

[Spirituality](#)



Children of Holy Family Chaldean Catholic Mission read about first Communion during a class in Phoenix March 25, 2017. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



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My daughter and I teach the parish second grade Sunday school class preparing for first communion and reconciliation. The children come from many different backgrounds with many different stories: of adoption, of living with grandparents, of safe homes and bedtime stories, of a parent in jail, of growing up with disabled sibling, of restful nights and restless ones, of plenty and lack.

A story that none of them have to tell is one of serious sin. That is, not serious sin that *they* have committed.

I think it's wise to prepare children for skills they will need but can't yet master or understand, and that includes the language of sin and forgiveness. Much of my life has been spent reciting this litany to children busy snatching cookies and hitting one another, "How do you ask?" "Say, 'Please.' " "Say, 'Thank you.' " "Say, 'I'm sorry.' "

- They said, "Please," when they meant, "Gimme."
- They said, "Thank you," when they meant, "I wanted French fries."
- They said, "I'm sorry," when they clearly weren't.

They were rehearsing the steps of virtue, learning the rhythm of the dance before taking the floor. That's important. We should give children the language and movements of gratitude and repentance before they can understand them and make them their own. The question for us, as parents and teachers, is to choose wisely how we speak to children of their failures and ours and of God's unrelenting faithfulness.

On Epiphany, we asked the children to look at the crèche: Jesus in the manger, the magi on the journey. "Who moves?" I asked them.

"The three wise men," some called out. "The camels," others said.

"That's right," I answered. "The magi start out far from Jesus. Then they move closer and closer. We move away from God sometimes and then closer to God sometimes, but God never moves away from us. God is always right there, waiting for us, loving us. Just as Jesus waits for the magi. Waits for the shepherds. Waits for all to come."

So much of the language of confession is written for adults, for those of us who *have* committed serious sins. What is the proper language for second graders?

I began looking for strong, simple acts of contrition and examinations of conscience for our class. The traditional act of contrition, with its language of having offended God, its language of dreading the loss of heaven and dreading the pains of hell no more speaks to the state of these young consciences than does the seventh commandment. They can't commit adultery any more than they can offend God by their actions. They have done nothing to cause them to dread the loss of heaven.

So, I wrote an act of contrition:

Jesus, I love you. I want to walk in your way. I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me. Amen.

I began looking for an examination of conscience. I found many, some of them betraying an alarming view of 8 year olds. Here's one based on the Ten Commandments. It's [available from a Houston parish](#) for duplication and use online.

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Under the first commandment there's this prompt, "I worshipped the devil or other gods ___ times." If any second grader is aware of having worshiped the devil ___ times, or any time, that is not his sin, but the sin of the ones who are his caretakers and guardians.

Under the ninth, there is this, "I did not pray for my parents to be faithful to each other ___ times." Why would, or should, a second grader be expected to feel any responsibility for her parents' fidelity or its lack? That's a matter for the parents, and not the child, to address in confession. Can you imagine the weight of knowing that you have been tasked to, in prayer ___ times, prevent the dissolution of your parents' marriage and so, of your whole world?

Granted, this is the worst of the lot, but it's only an exaggeration of the tendency to treat young children as small adults. Here's my try, based on responsibilities to God and others:

- Have I failed to thank God for the gifts I have been given of food and shelter, and for the gifts of family and friends?
- Have I failed to ask God each day to be with me and help me?

- Have I failed to ask God each day to be and help my family, my friends and my teachers?
- Have I failed to rest in God? Have I come to Mass with a grudging heart?
- Have I failed to speak God's name with respect and love?
- Have I disobeyed my parents? Have I spoken disrespectfully to them? Have I refused to help when I am asked?
- Have I left messes for others to clean up?
- Have I lied?
- Have I refused to share with my sisters and brothers and with my friends?
- Have I hit or hurt another when I was angry?
- Have I called people names or left them out?
- Have I taken things that don't belong to me?
- Have I cheated at school or when I play games?

It is difficult to write an act of contrition or examination of conscience that feels true to a child's experience and that respects the nature and understanding of a young child. But we have to try. God's forgiveness is here. We have to find the words and gestures that help children reach out to that grace.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum's latest book, with co-author Anna Keating, is *The Catholic Catalogue: A Field Guide to the Daily Acts That Make Up a Catholic Life*.]

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