his questions. For example, I was taught to go to Confession every month, but his teacher refuses to put any time expectations on going. Surely we need some rules?**

The Church, like each one of us, is growing all the time because the Church is constantly moving towards the fulfillment found in complete unity with God. This process of growth is as painful for the whole Church as it is for each one of us individually. On the one hand, the Church is

unchangeable as it is built solidly on God's Word. On the other hand, it is constantly striving to give birth to that Word and to offer new life to each succeeding generation. Like Christ, the Church is divine and teaches the truth; but like Christ, it is also human and tries to adapt itself so as to bring as many people of goodwill as it can into it. This is why the Church is constantly "changing." The passing of each generation brings a fresh appearance of the Church. Yet its essential personality remains the same. These changes in appearance can be confusing to many people. Yet without them the Church would stagnate.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is one of the areas that the Church has adapted to today's world. Confession is meant to be a personal conversation between Christ and ourselves. Christ's words are more important than anything we have to say. This has led to less repetition of set formulae and less frequent Confession. But the Church continues to remind us of its importance in helping us turn towards God.

**What has happened to mortal sin? Everything seems so easy-going and too permissive these days.**

As you will see from our history of this sacrament on pages 12-13, the ways in which we express our understanding of sin have developed and changed over the years. Until recently sin was often divided into mortal sin and venial sin. Mortal sin was a grievous offense against God that it was said "killed the soul." Venial sin was an offense that "displeases God and often leads to mortal sin." The purpose of this division was to distinguish between serious and less serious sin. As we can see from the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, God never seeks the death or banishment of anyone. In fact the opposite; God constantly seeks out the lost, the abandoned and those who feel they are beyond hope or help. Clearly, God does not want to destroy his children. Rather, because of his great love for us, God gives us complete freedom to choose: freedom to choose whether we want to live as his children or whether we want to reject his teaching and his ways. If we decide in that freedom to reject God and to walk in other ways, we then separate ourselves from God. We place ourselves outside God's help and refuse God's promises. In God's great love for us God will not force us back. God only mourns our rejection of him.

If we decide in that freedom that we want to walk in God's ways and try to follow God's teaching, then God will never reject us or condemn us. When we fail, when we wander from God's ways, we will experience the alienation and pain felt when we put ourselves outside our heavenly Father's love. But as soon as we seek reconciliation, it is ours. That is the promise of Christ. It is only when we refuse to accept his total offer of healing love and refuse to believe in reconciliation that we cannot be forgiven and reconciled.

**I am not a Catholic and I feel unhappy about my daughter being subjected to this process of confession at such a young age. She is a good little girl and to start telling her she is a sinner seems destructive and damaging.**

You are quite right in your instinct to want to prevent your daughter from being damaged by an unhappy or uncomfortable experience. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is in children's terms rather like "making up" with God when we have turned away from God's friendship. The concept of "making up" is very familiar to all children as they negotiate friendships at school and

at play. Most of us can remember the special rhymes and rituals from playground days associated with this developing understanding of the way we rebuild relationships that have become damaged or broken down. Introducing children to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is part of the foundation of their personal relationship with God. They learn that however unfriendly they are toward God or other people, they can say “sorry.” They can be reconciled with their heavenly Father. At the heart of this teaching is the lesson that they are unconditionally loved. Throughout their life God will never reject them, turn away from them or condemn them. Such knowledge can give every person confidence to grow and reach their full potential as God intended them to.

### **Parents are the key to love**

“Can you tell me who made you?” the priest asked a small boy. The lad thought for a moment, then he looked up at the priest and said, “God made part of me.”

“What do you mean, part of you?”

“Well,” answered the boy, “God made me little, I grew the rest myself.”

“Growing the rest” is a lifetime job for all of us. God has fitted each of us to live one life - our own. We find personal wholeness and joy in discovering and using the particular gifts God has given us for living that life. “We are collaborators in creation,” wrote the theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. What each one of us becomes is what the world becomes. And each one of us makes a difference. You make a difference. Your child makes a difference.

What do we imagine a “good Catholic parent” should be? Is it someone who can educate their children in the specific teachings of Christianity? Or is it someone who can nurture them so that their emotional and psychological growth can fully develop and mature? In a sense, the answer is “yes” to both questions but there can be a tendency to over-emphasize the first aspect, the teaching of the rules and system of our faith, at the expense of the nurturing side of faith development.

Throughout childhood we move through stages of development, thinking and morality - these are listed below. Our response to these stages is linked with our personal experiences, our relationship with our parents and family and our environment. The way in which your child negotiates or fails to negotiate these stages will lay the foundation for the development of faith in the future:

#### **1. An ability to trust**

Learning to trust or distrust is something we acquire in our earliest years. The experience of reliable, unconditional love forms the basis for learning, forgiveness, selflessness, and generous love.

#### **2. Learning the rules**

Rules are kept simply to avoid punishment rather than for any concern about morality or the rightness of authority. Some actions satisfy certain needs, for example the need to be accepted or rewarded.

### **3. Peer pressure**

A child begins to develop loyalty to the group, family or school. As relationships develop and new relationships are formed, right behavior in order to seek the approval and acceptance by these groups is seen as important.

### **4. Making their own decisions**

Personal religious thought begins to develop at this stage and the individual begins to learn to be him or herself and make personal decisions with less reference to the approval or otherwise of the group or family.

From this basic outline it is clear that there are limits to what we can teach a young child in any formal sense. What is confirmed is the old saying, "Faith is caught not taught."

Faith is not simply "knowing about God," it is knowing God in a personal way. In life we learn about personal love in and through other people from the moment of our birth, long before we have any teaching in a formal sense. Children are born with feelings and to dismiss the emotional elements of faith is a serious mistake.

Here are some key points about passing on the faith in a practical and realistic way that your child can build upon in the years ahead:

It is important that your child learns to give and receive affection, to develop confidence, and is able to seek reassurance.

Try to share with your child what is meaningful to them in your relationship with God.

Sharing thanksgiving (grace at mealtimes), preparation and the celebration of key seasons (Advent, Lent). Use prayer as a simple form of showing confidence and trust in God who is all-loving, faithful and trustworthy. These lay a sound foundation for faith development.

## **God and God's People**

The Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, carries the history of God's relationship with men and women. This history is told in story, parable, historical fact, poetry and prophecy, but one thing is abundantly clear from start to finish: God constantly seeks reconciliation with men and women.



## **In the beginning**

The very beginning of this story of our relationship with God begins with a break in the unity which men and women shared with their Creator. ....