

DUTY OF PARENTS

“The family is, so to speak, the domestic Church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care any religious vocation.”

“Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education, and especially religious education.”

(From the teaching of the Vatican Council)

PARENTAL GUIDANCE SERIES

This booklet is one of a series — specially published to help parents in their tasks of giving religious education to their children. Other titles in our Parental Guidance Series are:—

- ★ **Helping Children to Pray** by Mary Purcell
- ★ **Your Child's Confirmation** do.
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your child's CONFIRMATION



MARY
PURCELL

Your Child's Confirmation

PARENTS' PRAYER

O God, who has granted us to be co-creators with you of the children whom you have entrusted to our care, grant that aided by thy grace we shall not fail in our duty towards them. Keep us from selfishness, Lord, and from being over indulgent or extremely severe with them, and grant us an understanding of their age and time, so that we can be of better guidance to them. In our anxiety for their worldly success let us always remember, Lord, that true success can only be achieved by obeying your holy will.

Help us to teach them by word and example the beauty of your love, the shortness of time and the length of eternity. Grant us all the grace to be reunited in the glory of Heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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by Mary Purcell

Most adults, if asked to state honestly what they remembered of Confirmation, would have to admit to one or more of the following: The efforts of teachers and parents to make us word-perfect in prayers and catechism and our consequent dread of disgracing ourselves and them by 'missing our question' on the day the bishop came; some nervous apprehension lest we noticeably flinch from the stroke on the cheek; pleasant anticipation of gifts in money or kind bestowed upon us by relatives, friends and neighbours. In parishes where Confirmation is not held annually Confirmation Day is not infrequently known as 'the bishop's day' or 'the day the bishop comes'. This is rather sad, for it should be 'the day of the Holy Spirit', the day he comes to complete in God's children what he began in them at Baptism.

Vague
Memories

It is not so easy to help children to prepare well for Confirmation as it is to help them prepare for First Confession and First Holy Communion. They are less docile at ten and eleven than they were at seven. Besides, we adults are so accustomed to going to Confession and Communion and have heard so many instructions on these two sacraments that we have funds of experience and knowledge to draw upon when helping the children to prepare for them. But Confirmation we received only once, and that many years ago. Our memories of it are vague and, in any case, we remember more about the cramming for it than we do of the sacrament itself. Perhaps we are not convinced that children need any preparation for it beyond the religious instruction they receive in school and the Confession they usually make a day or two before.

Wrong
Emphasis

Even if we do say a few words concerning the sacrament we tend to stress the child himself — what Confirmation will do for him, his responsibilities as a confirmed

Christian etc. — and miss the real significance of the sacrament. For the emphasis should be not on the child, the recipient, but on the Holy Spirit who comes to enlighten, to strengthen, to reinforce, to make grow in grace.

TAKING AN ACTIVE PART

When an infant receives the Holy Spirit in Baptism, he is unaware of what is happening. His reason and understanding are yet dormant. Others make the essential responses and assents in his name. But at Confirmation, 'the Pentecost of the individual', he is or should be aware of what is happening. He is expected to take an active part in the ceremony, to say a whole-hearted AMEN first when the Bishop concludes the prayers invoking the Holy Spirit and again when at the actual confirming he is signed with the Sign of the Cross and anointed with Chrism.

The Church requires for Confirmation that children receive 'more thorough knowledge of their religion' and each diocese lays down what knowledge is expected. If children have attended school regularly up to Confirmation age and if parents have helped with religion lessons at home there should be little difficulty about the examination preceding Confirmation. Let us imagine that they *do* know all that they are required to know, and think of how we might help them prepare for that sacrament which they will receive once and once only.

Breath of Life

We can remind them that the word *spirit*, from the Latin *spiritus*, means a breath, the 'in'-breathing of the air so essential to life. They have seen pictures of the 'kiss of life' being given to resuscitate apparently lifeless persons rescued from drowning or smoke-filled houses. *Breath of God* was an old name for the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. When God breathed into Adam at the dawn of creation, what had been dust became a living man. The prophet Job reflects:

The Spirit of God, the breath of the Almighty made me. At Baptism, the first ceremony is that of the priest breathing on the child's face, bidding Satan to 'depart and make way for the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete'.

Some children seem to have the idea that the Holy Spirit did not come into existence until the first Pentecost. It is good to get them to recite the lines of the Nicene Creed, the Creed we say at Mass, the lines summarizing Church teaching on the Holy Spirit.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Together

with the Father and the Son he is adored and glorified; He it was who spoke through the prophets.

Mystery

At this point we need to go back to those two fundamental mysteries, the Unity and Trinity of God. Not to explain them, for who can explain these sublime truths, but to stress them and to make the point — which children approaching adolescence need to be reminded of — that there are certain truths to which we must say *I believe* without expecting to understand them in this life. It may help our own faith to read what the late Don Marmion wrote in *Christ, the Life of the Soul*, on these mysteries, but in the end the holy and enlightened Benedictine stated that concerning the ineffable mysteries of the Unity and Trinity 'we can only lisp'. It is no harms to repeat with children of this age group the legend of St. Augustine, usually told to younger children when introducing the mysterious terms: One God; Three Persons.

St. Augustine

One day the great Augustine, one of the most brilliant thinkers of his own or any age, sat by the sea-shore. He was trying to explain to himself how there could be three persons in one God. For hours he sat there, thinking and thinking. Finally he noticed a little child running over and back between the ocean and a tiny hole he had dug in the sand. The child had a small sea-shell in his hand. Augustine called him over and asked him what he was doing.

'I am emptying the ocean into this hole with the sea-shell,' replied the child.

'Silly child,' said the saint, 'the hole you have dug is too small to contain the ocean. And you could run back and forth with that little sea-shell forever and still not empty the ocean. Besides, when you pour a sea-shell full of water into the hole, it drains back down through the sand and soaks back to the ocean bed.'

'I know,' said the child. 'I was sent to tell you that I will empty the ocean with my sea-shell into that tiny hole, before you can fathom how there are Three Persons in One God.'

When Augustine recovered from his surprise there was no child. He took the apparition to mean that God wished him to realize that the human intelligence has its limitations and that certain mysteries must be taken on faith.

Faith

Nowadays, when so many are inclined to disbelief if they cannot prove all the truths of faith to their satisfaction, it is good to forewarn children of pre-adolescent age that we received our knowledge of the Blessed Trinity through Christ and his Church, that when we say *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, we are declaring our belief in him who said *He who believes and is baptized shall be saved*.

Make it quite clear to them that the Holy Spirit existed, with the Father and the Son, from all eternity. The first lines of the Bible mention him :

And the earth was void and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved over the waters.

The Hebrew phrase that describes the primeval chaos and confusion is *tobu* and *bobu*, a phrase expressing greater confusion than the Gaelic phrase *tré na chéile*. Even then, before any form of life existed, God's holy spirit was active, establishing order; first light, then stability, then life. *The spirit of the Lord fills the entire earth*, muses Solomon. Right through the Old and New Testaments the phrases, *led by the Spirit, moved by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit of God*, occur again and again.

READ THE GOSPEL

On another evening we read with the children the Gospel account of the Baptism in the Jordan when the Holy Spirit descended upon our Lord, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaias :

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and fortitude, the Spirit of knowledge and piety, and he shall be filled with the Spirit of the fear of the Lord.

In Chapter 3 of St. John's Gospel they can read Christ's words to Nicodemus : *Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*. Chapters 14, 15 and 16 contain our Lord's promise to his apostles that he would send them the Holy Spirit. Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles records the happenings of the first Pentecost. Such reading during the weeks immediately preceding Confirmation should increase the child's knowledge of the Holy Spirit and help him to grow in devotion to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Confirmation will become in his mind, not a mere event of the school year, but the coming of a Person, a Person whose coming is going to mean a lot for him.

Sometimes youngsters get wrong and snobbish ideas about manual work; they imagine that it is inferior to mental work, that no special guidance is required for it. Yet God, when instructing Moses on how the tabernacle and the Ark should be made states that he has called *the son of Uri, a man of the tribe of Juda, and filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom and understanding and knowledge of all manner of work, to fashion things of gold and silver and marble and precious stones and varieties of wood for the making and adorning of the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant*.

The First Pentecost

When reading the second chapter of the Acts, which describes the first Pentecost, some are inclined to stop when they have read of the happenings in the Upper Room : the 120 persons assembled in prayer with our Lady and the apostles; the sound of the mighty wind that filled the whole house, the parted tongues of fire; the gift of tongues. But we should not stop at that point, for the subsequent narrative relates the effects that followed the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We have to imagine, for ourselves as for the children, that ancient city of Jerusalem, its narrow streets crowded with pilgrims. The Jews had three great feasts in the year : The Passover or Pasch which was the feast of unleavened bread and coincides with our Easter; Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, also called the Feast of Weeks or First Fruits, which came seven weeks after the Pasch; and the Feast of Tabernacles or Tents. Pentecost was a harvest as well as a religious festival, for the wheat harvest in Palestine is reaped in late May or early June. Pentecost drew the largest crowds from overseas, because sailing on the Mediterranean was usually easy at that time of the year when storms were unusual.

The Gift of Tongues

Their religious obligations fulfilled, everyone made merry, drifting up and down the streets, great tides of humanity from a score of countries. Generation after generation of Jews came back to the homeland each year for this feast, renewing old relationships and friendships, celebrating in the traditional manner. As most of them spoke the language of the countries they came from there was confusion, everything *tré na chéile*, reminiscent of the chaos before Creation.

Suddenly, into the midst of these crowds rush some Galileans, fishermen, working men, mountainy men, push-

ing their way towards the Temple, telling as they went of the wonderful happening in the Upper Room. And, as the pilgrims rushed now to one, now to another of these Galileans, each man understood their words; each man heard his own language. Arabs heard Arabic, Cretans their Greek dialect, Persians and others from the east heard oriental tongues, Egyptians heard Egyptian, and Romans must have been astounded to hear Latin given a Galilean *blas*.

Peter's
Inspired
Sermon

So extraordinary a thing was it that some cynics and wiseacres in the crowd said 'They are drunk'. But Peter stood up and hotly defended his brethren, declaring that this was the fulfilment of a prophecy made by Joel, and he proceeded to give the sermon that converted three thousand people. Then we see how the Holy Spirit, working on the maelstrom of people, that mixum-gatherum of nationalities, evokes a response. The crowds press around the apostles saying *O men, brothers, what shall we do? Tell us what to do?* And Peter replies, *Do penance and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins. And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.* If there is time to read more we can go on to the story of St. Stephen, the first martyr who, as our Lord had promised, was so filled with the Holy Spirit, that he made inspired answers to his judges and was strengthened to become the first Christian martyr.

NO
MIRACLES?

We should keep impressing upon those to be confirmed that they receive the same Holy Spirit who descended upon those in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. We point out that the coming of the Holy Ghost at the First Pentecost was accompanied by great miracles because it was important to draw man's attention to the infant Church. We need not expect miracles, but we are certain that same Spirit will come to us, guiding us, giving us moral courage, praying within us. St. Paul tells us that we cannot pray as much as a word, not even say the word *Father* to God, without the Holy Ghost who prays in a wondrous manner within us. St. Ignatius of Antioch, writing to his Christians as he was on his way to a martyrdom in which he was thrown to wild beasts, said that his very heart-beats seemed to him to sound like the Holy Spirit within him, saying, *Come — come-to-the-Father. Come — come-to-the-Father.* Our own St. Patrick, echoing St. Paul, had a vision of the Spirit praying within his soul.

How the
Spirit Guides

Though we may tell all this to the children we need to explain a little; otherwise highly-strung, imaginative youngsters may see themselves as latter-day Bernards or Joans-of-Arc called to lead Crusades or armies of liberation!

These saints, we tell them, were entrusted with special missions and got very special guidance from the Third Person of the Trinity. He guides *us* in other ways. A boy leaving Primary school for instance is told by his parents to choose one of three courses: he may go on for further education; he may start work at a local firm; he may remain to work in the family business or farm. He cannot decide what to do. His is precisely the kind of problem which the Holy Spirit will help solve. That boy prays for guidance, but he must not expect to see a certain college in a vision, or a disembodied hand pointing towards the factory or farm! As well as praying he asks the advice of those who know him best, persons on whose judgment he can rely. Having prayed, taken advice and thought things over, he makes his decision. If he has done his part, the Holy Spirit guides him towards the right decision.

Explaining the
Ceremonies

During the final days before Confirmation, children should be told about the minister of the sacrament, the bishop who for us represents our Lord, the Good Shepherd. We explain the rites, so that they will understand what is happening at each stage when the actual conferring of the sacrament begins. A booklet, *Confirmation, the Gift of the Spirit*, (obtainable at Gills and Burns Oates, Dublin) gives the prayers and ceremonies. Children need to be reminded to answer *Amen* from their hearts especially when the bishop, taking each individual confirmed and, tracing a cross on his forehead with Chrism, says:

I sign you with the Sign of the Cross, and I confirm you with the Chrism of Salvation, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

We tell of how the Chrism was blessed on Holy Thursday, of how oil is used for soothing, for healing, for limbering the muscles of athletes. Oil rubbed on the skin penetrates it, a sign of the grace and strengthening power of the Holy Spirit penetrating the soul. The stroke on the cheek, usually taken as a sign that by Confirmation a Christian is strengthened to suffer and if necessary even to die for Christ, is a vestige of an earlier rite. This was a kiss of peace, given by the bishop to welcome the newly-confirmed into the Christian assembly. There remain the concluding prayers and the blessing given by the bishop.

Remembering
the Holy Spirit

No rushing wind, no gift of tongues, we tell our young person, but he has now within him, in greater measure than after Baptism, the Spirit of God who will remain with him to counsel and advise him at every turn of life, who will pray in him and draw him closer to God. We remind him not to neglect the Holy Spirit within his soul. He finds lessons difficult, is puzzled over a school test — that is the time to call upon the Spirit of understanding and knowledge. He has to make an important decision, to shoulder certain responsibilities — the Spirit of wisdom and counsel is there to help him. He cannot pray; he has within him one who will pray in his stead, the Spirit of piety. He is tempted; let him call upon the Spirit of fortitude, the Spirit of the Fear of the Lord.

Children
No Longer

At Confirmation each one receives power and strength sufficient to make him a saint, but that power has to be tapped. The sacrament has been called the sacrament of Catholic Action. By it all are called to be apostles, to bear witness to Christ, each in his own sphere. This is done by prayer, by the example of a good life, by undertaking some form of apostolic work. If the future adult is to be an apostle, to bear witness for Christ, the newly-confirmed must be given opportunities to practice that most distinctive of Christian virtues, charity. Doing some small service regularly for the old, the infirm, the lonely, the misfits of society in the immediate neighbourhood is the first step towards real Christian living later on.

Parents can help greatly in this matter by suggesting and encouraging such acts of charity; the confirmed child is not too young to begin spreading the warmth of Christ's love and selflessness everywhere.

To the child just confirmed who says, 'But I *feel* just the same as before Confirmation' we reply that feelings are no reliable guide. At the same time we show them, by giving them certain responsibilities in the home that we, like the Church, regard them as children no longer, but as God's growing sons and daughters. Great things may be expected of them now that they have been strengthened and perfected as Christians, we tell them. The motto of St. Teresa of Avila might well be theirs:

Teresa alone can do nothing, but Teresa and Almighty God can do all things.

for the Holy Spirit is God, and the Third Person of the most Holy Trinity.

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