

CUF Position on First Communion Question

By ANTHONY ACCIARI

Like so many of the unnecessary and uncalled-for changes in this post-Vatican II era the complete reversal (prior to the recent decree from Rome) on the age for First Confession has left many Catholic parents confused, disenchanted and alienated. What makes this situation still less intelligible is that nothing in the Vatican II documents gave any warning of what to expect. We are all by now very familiar with the "new theologians" and modern educators "super-market" approach to the documents whereby they pick and choose statements that seem to justify their pet theories and discard others as unacceptable. One passage in the Constitution of the Liturgy is regularly quoted by the proponents of delayed confessions. The passage reads "the rite and formulas for the Sacrament of Penance are to be revised so they give more luminous expression to both the nature and effect of the Sacrament." Immediately after this reference they paraphrase and without directly quoting a statement in the documents by saying "elsewhere it speaks of adapting the liturgy to the age of the people." The actual statement is quite different. (See the Constitution on the Liturgy I, 19). What the Constitution urges is liturgical instruction and active participation adjusted to the different mental, cultural and age levels.

It is entirely the opposite of not giving or delaying instruction and therefore depriving the faithful of sacramental grace because of some preconceived and unproven theory: which the Church in its highest authority has explicitly and without equivocation condemned.

"MODERN" PSYCHOLOGY

Most of those who support late confession also appeal without hesitation to what they call "the latest findings in psychology." As they interpret it, children are incapable of any "formal sin" before the age of puberty which may range from 11 to 14 and even beyond. However there is no real evidence that "modern psychology" has come to that.

Senior Citizens Liturgy held

Senior citizens were the special guests at a Mass celebrated last Sunday at Holy Family Church.

Mrs. Milton Ritzenthaler was in charge of arrangements. Deacon Louis Sirianni, who heads the liturgy program for the parish, worked on planning.

Altar servers were Elmer Walter and Milton Ritzenthaler. Mrs. Edna Dugan and Mrs. Vickie Clar read the scriptures. Presenting the gifts at the offertory were Mrs. Ida Sheg, Mrs. Marion Mandara and Miss Margaret Frank.

A get-together over coffee was held after the Mass.

Anthony Acciari is chairman of the local chapter of Catholics United for the Faith (CUF). We grant CUF space for its view on the premise that it may stir discussion which will help the diocese in reaching decisions on the First Communion-First Penance issue.

conclusion. On the contrary we did find that:

1. Some children develop standards of moral conduct when they are very young. (R. I. Watson: Psychology of the Child, New York, J. Wiley & Sons 1965, pp. 455-56).
2. An important part of a child's formation of conscience takes place before the age of ten and much of it at five and six; and this early conscience formation tends to endure through life. (R. R. Sears, E. E. Maccoby and H. Levin: Patterns of Child Rearing, New York, Harper and Row, 1957, p. 364).
3. A child's admission of guilt and attempt to make amends are steps towards learning self-control. (Ibid pp. 377-79).
4. A child gains peace of mind through confessing his misdeeds and receiving forgiveness. (Ibid).
5. A weak conscience even in a child is a liability as it leads to moral judgments based on expedience and infantile reactions. (Ibid pp. 379-80).
6. Training plays a significant role in conscience formation. (Some Material in Children's Personality and Character: Genet Psychol. Monogr. 1961 Vol. 63, pp. 199-278).
7. Recognition of guilt and confession of it at an early age makes for stronger resistance to temptation later on. (R. E. Grinder: Parental Childrearing Practices - Child Development, 1962, Vol. 33, pp. 803-20, p. 604).

The psychologists who arrived at these conclusions were not even remotely concerned with the age for sacramental confession and very likely not even Catholic; yet they are in complete accord with the belief that young children should not be deprived of the Sacrament of Penance, if only on a psychological basis.

THE REAL ISSUE

However, at stake here is more than a delay of a few years in receiving the Sacrament of Penance. The problem is eminently more fundamental than that. As Msgr. Geo. A. Kelly, Ph.D., wrote in the October 1972 issue of The Priest:

"A disturbance of the sequence of First Confession before Communion immediately suggests re-evaluating other Catholic beliefs and practices. For example, if the young are judged psychologically incapable of even venial sins, how about the freedom from sin of most adults most of the time? Should confession be only for the pious Catholic? Should it become as rare for Catholics as it is for the Greek and the Protestant? Is personal worthiness (state of grace gained through Confession) to continue as a qualification for the reception of the Eucharist? If now, what are the Catholics of the future to think about the Real Presence? If sin is to be explained in purely psychiatric or

sociological terms, what new approaches to original sin, external punishment, even the redemptive act of Christ Himself can be expected to hold sway ultimately among Catholics?"

Father John A. Hardon, SJ, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Bellarmine School of Theology reinforces this view in his in-depth study of the problem of delayed confession, published in *Eglise et Theologie* I, 1972. He stated that "the real focus in this crusade is not the children but sin, whether among children or adults; and the real problem that faces the Church is the acceptance of a mystery of faith: that sacraments like confession actually confer the grace they signify and are not mere symbols of religious experience." He goes on to state that it is not coincidental that where the clamor for delayed confession, notably Belgium, Holland and the United States, is the strongest, the rate of regular confessions has experienced a tremendous decline.

The same reasons were reiterated by Msgr. J. F. McCarthy, JCD, president of the Roman Theological Forum in a speech before an assembly of nuns in St. Louis, August 1972. He stated that the drive against the admission of young children to the Sacrament of Penance is based on a pluralistic attempt to deprive them of that fundamental spirit of repentance which is the point of departure for the spiritual life. It is a fundamental attack on the awareness of sin — original and actual — as a danger factor in the lives of children.

I could go on at length quoting many other authorities like Cardinal Krol, Archbishop Sheen, Archbishop Dwyer, the Dominican psychologist, Father Vincent F. Gere, OP, etc. but I

think it is abundantly clear that there are a great many in the Church today who do not share our bishop's disappointment and confusion over Rome's decision to end the experiment.

THE FAITH IN THE MODERN WORLD

Catholics United for the Faith does not minimize the problem of making the faith intelligible and acceptable in the modern world. Children are an important part of this world and subject to all its secularist pressures. If in the past teaching them moral values was difficult, today it is monumentally so. You do not solve the chaotic complexities of modern existence for children by delaying or postponing what has been a proven help in the past.

I think Cardinal Wright put it very aptly in the December 1971 issue of the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. He wrote — "concerning early confessions the modern generation which we must catechize, and which in turn must catechize the next, is in danger of falling prey to the loss of the sense of sin, that this void is today beginning to be felt in our society, needs no other documentation than the daily newspaper. We can not begin our spiritual, educational and sacramental battle against desecralization and degeneracy too soon in a person's life if we wish to forestall the day when, in Orwell's terrifying phrase, 'the watchers will be unable to tell the pigs from the men or the men from the pigs.'"

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