

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 13 – PENANCE AND RECONCILIATION (Confession)

We come now to the Sacrament which most people call CONFESSION and which the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to as the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The word ‘reconciliation’ reminds us of something that is often forgotten - namely the SOCIAL aspect of sin. When I was talking of JUDGEMENT, I mentioned that sin is like a small child disobeying its mother and putting its hand in the fire. The result, of course, was not just that the child disobeyed its mother but, as a consequence, it burned itself. Now we shall look at another consequence of sin.

When I commit sin, three things happen: first, I offend God and so need to be FORGIVEN; secondly, I damage myself and so need to be HEALED; and thirdly, I destroy or damage my relationship with all the members of Christ’s Body, the Church and so I need to be RECONCILED. A septic finger, if neglected, does not just remain a septic finger - the poison spreads and the whole body is infected. The effects of this Sacrament deal with all three of these consequences of sin. So, the sins I have committed are forgiven, the damage I have done to myself is healed and I am reconciled with all the members of Christ’s Body, the Church.

The signs used in this sacrament should, therefore, in some way, indicate these things. THE AUDIBLE SIGN is the ABSOLUTION - the words of forgiveness spoken by the priest. They are. “GOD THE FATHER OF MERCIES, THROUGH THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HIS SON, HAS RECONCILED THE WORLD TO HIMSELF AND SENT THE HOLY SPIRIT AMONG US FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS. THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH MAY GOD GIVE YOU PARDON AND PEACE AND I ABSOLVE YOU FROM YOUR SINS IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.” So this sign clearly indicates that I am forgiven.

Sometimes THE VISIBLE SIGN is not seen by the penitent if he or she is separated from the priest by a curtain or a grill. But, whether it is seen or not, the priest holds his hands, or at least his right hand, towards (or over) the penitent, just as Our Lord stretched out his hand to heal the leper. A clear sign, therefore of healing.

What of reconciliation? Well, the priest is the representative of the Community, the Church, witnessing my desire to be forgiven, healed and reconciled with that Community. And on behalf of that community, he reconciles me. You may remember my mentioning earlier people who say: “I tell God in my heart I’m sorry for my sins.” Such people simply don’t realise that there is a need to “go public” as we say nowadays and the Penitential Rite at Mass when I confess to “you my brothers and sisters” shows that we recognise the need to be reconciled. Here, in this Sacrament, I am reconciled and the priest is the witness. In many parishes there is a weekly or monthly time for Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament with Confession available at the same time. This is an excellent practice since it not only gives the Sacrament the dignity it deserves but, also, it makes it a public ceremony and thus a more meaningful sign of reconciliation.

Here’s one more point. Our Lord told the parable of the Prodigal Son in order to illustrate God’s Compassion, Generosity and Eagerness to forgive the sinner - and it is significant that the story ended with a CELEBRATION.

When I was dealing with the Sacraments in general, I said they were MEETINGS with Christ and that we needed to do all we could to make those meetings as WHOLE-HEARTED as possible. Surely this must mean taking great care over the TIME I go, the PLACE I choose, and the MANNER in which I confess.

I mentioned in the second chapter on the Church, that the forgiveness of sins was one of the two great powers given to the Church and, most importantly, that the one who had been given the power to forgive (i.e. the priest) had to decide whether to forgive or not. So, an act of judgement was called for - shall I forgive or not? And you may remember the two obvious conditions: first, the priest must know WHAT he is forgiving and, secondly, he must be satisfied that the penitent is SORRY (an expression of ‘contrition’ as it is often called). How could he know unless he is told? Hence, of course, the need for CONFESSION.

There are, then, three conditions required of the one forgiving:

- He must obviously have the power - so he must be a priest and have the right to USE that power - called faculties.
- He must know what it is he is forgiving.
- He must be satisfied that the penitent is sorry.

What conditions are required of the one asking forgiveness? The ACTS OF THE PENITENT as they are called. Again, there are three:-

- CONTRITION: that is, genuine sorrow for the sin(s) committed and a firm purpose of amendment.
- CONFESSION: the penitent must confess all post-baptismal mortal sin. To deliberately conceal serious sin is a grievous sin of sacrilege.
- SATISFACTION: the penitent must accept and perform the penance given by the priest.

How often should we go to Confession? There are two guidelines here. First, those conscious of mortal sin not yet confessed are bound to confess as soon as possible and never less than once a year. Those not conscious of mortal sin strictly speaking need not confess. However, to deliberately neglect the Sacrament to this extent is the sign of an extremely lax CONSCIENCE and such people usually end up in mortal sin.

Secondly, the Church recommends frequent confession and She has in mind here people who have not committed mortal sin. Why is this? Well, you may remember that I mentioned earlier that one of the effects of this sacrament is healing. Now there are two kinds of medicine - CURATIVE and PREVENTATIVE. Thus, I take an aspirin to cure a headache. But suppose I am going on business to Kenya - I get an inoculation against yellow fever to prevent my catching the disease. This is the thinking here. I am encouraged to confess frequently not so much to GET OUT of sin as to KEEP OUT of it.

In other words, we need the Grace of the Sacrament to help us to resist temptation and to avoid the occasions of sin. Incidentally, those who take trouble over the choice of WHEN, WHERE and TO WHOM they confess, invariably go regularly! Personally, I recommend at least once a month.

I now want to return to the subject of sin itself. I said I would do so when dealing with the FORGIVENESS OF SINS. You may remember I mentioned three conditions that must be simultaneously present before mortal sin is committed. Commenting on the second condition – that there must be full knowledge - I said that I cannot commit mortal sin if there is ignorance or inattention present.

Sin is a decision of the mind and will. Just as PRAYER is the raising up of the mind and heart TO God so sin is the turning away of the mind and heart FROM God. The essence of sin lies in this turning away from the will of God or - and this is very important - WHAT IS THOUGHT TO BE the will of God. Just as if I do not realise a thing is wrong I do not commit sin, so if I think a thing is wrong and go ahead and do it then I do commit sin! The deliberate turning away is present even though I am mistaken in thinking the thing is wrong.

All this brings me to that much misunderstood thing called CONSCIENCE. Let us clear away common errors first. Conscience is NOT a 'guilty feeling'. I may 'feel guilty' and yet do no wrong at all. Many pious people who are in hospital may say they FEEL guilty at missing Mass! Whereas I doubt if Hitler felt in the least bit guilty when he sent millions of Jews to the Gas Chamber. Conscience is not an infallible guide - either because it did not tell the ignorant person he was doing wrong, or because it failed to tell the misinformed person that what he thought was sin was not. So what, then, is conscience? Conscience, we say, is a FACULTY.

It is a faculty given us by God to enable us to judge the morality of our acts. In other words, to tell us if something is right or wrong. However, in order for it to function properly three things are required:

- It needs **SUFFICIENT INFORMATION**. This is provided over the years by parents, schools, priests and the teaching authority of the Church.
- The information must be **CORRECT**. If conscience has been *misinformed* then when it is examined on that point it will invariably *misinform* you. However, provided conscience has **SUFFICIENT** information - and that information is **CORRECT** - we say it is **AN INFORMED CONSCIENCE**. Nevertheless, to function properly it still requires a third thing:
- It must be **REGULARLY USED**. However well-informed my conscience may be, if I neglect to examine it regularly, it will become **LAX** and in the end die.

The term “examination of conscience” is often used in an incorrect way. Thus if I were to say to myself just before going to confession: “Lying is a sin - have I lied?” I am not examining my conscience, I am refreshing my memory! For proper examination of conscience, conscience and memory work hand-in-hand. Thus, at the end of the day, **MEMORY** recalls all the events of the day, while **CONSCIENCE** makes judgements on those events. So for instance memory says I said such-and-such to Mrs. Smith and then conscience says “That was wrong!” Conscience only requires memory when it is dealing with the past. It can work in the present by telling you that what you are saying or doing now is wrong and it can cover the future by telling you that what you are contemplating doing would be wrong.

Correctly and sufficiently informed - and regularly used - conscience does a great job. Let me just sum up what this wonderful Sacrament obtains for me:

- **FORGIVENESS** of my **SINS**.
- **HEALING** of the **DAMAGE** they have **DONE** to me

and

- **RECONCILIATION** with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

The words of absolution indicate the forgiveness. The hands of the priest indicate the healing. The presence of the priest indicates the reconciliation.

To be able to forgive - one must be a priest, know what has been done, and be satisfied the penitent is sorry. To be forgiven - one requires Contrition, Confession and Satisfaction (that is, performance of the penance imposed by the priest).

To make the meeting with Christ whole-hearted:

- Great care should be taken over when, where, how and to whom I confess.
- Great care should be taken over the examination of conscience beforehand.
- Great care should be taken too over the thanksgiving and performance of the penance afterwards.

So - if I really take trouble, this Sacrament can become for me, what God meant it to be: **A SIGN OF HIS COMPASSION, JOY AND EAGERNESS TO FORGIVE**. Indeed, **A TRUE CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION**.