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THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION AS A SPIRITUAL EVENT IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

***Abstract:** The Holy Sacraments are works seen, established by Christ the Saviour and entrusted to the Church, by means of which they bestow the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the believer. The sacrament is Christ through His ministers: bishops and priests. The necessity of the Holy Sacraments is undeniable, as they communicate God's grace, which is the compulsory condition for redemption. The Sacrament of Confession is required by the condition of our life in this world, subject to sin and error of all sorts. We particularly tackle the Sacrament of Confession (of Confession or of Penitence), because it represents the most efficient way of individual catechization, being the Sacrament through which man re-news himself, as it serves to practically re-build the connection between God's grace and man. Rightfully so, this Holy Sacrament has always been considered as "a good opportunity for individual pastoral identity". Sitting in the confession chair, the priest or the bishop is not only a sacramental manager, but also "a teacher, an educator and a guide in the lives of the believers" of all ages. Beside its sacramental-therapeutical value, the educational-catechized and formative value of confession is indisputable. That is why confession has been regarded as an efficient means and a good opportunity for individual catechization, which is part of the priest's activity, providing the chance for a real and honest dialogue, from man to man, between confessor and believer of any age. With children, confession will not be a substitute for the advice of professors or parents, or for school education, but it will have its well-defined role in the child's life as a beginning of self-awareness. The child's individual confession is a unique opportunity to cement a lasting personal connection, from man to man, from man to God, where the child can open up spiritually with all his problems, without the stress caused by the relationship professor-student, parent-son.*

***Keywords:** penitence, confession, spirituality, connection, friendship.*

The Child's First Confession

By tackling this issue, we enter an area which, in Romanian Orthodox theology, is almost absent. The child, the teenager and the youth in general, with their problems, have never been the focus of a pastoral study during the communist regime. This entails the lack of local bibliography and data. Moreover, with regard to public Orthodox worship, we can notice that the structure of Orthodox religious services, mainly designed for adults, pay less attention to children and youth in general. The child who partakes in the Orthodox religion finds it difficult to identify his own place in the place of worship; he is sometimes sent away or scolded by certain zealous Christians, who are hypersensitive to the child's restlessness. In other cases, the parents themselves refuse to bring their children to church because they might bother other people or because they would grow impatient until the end of the Holy Mass. The Sacrament of Confessing sins may become for the priest confessor an adequate instrument for the pastoral, either with children and youth, or with parents.

Within the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the child's first confession occurs at the age of seven¹. This does not mean that, up to now, the child has been excluded from the life of the ecclesiastical community, and even less so from Eucharistic life. The canonical Orthodox tradition in this respect displays a surprising agility by means of which it understands the diachronic spiritual progress, as it allows the child to grow up along Christ in the Church. This progress is achieved by receiving Communion up to the age of seven without confession, without the practice and discipline of fasting and without canonical interdiction which would disrupt the free development of spiritual life.

1. Ene BRANISTE, *Liturgica specială / Special Liturgics*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă / The Biblical Institute of Orthodox Mission Press, Bucharest, 1980, p. 385; cf. *Pravila cea Mare / The Great Codex*, gl. 321; Ilie CLEOPA, "Despre căsătorie, datoriile soților și copiilor" / "On marriage, the duties of wives and children", in: IOANICHIE BALAN, *Convorbiri duhovnicești / Spiritual Conversations*, Ed. Episcopiei Romanului și a Hușilor / The Bishop of Roman and Husi Press, 1988, vol. I, pp. 69-93; Sister MAGDALEN, *Reflections on children in the Orthodox Church today*, Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Essex, 1988, p. 30.

The occurrence of confession at this age of seven neither disrupts, nor diminishes the continuity of the child's spiritual life, but, quite the contrary, it is destined to develop it by establishing the child as a member of the community and as a participant in the life of the community, through his closeness to and personal connection with the priest confessor. And mention must be made from the very beginning that the child's confession does not have a penitential character, but an educational and sacramental one. In this case, the priest plays the role of the "father" and "educator towards Christ", as he carefully and lovingly guides the child's life on the path of faith. In this case the priest confessor will first have to earn the child's trust relying mainly on his attitude, on his manner of welcoming the child in his confession chair, on his affection rather than his words. The first meeting between child and confessor are very important for the future progress of the child's spiritual life.

Nowadays, the ways in which life and work are organized made the youth participate in the activities of some scholastic, leisure, sports, etc. associations capable of influencing their behaviour, their choices and their decisions. The informative instruments also have their own impact on children and youth who have no power to control and assess the information received, which, in time, becomes conviction, influencing the young person's image, language and attitudes. An important part here is played by the televised image which, for any young individual today, has become a true and unique bridge to any sort of knowledge. The TV channel, in most cases, reveals for the first time what people think about God, mankind's religious history, the events in the life of the Church. The child starts receiving all this complex information, often contradictory, even during early childhood. When faced with debates on the meaning of life, death, morality, culture, he is met with relative opinions and is in the position of not knowing their true meaning. God, the Church, faith within this pluralism of ideas and attitudes may become themselves a possible path to making things relative as well as the other human values².

2. Giovanni VILLATA, "Fanciulli", in: *Enciclopedia pastorale / Pastoral Encyclopedia*, a cura di BRUNO SEVESO, vol. IV, Piemme, Casale Monferrato, 1993, p. 269.

From a psychological point of view, taking into consideration the child's psycho-physical development, we may say that he is always in search of the ideal, of himself, and he is often in contradiction with himself, he experiences a "world" in constant transformation and contradiction. During childhood (6/7 – 11 years³), the child is guided in his moral evolution by a heteronomous conscience. He understands the system of rules and laws that he refers to, obeying it as if it were a chaining ethical order: "This is done so because it has to be done so". If this ethical order is insisted upon with an authoritarian education, the risks is later, even in adulthood, for the young man to remain very connected to this heteronomous morale, to remain tied to the morale of the rule and not that of the value. Sin, therefore, will be understood as breaking the fixed rule or law. For this, the Sacrament of Confession lies at this age as the foundation of the child's Christian and religious conscience.

The child's psycho-evolutional specificity confers an important role to confessing sins in educating the moral conscience of the child, teenager or young individual. In fact, we can say that confessing sins has no age⁴, *but the manner of the first confession of sins becomes, for many, a rule for future confessions*. In this case, one continues to observe stereotypical forms acquired before without focusing on the psycho-evolutional experience and without emphasizing what is profound and personal in the moral action and in the spiritual experience. The first confession, the first contact with the priest confessor acquires such utmost importance for the child that it could determine his spiritual life forever, in its essential physiognomy and in its motivations. And mention must be made here of the fact that the priest confessor must prepare, with great care and pastoral intelligence, the child's first meeting with the Sacrament of Confession, and ultimately with Christ Himself.

3. Giuseppe SOVERNIGO, *Senso di colpa, peccato e confessione. Aspetti psicopedagogici / The Meaning of Guilt, Sin and Confession. Psycho-pedagogical Aspects*, Dehoniane, Bologna, 2000, p. 124.

4. Guido GATTI, *Confessare oggi. Un manuale per i confessori / Confessing Today. A Textbook for the Confessors*, Leumann – Torino, Elle Di Ci, 1999, p. 124.

The diversity of the child's inner world, where guilt and sin hold no definite place, requires great care and a natural help that the child cannot find in friends, professors, and even less in parents whom he feels much tied to and dependant on⁵. This help in finding answers to their own inner problems, the child and the young individual can find in the priest confessor who must always adapt to their psychology.

Up to the age of almost 11-12 years, the child hardly ever admits guilt; he is incapable of accepting the assessment criteria applied by adults⁶. If up to the age of seven he could find a complex of interdictions quite burdening for his capability of understanding, he can now find rules even more incompatible with his vivacity. Some children equate feeling guilty with expecting punishment. Receiving punishment gives them the feeling that he paid a debt, which will make him feel relieved. Yet, even in these cases, punishment is always feared and not accepted without rebellion. The state of aggressiveness resulting from feeling powerless and wronged causes a relapse; it thus establishes a vicious circle that springs from aggressively feeling guilty to searching for punishment. Under such circumstances, the action to be taken may range from the desired thing to finding punishment, or anticipating even self-punishment⁷. It is clear that the psychological development of the sense of guilt and sin within a child's soul, beyond a certain educational wisdom, could lead straight to pathological feelings of guilt with negative effects on the psychological evolution; or it may lead to a narrow and law-abiding moral and religious experience, far from the Christian way of experiencing moral commitment⁸. To avoid instilling such pathological feelings of guilt in the child's and the young individual's moral experience, within the Sacrament of Confession,

5. G. GATTI *Confessare oggi / Confessing Today*, p. 124: foloseste termenul de "satelizare" prin care explică dependentă copilului față de părinți / uses the term "satelizing" to explain the child's dependence on his parents.

6. Arlette BOURCIER, *Per una nuova educazione morale / For a New Moral Education*, trad. it. di Sergio Quinzio, Queriniana, Brescia, 1968, p. 158.

7. Serge LEBOVICI, *I sentimenti di colpa nel bambino e nell'adulto, I sentimenti di colpa / Feelings of Guilt in the Child and in the Adult. Feelings of Guilt*, Feltrinelli, Padova, 1980, pp. 45-49.

8. G. GATTI, *Confessare oggi / Confessing Today*, p. 124.

the priest confessor will have to realize that he must not judge the child according to adult conscience or to his own system of values. He mustn't also mistake involuntary inadvertency or imprudence for the genuine fault with conscious responsibility. And, particularly, he must not brutally threaten the child with horrible punishment – jail, death, hell – or attribute God's punishment for an evil occurring after imprudent behaviour.

Above all, during Confession, the priest confessor will preserve the spontaneous and free character without betraying an "agreement" with the parents or professors or an alleged "scenario". The confessor and the child who confesses must develop a relationship based on trust and friendship and this requires special attention, more so than in the case of the adult, as each procedural mistake in this sacramental and emotional situation could have negative consequences for the child's spiritual experience. On this issue we can agree with Sister Magdalen at the S. John Chrysostom Convent in Essex (England) that "it does not matter what the confessor will tell the child, nor the form under which the meeting will take place"⁹ but the affective relationship that must develop between the two. For this, it is absolutely necessary for the priest confessor to lay special importance on this meeting, because, as we have mentioned before, it is this first meeting with the confessor that the child's or the youth's spiritual progress will depend upon, as well as his following relationship with the Church and with the entire life of the religious community. A harsh confessor risks not only being abandoned, but also leading to feelings of aversion and refuse towards religious life.

During the act of Confession, the priest will have to be a friend that the child or the young individual can trust. The heart and liking of a child, and not only, can be earned more with an understanding attitude than with advice and words that do not apply to a child. Whichever way it might be, the first meeting, developing positively or failing, will never be forgotten¹⁰. Consequently, the confessor, in his sacramental

9. Sister MAGDALEN, *Reflections on children*, p. 30.

10. Antonio DAL COVOLO, *La confessione oggi / Confession Today*, Città Nuova, Roma, 1978, p. 151.

action, will have to possess abilities and attention adequate to the psychology of the penitent, in our case, to the child.

The child's confession, made in this conscience, may become a powerful pastoral means, providing the opportunity to render the relationship priest-child human and personal.

It is compulsory to treat and consider the child as a person, as a human being with his problems, discussed individually with the confessor, not collectively or publicly, no matter the age and the maturity or immaturity of penitents. A serious error is caused by the ignorance, the indifference and the lack of interest of many clerics regarding confession and Communion of children up to the age of 13-14 years. It is good to have all children receive Communion, to have them brought in groups to the church, but this does not exclude individual confession. Considering that public or collective confession is not a canonical practice "against church practice and with negative consequences for the spiritual life of believers,"¹¹ it is all the more non-advisable to have children confess collectively.

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The Confession of Teenagers

Teenage has always been the focus of psychology and sociology, being qualified by various adjectives: the critical age, the precious age, the awkward, misunderstood age. Yet, one thing is certain: it is a difficult, delicate age. During this time, yesterday's child, who was very connected to his parents' judgments, is looking for a balance with himself, with the family, social, moral space where he is living, and

11. Nicolae NECULA, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică / Tradition and Renewal in Liturgical Service*, Ed. Episcopiei Dunării de Jos / Lower Danube Bishopry Press, Galati, 1996, p. 172.

with his own way of acting and thinking. In other words, he is trying on a new appearance, a new identity with more freedom than before, namely independence.

From the perspective of the young individual, good and evil are perceived as two categories that cannot be applied separately to social reality, as two dimensions of experience between which no definite border can be traced. Along this line, good and evil become two functional principles of the present moment. Good is what is done and felt at a certain moment, it is what we would understand in the formula: to live in the now, to live day by day. For the teenager, the principles of good and evil are actually connected to the dynamics of everyday life and tend to take upon them a relative nature¹². As a consequence, the concepts of good and evil take on a diverse significance.

The word “sin” is well-known not to be well received by the youth who perceive it as obsolete, and, consequently, they prefer substituting it with the concept of “mistake, guilt, error”. Mistake, as defined by the teenager, ultimately means a violation of one’s own principles, of one’s own choices, and less of a violation of some divine order. And mention must be made here that the young individual tends to see the meaning of sin in close connection with self-accomplishment, but this is an immature, horizontal and individualistic opinion, with no reference to the theological structures of sin.

According to research¹³ conducted on the youth with regard to their conception of sin, it seems that not only is the concept of sin generally less powerful in the young individual’s conscience, but also the concept of original sin, whereas social or collective sin is considered from an individualistic perspective, as a responsible

12. Franco GARELLI, Enrica ROSANNA, “Giovani e riconciliazione. Ricerca empirica condotta su un campione di giovani italiani (18-19 anni)” / “The Youth and Reconciling. Empirical Research Conducted on Italian Youth Sample-Group (18-19 years)”, in: MARIO MIDALI E RICCARDO TONELLI, *Giovani e Riconciliazione / The Youth and Reconciling*, LAS, Roma, 1984, pp.17-59, aici p. 32.

13. Raimondo FRATTALLONE, *Amare la vita e vivere l’amore. Riflessioni etico-pastorali sull’amore e la sessualità umana / Loving Life and Living Love. Pastoral Reflections on Love and Human Sexuality*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann – Torino, pp. 51-66.

mistake shared by all. Sins or mistakes, in the teenager's opinion, seem to be identified today with incoherence, indifference, pessimism, lies, disobedience, violence, drugs, sins related to love and sex. Yet, what is interesting here is the fact that all these sins, mistakes are conceptualized as sins and mistakes against one's own individuality, and not as sins against God and the divine order. Hence, the arsenal of means meant to overcome the feeling of guilt or sin is mainly made up of various ways of personal commitment: admitting one's own mistake, trusting one's own Self, educating the conscience in less sacramental ways, namely the Sacrament of Confession. And in this respect we might say that, despite having religion classes in schools, we can talk about a crisis of the Sacrament of Confession among the youth, caused both by the small frequency in this sacrament, and especially by the lack of significance of this sacrament for the youth. Nowadays, for many young people, penitence and reconciliation with God and the Church represent a personal dialogue with themselves, without being forgiven, without truly turning their backs to sin, but this dialogue remains for many: *Me and my God*¹⁴. The Sacrament of Confession is, in this case, reduced to a totally individual fact with a consolatory function.

Educating and advising within the Sacrament of Confession means today educating about having faith and hope.

For a young individual, problems related to believing in God or not represent mistrust in the Gospel caused by the exigency of a rational demonstration. The problems related to the young individual's capability of believing or not believing must be carefully assessed by the priest confessor, bracing to face various rational objections. And mentions must be made here that the priest confessor must take into consideration that the young individual's power to believe is mostly open to the laic world and he internalizes the philosophical and social concepts of general religious mentality. Faith and religiousness in a young individual are most often expressed in a personal, criticizing manner especially towards the official contents of religion. The youth

14. F. GARELLI, E. ROSANNA, *Giovani e riconciliazione / The Youth and Reconciling*, p. 59.

are less prone to a spiritual experience in the Confession chair, and, consequently, they negatively criticize a religiousness that is manifest in ritual actions¹⁵.

Another aspect that the priest confessor will have to pay attention to when receiving youth's confession will be explaining the spiritual or ecclesiastic dimension of the Sacrament of Confession. It is a problematic aspect for a young individual who, not having had a positive spiritual experience, considers the Church to be an institution or a structure of power more or less oppressing freedom¹⁶. To do this during the dialogue in the Confession chair, the priest will rediscover for the young individual the meaning of religious belonging as a son of God and as a member of the Church.

Secondly, in the Confession chair, for a genuine connection of the young individual with experiencing faith and with the church, it will be necessary to revise the young individual's personal sex life, both at the level of convictions, and at the level of moral behaviour. In this respect, the priest confessor will have to display great tact and gentleness with regard to potential difficulties in the area of sexual disorders: premarital intercourse, homosexuality, masturbation. Here, the confessor will first present the teaching of the Church, gradually solving potential objections regarding chastity and he will indicate the necessary means after having established whether he is dealing with a sporadic act, with a habit, or with a more stable personality structure¹⁷. With respect to means, the confessor may advise asceticism that may purify mind and heart, friendship and support of those close to him, the personal experience of God's love.

15. EUGENIO FIZZOTTI, *Verso una psicologia della religione. 2. Il cammino della religiosità / Towards a Psychology of Religion. 2. The Path to Religiousness*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann – Torino, 1995, p. 115.

16. Raimondo FRATTALLONE, *La pastorale del sacramento della penitenza / The Pastoral of the Sacrament of Penitence*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann – Torino, 1995, p. 118.

17. R. FRATTALLONE *Amare la vita e vivere l'amore / Loving Life and Living Love*, pp. 51-66.

Conclusion

As we can see within the Sacrament of Confession in the case of the youth, the persona of the confessor has considerable importance. The way in which he welcomes, advises, corrects, gestures has great influence on the young individual. The confessor must necessarily have the right knowledge of pastoral psychology and teenage psychology to adequately assess each spiritual situation of a young person. Time, superficiality, individualism, and other issues have no place when dealing with the young and their problems. The young have this urgent need to be understood. And for this, the confessor will allot all the necessary time and all his availability to educate the young not only in confession, but to also receive the other sacraments, to build a conscience open to ecclesiastic and sacramental belonging.