

The Sacrament of Reconciliation as a Family

"I am sorry"difficult words for many people to say. Often, in our culture and society, we don't place value on admitting our mistakes and failings and therefore making it unnecessary to apologize. A genuine apology requires empathy for others and the confidence and strength to admit our faults and weakness. Humility, thinking of others first, is also an important quality to have when apologizing. Jesus said to His disciples, "Learn of me, because I am gentle, and humble of heart". (Matthew 11:29)

From birth, children have the capacity for empathy, kindness and love; the Lord has placed this on their hearts. When we love others, it becomes difficult to cause them pain and hurt. In 1 Peter, the apostle Peter encourages Christians to 'have compassion for one another; love each other, be tenderhearted, and be courteous'. As they grow, children begin to understand how and when they have hurt others by their words and actions and are presented with opportunities to make amends and learn to apologize. Teaching children to say "I am sorry" is important but we should also understand that children learn to apologize in different ways.

When parents accept that their children will make mistakes, they are more equipped to help them grow from the experience. Although it seems to contradict routine parenting strategies, some would suggest that insisting on an apology isn't necessary or helpful. It's not so much the words, "I'm sorry" as it is what children learn from their mistakes and the experience. Parents should consider a patient approach that guides their children toward a change in behavior. After all, isn't that a similar teaching model given to us by Jesus? And with help from Mom and Dad, when a child recognizes their mistakes, they develop the desire and willingness to improve and do better in the future.

As children learn about God, they begin to understand how and when they go against God's wishes. Even though children have the capacity for empathy, it doesn't necessarily come easily or naturally to them. Empathy is having passion (feeling) for another person because of their suffering. As children develop a greater sense of empathy for others, they spend less time apologizing. Parents should model empathy and

forgiveness for their children—both at home and outside the home. Let them see qualities such as empathy and forgiveness in your relationship with others. Parents have a unique opportunity to model mercy, grace, and forgiveness as you say you are sorry, ask forgiveness of one another, and forgive each other.

It may be a challenge initially but celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation can become a regular practice for your family. Growing up, I was blessed to have parents who modeled the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I learned they needed God's forgiveness as well. Their example was so much more important than words. They showed us love, grace, and forgiveness at home in their relationship with each other and in their relationship with God. And reconciliation was practiced at home. We witnessed our parents apologize to each other; even for small things. And they set a powerful example by apologizing to their children.

Celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a beautiful experience of God's mercy and love. Children see the beauty of the sacrament, often more than adults. We don't go to confession because we are bad people; we go to confession because our sins won't go away just because we ignore them. Mother Theresa said, "confession is nothing but humility in action". Pope John Paul II called confession an act of "honesty and courage". And the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to it as a celebration a total of eight times. God has given us this sacrament so we can experience His love for us.

Don't assume they know; spend some time talking to your children about the Sacrament of Reconciliation so they begin to understand this beautiful sacrament. Find an examination of conscience you feel is best for your children and family and spend time reflecting on it. Pray together as a family; prayer opens hearts, young and old, to God's great love and mercy. Remember, parents are first educators of faith for their children. Your actions and practice of faith, including the Sacrament of Reconciliation, can make a lasting impression and is a wonderful gift to your children.

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