

## Marie-Hélène Mathieu's Column

### Can severely disabled people receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

Mgr Stéphane Desmazières, the then bishop of Beauvais, judged quite obviously, until his meeting with l'Arche, 'that a sacrament could not be given to someone who does not understand anything and does not know what it is that he/she is doing'. At the retreat in the Saint-Rémi-les-Chevreuses community, he confided his consternation at its new ministry to limited people.

At the time of a penitential celebration, he saw a man arrive who looked at him without saying anything and who was waiting. His look seemed to say: "*What are you expecting to give the forgiveness of God that I have come to seek?*" Then the bishop understood that he was there in the name of Jesus, testimony of his merciful tenderness. He tried to translate it by his look, his smile, some words full of gentleness, then he said that he was going to give the forgiveness of Jesus. He spoke, with a certain gravity, the words of absolution, slowly making the sign of a large cross over the man. Then he finished: '*Go in peace, my son, God has forgiven all your sins.*' With these words, the young man opened his arms and embraced him and, with a radiant face, went away.

In order to give forgiveness for his sins to a severely disabled person, the important thing, therefore, would not be their formulated confession but their implicit recognition of weakness and misery.

In this sense, three events in the Gospel enlighten us. Three meetings where Jesus makes us understand that it is always God who loves us first, who takes the initiative and that He does not need a formulated confession to give his mercy. Zacchaeus, chief tax collector and thief, was so deeply moved by the extraordinary words: '*Zacchaeus, come down immediately, we are going to stay at your house today*', that without making a confession in the strictest sense, he announced his conversion on all the points where he had lapsed.

There is also the paralysed man taken to Jesus on a stretcher carried by four men. Had he even asked to see Jesus? In any case, he had not said a word, confessed any sin, when Jesus, seeing his gaze, said to him: '*Your sins are forgiven*'.

Even more astonishing. It was Jesus who looked at Peter and asked him: '*Do you love me?*', without waiting for the apostle to ask his forgiveness for his betrayal.

But all three objectively carried the weight of their sins. What happens with a severely disabled person? Is he/she capable of committing a sin and regretting it? Certainly, it is very difficult to distinguish the guilt of anyone, even more so of a person who is not able to express it. Like us, he/she is injured by the original sin, he/she retains the freedom, if limited in his/her expression, to say 'yes' or 'no' to the love offered to him/her. Recognise in him/her this share of responsibility, it helps him/her grow in maturity and in the gift of him/herself according to his/her true age and not his/her mental age. In effect, whatever his/her development, we should not infantilise him/her.

How can we ensure the best conditions for preparing to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for meeting the priest in private?

Parents tell me about the importance of a family atmosphere where the forgiveness given and received is natural as soon as the peace has been broken. Brothers, sisters and even parents each express it in their own way. The disabled person can often find the gesture (hug, kiss, favour done ...) to show regret for his/her angry, sulky, aggressive attitude...

It is vital for the disabled person to see his/her parents and other adults ask for and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a true joy in order to sense that this sacrament is also for them.

What more immediate preparation for this sacrament can be considered? We, parents or educators, should not anticipate the dialogue with the priest too much with questions, which risk breaking the privacy of the person, but recall how much Jesus loves him/her and is awaiting him/her. We can, however, go over the different parts of the day where he/she has the opportunity to accept or refuse the love. Rather than lingering on the past too much, it is worth considering already the meeting with Jesus and awake his/her desire to please Him. With some people, communication is limited to a few gestures. A priest who spends a good deal of his time with them recalls these signs of comprehension: 'Céline expresses herself by grasping my little finger, Flora endeavours to look at me and Richard gives a hint of a quite weak smile'.

Monseigneur Gérard Daucourt<sup>1</sup> tells of a penitential day at l'Arche close to Rome, where each person had to find a gesture, drawing, photo or song to translate what he/she understood of the Sacrament of Forgiveness. 'Vittorio', he wrote, '*turned up with a stone that he showed to everyone by pressing it strongly on his heart. Then, he gave it to the priest and went and embraced each member of the community. The sin, the forgiveness by the ministry of the priest and the reconciliation, all had been recalled!*'

However, where can we find priests, educators and catechists who can give the time to be patiently attentive to each of these people, to also endeavour to acquire a competency in non-verbal methods of communication?

Doubtless, by giving them the opportunity to experiment with these little ones to whom God reveals his mysteries, how much the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a gift of freedom and consolation for those who receive it as much as for those who give it, is also revealed.

**Marie-Hélène Mathieu**

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<sup>1</sup> Mgr Daucourt, bishop of Nanterre, has written a magnificent little book: *Je ne peux pas dire "Jésus" mais je l'aime* (I cannot say 'Jesus' but I love Him). Les Chemins de l'Arche ; la Ferme, B.P 35, 60350 Trosly-Breuil.