



There is no question about Jesus' love for children, the most helpless members of society. When some parents wished to bring their children to Jesus for his blessing, his disciples tried to keep them away. Jesus would have none of it.

13 Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; 14 but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." 15 And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. (Matthew 19: 13 - 15)

Jesus continues to welcome children today. The primary way he welcomes them is through the sacraments. In Baptism, they are freed from original sin and become sons and daughters of God in a new way. At the age of discretion they are being prepared to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Before Holy Communion, following the requirements of the Church, they will be prepared to receive Jesus' forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. (CCC 1457)

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN FROM EVIL

There is a story in the life of Gautama who became the Buddha. He was born a prince in India and was so precious to his father that he was kept in an enclosed environment so he would not experience pain in the world. So for many years he lived a charmed, happy life. Then he went out of the enclosure as a young man and saw an old man, and knew that one day he would also get old. He saw a corpse, and knew one day he would die. He saw a man who was ill, and knew there was suffering in the world. These experiences changed him profoundly, and he left his father's enclosure to search for the meaning of life.

There are many ways parents today would like to shield their children from the reality of evil in the world. But the day when placing our child into an enclosure to protect them from images and stories of evil are long over. Through the media, and especially the internet, the stories have invaded our homes. And as children enter the social world of school with classmates, they experience the hurts, and petty jealousies that are the inevitable consequence of these relationships. In the process the temptation to hold grudges, strike back, and making others pay for what they have done is equally present. By the age of



discretion our children are well aware of the difference between good and evil, and their own complicity in making sinful choices to the detriment of others.

Sinful behavior is not simply something our children observe in the world. In our families also there are many instances when sinful choices are in need of apologies and forgiveness. In the ongoing process of family life the practice of celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a strong means of grace to help families to live and grow together.

A STORY OF FORGIVENESS

Many are familiar of the story of the brothers Esau and Jacob. They were twins, with Esau the older and Jacob the younger. Isaac favored the muscular and active Esau, Rebekah the younger and more intelligent Jacob. Jacob, with the help of his mother, takes advantage of Esau's slower wit and buys his birthright as the older son for a bowl of lentil stew (Genesis 25: 29 - 34). Later Jacob disguises himself as Esau to receive Isaac's blessing, which sets Esau into a murderous rage (Genes 27). Jacob escapes to his uncle Laban, who takes him in, and gives him his daughters Leah and Rachel in marriage in return for Jacob's labor.

Jacob prospers and finding that he no longer wants to work for Laban, leaves with his family to return to his homestead. Esau has become a powerful man with many followers. As Jacob approaches Edom where Esau lives, he finds out that Esau is coming with 400 men. Fearing the worst, Jacob divides his holdings into two companies, so if one was destroyed, the other would survive.

Finally, the day of feared confrontation, Jacob moves to meet his brother bowing to the ground seven times as he approached.

4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (Genesis 34:4)

JESUS SHARES HIS AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SINS

Sin is an offense against God and others. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we have the opportunity to approach God for forgiveness and to be reconciled with the Church and



our community. As sin is an offense against God, only God can forgive. As the Son of God, Jesus shares this power with his Father. In the story of the paralytic whose friends lowered through the roof, Jesus first forgives the man's sins. When the scribes who were present objected, Jesus responded,

“Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? 10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— 11 “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” 12 And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2: 8 - 12)

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus bestowed the ministry of forgiveness on his disciples.

21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (John 20: 21 - 23)

Along with the power to forgive sins, Jesus gave to the Church the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. Jesus most notably did this when he told St. Peter 19 “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19)

The office of binding and loosing given to Peter is shared with the college of apostles united with him as their head. (CCC 1444)

FORMS OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Over the centuries the form of the Sacrament of Reconciliation varied. During the first centuries of the Church Christians who committed particularly grave sins (adultery, idolatry, or murder) were exiled from the community and not readmitted until they had per-



formed a period (often for years) of public penance. In some local communities readmission to the Church would only take place once in a lifetime.

The practice of “private” practice of confession was adopted by Irish monks following the way of the Eastern monastic tradition. Irish missionaries brought this practice to Western Europe as they worked to convert the tribes that had moved in after the fall of the Roman Empire. The private practice of penance did not require the public and prolonged completion of acts of penance before reconciliation with the Church. Since then the sacrament has been performed in secret between the penitent and the priest. This also allowed for the repeating of the sacrament and opened up the possibility of regular confession as a spiritual discipline. In this practice both grave or venial sins could be forgiven in in one sacramental celebration. This established in its main lines the celebration of penance that is practiced in the present day. (CCC 1477)

PREPARING FOR FIRST RECONCILIATION

When preparing children for First Reconciliation, it is important that they understand the difference between an accident and a sinful choice. An accident, dropping a dish that is too hot to pick up, tripping someone you did not see, is not a sin. Children can feel upset when these things happen, but true accidents do not have to be confessed.

Personal sins are deliberate choices by children that intend to harm a relationship with God and others. If a child deliberately tripped someone with intent to harm that person, that is a sin. Stealing something and lying about it, deliberately provoking anger in a brother or sister, are sins that can be brought to Jesus in the confessional.

When preparing a child for First Reconciliation we can again stress Jesus’ love for children. Along with the story in the Gospels of Jesus blessing the children, we can add how he restored life to Jarius’ daughter (Mark 5: 21 - 43) and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7: 11 - 17).

When approaching Reconciliation a child needs to acknowledge that there is good and evil in the world and that evil is not simply something that happens to them. They also must take responsibility for the evil acts that they have personally committed. When they



recognize that they have sinned against someone, and recognize their need for forgiveness, they not only need forgiveness from the person they hurt, but also from God.

The child can prepare for the Sacrament of Reconciliation through an examination of conscience, with questions (readily available through programs on First Reconciliation) that help the child recognize thoughts, words and actions that need to be confessed.

When the child recognizes he has sinned, he approaches Reconciliation with a contrite heart. If the child approaches the sacrament knowing in his heart that he is sorry because his love of God is above all things; he has perfect contrition. However when the child is moved to Reconciliation out of fear of punishment, this is “imperfect” contrition. Imperfect contrition is a positive move as it stirs the conscience and leads the child to confession and to be absolved of the sin. (CCC 1453)

In the celebration of Reconciliation the child confesses his sins to a priest as fully as he can. Any mortal sin must be confessed. While venial sins are not necessarily confessed, doing so in regular confession allows the child be aware of tendencies to sin that interfere with his growth in the spiritual life.

The priest will give the child a penance. This may be a prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial. These help the child continue the work done in the confessional of living a way modeled by the life of Christ.

The priest then gives absolution:

God, the Father of mercies,
through the death and the resurrection of his Son
has reconciled the world to himself
and sent the Holy Spirit among us
for the forgiveness of sins;
through the ministry of the Church
may God give you pardon and peace,
and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father,
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸



Catholic Moments

FIRST RECONCILIATION

CONCLUSION

Preparing the child for First Reconciliation gives the whole family the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of sin and forgiveness, and to motivate the whole family to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Then they may also schedule regular times when they may approach Jesus to practice their spiritual discipline leading them to live closer to Jesus Christ and one another.