

Why Your Kids Don't Go to Confession

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Fifteen years. That's how long I have been ordained. And in that time, I have always been assigned to a parish with a Catholic school. This means that I have a generation out there of Catholic school "kids" aged 15- to 30-years-old, hopefully still Catholic, some of whom may now be married and having kids of their own.

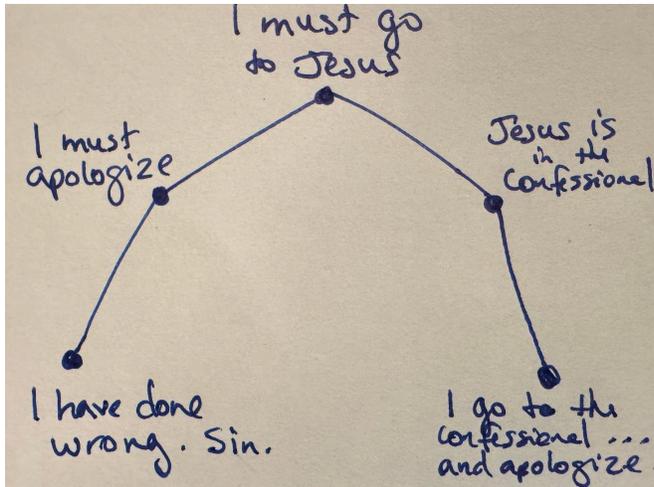
Like many Catholics born in the previous Century, I am wondering why my spiritual children (and grandchildren) are not practicing the faith. And, for this "pre-Lenten" Substack post I am particularly wondering why they aren't going to confession. Even in Lent.

Well, after fifteen years, I can tell you why. Please forgive my arrogance.

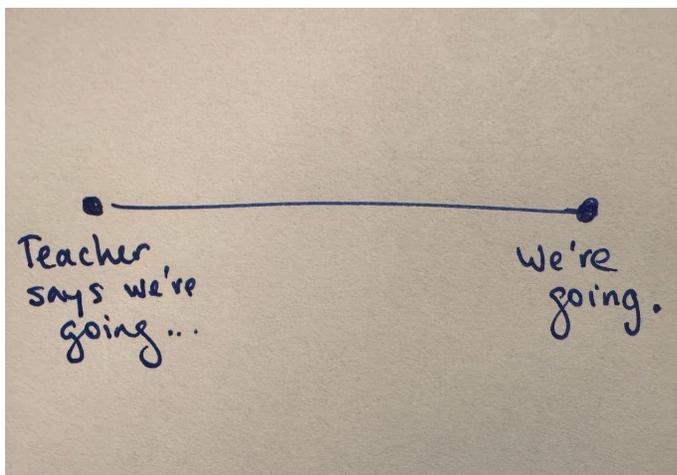
In the next few weeks, if you have a son or daughter in a Catholic school, your child's teacher is going to say the following words: "Ok kids, it's Lent! So we're going to confession today. Let's examine our conscience and we'll go." And that, right there, is why your kids – and my spiritual kids – are not going to confession as adults.

Yes, I'll explain.

When you and I go to confession, there are several dots that we must connect before we get into the confessional. We must first realize that we have done something wrong; then we must admit that wrong-doing requires apology; when it comes to apologizing to God, not all ways are equal; so I admit that I have to go to confession; and then, after I have gathered up the gumption to do so, I go to confession. For a mature Catholic, our "dot structure" looks like this:



Compare that with the dot structure of a typical Catholic school student.



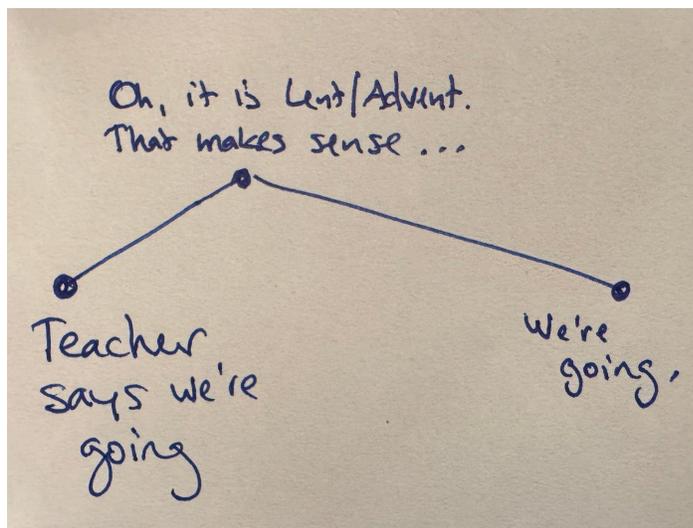
On a random day in Lent (or Advent) they are told by their teacher, "Today is confession day! So, we will examine our conscience during second period [examination of conscience only if your kids go to a "good school"] and then, before lunch, we will go to church." They go to confession before lunch and, by lunchtime, they have pretty much forgotten that they ever went.

If this “confession day” happened in Lent – say, in February – and if the child doesn’t go again until that pre-determined but totally random day in Advent (in December) that means it will have been roughly 9-10 months since your child’s last confession.

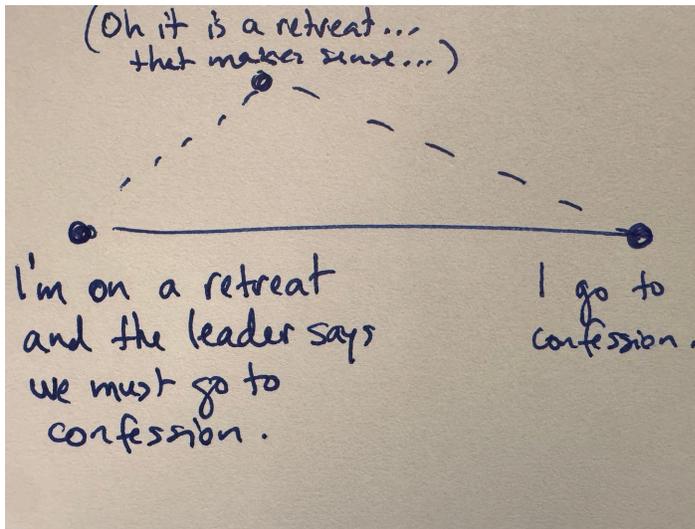
Can we really say that is healthy?

From an educational standpoint, there is absolutely no way that children will remember ANY un-repeated lessons after ten months. As a priest, I find it miraculous that any student makes any noticeable progress at all. This is true not only for a Catholic Day School, but also for the night schools (CCD, PSR, etc).

If our child learns any lesson via the above dot structure (a lesson that is learned only by the particularly astute, really), the lesson is that, during Lent and Advent (when the random Confession Day arrives), we should perhaps *expect* that someone will *invite* us to confession. Maybe. We learn that *The Season* is the reason for confession. Not the Sin. And not the mercy.



As a priest in an Archdiocese, I am called to help with confessions at retreats (Cursillo, CHRP, ACTS, etc). And, wouldn't you know it? The dot structure of the Catholic school still applies! Here is what it looks like:



Perhaps the retreatants are (finally) catechized on the retreat about sin and the need for contrition and so on. And that's marvelous. But, I can tell you from personal experience: most retreatants go to confession because they have been reminded to go – not because they were particularly convicted of sin and convinced that confession is the absolute remedy.

THIS is why your Catholic-schooled children and grand-children don't go to confession when they graduate from Catholic school. For them, confession was a school thing, not a sin thing. For so many parents, we think that confession being a school thing would provide enough momentum to propel their child into Catholic maturity. It doesn't.

Here's the measure: if your eighth grader goes to a Friday night party and does something dumb (ie, sinful), would he or she ask you to take him to confession the next day? If not, you need to start connecting some dots. It is the parents' duty – during the summer, for example – that when they saw their little Jimmy or their little Jane do something wrong, to point that wrong out; to then practice “immediacy” (that is, to instruct them what to do when they had sinned); to teach them that the remedy to sin is Jesus in the confessional; and then to take them there. Get used to this appointment. Especially in the summer. And parents need to start going to confession in the summer.

If confession remains a Catholic school thing, a CCD thing, a PSR thing – well, when those things disappear, which it absolutely does at graduation, so to do all the dots that used to lead the not-yet-matured Catholic to the confessional. And if you understand that, you understand why the same can be said about Catholic schools and the Catholic Mass. *Hey kids! It's Wednesday. And Wednesday is Mass day! We go to Mass!*

If the parents do not connect more dots, Holy Mass will be just a Catholic School thing ... and when Catholic school disappears at graduation, so too will Holy Mass. Which is exactly what happens. That's why your kids don't go to Mass. And that's why your kids don't go to confession. The Catholic school was never meant to replace the parents. But everyone was happily let it. We cannot claim ignorance nor victimhood any more. If our kids don't go, it's our own dumb fault.

Maybe this Lent that's one of the things we should confess....