

### III

## PRAYER AS A TRAINING SCHOOL FOR CONFESSION

*"I prayed...and made my confession." Daniel 9:4*

The seed of faith that it frequently pleases God to sow within the heart of a child does not grow and flourish of its own accord. Imagine, for a moment, that a child within whose heart this seed had been planted had been kidnapped soon after its birth by a tribe of savages, that it had been taken far from its father and mother and far from the blessed influences of Christ's church. Do you suppose that child's faith would have developed? By no means, though he were now a man of thirty years of age. If the seed of faith in any child is to sprout, grow up, and burst into bloom, that child must be kept in contact with the church that baptized it, must be kept familiar with God's holy word, and must, in short, be *prepared* for making its confession.

That emphasis does not mean to imply that external means alone can ever succeed in causing faith to develop and to flourish. External means cannot cause that. All external cultivation will avail nothing unless God the Holy Ghost causes that seed of faith to germinate and unless he supports that tender growth by His divine power. If the divine influence were wanting, that seed of faith would be as unproductive as that which falls upon stony places, and all external attempts to cultivate it would be as effective as plowing a bed of rocks.

A farmer sweats at his labor and expends great care and tireless energy at tilling his fields. But unless his efforts are accompanied by the life-imparting rays of the sun, he will reap no harvest. It is equally true that the internal operations of the Holy Spirit must accompany the external means of preparation for confession if a child's confession of his Lord is to be genuine. That is not saying that God's omnipotence is limited or that is dependent upon external means to bring faith to its full fruition. A child who dies as an infant can be saved even though it has

never comprehended the word of God. God has other means of saving such infants, other means of educating to a full appreciation of their Savior. The arm of the Lord is never shortened. But for those of us who grow into consciously responsible maturity, it has pleased God to fix this law: The internal work of the Spirit and the external means of grace serve as complements to each other.

It is obvious therefore that preparation is necessary for making public confession.

Of what should that preparation consist? Merely of home and catechetical training? Does an accumulation of knowledge, a committing to memory, a familiarity with various facts and particulars suffice to prepare the child for a true confession? Indeed not. To “make confession” is a much weightier matter than to “recite a lesson,” and actively to join God’s church involves much more than to be able to repeat the tenets she embraces and the canons she professes. True, study is necessary and indispensable, and committing to memory is invaluable. Much time and attention must be devoted to giving the child a vivid impression of Christ and of his word. But these means do not, to use a figure, exhaust the curriculum in the school for the preparation for confession. If they did, one could with as much hope for success attempt to prepare pagan and Jewish children for making their confession of faith. To suppose that such means suffice would be assuming that confession is only an intellectual matter, and that the heart does not enter into it at all. Such an assumption is surely unwarranted.

It is for that reason that the preceding meditation emphasized the fact that a child must be constantly confessing Jesus among his companions at school if ever his public confession is to be a true one. To confess is to “show one’s colors” for one’s king, to be loyal to Jesus, to allow oneself to become incorporated into Christ’s battalion, and in that way to be active for his majesty and kingdom.

That child will never become an audacious soldier who, as a child, does not exhibit courage and daring among his fellows. It is even more true that no decisive confession was ever made by an adult whose eyes, when he was a child, had not sometimes lowered with indignation at every reproach heaped upon his Savior.

However, one other thing is needful for one’s preparation for confession. It is a requisite that generally is not sufficiently emphasized. The Bible names two kinds of confession: a

confession of one's Savior, and a confession of one's sins. These two kinds should coexist in the heart of a Christian, be he an adult or a child.

Your confession of your Savior and Lord before the congregation must include a confession of your personal wretchedness. A confession that desires Jesus but that is not characterized by a profound conviction of personal sin and guilt is false. Paul would call that a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Indeed, it would be a weak and flimsy confession. That is self-evident. Why a Redeemer if there be no need for redemption? How yearn for a Savior except there is a consciousness of the bonds of death? Again, why should you seek the Physician if you do not sense that your soul is sick? Yes, there should be a consciousness, a poignant, painful consciousness of personal sin and guilt. That does not mean that you must have the full and profound consciousness of your depravity in the moment you say yes before the congregation. Those who profess the necessity of that drift toward emotionalism and depart from the meaning of the word of God. But it is unequivocally true that he who confesses his Savior must confess his wretchedness also. To a degree and in a way appropriate to his age and experience, he must fully sense that he is lost, and that therefore he, together with all God's children, is taking refuge under the Savior's wings.

If one is to make one's confession in that way, one must be prepared for it from youth up. Then the child must be educated according to Daniel's rule: "I prayed, and made my confession unto the Lord."

A child must learn to pray. You must teach him to do so. Does that mean that you must convert him into a little preacher by having him display his cleverness at making prayers? No, for that would be destroying the tenderest qualities in the child's soul. Children should be kept from all attempts at ostentation. A child must learn to pray in a childlike fashion: modestly, shyly almost. There is a custom in some homes to have four or five children "rattle off" their "Lord, bless this food, Amen" successively, after the father has completed the family prayer. That custom ought to be discouraged. It thwarts fervent, heartfelt prayer in the soul of a child. Perhaps children cannot enter into the petitions of the father. Perhaps they need their own intercessor. If that is true, let one of the older children be that intercessor. Teach him to pray slowly, reverently, so that his praying may be true prayer.

And as for the rest, let their morning prayers at arising and their evening prayers at going to bed be their quiet training school for confession. In that school you must be the teacher. Hence you must give them a model, but in giving it you must pray. Then they must pray it with you. In that way they will reach the stage at which they can pray alone. Their prayer may be a formulated one sometimes, provided it be discreetly chosen and infrequently used. Formulated prayers are to be used only when the spirit is too dull to shape its own petitions. Personally engendered prayers should be the goal, the ideal. Each child should pray in his unique, individual way; he should pray not in the language of adults, but in that of children. He should express his thanks for what has made him glad, and his petitions for what troubles him. And he should give his praises just as he might give them if his Jesus were present to receive his embraces.

Above all, teach your child to pray on special occasions. The bidding "In all thy ways acknowledge him" is a fountain of riches for prayer. Mornings, at noonday, evenings—yes, indeed. But these occasions do not suffice for prayer to attain its own true value. True prayer attains its richest quality when every obstacle that life presents causes the soul to send a cry of help to God, when every joy that throbs at the heart engenders a note of praise and sends it up on high. Your child must know intimately that prayer is that. Nothing is too trivial for God's attention. A difficult lesson at school perplexes a child as much as a difficult campaign annoys a general. And the Lord God wishes to be acknowledged in all things. Hence, teach your child to pray not because you ask it, not because he knows you will observe and be pleased, but because he knows he needs the peace it gives his heart.

In that way a child should also pray for the forgiveness of sins. It is very easy to change a child into a little Pharisee. He can repeat the words "I am wretched, Lord and deserve to die," very sanctimoniously. Yet after he has cheated, or lied, or wounded his mother's feelings he has not the least personal conviction of guilt. Nevertheless, your purpose in teaching him prayer should be to augment a conviction of guilt in him. He should sense that in a childlike way but in a heartfelt manner, and should ask God to forgive him. You know how your child reacts when he has injured you. He regrets it later, comes to you ingratiatingly, sincerely, whispers into your ear that he is sorry and that you must not be angry any more. His confession to God

should be as real and sincere as that. He should confess his guilt in specific terms, should name his naughtiness as he himself appreciates his sin in them. If he does so, he prays sincerely and in a heartfelt manner. Then he is learning what justice is, and he is learning what it means to live honestly and uprightly before his God.

A mother has an especially responsible and holy calling in this matter. She cannot fulfill her responsibility unless she herself knows and has experienced the reality of prayer in the sense in which it has been defined. She must share with her children a sure and a quiet trust in God. Mothers, older sisters, housemaids—these have a holy calling and a precious privilege in teaching children to pray. Christian education is a sacred matter and a beautiful privilege. And it costs the soul many an exacting effort.