

CONFESSION TO A PRIEST:

What it is Not, What it Does to Society, What to the Individual.

BY THE REV. W. H. ANDERSON, S.J.

I.—What Confession is Not.

People's mistakes about the Catholic Faith, and the charges of some who ought to know better, take various lines. They "shall say all manner of evil against you, falsely, for My sake." The supremacy of the Pope is popularly denounced as ambition; the Sacramental system, as priestcraft; the science of casuistry, as the art of lying; intentions of Masses, as the greed of wealth. Definitions of dogma? they are said to be bondage to the intellect; spiritual guidance? it is bondage to the will; recommending almsdeeds? it is robbing the widow and orphan; evangelical counsels? rank Manichaeism; repression of error by Catholic powers? old-world intolerance. Such are the opinions about us in the public mind. We are all these things together; or now one, now the other, according to the humour of the moment. The wind shifts and veers, but the bark of Peter steers among many rocks, and is always close on a lee-shore. "The Church of Rome," says someone in a popular serial, "hardens the heart; but, en revanche, it softens the brain!" (Of course the very opposite is the truth of the matter!)

The charges against the Sacrament of Penance are darker still. Men do not hesitate to accuse those whom Our Lord has consecrated to minister the means of grace to His people of being ministers of evil, of conscious, voluntary, systematic evil. Not only of being unworthy, personally, of their vocation to peculiar holiness—which has been the case (God knows) in the Church's history—but they are supposed to be, in the confessional, agents of evil, instruments of evil, practitioners, teachers, inculcators of evil. Of evil most hateful in the eyes of God, Who is thrice-holy.

Men say all this in an easy, off-hand kind of way, which is by no means without its malice. Some of them, it is to be feared, would even feel sorry to be undeceived. Yet a person need not be knowingly malicious, or dishonest, to have some uneasy suspicions of the kind. It is riot hard to imagine a "man of good-will" saying to a Catholic: "Many parts of your system attract me. I feel their beauty, their solemnity and reasonableness, but I do not see my way through the confessional. There is something dark and mysterious there. What goes on in it? What is said and advised? I wonder what is confessed, and under what conditions it is absolved? Confession gives great power to man over his fellows: and man is a poor, frail creature, after all. Power is dangerous to him. Experience, and the poet, tell us that man,

"Dressed in a little brief authority,
Plays such fantastic tricks, before high heaven,
As make the angels weep.'

Are any such tricks played in that sacred tribunal?"

Now, to answer this man of good-will—not the professed calumniator, who gets his bread by unwashed falsehood—we make three statements.

1. The confessional is not a school of evil.

It is repulsive even to put this in words, speaking, as we are, of one of the Holy Sacraments of Our Lord's Church. Sanctity, as every little child may know, is one of the four great marks of that Church, to create and perpetuate which Jesus suffered on the Cross. [One, Holy, Apostolic, and Catholic.] And the Church is holy, among other reasons, in virtue of the Holy Sacraments which she administers.

They are the channels of grace, and grace is a gift from the All-holy God. But they who do not believe the Sacraments can only look on the outside of things. And what they see is not self-evidently holy, but simply mysterious. It may be holy or unholy for aught they know, for they know nothing, and can know next to nothing. People disappear within the confessional, and come out again. The priest is bound by the Sacramental seal, not so much as to hint, or breathe upon,

anything he has heard. The person confessing is also bound to some extent, though not Sacramentally, yet by sacred obligations of trust and confidence. Why? Because the whole transaction is supernatural. It has no relation to any other mode of acknowledgement, or to any other manifestation, or to mere human and friendly counsel. These may be honourable to both parties, and advantageous to the seekers : but they are not Sacramental confession.

So our well-meaning man, having derived no light from what he sees, and perhaps little from inquiry, has no resource but to go to our books and find out for himself.

He goes, then, to our books—books that need not fear the light, though they were not written for him. They were written for men who are called to be practitioners in the most discriminative and delicate science that can occupy human thought. Such books are not less necessary because they must needs be partly concerned with painful details. Sin itself is a matter of detail; it is not only a general state of soul, but a succession of acts, words, thoughts, omissions. The confessor, like the judge in a court, hears about sins, and enforces rules for amendment, in detail. He must know the individual case of his penitent, and in all needful detail. If he did not, he would be like the falsely charitable man of whom St. James speaks, who says to the needy, “Go in peace, be you warmed and filled,” yet gives not those things that are needful—“what shall it profit?”

The priests of God, under the law, had the office of viewing, discerning, and declaring those who came to them, to be either tainted and excommunicated lepers or clean from leprosy. A whole chapter in Leviticus is occupied with the rules that were to guide the priest in this office of discerning. They make up, so to say, a treatise of moral theology on the subject of leprosy, issued by divine command, and in great detail. The leper is to come and manifest himself. What would it profit it he came to the priest muffled up, and not (as Our Lord bade the lepers in the Gospel) showing himself to the priest? This would be just like a sinner coming to acknowledge his guilt in general, not detailing it as far as is needed for the priest to Judge of his case. It would be neither more nor less than the “General Confession” in the Protestant prayer-book, which is easier to make than even coming to church.

A man who does not believe the Gospel must, of course, disbelieve the power of the priest. The Jews, disbelieving the Gospel, by logical consequence denied that power in the Person of the Author of Sacraments, the Great High Priest. Their objections, then, were the objections against the confessional now. They said, “Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” “Who is this that forgives sins also?” Perfectly true, if they were right in rejecting Christ. Perfectly false, since He is true. Our Lord can absolve by a word, for He is God, which the Jews did not believe. And, because He is God, they to whom He has given the power can absolve by a word—which most non-Catholics do not believe. The unbelief is the same in both cases. Men do not believe that the human is secretly endowed with the superhuman power. But does anyone really believe the words, “Receive all of you the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them.” “I will give to you (Peter) the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven”? Then for that man to suppose it needless that the conscience of the penitent should be examined, and that the priest should be instructed to examine it, is to show a want of good sense that men would be ashamed of in any question of politics, commerce, or social science.

It is a pity, they who are so ready to quote, translate, or caricature our books, when it seems to suit their purpose, should not quote and translate other passages in them, quite as easy to find. For on the threshold of treatises on some departments of moral science, none the less needful to divers classes of souls because they are painful and distressing, the student is solemnly warned to study with the fear and thought of God before his eyes; to study them simply for His glory and his neighbour’s good; in a spirit, not of curiosity, but of humble prayer. Subjects, without which a treatise on moral science would be as fatally incomplete as an imperfect treatise on physical healing, are entered upon reluctantly, and treated just so far as is demanded by the good of souls. They are to be studied by those for whom alone they are intended and, therefore, so written as to remove them from popular use. Students for whom these treatises are meant either possess or aspire to the supernatural gift of consecration to the priesthood. They are, by office, obligation, and rule, men of prayer, trained to keep their consciences jealously from every permitted thought of sin. They endeavour, and pray that divine grace may crown their endeavour, to look on the transgressions of their brethren as the sun looks on the foul places of

earth, with undefiled eye; they only approach the field of swine that they may bring back from it the repentant prodigal.

Further, ecclesiastical students are warned that, when they enter on their ministry, and receive confessions, they are to be most careful in the questions they put. They are never to push them beyond what is really needful. They are to err on the side of too little rather than of too much; to consult more for the profit of souls than even for the integrity of the Sacrament; to avoid, above all things, suggesting, much more making known, what the penitent may be happily ignorant of.

In a word, prudence—the delicate and vigilant prudence of a saintly temper of soul, jealous for the divine honour and the good of others—is among the first qualities for a confessor. He is a physician of souls, bound to know his science thoroughly, and to apply it with careful, anxious discrimination. A medical man would be poorly furnished who had not read surgical treatises that gave detailed accounts of all manner of diseases and painful operations. Do these things corrupt or harden his heart, when his motive for the study is high and pure? Do people get up public meetings, and go about lecturing against him, because such books are on his shelves and such knowledge is in his head? Who denounces him as unworthy the confidence of the fathers of families, or of the purest of a nation's daughters, because he is a scientific surgeon, and not a mere blundering empiric? What the surgeon is in the physical order, the priest is in the spiritual. Rather, the priest has a science and an office as much more responsible, delicate, and needful than the other's, as the soul is more precious than the body, and the grace of God than bodily health or life. There is a most true proverb, that the surgeon should have "an eagle's eye, a lion's heart, and a lady's hand." And this, in a higher and better sense, is what the careful, prayerful study of moral theology tends to make the confessor.

How far does this common sense view of things enter into the statement regarding us, or even the wish and hope about us, of those who cater for the public attention, and for blind public prejudice, on the subject of confession?

2. The confessional does not encourage sin.

Here, again, we must put ourselves in the position of the inquirer. He sees people go to confession, and come back. Outwardly, they return much as they went. There is nothing demonstrative about them, either way. It may be hoped, could he observe minutely their conduct and motives, he would trace in them the decided benefit they have received. Not being able to do this, his conclusion is, and his fear for them (if a man of good-will), that they come back not greatly the better for it. Confession, he thinks, must become very much a thing of course, a mere routine, and people may be so habituated to considering sin, and to stating it, as to blunt a sense of its evil. They may lose the thorough determination to "go and sin no more." Novelists, and such historians and controversial writers as are writers of fiction, contribute to swell this powerful tradition.

Two points of Catholic theology may be stated in answer.

(a) The gravity of sin.

Sins are mortal or venial, according as they destroy the life of the soul, by cutting it off from God, or only wound and weaken it—a distinction founded in common sense as well as faith, and acted on every day by the world at large. He who steals a handkerchief is not a murderer, nor he who strikes a schoolfellow a parricide. No man was ever hanged at the Old Bailey for a jocose falsehood.

Let us take venial sin. Is it a small thing, because it is smaller than mortal? Does confession teach people to make light of it?

Venial sin is the greatest evil under the sun, next only to mortal. One venial sin is a greater evil than all possible pains and misfortunes affecting mankind. If by telling a venial falsehood I could save the lives of all in a neighbourhood, of all in London, all in Great Britain, Europe, the world, I must not do the greater evil to save the less. No famines, pestilences, wars, no diseases, reverses, bereavements, or deaths the most horrible, can equal the evil of one little venial sin. For sin, even venial, is aimed against God, Who is the highest Good; whereas all other evils affect the mere creature. Theologians carry the statement much further; but this may suffice to our point.

Such is the doctrine of the Church, therefore of every priest in the confessional. Therefore, the popular apprehension about confession being a routine business, with all else which amusing writers of fiction have joked, hinted, or declared, is

one unmitigated error. May it appear for them at the Last Day to have been an involuntary, inculpable error? Charity bids us hope it, though experience sometimes makes it difficult to suppose.

(b) The necessity that lies on all who confess their sins to resolve against them with earnestness.

Confession is not a process of rubbing out old scores and running up new ones. The penitent must be really penitent, or he cannot be absolved. Now, it is, of course, a part of real penitence to resolve to sin no more. To suppose otherwise would be a contradiction in terms. Moreover, this resolution to forsake the sin he has confessed must be firm, such as is likely to stand the brunt of trials and difficulties in serving God. It must be effectual, not a vague determination in general. He must specially propose to himself to procure means to improve and use them. He must resolve to surround himself with safeguards against a relapse into his sins; also, to avoid the occasions of them. It must be universal; his resolution must extend to all mortal sins, such as he has committed, or such as he might commit. The more thoroughly it extends over all venial sins, the better is the confession. Without so total an aversion from mortal sin, which is the death of the soul, it is plain there can be no true conversion to God, Who is the life of the soul.

3. Nor is the confession of the faithful such an advantage to the clergy as some are fond of supposing.

On the contrary, it forms the most laborious and exhausting department of their work, for which they neither do nor can receive any remuneration. The honorarium given to the priest, as a contribution towards his support, by those who ask to appropriate the intention of his Mass is founded on the principle St. Paul lays down: "They who serve the altar partake with the altar." But no such explanation holds with regard to confession, for no such consideration is known. It would be a distinct sin to accept it—the sin of Simony. The Sacraments are never the matter of barter and sale, and the confessor works on, in the tribunal of penance, with only one hope of remuneration. He hopes, at last, to hear from his Master, "well done, good and faithful servant; enter you into the joy of your Lord." And his hopes rest on the consoling promise: "They that instruct many to justice {shall shine} as stars for all eternity." (Daniel 12; 3)

These three considerations, duly and prayerfully weighed by honest inquirers, may do something towards shaking the gigantic tradition of calumny which the interest of some, the prejudice of many, have combined to build, and daub with very untempered mortar.

Prayerfully weighed, for, after all, true conviction is a matter of divine grace, and grace is won by prayer.

"A man convinced against his will

Is of the same opinion still":

And this is why, all along, we have addressed the men of good-will. None other would listen; nor, if they listened, would heed.

II—It Confers Benefits on Society and on the Individual.

If some misconceptions have been now cleared away, let us proceed to two positive statements.

(a) Confession is a benefit to society.

For what is the greatest good of society? What, therefore, the object of an enlightened, philanthropic statesman and legislator? Surely, the production of good citizens, good members of the community; and, in this way, the greatest possible good of the greatest possible number. To suppose everyone good would be Utopian; it would imply a kingdom of saints. But a Government is Christian, a community peaceful and prosperous a people happy, in proportion as the condition of things tends to this result. Our condition of things is un-Christian, and the Government would seem to neglect a primary duty by tacit sanction of much that militates against public order and morality in the public press, in objects of art, stage exhibitions, and other like things. Free institutions, exaggerated, come to this: license to go astray, and to lead others astray.

But suppose every authority conscientious, and the powers that are, more vigilant in this respect than they are. Still, there would be a limit to their possibilities. The mark proposed to itself by an imaginary Government—somewhere in the Fortunate Isles -as stated above, would be a high point to reach; but, "thus far it would go, no further." Men of secular authority must needs stop at external acts, for they cannot penetrate beyond. If they legislated for these, and bore the

sword of the executive for these in a Christian way, it would be a vast deal; it would do much towards bringing back the ages of Faith. If they who direct the widest spheres of action, they who are the rulers of public opinion, and who thereby mould and influence also the narrowest spheres of family life, would take a leaf out of the moral theology of the confessional, we should see an improvement throughout the land. To draw this truth out in detail would be writing a Utopia, and it is to be supposed our blessed twentieth century would not stand it.

However, such would be the highest point a mere human power could attain. When educators have done their utmost with a population, and laws are framed and enforced on a Christian basis, having in view man's best interest, not material and commercial only nor chiefly, but moral, the human authority ends there. Why? Because man can only enforce outward conformity on his fellow-man. It needs a higher sanction of authority, and a spiritual motive, to reach the inner will. You may enact penal laws in terrorem, and execute them; you cannot move the interior assent:

*“For who would force the will, tilts with a straw
Against a giant cased in adamant.”*

Consequently, if legislators were wise, then, after the schoolmaster, the lecturer, the policeman, the judge, the prison-inspector, had each done his duty, they would call in the confessor. Rather, they would invite the confessor from the first, and be glad to promote the exercise of his functions. His business would supersede most of the others. For his sphere is the interior will. And if the best Christian makes the best citizen, is it not worth the inquiry, how far the best frequenter of the confessional makes the best Christian? Reason is perfectly good within its sphere, and Faith is never against it, though beyond and above it. So, too, education, treatises, lectures, social science, police regulations, prison discipline, reformatories, asylums for the insane, are all excellent; the spiritual influence in the spiritual tribunal is never against them, while always beyond and above them. Medical treatment is a right good thing when you have actually caught the complaint, but we all acknowledge that “prevention is better than cure.”

Let us note some chief points in which confession is beneficial both to society and to the individual, for, clearly, benefit to the former mostly involves benefit to the latter.

The statistics of poverty, crime, and lunacy would show two things : First, the appalling amount of misery rife in the community. Secondly, the enormous sums of money that we spend, or that officials spend for us, in vainly trying to prevent crime, then in punishing it, then in reforming (more or less well) the criminal. Also, in maintaining at our cost the incurable victim of crime, whether incorrigible or lunatic. Another interesting table would show the proportion borne, among Catholic criminals, by the number of confessions, previous to conviction, to the number of convictions. How often confession before conviction? Moralists tabulate convicts, as to whether they can or cannot read and write; then they reason upon their tables, and say, “See cause and effect.” It might show a surprising result if they tabulated convicts as to whether they have been going to confession or no.

(1) Drunkenness is one of the monster evils cankering society, and, if we believe medical evidence, all classes of society. Confession is the antagonist to drunkenness. It would be curious to discover how often the pledge is given in the confessional, and how many have dated their reform from that moment.

(2) The Social Evil must disappear in proportion as confession is frequented, in spite of our calumniators. And that in two ways: because of the strength there imparted against temptation, and because of the firm resolutions there exacted against relapse, and to avoid dangerous occasions of sin.

(3) Restitution. This is enforced in confession as an absolute duty, without which, where it is possible, or without the settled purpose of it as soon as possible, there can be no absolution given. Yet, here, again, confession supplies in its own more perfect way what the human legislature, and executive aim at, and can only attain in part. The natural conscience of man testifies to the need of restitution; witness the public acknowledgements of the Chancellor of the Exchequer from time to time, on the receipt of unclaimed taxes. But an executive can only enforce the repair of the fraud when discovered. The confessor detects it in its source, the will, and he heals it there, before it has come out in act, or while the act is still hid from the knowledge of man. Voltaire, amid his impieties, as though forced for a moment to speak the truth,

somewhere acknowledges the wholesome influence of confession in this respect. Whether he did so or no, it needs little observation to bring any thinking man to that conclusion.

But restitution is not only of goods ill-gotten or detained. It is also of good name and character taken away. Is this no benefit to society at large, and to the peace and happiness of families? Characters taken away must be restored—restored with a publicity that shall bear proportion to the wrong inflicted.

Here we see the result and the benefit. In how many cases of prevention do the result and the benefit remain unknown?

(4) **The secret societies** that have worked so much evil, and work it today, and will work more yet, are directly opposed by confession. This is so true, and the propagandists of those societies are so well aware of it, that they inculcate on their disciples to keep away from confession, or to come with sacrilege on their lips, concealing their membership. We have yet to see the final result of those ungodly combinations. But whatever evil they may bring on society would be simply prevented by frequenting the confessional, in which they are unconditionally forbidden. [Note this was written before the disasters of Mexico and Spain in the 1930's, and the evils of Ku-Klux in America or Mau-Mau in Kenya, were widely known.]

(5) **Madness.** Intemperance and ill-regulated affection are stated by competent judges to be among the chief causes of insanity. Both of these are directly met by confession. But its remedies for an insane mind extend more widely. For madness ensues on solitude of spirit. A mind becomes morbid when shut up within itself, and where it has no outlet of thought, nor authoritative adviser and guide.

(Footnote, Coleridge wrote:

*“Each pore and natural outlet withered up
By ignorance, and parching poverty,
His energies roll inward on himself,
And stagnate and corrupt, till, changed to poison,
They break out on him, like a loathsome plague-spot.
Then we call in our pampered mountebanks,
And this is their best cure!”* etc.

Or, take Macbeth's yearnings for some such external and effectual remedy:—

*“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet, oblivious antidote
Cleanse the foul bosom of that perilous stuff
That weighs upon the heart?”*

To which the doctor, like many another, answers:

“Therein the patient

Must minister to himself!”

And the guilty wretch exclaims, naturally enough:

“Throw physic to the dogs—I'll none of it!”)

Hence, people fall into delusions, into fixed ideas about themselves and those around them. From such evils they might be freed by one word spoken to them in the confessional. But they go through life without having that one word spoken to them. Hence, in abandoning the practice of confession, society relinquishes one chief safeguard against the mischievous, incapacitating, and even fatal delusions of its members.

(6) **Hatred and quarrels.** Among the impulsive nations of the South you sometimes see pistols and poniards suspended by the altars, near those confessionals where the fatal purpose of revenge has been abandoned. These are but

some few tokens of the numberless unknown instances of the Church enforcing the Gospel precept, "First go to be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." This is doing the work of the most perfect police force, since it not only detects a crime meditated, but prevents it beforehand, and hinders the recurrence of the danger by healing the morbid will from which that danger springs.

(b) More closely, as to the benefit conferred by confession on the individual.

(1) Besides pronounced forms of insanity. there are morbid states of mind, distressing to the sufferers and their friends; religious melancholy, exaggerated fears, unbalanced by a perception of the divine mercies; a false conscience under various departments of duty; scruples of many kinds; apprehensions of having committed the sin against the Holy Ghost—the unpardonable sin. These are not fanciful pictures, but painful realities. No clergyman, even non-Catholic, no superintendent of an asylum, no medical man, but has had experience of such cases. They have no adequate remedy out of the Catholic Church; they are authoritatively healed in the confessional. The priest is empowered, as a servant of God administering His Sacrament, to declare, by His law applied to the individual case, such and such a fear to be groundless, such and such a view of duty to be out of balance.

So he heals, consoles, strengthens, sends the penitent on his way rejoicing, with "Go in peace." On this whole subject let any inquirer, if he have the means and the leisure, construct a tabulated statement of the number of insane Catholics who have frequented confession, and of insane non-confessing Catholics, and then, again, of insane non-Catholics.

(2) General guidance on all matters of duty; instruction on duties unknown; reawakened perceptions of duties ignored or forgotten; direction and decision on duties that seem conflicting. Consider the anxiety and misery of doubts as to duty; how they cramp and weaken the soul; how they impede useful energy. Yet how frequent they are in a world where duty is often so tangled a path! Then, how difficult it is to decide in one's own case, if people have any humility or any keen sense of responsibility! We cannot, in the most important matters, always adjust them for ourselves.

The confessional does this, and unerringly, as far as the penitent is concerned, for "he that hears you hears Me." And spiritual writers are agreed that, even should the priest decide erroneously, the obedient soul cannot go wrong. This, then, is nothing less than the echo of the voice of God to the soul. It is the light shining on the priest's breast-plate in the holy place, giving an assured oracle of the divine will.

(3) Whatever belongs to the higher ranges of the spiritual life is also met and provided for: instruction in the most perfect modes of prayer, and every step on the path to evangelical perfection. But in these few notes we have been occupied only with the outworks and buttresses; such other things concern the inner shrine.

Confession, and confession only, has here been spoken of, because the slanders of the day have made the topic more urgent. Small wonder that people who have no means of testing what they hear said are disquieted. They desire to see the system fairly "unmasked." So do we. The object of this brief summary is to help in the unmasking. We desire nothing better than a frank and fair disclosure, to public opinion, of the confessional, in the true character of its working. Souls beyond the Church's pale are at this day craving for confession on every side; some practise it, many wish they dared do so. Anglican confessions are becoming frequent. We fear for them much, for in the hands of unauthorized ministers such practices are always dangerous, and may be noxious, or even fatal. But they are witnesses that the confessional is ordained by God, who prepares the soul to use it and to benefit by the use.

We will further suggest this. Let anyone take this little tract to the first instructed and practical Catholic, and say, "Tell me—by your personal experience, Is what I read here true?" Then let him go on his knees and pray for grace to see the truth. Almighty God will not refuse to teach him, if he asks with a real, earnest wish to know, and to follow on. "You shall know, and shall follow on, that you may know the Lord."
