

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE AND THE YOUNGER CHILD

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(Although this paper was written for the purpose of introducing the younger child to the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, the same basic principles may be used when discussing the sacraments with older children.)

"The aim of all religious teaching in the Orthodox Church is to introduce the child (or the adult) into the Church, to integrate him into her life - - the life of grace, communion with God, love, unity and spiritual progress toward eternal salvation, for such are the essential aims of the Church." (Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, LITURGY AND LIFE)

Integration into the Christian life is the goal of all our teaching, but this goal becomes especially clear when we introduce a child to the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, the sacraments of reconciliation and reunion to the Body of Christ. To assume such a role, however, of helping to mold or shape a child's thoughts and attitudes concerning himself and his relationship to God and to other human beings, is an awe-some and fearful responsibility. Therefore, it is first necessary that we understand and strive ourselves for a right relationship with God and with each other before we attempt or even speak of the procedure of teaching or acquainting a child with these sacraments. We must first refresh our thinking about the sacraments as they relate to our own lives, and then we can discuss a few general concepts concerning Penance and Holy Communion and their relation to the life of a younger child.

THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

Sacrament of Reconciliation

The Sacrament of Penance is the sacrament of reconciliation, for the primary prerequisite for the Sacrament is the desire to return to God. It is the sinful state that causes the separation between us, and it is the desire for repentance and reconciliation that leads us again to communion with God. The Sacrament of Penance is offered by the Church to enable us once again to restore this unity with God. Our approach to Penance, therefore, must involve this idea of separation, of the fact that we, through our own will and through our own acts, have desired something other than God, and consequently have effected a deep separation between ourselves and our Creator. It is only when we acquire a true perspective of the world and see value in the things that are truly valuable that we can begin to see God and see how far we are from Him. Then repentance and the striving for communion begins; then the Sacrament of Penance, the sacrament

of reconciliation, becomes our first step in the restoration of our union with God.

Self-sacrifice and Renewal of Life

The Sacrament of Penance is not an automatic device that in five minutes can wipe out our separation from God and replace it with immediate and full communion. Repentance is a continuing act of love and self-sacrifice. It is a continuing act of rejection of the so-called valuable things of this world and a continuing acceptance of Christ and the things of the world to come. Our life in this world involves a constant choice--a choice between good and evil, between God and man, between material and spiritual, between an unlimited number of little choices that have to be made each day. It is this struggle each day that involves the decisions of self-sacrifice and love that are evidence of complete submission to Christ. If we submit fully to Christ, we are unable to sin against Him. This submission then is the key to the restoration of our communion with Him. To live in Christ is to live in a perfect unity of love. It is this perfect unity in love that is our goal for eternity.

The Teacher and the Sacrament of Penance

In order to teach the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Holy Communion to others, it is necessary that we first of all have a continuing experience of these sacraments ourselves. It is not sufficient for a teacher to speak of frequent Communion or of the attitudes necessary for Confession. She must herself receive the sacraments frequently and be a living example of the attitudes she is trying to cultivate in her students. Especially with younger children, the attitude of a teacher is extremely important; insincerity is quickly felt by them and an example is much easier to understand and follow than several pamphlets or lessons on the same subject. Christ taught the Christian life by example; we also must take His lead and strive first to live the Christian life and by our living to teach it. Though we will discuss in this introduction many methods of teaching the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we need always to keep in mind that these methods are secondary to that method of teaching by living that we have already mentioned.

THE RITE OF PENANCE

It is not our purpose here to discuss in detail the specific methods used by the priest in assisting a person to confess his or her sins. We will merely outline the basic form, the main elements involved in the process of helping a child to make a good confession of sins, and will also speak briefly about the process of preparing the child for Holy Communion,

The Preparation

The Preparation of a child for the Sacrament of Penance will primarily consist in helping the child to establish the proper attitude toward the sacrament, that is, an attitude of humility, contrition and sincere desire to amend his or her way of life in order to come closer to God. [1] Stories showing how other people recognized how far they were from God because of their sinful acts and how they repented, turning back to God with the real desire to be in communion with Him again, should be selected from the Scriptures and from lives of saints and discussed in class. [2] Prayers and verses from the Psalms that are of a penitential nature should be read, examined and discussed; a few of these may be read frequently or memorized. [3] Class discussion on how we often stray from God (by sinning against God, against each other, or against ourselves) can help the children come to an awareness of their sins themselves.

Several warnings, however, should be kept in mind: Teachers should be careful not to suggest specific sins, but rather to lead the children to think out themselves "how we often hurt someone else, how we forget to do good things for others, how we treat God's creation, etc." Care should be taken so that each child does not recall to the class how he has sinned (lest the discussion become a confession in the classroom). Although we wish to encourage a self-analytical attitude, care should be taken to avoid a misinterpretation of this attitude, so that it would not result in a self-centeredness or a psychological discussion of "my problem" during the confession. The proper attitude can only be maintained by a constant reference of ourselves to God: how far we are from Him because of how badly we behave towards Him, and towards ourselves, and towards others who are made in His image.

The children may be warned not to follow the example of the Pharisee who compared himself to other men and who felt he was good in comparison, but to follow the example of the Publican who saw himself only in relation to God and who found himself miserable in the sight of God. Finally, the children should be referred to the parable of the Prodigal Son, which illustrates both the son's desire to return to his father, and especially the father's joy and willingness to forgive and welcome his son back into the family. The

teacher should point out that God is always willing to forgive and receive those who are truly sorry for their sins back into His love.

The Confession

The form of the confession proper often varies; therefore it would be best to have the parish priest explain the form (i. e. what to do) to the children himself. The teacher may discuss with the priest before class the material and the concepts that have been covered (such discussion should also take place before the unit begins), the reaction of the class to certain stories on repentance that have been discussed, and their general attitude toward confession. A close cooperation between priest and teacher (and parent, if a meeting can be arranged to inform parents on how the Church School and home can cooperate in helping the child) is most essential in preparing the child for this Sacrament. The desire to amend, to change our lives, should be stressed as the necessary result of confession. Only then is the absolution given as the sign of this "conversion," of this change of mind and action. And, of course, the goal of the change--that of communion with God--must always be repeated.

Preparation for Communion

Though we usually assume that preparation for Confession is necessary, we often forget that preparation for Holy Communion is also necessary. Fasting, prayer and the real desire for reconciliation and communion with God are the elements of this preparation. Younger children should be acquainted with at least one or two of the shorter prayers before Communion; these should not only be memorized but also should be examined and discussed for an understanding of their content. Teachers might also review the procedure for receiving Communion and may wish to acquaint their students with one of the prayers following Holy Communion. Again, the necessity of amending our lives, of avoiding our previous sinful acts and of living to glorify God should be stressed.

PENANCE AND THE YOUNGER CHILD

The Primary Child

The primary grade teacher who has taught children of several ages will readily recognize that the child's rate of development at this level is quite rapid and varied.

Though the six-year-old child is often inconsistent and has difficulty deciding what to do, even when he realizes what is right or wrong, seven or eight-year-old children not only realize the difference between right and wrong, but are beginning to feel some responsibility for their acts. The seven-year-old is particularly reflective; the eight-year-old is already willing to accept the consequences for his acts if he is really to blame (but if he shares the blame, he may say so quickly). Both the seven and eight-year-olds

concepts about God are expanding, the seven-year-old being interested particularly in the "why's" and "how's" of things. Their concepts of time and space are expanding and teachers can be more specific about "when" and "where" something happened. Heaven is of particular interest to children of both ages.⁵ This then should be kept in mind when speaking of the purpose of Confession, i.e. to be reunited with God so that we may live forever with Him in heaven.

The Child's Experience of Sin

To the child "sin" is still a strange word, so other terms such as right and wrong, obey and disobey, or good and bad may have to be used synonymously with sin to establish the meaning of the term. The same is also true for other terms we may refer to in speaking of Penance, e.g. humility, repentance, contrition, amendment, etc. Such terms cannot be used at this level so teachers must be careful to use simpler terms or phrases that express the same attitudes or concepts. A child may not experience "contrition," but may "feel sorry" for his sins. If our approach to the Sacrament is not simple, direct, and related to his life, he may only think of sin as stealing, killing, etc, and not as hurting his little brother by taking away his toys or bothering his father when he wants to rest after work. The experience of sin in the life of a seven or eight-year-old is vastly different from that of an adult, but often we teachers do not realize this fact. We are content to stick to the Ten Commandments as they are expressed in adult language and ignore the world and life as seen through the eyes of a youngster. Here is where our ability to do a little role-playing can be most valuable. If we can see the world through the eyes of a seven-year-old, we may be better able to help him recognize his sins and to live a better life.

TEACHING THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

We have said previously that the goal of our teaching is to help integrate the child into the life of the Body of Christ. This is especially so when we are acquainting the child with the Sacrament of Penance. More important than teaching the external form of the Sacrament (which can be learned in a very short time) is the development of the proper understanding and attitudes concerning the Sacrament. It is not so much the amount of information about the Sacrament that will lead the child to true repentance, as it is the experience of participation in the Sacrament with the assistance of loving teachers and pastors to guide and prepare the way toward self-analysis, repentance and a real desire for communion with God. We must keep this goal in mind so that our teaching of this, or any other sacrament, will not become mechanistic and devoid of meaning and relevance to the child.

Salvation-History as a Frame of Reference

Since the younger child of seven or eight years of age is a reasoning child (e.g. he is interested in the causes of things, in conclusions or logical ends, and likes to reflect upon his experiences), it becomes necessary to supply not only directives for his actions, but reasons for those directives. His increased awareness of time and space now allows the teacher to connect the isolated Bible stories he has been hearing into some logical sequence, such as "salvation-history" or "the history of God's people." Such a sequence can then provide the basis for meaningful discussions on the necessity for repentance, on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, on the responsibilities of all people to God and to each other, etc. A discussion on the result of Adam's Fall or the meaning of the Incarnation will, of course, have to be limited and described in simple terms, but nevertheless, these events can now be told in relation to each other in terms of time or in terms of cause and effect.

Use of the Scriptures

The most effective means of using the Scriptures now is to help convey concepts and attitudes related to Penance. For example, the story of the Prodigal Son might well be used to illustrate several ideas: (a) how a boy wasted the good things that had been given to him by his father, (b) how he realized what he had done and how he felt sorry for the wrongs he had committed, (c) how his father was willing to welcome him back into the household, etc. Role playing or creative dramatics could be used to let each child "show how the son felt before and after he squandered his goods," or to "show how the father felt or acted when his son returned." Since terms such as "humility," "forgiveness," and "repentance" are difficult for the children to understand, such role-playing of carefully selected Bible stories can help the children to understand and grasp the concepts or attitudes that you wish to stress. Nearly all of the stories of the Gospel lessons of the Pre-Fast period (including the Sunday of Zaccheus before Pre-Fast) may be used this way.

Use of the Liturgical Year

The liturgical year can be the basis of our teaching of the Sacrament of Penance. The Pre-Fast and Great Lent periods may be used as a guide for teaching the attitudes necessary for true repentance. The fasts of the Church may serve as periods of the year when participation in the Sacraments is emphasized (though this should be taken as a minimum, not as a maximum goal). Days on which important saints are commemorated may be used to show how each respective saint strove for communion with God. Teachers should be familiar with the texts of the services used throughout the year, for many useful ideas in teaching can be gathered from them. For years the liturgical cycle was the sole means of teaching in the Church; it would be wise for us to look back to the

services of the Church for guidance in our teaching in the Church school today and to encourage greater participation in the services for both children and adults so that our teaching will not only be heard, but experienced.

Use of the Prayers of the Church

Too often the prayers of the Church are memorized and not understood, a practice that is commonly followed in many of our Church Schools without much thought on the part of teacher, parent, or supervisor. The fault is not entirely theirs, for the thinking for many years was that learning prayers meant simply memorization of prayers. However, most of us know from our own experience that memorization of prayers does not necessarily mean that we understand anything of their content. The prayers of the Church preceding the Sacraments of Penance and Communion are numerous and extremely essential for a good preparation of the Sacraments. However, routine recitation of these prayers without thought to their meaning is not the most effective use of them.

Teachers might select a few of the simpler prayers in the prayer book and use them as the basis for discussion in class, reading selected sentences and explaining them, allowing for discussion on how the ideas contained relate to the lives of the children in the class. At this level, one or two prayers might be sufficient, but other prayers might be added one by one each year. Many of these prayers refer to persons in the Old or New Testaments, who are examples of true repentance; some of the stories of these persons might well be used in your lessons. For example, as the children recite the prayer, "Of Thy Mystical Supper..." before Communion, do they realize the meaning of the reference to Judas or to the thief, or, in the "Lord's Prayer," do they understand, in relation to their own lives, what is meant by "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Again, we must try to see these prayers through the eyes and ears of a seven-year-old in order to know how much they understand or are capable of understanding. Such careful analysis of the prayers of the Church may provide us with much material for lessons throughout the school year.

Love as the Key

Finally, the greatest tool, the greatest gift in all teaching is love. Without a loving attitude on the part of the teacher, pastor, or parent the child will find it difficult to grasp the concept of a loving and forgiving God, a God who understands and is willing to forgive their sins and welcome them into His Heavenly Kingdom. The positive approach to "doing good because we love God so much and don't want to hurt Him" is much more effective than the negative approach of "avoiding evil because God will punish us." We know ourselves that we will do whatever we

can to please someone we love and will be hurt ourselves if we are the cause of hurting the person we love. Such positive motivation might be the best teaching or guidance that we could offer in helping our children to lead Christian lives, along with the Christian example that we ourselves present.

SUMMARY

These are some of the concepts, attitudes and methods involved in teaching the Sacrament of Penance to the younger child. The key to the whole problem, however, is the teacher and, more importantly, the pastor. Our attitude and our method of confronting the child will be a major factor in determining the degree to which the child understands and readily participates in the Sacrament of Penance and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. If we are understanding of the child's daily life, his needs and experiences, if we approach the child with love in a sincere attempt to bring the child closer to God and to others, and if we strive ourselves for reconciliation and reunion with the Body of Christ, then these sacraments can become a real means of communion with God for the child, rather than a mere mechanical fulfillment of an obligation. Then the child can experience that joy of the life of grace, the life of communion with God and the Body of Christ which leads to eternal joy in God's heavenly kingdom.

Resources:

- ❑ *These are the Sacraments* by Anthony Coniaris [\$10.95 DRE]
- ❑ *Repentance and Confession* by John Chryssavgis [\$5.95, DRE]
- ❑ *Preparing for Confession* by L. Joseph Letendre [Available from Light & Life]
- ❑ *Making Things Right* [Teacher's Manual \$10.00, Student's book \$5.00, Activity pack \$3.00, DRE]
- ❑ *The Sacraments: Penance (Confession)* Video filmed at Holy Cross Church, Pittsburgh. 48 minutes, color. [\$30.00, DRE]
- ❑ *A Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians* [\$4.50, DRE]
- ❑ *My Orthodox Prayer Book* by Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos [\$5.00, DRE]

Sample Lesson Outline: Teaching the Sacrament of Penance during Great Lent

1. Sunday before the Pre-Fast Period: Story of Zaccheus

- A. Gospel lesson: Luke 19:1-10 - Zaccheus, a sinner, desires to see Christ, He makes the effort to do so and Christ comes to his house. Zaccheus repents and Jesus grants him salvation.
- B. Object of the lesson: To point out the condition and result of the Sacrament of Penance.
 - 1) We must first want to see God and to live in his Kingdom.
 - 2) We must make the effort to come to God. This we do whenever we do good and whenever we come to God to confess the things we have done wrong.
 - 3) If we are truly sorry for our sins and if we try to correct our mistakes, God forgives our sins and grants us life in His Kingdom of Heaven.
- C. Theme: The desire to see God and making the effort to come to Him.
- D. Method: Telling the story, discussing the story, drawing out main points from the discussion and relating these to Confession; role-playing the story.

2. Pre-Fast, First Sunday: The Publican and the Pharisee

- A. Gospel lesson: Luke 18:10-14 - Two men enter the temple to pray, the Pharisee who praises himself before God, and the Publican who humbles himself saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." God justifies the Publican because of his humility.
- B. Object of the lesson: To point out the attitude necessary for Confession, that is, Humility.
- C. If we wish to come to God and to live with Him in Heaven, we must first be sorry for the things we have done wrong. We feel badly because we have not been good to God and to other people, as God has been to us. We must not boast or brag about the good things we have done.
- D. Theme: Feeling sorry for our sins.
- E. Method: Telling the story, drawing upon children's experiences of when they have done something wrong and have felt sorry. Learn the prayer of the Publican.

3. Pre-Fast, Second Sunday: The Prodigal Son

- A. Gospel lesson: Luke 15:11-32 (v. 25-32 may be omitted now) The younger of two sons asks his father for his share of the inheritance, leaves his father and squanders his money. He becomes a servant for another man and finally realizes that he would have been better at home. He decides to return to his father, to repent, and ask to be accepted as one of his servants. His father sees him returning and runs to embrace his son. The son confesses his sin and the father rejoices.
- B. Object of the lesson: To point out our misuse of God's gifts and the necessity to repent and return to God.
 - 1) Discussion of all the things God has done for us and has given us.
 - 2) Discussion of how we forget God and what he has done for us, of the little ways we disobey God each day, of how we hurt God and other people by the things we do or don't do.
 - 3) Discussion of how we can return to God, of how we can live a better life.
 - 4) Confession as a means of beginning our return. God's joy when we do return.
- C. Theme: God rejoices when we return to Him.
- D. Method: Telling of the story, discussion (see above), role-playing of the story,

4. Pre-Fast, Third Sunday: Parable of the Last Judgment

- A. Gospel lesson: Matthew 25:31-46 - Christ describes the last judgment and points out the necessity for seeing Christ in every person, i.e. "as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me."
- B. Object of the lesson: To point out how Christ wants us to live.
 - 1) We must love God, and in loving Him, we must love our neighbor.
 - 2) We should behave towards our neighbor as we would behave towards God Himself.
 - 3) Christ will judge us [i.e. choose who will live with Him in God's Heavenly Kingdom] according to how we live.
- C. Theme: God wants us to love our neighbors as we love Him.

- D. Method: Telling and explaining the story. Discussion of how we obey God and disobey Him by the way we treat other people and how we can live a better life by helping our neighbor.
Supplement: Good Samaritan.
- 5. Pre-Fast, Fourth Sunday: Forgiveness Sunday**
- A. Gospel lesson: Matthew 6:14-21, Forgiveness and Fasting - If we wish to be forgiven for our sins, we must forgive others as God forgives us. We must fast in secret and not show others how we fast (i.e. or how "good" we are). We should be more concerned for our life in heaven rather than for our life on earth. ["Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."]
- B. Object of the lesson: To point the direction for behavior during Lent.
- 1) To begin Lent by forgiving others for their sins and by asking others to forgive us.
 - 2) To fast, but not to boast of our fast to others.
 - 3) To make the return to God by feeling sorry for our sins, by confessing them to the priest and by trying to live a better life by giving ourselves to God and to our neighbors. To add to our prayers, to attend Church more often, etc.
- C. Theme: Forgiveness.
- D. Method: Reading and explaining of the Gospel text, reviewing of the concepts in past lessons, general discussion of Lent and Confession. Learn the Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian.
- 6. First Sunday of Lent: Orthodoxy Sunday - Discussion of the Sacrament of Confession**
- A. Preparation - Reading and explanation of a few prayers before confession. Thinking about how we have sinned. Relate to past lessons.
- B. The Liturgical Order
- 1) Prayers before Confession
 - 2) Short Talk by the priest
 - 3) Confession
 - 4) Absolution
- C. Theme: Fulfillment - Living a new life as related to lessons 4 and 5. Also discuss prayers before Communion, receiving of Communion, prayers after Communion, responsibilities of Communion [i.e. changing our lives, doing what God wants us to do]. The pastor may wish to conduct this session or sit in on the class as a resource person. This session would emphasize the mechanics of going to Confession.
- 7. Second Sunday of Lent: St. Gregory Palamas - Discussion of Holy Communion**
- A. Review what the students know about the Divine Liturgy and Communion.
- B. Discussion of the Liturgy as our coming together to be God's people.
- C. Review prayers before and after Communion and the story of the Last Supper.
- 8. Third Sunday of Lent - Adoration of the Cross**
- A. Theme: Christ makes a new life possible through His Death on the Cross and His Resurrection from the dead.
- B. Review Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, some events in the life of Christ.
- C. Lesson on the Crucifixion. Learn the hymn: "Before Thy Cross..."
- 9. Fourth Sunday of Lent: St. John of the Ladder**
- A. Theme: Resurrection
- B. Method: Teacher may use any of the Gospel lessons on the Resurrection of Christ.
- 10. Fifth Sunday of Lent: St. Mary of Egypt**
- A. Review Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday and Holy Week. Emphasize the theme of the resurrection of all people when discussing the story of Lazarus.
- B. Make a chart showing the events of the life of Christ commemorated during this period of Lazarus Saturday through Easter.
- C. Learn the troparion for Palm Sunday and "Christ is Risen..."
- 11. Palm Sunday**
- A. RESOURCE MATERIALS
- 1) For students: *We Return to God*
 - 2) For adults: *If We Confess Our Sins* available from the OCEC & Light & Life

12. Pascha