

CONFESSION IS A JOY

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The Friday Evening Poker Club was holding solemn session in the Bradley's comfortable library. Stacks of Chips still in fairly even heights indicated that the evening was young. So did the fat, black cigars which the three men held firmly in their teeth.

"Cigarettes are for bridge; cigars are for poker," was the slogan of the male members of the Friday Evening Poker Club; and their wives gave silent agreement. The cards snapped to the six about the card table in rapid staccato. Bets were made precisely and passionately. Chips were moved forward quietly or fell in sharp little clatters on top of one another. But the real excitement of the evening was to come later. When the clock drew on toward eleven, the hostess would say, with a smile, "Lunch will be served at exactly eleven remember. So play hard, those of you who are behind." Then the men would lean forward chewing extinct cigars and studying the cards as if the stakes were as fabulous as those in a movie sequence instead of penny ante and five cent limit.

Smart Wives

The Friday Evening Poker Club was really the smart idea of three wise matrons. None of them gave a hoot for poker. But all of them knew their husbands did. So wisely they went along. In fact, the club rotated from home to home. Play lasted from eight to eleven, climaxing in a buffet supper. After the fifth deal, Mr. Bradley would shuffle the cards in expert fashion and inevitably remark, "I don't mind contract once in a while. But it's really a woman's game." "Do you mean it takes brains?" sweetly asked his wife. "If it does" retorted Steve Fisher, coming to Bradley's rescue, "how does it happen Russian refugees can teach us Americans so many tricks about it?" "Poker's a man's game," murmured the rather meek Mr. Byrnes from behind his hand; and by this statement he ignored the fact that the three wives really played an excellent game, and usually one of them cashed a stack of chips that made the banker wince. Mrs. Bradley really enjoyed the club, largely because she liked the two Catholic couples who belonged to it with them, but chiefly because she could purr a bit as her husband played his hands like a master of psychology (Philo Vance, for example, testing a murderer's nerve), grew deliberately calm and quietly masterful when with two pairs he bluffed Steve Fisher out of his full house, and became grimly determined when Ned Byrnes, who seldom stayed in without a handful, laid down three aces to top his three jacks and sweep in a fat jackpot.

Cards rightly used, she felt, could be made to bring out the best in husbands.

But, she sighed, wrongly used, they brought out the worst in husbands and wives. Wives were wise, then, when they played cards, provided they let their husbands choose their own game.

As for poker, it permitted just enough conversation to keep the women from being bored. Many a time the husbands would have screamed in pain had they seen the hands their wives cast aside unplayed because playing would have interfered with an important piece of news that could be thrashed out while the men concentrated on the capture of a small stack of whites hardly stained with reds and blues.

Let's Play

"Raising you five."

"And another five."

"I'm out."

"Seeing you."

"Seeing you."

"me, too."

"What have you got?"

"Aces and fives."

"They're good with me."

"Three tens."

"They're good."

"I needed that pot."

"Steve's dealing."

"Ante, honey."

"I always ante, darling, if you give me time."

"No time like the present, dear."

"Sunday's Pentecost."

This from Mrs. Byrnes who could be counted on to say the most unforeseen things at the most unexpected times. Everybody looked up in surprise.

Interruption

"I beg your pardon?" asked Mrs. Bradley, puzzled. "Oh, I just said that Sunday would be Pentecost. Ned, don't forget to go to confession tomorrow afternoon before you come to the club." Ned Byrnes most patient of husbands, slammed down his hand with a thud that made everyone else, for no good reason, burst into a shout of laughter. "Great guns!" he cried helplessly. "What's confession got to do with this hand?" "Nothing, darling. I was just thinking." "Watch him," grinned the host to the others. "I bet he's got a fistful." "Fistful, my aunt's dead husband!" growled Mr. Byrnes in his most violent profanity. "But why Grace had to bring up confession when she knows I hate it. Me, too," sighed Mrs. Fisher sympathetically. Mr. Bradley laughed. "I didn't know confession was supposed to be a kind of clam bake, with real beer and dancing on the side."

I Hate Confession

"Oh nobody really likes to go to confession," sighed Mrs. Byrnes. "But with Pentecost coming I just thought you'd like me to remind you." Ned Byrnes' mutter did not rise above his barricade of three jacks and a neat little pair of sixes. "It is queer how many of us dislike confession." This from Mrs. Bradley. "You're telling us?" was her husband's slangy comment. She laid down her cards, picked them up for a second look, and then tossed them into the discard. "I'm out," she said, and then continued: "I've often wondered if maybe I didn't have a wrong viewpoint there. The Lord certainly made it easy for us to get rid of our sins, and getting rid of sins should be pleasant enough, goodness knows." The three men groaned in chorus.

Dull and Monotonous

"Well, it's not." "I know it's not, and that's what makes me wonder if the fault is with us rather than with confession. Perhaps if we really understood it. . . ."

"I understand it," her husband laughed. "'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, and I hope you're a little deaf because when I rattle off my sins you may miss some of them.' Then a penance, a swift absolution, and I stagger out glad if I escaped without questions or advice." They all laughed, slightly embarrassed.

"And month after month," Mrs. Fisher put in, "the same sins. I'd like to bet that each of us women could use a carbon copy of each other's confessions."

"Then you ought to stop going together," grinned her husband.

"No, I mean uncharitableness in speech, talking unkindly to the children—and your husband." "Growing impatient when our husbands show bad temper," she continued, making a deliberate face at hers: "being vain and conceited."

"With reason," supplemented Mr. Bradley gallantly.

"Thank you, kind sir."

Once more they laughed

A Phone Call

"It all seems so dull and pointless, and generally unpleasant." "That's just the point," Mrs. Bradley urged. "Surely if Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance, it must be as beautiful as Holy Communion is beautiful, or Confirmation, or--- "Matrimony?" suggested her husband. "Yes, darling, matrimony. But we Catholics seem to get so little joy out of confession! I wish Father Hall could take an evening sometimes and really tell us badly instructed Catholics what it's all about." The phone rang. The maid appeared and answered it as the sextet picked up newly dealt cards and scanned them intently. "Mr. Bradley," called the maid softly, "it's for you. Long distance; person to person, from Lakeside."

"Thanks," he answered, and laid down his cards. "I'm in and betting a red. No, it costs you all two reds to draw cards." Then to the 'phone: "Yes, Mr. Bradley talking.... Thanks.... Why, hello, Father Hall! Speaking of angels! . . . Just the six of us here, you know. The Friday Evening Poker Club. . . . No. Delighted to hear from you. . . . Tuesday evening you'll be in town? Grand! Make it dinner. . . . That's fine. . . . Just a minute, please; hold the wire." To the players who are watching him with interest: "It's Father Hall. He's coming up Tuesday on business and says he'll drop in for the evening. How about you people coming in later, and we'll get him to thrash out this confession matter?"

And a Date

A questioning interchange of glances between husbands and wives, and all heads nodded vigorously. "Grand!" Then once more to the 'phone.. "We'll expect you on Tuesday for dinner at seven. A few friends in later, if you don't mind. We're going to make you sing for your supper. . . . No, not really sing. I was just talking. . . . Goodnight Father. I'll drop you a line. Till Tuesday evening." An approving chorus welcomed him back to the table. "Grand luck." "But it is a shame to make him work when he might have a bit of a holiday." "He'll love it," from Mr. Bradley. "Anyway, we'll expect all of you Tuesday." He swept up his cards. "Who's in? What? Nobody! Doggone the lot of you! A bunch of pickers; and me with a pat straight, king high!"

Days later

They sat in the same library, the same six with Father Hall as the added guest. The priest - old family friend by choice, parish priest of Lakeside by the appointment of his Bishop, brilliant novelist by his own developed talent - relaxed comfortably in a deep chair, and seemed to be mentally playing with the subject that had been deliberately introduced by his hostess. "Unfortunately," he said, "for some reason, confession seems to be the unappreciated Sacrament. Quite too many Catholics feel as you do about it." Mrs. Bradley nodded. "That's what we all more or less agreed." "And we felt, too, added Mrs. Byrnes, "that something must be wrong with us." "It's probably unnatural not to like to go to confession," said Mr. Fisher, ruefully, "and doggone it, we don't want to feel unnatural."

The priest turned toward the last speaker directly. "Of course, it's not unnatural. Confession has to do with sin, and, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, sin is not a pleasant thing to deal with. As for going down on one's knees and admitting to a fellow man that one has been cheap and low and let his animal instincts run away with him, that one has taken a mean crack at an absent friend, or boxed the children's ears because there was fish for dinner or one's dress failed to create the impression expected, or that one has lied contemptibly or was irrationally angry, or let dirty things slip from one's tongue or through one's mind - well, believe me, that's not pleasant, and it's usually very embarrassing, and tears holes in our pride. "So, really, I'm not surprised when we find confession unpleasant and difficult - if we take only that side of it."

In and Out

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Fisher, "that that is, the only side most of us see. I know that I bolt out my sins and get back into the pew just as fast as I can make it." "And thank God it's over," added Mr. Byrnes. "Right." Father Hall laughed. "Oh, a priest gets to know your type. Do you mind if I say that he also feels just a little sorry for you? Telling one's meannesses and showing up the rotten side of one's nature isn't particularly appealing, I admit; but it is a shame that people should make an agony out of what could easily be a joy." The men shook their heads doubtfully. The women seemed less hopeless. But the priest continued.

Great Sinner; Great Joy

"Strangely, it is quite ordinary confessions of rather trivial and commonplace sins (if any sins are really trivial and commonplace) that leave people annoyed and perturbed, and feeling dull and a little foolish. When a great sinner pours out some black tale of horrible sins stretching over a lifetime of evil and the priest gives him absolution, he goes out of the confessional with his head bumping against the arches, a light on his face, peace singing in his heart, and an almost uncontrollable inclination to shout or slap the nearest waiting penitent on the back and tell him how good God is. But after commonplace confessions, as after all commonplace things, people have commonplace reactions."

"I'm afraid," said Mrs. Bradley, "that you are talking to terribly commonplace people." "Yet confession is meant for all; for the Pope who kneels to his confessor, and the little youngster who rattles off his disobediences toward his older sister, and for the saint who has nothing to confess except trifling laziness on the higher levels of perfection. So--"

He paused, put his cigar on the ash tray, and took out a pipe. "Would this," he asked half playfully, half plaintively, "completely desecrate your library?" All the ladies joined in an eager protest that they liked pipes. Whereat their husbands looked at one another in astonishment. This was news. But the priest, evidently deep in thought, filled the pipe from his well worn rubber pouch, tamped it with a practised thumb, lit it at a flame that illuminated his face, concentrated far less on his pipe than on the subject in his mind, took two slow puffs, and resumed.

Sin-Haunted

"One of the strangest and most terrifying of human emotions is the consciousness of sin; and it is universal. Whether believers or unbelievers, men go through life haunted by this sense of guilt. Sin, no matter how you take it, is a crime and leaves upon men and women alike a sense of being criminals. "The Greeks, who always treated important things romantically, put the whole idea into a figure of speech. They visualised the sinner as hunted down by the Furies and torn to pieces. At least once, they pictured these Furies as actual dogs, ripping the criminals to bits. "The old Egyptian inscriptions show us the tiny, trembling soul of the sinner standing in the presence of the judge of the dead, who weighted him against his sin and drove him forth under a lash to unhappiness.

Like Ghosts

"The literature of every age is filled with this haunting sense of guilt. You find it in the universal tradition that murderers are forced to return to the scenes of their crimes. That the ghosts of the dead haunt the guilty. That the unrepentant criminal cannot rest quietly, even in his grave. That it is well to do penance even for sins of which one may not be aware, by throwing, for example, a ring into the sea for the gods. "We see throughout history great sinners pursued relentlessly by this dogging sense of guilt. Vespasian used to walk the dark corridors at night, afraid of the clutching hands of his victims. Half the music of the pagan world was written to distract powerful sinners from the thought of their sin."

All People Dread Guilt

"I had always thought," murmured Mrs. Fisher, "that the sense of sin and guilt was Christian." "Because Christianity clarified the soul and enlightened the conscience, and built up a purer moral law, it made men see sin more clearly. It showed them the consequences of sin in hell - and on Calvary. But Christianity only developed what all men know as the voice of conscience. The idea of sin and remorse of conscience following guilt are universal human experiences. Chesterton once said to a lot of modern word jugglers, who were trying to talk the disagreeable fact of sin out of existence, "why, sin is as plain a fact as potatoes."

"Rid Us of Sin!"

"And evidently much more general," suggested Mr. Fisher. "Weren't potatoes introduced rather late in history?" "What a sad day that was for the ladies' waistlines!" sighed his wife; and all the ladies joined in the sigh. "Well, the Jews, to rid themselves of this sense of guilt, this feeling that they were criminals against God and their fellows, did all sorts of symbolic things - some of them at God's command! They laid their sins on the head of a goat, and then drove the goat out into the desert to die in their stead. They washed themselves, in innumerable ceremonies, to indicate their freedom from sin; and, by the way, pagan people did that, too. You remember, I'm sure, how Pilate washed his hands to clear away his possible guilt for the death of Christ.

Christ Sympathised

"So, we see men everywhere longing for an assurance that the filthy thing called sin is wiped away and that they are no longer criminals in the sight of the gods, or of God, and of their fellow men. "Now, no one ever more clearly understood the criminal character of sin and the universal haunting fear in the heart of man than did Christ Our Lord. He knew that the crimes of the world would culminate when sin nailed Him to the cross. But from His heart He pitied the sinner. "So we find His regular greeting of reassurance, even to those who came to Him for quite other reasons, was, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Frequently, with characteristic insight into the troubled condition of the sinner's soul, He added, "Go in peace." "Here was something new under the sun. Sinners, tortured by the sense of sin, suddenly heard someone say with convincing authority that they need worry no longer, that their sins were forgiven them. We see those who hear this leap to their feet in their relief and rush away shouting with joy. We see Magdalen follow Him, grateful from the moment He forgives her sins, until He is concealed from her by the sealed tomb."

Sceptics Doubt

Father Hall, with a quick little rap, jarred the embers of tobacco deeper into the bowl of his pipe. "Naturally, the sceptics, who found fault with everything else Our Lord did, found a lot of fault with Him for daring to forgive sins. You probably remember the paralytic who was let down through the roof when Jesus couldn't be reached through the crowded door." "My favorite Gospel story," laughed Mr. Bradley. "I don't know whether I admire more the faith of the man with the palsy or the resourcefulness of his friends."

Drama

"Yes," nodded Father Hall, "that is one story we all know. Well, when Christ looked into the troubled eyes of the paralytic, He saw that haunting fear of sin that clouded his soul. So, characteristically, once more, He said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." "That gave the sceptics their big moment. They started talking - very much, I must say, like Protestants. "Why, who can forgive sins save only God?" (A priest is asked that question, by the way, a hundred times a year by perfectly well-meaning Protestants.)

"Christ looked at them quietly. As God, certainly, He could forgive sins. The point was that He forgave them as man. He had to prove that. You remember how conclusively He did. He gave the sceptics the famous dilemma: "Is it easier to say, Thy sins are forgiven thee, or to say, Arise and walk?" If He could work the miracle which they could see, He had proved to them He could work the wonder they could not see, but which the sick man had already experienced in his secret soul. They did not dare accept His challenge; so He said calmly: "But that you may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then said He to the man sick of the palsy): Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house. And he promptly did.

"Christ had proved that as man He had the power of forgiving sins. "Dramatic, wasn't it?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Very. But Christ was so interested in bringing home His power that He had to be dramatic. He wanted it perfectly clear in their minds that one of His great purposes was to relieve men of this oppressive uncertainty about their guilt; and this was the first of the steps He was taking to that end, so exceedingly important for the peace of mind of all the world." "Namely?" from Mrs. Bradley.

The Second Step

"He passed on to His Church this power of forgiving sins and destroying the despairing sense of guilt. He had the power. He gave it explicitly to His Church; and His Church unflinchingly used it. "Most solemnly He had promised His Apostles the power to bind and loose sins. Then, in another beautiful drama, He conferred the power. "You remember

the scene, I'm sure. It was after the Resurrection. Christ appears to the Apostles in the upper room, entering through the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Deliberately He breathes upon them and says: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain they are retained.' That famous text is a commonplace of Catholic teaching.

The Church Carries On

"Well, from that moment the Church exercised that gloriously consoling power. Sometimes there were disputes about the circumstances under which certain sins could be forgiven. There was a question about how often a recurring sinner could be absolved. But the Church never doubted her power to forgive sins and went on exercising it century after century. "And that was inevitable. Christ did not limit His benefits to the people of His own day. He came that all might receive His graces. Not the least of these graces were peace and the forgiveness of sins." Mr. Fisher was the only one who looked perplexed. "Yes, but this doesn't quite explain confession," he said. "Where, precisely, does confession fit in?"

Through Confession

"Confession is part of the Sacrament of Penance, which is simply the Church's exercise of this Christ-given power in favour of the individual soul. Through it is exercised the act of forgiving or of retaining sins, depending on the person's proof of worthiness or unworthiness. "Christ, you must remember, never dealt merely with groups, or crowds, or vague masses of people. He was always individual. The individual soul mattered. He was as individual as the miracles He worked, with special attention to each sick person. He was as individual as Holy Communion, or the laying on of hands, or the call to individual men to become His disciples.

For Individual Souls

"So His forgiveness of sin was individual. Sin is the most personal thing in the world. So must be the forgiveness of sin and the peace and reassurance that follow forgiveness. "Besides, men needed not merely the hope that a silent God had forgiven them. They needed also the assurance that they had heard words of forgiveness, words that were meant for them and were addressed to them " All this demanded confession. The person kneeling admits his sins to prove that he is sorry and to give the judge the opportunity to determine his worthiness of pardon. A representative of Christ empowered to repeat Christ's gracious and consoling act of forgiveness, sits in sympathetic judgment, and then, to this individual sinner, speaks individual words of convincing forgiveness; and the sinner rises, knowing that to his soul have come peace and reconciliation with God. "Nothing could be more humanly reasonable. Nothing could be more divinely condescending or kind."

Christian Psycho-Analysis

The maid entered and placed a tray of ice water and glasses on a table. Two of the men poured glasses frosted with a cool mist. Mrs. Bradley passed flat pink and white mists to the women. But all were too intent to break the chain of thought. "I said this was humanly reasonable. Let me show you what I meant. A short time back (for the vogue has slightly faded) we were hearing a great deal about psycho-analysis. The theory was based largely on the assumption that civilized men are too repressed; they never rid their hearts of the poison of youthful sins and guilt; they go through the carrying disheartening secrets that would lose their main horror if they lost their secrecy. There is a great deal to that. "But, may I say, with all reverence, that Christ anticipated psychoanalysis, in its pleasant, correct, and healing aspects, by about two thousands years?" "No!" ejaculated Mrs. Byrnes.

A human Need

"Precisely. A Catholic who uses confession correctly has no repressions. He has told his poisonous secrets and got them once and for all out of his system. He goes through life hugging no corpses of secret crimes to his heart. He has long since told his guilt to a fellow man, heard from the man the positive assurance that God has forgiven him, and has cast off for himself the sad consequences that rise from unconfessed sin, and the pursuing sense of guilt. Psychoanalysis is just twenty centuries behind Christ in its treatment of disordered minds. "So, you see, Protestantism not only went against the solid history of Christianity when it destroyed confession. It closed to mankind one of the most effective of human spiritual and emotional exhausts. It blocked a divinely instituted safety valve. Puritanism, with its prohibitions and its savage repressions, was a typical consequence."

To God Directly?

"But doesn't the Protestant confess directly to God?" asked Mrs. Fisher. "I have a non-Catholic friend who tells me that at least once a year," her husband agreed. "I'm quite sure they do," smiled Father Hall. "But so did the Jews before Christ came. Christ added precisely this new element, that He did not leave confession of sins to a silent God. He entrusted the power of forgiving sins directly to men. 'Whose sins you shall forgive' was directed to men "And that was where He was so humanly and divinely wise. We kneel to a man who knows from experience our human weakness, who has suffered our temptation, and who, because of his long training and careful experience, can give us

the advice and help we need. We unburden ourselves to a fellow man, who listens with a combination of human sympathy and divine authority. We release our souls to this spiritual physician. Then we hear pronounced the dear words that the human soul must hear if it is to be fully assured of forgiveness. "It is all mercifully and divinely conceived and designed, this confession of ours, fundamentally suited to our need of release; fundamentally adapted to our craving for individual attention and the certainty of a positive response."

Criminal Man

"It's all beginning to look a lot clearer," Mr. Bradley said, looking toward his wife for her agreement. Father Mall pushed forward. "Christ, Who looked at sin with the clear eyes of one who meant to fight it to the last ditch of Gethesemane and the final charge of Calvary's heights, knew that every sinner is a criminal. Criminals, if there is any justice, must stand trial and hear sentence pronounced; and if these criminals have offended the just God, they may be sure of absolute justice. "So deliberately and insistently, Christ warned the criminal human race of a terrible trial that they must stand. He called it the Last Judgment, and pictures it with a wealth of detail He seldom gave to His descriptions.

Two Tribunals

"There, before all the world, gathered from the graves of all time, the sinner would stand in the presence of Christ, no longer the Good Shepherd but the Inflexible Judge, hear his sins listed in terrifying array, and sentence, swift but just, relentless and utterly appalling, pronounced. . . . "Unless. . . . "Well, unless the criminal has voluntarily pleaded guilty before another tribunal, and in another trial that Christ instituted; the trial in the court room of the confessional. Being a criminal, the sinner must stand trial. Gods justice demanded that. But he was given a choice between two courts, the Last Judgment and confession.

"Now, let's admit that neither of them is particularly attractive. Neither are the crimes of which we have been guilty; and criminals have really not much excuse for being fussy about the way their crimes are handled. "But, if we stop to compare these two trials, I rather think that on our knees we will thank the gentle Christ for His graciousness in giving us a choice that we certainly don't deserve. "Confession comes to look very beautiful if you give even a thought to its alternative, the Last Judgment."

"We Shall Be Tried"

Though Father Hall took what seemed an interminable time to refill and light his pipe, no one spoke. In fact, there was a general concentration of eyes on the figure in the rug, and out of the corner of his eye Father Hill was not missing it. "Where precisely do the two trials take place," he resumed. "The Last Judgment, as Christ terrifyingly describes it, takes place with all humanity, from Adam to the last child born of woman, looking upon my bare and naked soul, my magnificent opportunities, my base treasons, my criminal assaults upon God, my evil deeds toward men. Shivering, I hear terrible lists of my sins read off, unrepented and unremitted, until, in Christ's words, I call upon the mountains to fall upon me and cover me as shame piles on shame and all men know my guilt. "I turn from this appalling scene to the merciful secrecy of the confessional. A dark curtain cuts me off from the curious world. The shadows cover my identity from even the priest. I am alone with a man who, even if he knew me, dare not whisper the least of my sins though silence were to cost him his life.

Accused

"Who will accuse me at that Last Judgment? My own soul, forced by the racking torture of conscience, will admit my guilt. My guardian angel will tell of his vain struggle to keep me from evil. The devil, producing triumphantly the compact of my mortal sin, by which I sold myself to him forever, will claim me for his own. Each man or woman who, by my life or words or deeds, was led into sin will bear witness; and, finally, Christ with the marks of the blows I struck His back and the nail wounds I drove into His hands, will level at me an unanswerable accusation. Terrifying group of witnesses! "Who accuses me in the confessional? That tender, merciful, considerate person who wouldn't hurt my feelings for the world, who spares me every possible humiliation, yet who must be believed by the priest—myself." Involuntarily Mrs. Fisher snapped the tension with a short, high laugh. The others shifted but did not take their eyes from the priest.

Judges

"And who is the judge of the Last Judgment? Christ, infinitely just, with mercy at an end, and nothing but strict, stern justice ahead. Christ, the rejected friend, the betrayed king, the deserted lover, now become the inexorable judge. Christ Who has felt my bitter ingratitude. Christ, before Whom all sham excuses and silly explanations die of their own breathlessness. Who sees through snivelling lies and tricky subterfuges, and measures truth with even hand. "But in the confessional waits the merciful Christ of the Sacred Heart, Christ the Father of the Prodigal Son, Christ the Good Shepherd, Christ of the Passion, waiting for any possible companion of the good thief; Christ Who finds more joy in one sinner doing penance than in ninety-nine just who need not penance—Christ with outstretched, aching arms.

“I’m afraid we think too much of the priest sitting in the confessional, and too little of the shadowy figure of Christ just behind the priest. Confession would be a far lovelier thing if we thought of it as a flight to the arms of the loving Christ, as the reclaspings of the hand of the Captain we have betrayed. “Of course, the priest is there, as the human judge; and never does he elsewhere feel himself quite so completely in the place of Christ. The mercy in his hands is the mercy of the merciful Saviour. The forgiveness he dispenses is the forgiveness of the Son of God; and there is joy in his heart when some particularly terrible sinner finds his way stumblingly into the confessional, and he is able to lead him back to peace and reconciliation at the Heart of the Saviour.

Depart!

“After both trials significant words are spoken. Both contain the order to go; to depart. But with what a difference! The thunder of the words that are the verdict of the Last Judgment dashes the criminal back into blackest despair. ‘Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ If Christ had not told us of these words Himself, we could never have guessed that they would some day pass the merciful lips of the Saviour. I for one can never sufficiently thank Him for the warning. But they are terrible words. God grant we may not hear them addressed to us. “Instead, if we wish, we who kneel in the confessional may hear the consoling words, ‘I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,’ followed by the quiet, reassuring whisper of the priest, in a tone that must be a little like Christ’s own, ‘Go in peace.’ “It is a deadly parallel, isn’t it? But it is certainly not a bad idea to look at it in cold-blooded comparison. We are criminals. We must stand trial. Which? We have a clear choice, and, thanks to the dear Christ, an easy one.”

Bad Confessions?

Father Hall rose from his chair, walked across, and, amid an almost palpable silence, poured out and drank a glass of ice water. Then there was a general stir, cigarettes appeared, matches were struck, and the mints came into rapid circulation.

It was the host who spoke first. “Thanks, Father. Very clear and very reasonable.” But Mrs. Byrnes was the one who shook her head. “And very terrifying. Suppose one makes a bad confession? That is what always bothers me. How can I be sure? How do I know whether this is a sin or not? What about my stupid consent; or did I give it? All those silly, human things are what upset me.”

Evidently she was talking for more than herself, for the whole group stirred interestedly, and murmurs seemed to back her up.

In other words, what Christ meant to be a deep consolation and a positive joy, we make a difficulty, a source of real annoyance and trial for our souls by our stupidity (forgive me) and our obstinacy.”

Old and Forgotten Scores

He could almost feel his listeners grow taut. “I mean both words, stupidity and obstinacy. Obstinacy, because good people persist in putting difficulties where there are none. They scrape up old sins out of the past, sins that were forgiven by God years ago, and though they are told by the priest to forget them and put them forever out of their mind, they keep fingering them over and dragging them out of their graves, and insulting God with a strangely twisted denial of His merciful forgiveness.”

Mrs. Byrnes almost gasped.

“I mean just that,” persisted the priest. “Nothing must be so thoroughly annoying to God (if anything could annoy God) as the sinner who constantly digs up a dead and buried past. It’s silly, it’s stupid, and it is an insult to God’s tender mercy.

“Can you fancy Mary Magdalen, after Christ had said, ‘Go in peace; thy sins are forgiven thee,’ coming back and saying, ‘Now, are You sure they are forgiven? I’m not certain that You understood what I meant about that particular evening in Tiberias. May I say it over again?’ Or Peter, each time he met Christ, pleading, ‘Now, are You quite sure that You have forgiven me my denial? You see, it was this way . . . and there were circumstances that You may not have understood.’ Even the patient Christ would, I think, grow weary of that. “After one has honestly told one’s sins, tried to be sorry for them, and put them in the hands of God, it is sheer, senseless obstinacy to keep dragging them forth for new investigation and discussion. If, in the past, one has sinned in a matter that is more than ordinarily serious, one can say in each confession, ‘And I accuse myself of the sin of -----, committed in my past life.’ But let’s not insult God’s mercy and His and the priest’s intelligence by raking up a past. God is not interested in it. Why, in heaven’s name, should we be?” He paused, and with unwonted emphasis knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

So Simple

“And the whole process of confession is so beautifully simple.” “I think you have here quite a group of stupid and obstinate people,” said Mrs. Bradley, quietly. “Won’t you explain?” The priest looked about him with a quizzical smile. “What precisely, do we have to tell in confession?” he began. “Oh, I know that one,” shot in Mr. Fisher. “All the serious sins of which we know we are guilty.” “Period,” said the priest. “What?” “Period. Just that and nothing

else. If you want to tell some venial sins, that's splendid. But the serious sins you know you have committed are all you must tell. And surely" (this in almost a pleading voice) "you know what serious sins are."

"Grievous matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent of the will," ticked off Mr. Bradley before the other men could reply. Correct, dear, dear, little children; what a smart class this is!" They laughed along with him "So, if a thing does God or a fellow man in society a serious injury—Sin Declares Itself." "Now, there is the point. How is one to know this?" "Usually the conscience has a way of speaking out pretty emphatically on the subject. The Church makes clear things about which we might have some legitimate doubt; and if still we don't know, if we are not sure, for example, whether it was serious to take that five dollars out of the collection box at the ten o'clock Mass---" "Not a chance! Not a chance!" "If you have a doubt, ask the priest in confession." "But sometimes," Mr. Byrnes suggested, timidly, "one hardly knows what words to use, framing such a question."

Then it is simpler still. Say, 'Father, I want to ask a question, and I don't know how to put it.' In three questions, quiet, unembarrassing, the priest will arrive at your difficulty, and, presto, it is settled. Usually the answer is, 'No, it's not a serious sin.'" "Not really!" from the men. "Exactly. People unfortunately, go through life torturing themselves with difficulties about things that are not sinful at all. One question would forever have set their minds at rest. On the other hand, however, if they do not ask, but go ahead and take a chance, they are guilty of serious sin, even if the thing they do is not serious. Deliberately refusing to find out doesn't help one bit. It leaves us as guilty, as if we know we were doing wrong."

Full and Half Consent

"But so often," said Mrs. Fisher, we can't be sure we really knew what we were doing or really gave consent." "Then it is too simple for words. You cannot possibly commit a serious sin unless you know at the time that you are doing so. For instance, thinking it is Thursday, I order and eat a thoroughly satisfactory slice of prime beef. Later in the afternoon, I find out it is Friday. Well, I have not sinned. Or pass by a window filled with pretty tough magazines. Later I realise that as I passed I took in more of those covers than I had realized in my abstracted state of mind. No need of the slightest worry. "Or while I am half asleep a series of indecent pictures pass through my imagination. Guilty? Certainly not. One who is half asleep cannot give full consent. "Things would be so much simpler if we remembered that Christ only asks from us a reasonable effort. He no more wants us to get into a state of trying to prod around in the scrapheap of memory than He wants us to spend our lives looking for lost pennies in ash piles.

Reasonable Effort

"All He wants is a fair and honest and reasonable effort on our part to recall our sins. Oh, believe me, unless we are hardened sinners, any serious sin will come leaping up out of the past to glare in our faces. A little thoughtful investigation of where we have been, what we have done, whom we have gone with, what we have read, with a brief glance at our business, home, church, amusements, will give us a pretty accurate survey of our lives. Detailed scrutiny will usually add no important knowledge and will simply set our mind whirling round in circles.

"You see, God wants honest men in confession. They need not be expert accountants. He does not expect us to spend time and energy looking for a missing penny in our spiritual balance-sheet." "That's consoling," was Mr. Bradley's comment.

A Beautiful Prayer

"In fact, I think that most people spend too much time examining their consciences and too little time doing more important things. That is just one reason why many find confession dull and uninspiring." "Really?" asked his hostess. "Then what should we do?" "Make confession a real and beautiful prayer." Father Hall leaned forward, as he always did when deeply interested. "Let's take a look at a confession correctly and inspiringly made. The penitent, who doesn't think himself very unusual, kneels before the altar. First of all he thanks God for the favours God has heaped upon him. He runs back in rapid survey over God's gifts of birth, protection, good parents, Catholic surroundings, baptism, the gift of faith, a Catholic education, health, friends, fair success, Holy Communion, the Holy Ghost in Confirmation, his work in life and the strength to do it, his home and family and pleasures. Then, Gratefully, he remembers the beautiful secret favours that God has given him out of an overflowing love. He says a heartfelt 'Thank you, God,' and against this background of God's goodness and generosity he determines to look at himself and his conduct.

"But before he does so he prays for light. He asks God to help him to know his sins and realize what an ungrateful son and traitorous soldier he has been. He asks for the strength to be honest in examining his conscience, and for the light to see his sins clearly and somewhat as Christ saw them in Gethsemane, and as he himself will see them on the last day.

Three Minutes

"Then, briefly, and as I explained before, he examines his conscience." "For how long?" asked Mr. Fisher. "Perhaps three minutes. At longest five." "Why, is that enough?" "Plenty. If he goes often, he can do it in less. If he makes an examination of conscience at night, as he should, it may not take more than a minute.

Sorrow

“Then he comes to the important task of assuring God that he is sorry. He remembers how good God has been, and he contrasts God’s goodness with his own selfishness, ingratitude, meanness, and contemptibleness. He thinks of the good, beautiful, all-satisfactory God and contrasts himself. That rather makes him want to crawl.

“Then he takes a brief glimpse into hell. ‘That won’t do at all. God save me from that.’ He lifts his eyes toward heaven. ‘I must reach that, no matter what. God, help me and keep me from things that interfere with that eternal joy.’ He gives a swift glance at purgatory. There in God’s prison-house he’ll burn out the venial sins that didn’t seem very important. ‘God, forgive me my venial sins.’ He then lifts his eyes to the crucifix. ‘That is what sin did, my personal sins. Mortal sins slashed that back, crowned that head, drove those ghastly wounds into hands and feet and side. Venial sins spit in that face, and slapped it with the backs of their hands. My God, I’m sorry.’ ‘I don’t need to tell you, surely, that this is so essential that the most precisely correct recital of one’s sins, down to the last gesture of impatience, is a perfectly wasted and futile performance unless the penitent is genuinely sorry for his sins.

The Future

“Then quietly he faces the future. ‘My God, I don’t want to commit these sins again. I certainly don’t want to repeat my former follies. I may fall in the future. Judging from my weakness in the past, this is not improbable. But I won’t, not deliberately. Give me Your grace, my God, and I promise not to sin again.’

“You know, ill-informed Protestants have a silly idea that we Catholics go to confession, rattle off our sin come out and start all over again with a blithe heart and a clear conscience. We know our confession is valueless without this determination not to sin again.” “But,” said Mr. Fisher slowly, ‘I’m Afraid that most of us know in our hearts we will.’ Father Hall was very earnest. “That’s not the point. Perhaps our past experience has been most discouraging. Perhaps we face the future with real fear. Yet here and now we know that sin is a stupid, criminal performance, and we are determined to do what we can to eliminate it for the future. We may fail. That is not the question. Right now we are resolved to use the help God has given us, notably Holy Communion and prayer and penance, to avoid the people and things that made us slip before, and to trust His grace. That’s enough.”

Then Confess

An audible sigh went round the group, real relief expressing itself outwardly. “And after all that - the act of thanksgiving, the prayer for light, the examination of conscience, the act of contrition, and the promise not to sin again - then,” Father Hall’s voice became humorously casual as if he had reached an anti-climax, “then we go to confession.”

They all relaxed, sitting back in their chairs. “Well, all I have to say,” was the emphatic comment of their host, “is that that’s a mighty different performance from what I’ve been going through.”

Silly Sins

“No wonder confession has seemed dull and uninspiring.” “But suppose you have nothing but those silly little sins that you tell week after week.” Mr. Byrnes was very earnest. “Oh, you mean the kind that didn’t crucify Christ, but are awfully annoying to the family?”

“Ask me to mention a few of them,” said the lady’s husband, sadly. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea,” said Father Hall, “to dodge a deal of purgatory by getting rid of those through confession. However, it’s worth remembering that while happiness in the next world is lost by mortal sin, this world is made horribly unpleasant by venial sins - small jealousies, petty meannesses, uncharitableness, small lies, fits of anger, nagging.

“If in each confession we concentrated on one venial sin, or, perhaps, did this for a series of confessions, told God we were sincerely sorry and wanted to be rid of that, we’d be helping our own souls—“And wouldn’t that improve the world?” commented Mr. Byrnes. His wife nodded sagely. “I’ll give you a list you might start on, too.”

Grace

“Besides that. when we go to confession, we get, in addition to the forgiveness of our sins, the grace of the sacrament. I’m afraid we forget all about that. But because of that grace, we don’t sin so easily, we are protected in temptations to mortal sin, we grow spiritually stronger, our souls are much more beautiful for Christ in Holy Communion, and we are preparing for our selves a higher place in heaven.”

“Strange,” murmured Mrs. Bradley, “but I really had forgotten all about that part of the sacrament.” “Regrettably, most people have. Confession was given not only to stop people from being sinners. Most important, it was given to help them to be saints. Confession should be a source of joy and consolation, and of strength for life’s difficult fights with a strong accent on the strength.”

Neglected Experts

Father Hall looked around with a slow smile. “As a priest, may I say I’m really disappointed in you?” “Not surprised,” said Mr. Fisher. “But for which of many reasons?” “Because I’d like to wager not one of you ever really

uses the priest.” There was so puzzled a look on every face that Father Hall laughed boyishly. “I’m terribly weary of Catholics who seem to think that I’m just a kind of automaton, sitting there in the darkness of the confessional wiping out their sins. They present their soul! I apply a wet cloth with a disinfectant, and off they go with nice, clean, shining surfaces, where before there were ugly scrawls and blotches and blots.

“Well, I’m not an automaton. I’m a highly trained specialist in human problems. I’m a physician of souls. I spent long years and patient study getting ready to help people by my advice and direction, and guidance, and if I speak to them, they shy away from me as if I had (forgive me) either a bad attack of scarlet fever or a Highly developed taste for green onions.” “Maybe,” taunted Mr. Bradley, “you have.” “Believe me,” said the priest, shaking a doleful head, “the taste for green onions is all too frequently on the other side of the grille. But why this shyness? Why this refusal to use the services of a specialist who is set aside by God and Church, not merely to wash your muddy souls, but to help you shine them up gloriously for eternity? “How many of you have a regular confessor?”

A Friend Indeed

“I have,” said Mr. Fisher. “The priest with the fewest people waiting outside his confessional.” “Not me, retorted his host. “I learned a long time ago: Few penitents outside, stern confessor inside.” “Perfectly normal, both of you; and yet,” resumed the priest, “until you have a regular confessor, you haven’t begun to get its full value from confession. Shop around a bit until you find a priest to whom you feel you can talk. Then tell him you intend to come to him regularly, and ask him if he’d mind discussing your problems with you. The chances are he’ll be pleased, and perhaps a little flattered. “Then go to him and realize that you have a spiritual friend, a wise father, a counsellor who will help you, not merely to avoid sin, but to become richer, in the spiritual sense, and finer, and a more fully developed person. How much happier a great many people would be if they had such a friend and guide!”

What to Ask

Mr. Fisher looked positively embarrassed. “Great Scott, Father, I shouldn’t have the faintest idea what to talk about.” “That annoying habit that bothers you. (I don’t know what it is; but you do.) Your difficulties in keeping your mind on your prayer. The sort of book you might need. Perhaps the question of a retreat. Problems of business, ethical, and moral problems. Questions of the family, the children, your employees. Future conduct that might become clearer just by being talked out with someone. Aspirations, hopes, ambitions. “In a short time, you may find that instead of sins to confess you have virtues to discuss, and new heights of goodness to scale. I’ve never known a person, to have a regular confessor without thanking God for the graces and strength that came through him.”

A Priest Forgets

The men were looking just a bit dubious. “I know just what you’re thinking. You’re not at all sure you want any priest to know too much about you. Well, in the first place, it is a good thing to have someone know you inside and out. Many a non-Catholic uses his lawyer or doctor for that. “Perhaps you don’t know it, but the priest in the confessional has been given a special grace by God. He forgets almost instantly everything he hears. Positively, if I had full permission, and were offered a vast fortune I couldn’t repeat any single concession I have ever heard” “Really?” “Strange, but absolutely true. Yet, if a penitent returns to me, God gives me the grace to call up out of the past what he told me and what advice I gave. There is a strange continuity running through the confessions of penitents, binding them together. Outside the confessional, if I met the penitent face to face, I could, with the most extreme difficulty, pick up the threads. So you needn’t think that because a priest knows you in confession he’ll know you outside. Decidedly he won’t; and what’s more, he won’t want to. “But it does seem a little sad that these priests, who are trained as few men are trained to know human problems and human nature, to guide one to a difficult future or to solve for one a complex problem, are really used so little. Partly, it is their fault. They get the idea that people resent their interest. That is, unfortunately, often true.

But I know this would be a vastly better world and Catholics would be a much, much happier and holier race, if they used the priest in confession not merely as an automatic eraser, but as a friend, a physician, a guide and a father; and how most priests would love so to be used!”
