

On Children's First Confession Prior to First Communion ***In Quibusdam Ecclesiae Partibus***

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In some parts of the Church and in some centers for catechetics, even though the Declaration *Sanctus Pontifex* was published on 24 May 1973 jointly by the Sacred Congregations for the Discipline of the Sacraments and for the Clergy (see AAS 65, 1973, 410), dissension and doubts still remain about the ecclesiastical discipline relevant to children's receiving the sacrament of penance before they receive their first communion. Many inquiries and requests have come to this Apostolic See from bishops, priests, and parents. One apostolic religious institute, exercising its ministry in many countries, has posed the question explicitly: after the promulgation of the Declaration, is it still lawful for first communion to precede first confession as a general rule in those parishes where this practice has been in force for the last several years?

Moreover, recent surveys by the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship have established the need of inculcating the Church's norms regarding this issue and also the timeliness of explaining again, to the extent required, the mind and force of this declaration. This is done by giving an official reply to the query raised by the religious institute already mentioned (see appendix).

It is certainly not necessary to explain the reason for publishing the Declaration. All are fully aware of the grave disturbance, created by some opinions based on psychological and pedagogical reasons, that was undermining the accepted practice of the Church. It is interesting to note, however, that, before the Decree *Quam singulari* (see AAS 2, 579), according to the general opinion, children who reached a certain age could be admitted to confession, but not to communion; now, conversely, it is claimed that children may receive communion, but that it is not right for confession to precede. The Decree *Quam singulari* itself placed the origin of the regrettable practice in question in the failure to settle clearly the age of discretion suited to receiving the sacraments: "The abuses we censure spring from this, that the age of discretion was not properly or correctly settled and that some assign one age for confession and another for the eucharist." For this reason in no. 1 of the legislative section, the Decree prescribes that there is only one age for these sacraments and that when it is reached, the obligation begins of receiving both according to the designated order, i.e., confession before communion: "The age of discretion both for confession and for communion is the age at which the child begins to reason, i.e., around the seventh year, either before or after. That is the time when the obligation begins of fulfilling the precept both of confession and of communion." [1]

That confession should precede communion is clear from the order in which these two sacraments are listed in the Decree, as well as from the fact that the repudiated abuses concerned the admission not to confession but rather to communion.

The need for safeguarding and protecting worthy participation in the eucharist has compelled the Church to introduce as the norm in its discipline and pastoral practice that confession should

precede communion. In this way it respects the right of the faithful - both adults and children - to receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

Moreover, St. Paul's admonition (see 1 Cor 11:28) truly establishes a directive norm that applies even to children. They too, therefore, should examine their conscience before receiving the eucharist. But often children are not able to examine their conscience clearly and surely without help; they will be able to do so more easily and safely if the assistance of a priest confessor is available to them. Many children feel troubled by small and unimportant things, while others may fail to recognize or make little of more serious faults.

Another consideration is the impossibility, if confession does not precede first communion, of respecting the precept of canon 854 of the Code of Canon Law, which assigns the judgment about the sufficient disposition for first communion to the priest.

It is further to be remembered what many good pastors have learned from their catechetical and ministerial experience, namely, the great benefits and saving power that first confession has in the life of children if it is carefully prepared, properly adapted to their age and their capacity to perceive spiritual things, and carefully administered.

When they arrive at the age of discretion, children already possess in the Church the right to receive both sacraments. It would be an absurd and unjust discrimination and a violation of conscience if they were prepared for and admitted only to communion. It is not enough to say that children have the right to go to confession, if this right is excluded in practice.

When children are sufficiently instructed and are aware of the special nature of these two sacraments, it will not be difficult for them to go first to the sacrament of reconciliation, which - in a simple but fundamental way - arouses in them the awareness of moral good and evil and aids them to bring a more mature disposition to their happy meeting with Christ in the eucharist. A deep conviction about the need of the greatest purity for the reception of the eucharist worthily, if prudently and properly instilled in children right from the time of their first communion, will accompany them for the rest of their lives and lead to a greater esteem for, and a more frequent use of, the sacrament of reconciliation. Pope Paul VI taught this in the letter he wrote through the Secretary of State on the occasion of the 26th Liturgical Week celebrated in Florence: "The Pope, finally, places a special emphasis on children's confession, particularly their first confession. This must always precede their first communion even if an extended period between the two is helpful. From the earliest years an evangelization must begin that will make ever stronger and more conscious the support of a living faith for their celebration of the sacrament and above all for a sure and consistent way of living the Christian life."

It may well be remarked that the special conditions of society and culture in different countries are not a legitimate reason for establishing a different discipline. Human nature is basically the same everywhere and the goals of spiritual development that belong to the sacrament are set equally before everyone. And indeed, whatever their social or cultural situation, if children can receive the eucharist in a conscious way, suited to their age, they can also have an equal awareness of sin and ask God's pardon in confession.

Finally, one must remember that the reform and reinvigoration of the sacrament of penance so needed today and so desired by pastors in the universal Church, cannot come about unless it has its foundation and beginning in the careful and effective preparation and reception of the sacraments of Christian initiation.

Endnote

1. The strict obligation of confession should, of course, be understood according to the accepted teaching of the Church.