

ON MAKING A GOOD CONFESSION

Walter Jewell

THE FIRST STEP

Let us begin by seeking some quiet corner of the church where there is little disturbance. Later, of course, we shall need a Confessor, but in all the work that goes before we must minister to ourselves. This, however, need not alarm us at all. What we have to do is very simple and straightforward. In fact, it is the way of a child, a path that many children, young and old, have successfully followed before us.

Further, there is not the least reason to doubt that God will help us. The most appealing note in the parable of the Prodigal Son is struck by the words : 'And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion and running to him fell upon his neck and kissed him ' God does not content Himself with waiting for poor sinners to approach Him — He comes running to meet them. His arm is about us now, and He is drawing us on to a perfect reconciliation with Himself. Let us surrender ourselves, then, to this wonderful courtesy of God, and ask confidently for the help of His grace.

In whatever prayer we use for this purpose, let us remind ourselves that God knows all things utterly, and any idea of screening things from Him is simply laughable. Our attitude must be the precise opposite. We must surrender ourselves completely, and thankfully lay ourselves open to the divine scrutiny. 'Send forth Thy light into my soul, and discover to me all those sins which I ought to confess at this time. Assist me by Thy grace, so that I may be able to declare them to the priest, fully, humbly, and with a contrite heart, and so obtain perfect remission of them through Thine infinite goodness.'*

There is lesser help, too, which we shall be well advised to obtain. This Sacrament is essentially a homecoming—a return to the divine Family And under God Himself, no one will be so interested in such a return as our Lady, the Mother of God and the mother of us all. We can ask for her assistance with every assurance.

'O most gracious Virgin Mary, beloved Mother of Jesus Christ my Redeemer, intercede for me with Him. Obtain for me the full remission of my sins and perfect amendment of life, to the salvation of my soul, and the glory of His name.'

In addition, our individual helpers, the Patron whose name we bear and the Angel appointed by God to be our guardian, will be intensely concerned with what is going on. Let us also ask their help.

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Having paved the way by prayer, it is clear that we must now look into our consciences and discover our sins. There is nothing morbid about this practice, for our object is a practical one. We are only surveying this dark army in order to destroy it. We can look upon past sins fearlessly because their day is done, and we are in a position to examine them with care.

Do we find this difficult? If so, we might feel disposed to postpone this Sacrament to another occasion when we may be feeling in the mood. But this is not at all a good idea, as mood and opportunity so seldom come to us hand in hand.

A far better plan is to take a planned examination of conscience, and to study it leisurely. It will be found a good enough net to draw up from the depths of our memory all the necessary matter for confession. For convenience, one of these examinations is given below.

Have I without sufficient reason missed my Easter duties or Mass on any Sunday or Holy-day of Obligation, or eaten meat on a day of abstinence, or not observed the fast?

Have I used the name of God in vain, in anger, or carelessly?

Have I omitted my daily prayers or said them badly?

Have I been careless in my preparation for, or thanksgiving after, receiving the Sacraments?

Have I been wanting in gratitude to God, or in confidence in God, or in resignation to His holy will?

**All quotations are from the Simple Prayer Book*

Have I been dishonest by stealing or cheating, or not paying bills, or debts, or not doing the work well for which I am paid or which it is my duty to do?

Have I been uncharitable by thought, word, or deed, or omission?

Have I told lies, to injure anyone or to excuse myself?

Have I revealed secrets I was bound to keep, or read other people's letters?

Have I been disobedient, rude, or sulky to those in authority over me?

Have I contributed to the Church according to my means?

Have I been harsh, overbearing, or sarcastic to those under my authority?

Have I brooded over injuries, or refused to forgive?

Have I been angry, envious, or jealous?

Have I despised others, or given scandal or bad example?

Have I been vain, proud, selfish, or self-seeking? Have I been immodest or impure in thought, word, or deed with myself or with others?

Have I been greedy or intemperate in eating or drinking?

Have I given way to depression or self-pity?

For Married people

Have I failed to show love, respect, and good example towards my partner?

Have I neglected my duty to my children in regard to their religious instruction, to their training in good habits, and to their schooling?

Have I sinned against the duties of married life?

We should now have a sufficiently clear idea of what we ought to confess. We need not feel concerned if the list seems very short. Not many of us indulge in a wide variety of sins. It is usually a matter of our having submitted again and again to a few favourite vices which have over-shadowed our lives and become our masters—a tyranny which we must certainly determine to overthrow.

One or two scruples are liable to trouble us at this stage, and we must deal with them firmly or they will impede our progress. There is the question of forgetfulness, for example. Suppose that there should lurk in our past some grave offence which our research has failed to bring to light? Will not this hidden foe in the darkness, unconfessed and unabsolved, stand between us and the divine forgiveness?

No. In the Sacrament of Penance what is forgotten is forgiven, provided, of course, that the forgetfulness is sincere, and not merely a refusal

of the mind to turn towards some skeleton in the cupboard. God does not ask for exceptional feats of memory before forgiving us. If we really cannot recall a sin, He is prepared, in His great mercy to forget it with us.

Sometimes we are in doubt as to whether we have sinned or not. Strange situations sometimes arise, and it is not always clear whether the path we elected to follow was in reality the right one. Possibly it was so overcast by our own doubts that we had no moral right to tread so dubious a way. Or again, we may have fallen victim to some absurd scruple which our common-sense should have rejected at once.

What shall we do—remain here for the next hour puzzling it? Not at all. What we must do is to take in to our Confessor our sins and our doubts together, so that he may forgive the one and resolve the other. He is, after all, a spiritual doctor, and a patient is not expected to explain to a physician the precise meaning of all his own symptoms. Let us simply note that we have here a matter for consultation when the moment arrives.

There is also the question of venial and mortal sins and their distinction. We know that mortal sins must be confessed because they mortally wound the soul and make of God an enemy, and thus need absolution more urgently than a severed artery needs the attention of a surgeon. How shall we distinguish them from lesser offences that need not be mentioned? Well, we know whether, with full and free consent, we opened the door of our minds to greet the temptation as a guest. Whether, with eyes wide open, we embraced it with full knowledge of what it was. And lastly, whether the sin involved a real insult to God. If the answer is a three-fold 'yes', then the sin was a mortal one, and must certainly receive attention now.

And what of those lesser sins of ours which are known as 'venial'? It may help us to understand their nature if we compare them with an attack of measles. We know that a child will not die from this disease in itself, and similarly, a small offence against God will not put an end to the divine Life in the soul. The child can recover from measles without the aid of a doctor, and venial sin need not be brought to the Confessional. It can be covered by ordinary contrition alone, should we prefer, for any reason, to leave it unconfessed now.

And yet it is foolish to treat an attack of measles lightly without bothering the doctor. Why? Not because the disease itself is dangerous but because of its possible complications. It may lead to broncho-pneumonia, which is often fatal. And it is quite possible for venial sin to drag a man's soul down to hell, not directly of course, but by giving birth to something far worse than its parent. It is therefore good policy to confess all the sins we can remember — mortal sin because it is essential, and venial sin as a wise precaution.

CONTRITION

Having our sins thus arrayed before us, what is the next step? It is contrition — sorrow for sin based on the love of God.

Now it is obvious that we are sorry for our sins, or what are we doing here? But we may well ask what sort of sorrow it is. We may feel that there is within us little warm genuine love of God, but plenty of healthy fear of the eternal darkness, fire and exile of hell. Will God accept this? Yes, He always meets us more than half-way, and what we lack now He will generously give us in the Sacrament itself. 'And the father said to his servants : Bring forth quickly the first robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.'

The above attitude of mind is known as 'attrition', and it will serve. But can we not offer to God something better than the minimum by rising to true contrition, i.e., sorrow for sin on account of our love for Him? Almost certainly we can.

But first a word of warning. We must not allow ourselves to be concerned or worried about the state of our feelings. Our moods are as changeable as the weather, and we can control them little more than we can regulate sunshine and storm. We can enjoy pleasant spiritual feelings when they come, but we should depend on them never. What we have to do is a matter for the mind and will.

Let us look at a Crucifix for a while, and turn over in our minds the various elements of the Passion. The agony in the garden, the insults, the spittings, the blows, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the heavy weight of the cross, and finally the Crucifixion itself.

We know, of course, that this intense suffering was on account of our sins. But this term 'our sins' does not merely mean the offences of men in general. It means those same acts that you and I have gathered together in our minds for this confession. Christ died for us as individuals, and our personal sins were really present to Him when He hung upon the Cross to redeem us.

This truth, of course, soars far beyond the imagination, but we are not concerned with what we can imagine. It is a fact, and in the light of it we must look upon our sins and see them for the detestable things they are.

Let us go a step further. What is the reason for this boundless generosity on the part of God-made-Man? Why have we poor sinners been loved so overwhelmingly?

We can only reply that God is God, and His mercy outstrips anything that we could possibly have expected. The divine Compassion finds expression in the Cross, and it is the infinite Love that has thus sought us out through the ages.

We can thus mount upon the Cross to survey God's utter perfection and absolute Holiness in Himself. And the Church wishes us to see our sins set up starkly against this ineffable background of divine Goodness. And here we have the highest motive for contrition : God is supremely lovable, and therefore sin is altogether horrible. We can be sorry for our folly, because He is the infinite Wisdom; sorry for our lies because He is the eternal truth; and sorry for our hate because He is Love itself.

'I grieve from the bottom of my heart that I have offended Thee, my most loving Father and Redeemer, unto whom all sin is infinitely displeasing; who hast so loved me that Thou didst shed Thy blood for me, and endure the bitter torments of a most cruel death.'

'I firmly resolve to forsake and flee from all sins, and to avoid the occasions of them; and to confess, in bitterness of spirit, all those sins which I have committed against Thy divine Goodness, and to love Thee, O my God, for Thine own sake, above all things, for ever.'

We know what is brought about by an act of perfect contrition. It is so pleasing to God that it is followed immediately by the full embrace of divine forgiveness even before we approach the confessional, and can effect the writing off of all punishment due to us. Have we succeeded in making it? Well, such questions are decided by God alone, not by us, so we had far better leave that matter in His hands. At all events, we have offered Him something better than the lowest form of our sorrow, and we need have no doubt that He will accept it.

We will have noticed in the above prayer a resolution to sin no more, and this strikes a note on which we are likely to pause. We have an uneasy sense that we are in no position to offer God guarantees of this kind, for we know too well the shifting sands of our fallen nature.

And yet this fear need not obstruct us. We know ourselves, yes, but God knows us a great deal better. In fact, He knows us utterly. And He is asking us, not for a guarantee, but for a resolution. He expects us to declare war upon our sins, and to fight them, but He does not expect that we shall never again be brought down upon the field of battle. With full confidence, then, we can place in His hands the resolve He is expecting.

'I am now resolved, with the help of Thy grace, to be more watchful over myself, to amend my faults and fulfil Thy law. Look down on me with the eyes of mercy, O God, and blot out my sins.'

This is a good time to say the Confiteor. It is a remarkable prayer, for it reminds us that God and the whole heavenly Court are listening to us now. This is startling, but true, for our Lord has told us of the joy in Heaven over one sinner that repents.

'I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary ever a Virgin, to Blessed Michael the Archangel, to Blessed John the Baptist, to the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and to all the Saints, that I have sinned exceedingly, in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.

'Therefore I beseech the Blessed Mary ever a Virgin, Blessed Michael the Archangel, Blessed John the Baptist, the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and all the Saints, to pray to the Lord our God for me.'

AT CONFESSION

We are now in a position to make our way to the Confessional. It is not a good idea to run hurriedly over our sins on the way. Our memories will be the fresher for a brief rest.

Upon entering, we are greeted with a blessing from the priest. This is God's welcome given to us through His minister, to which we can best respond by opening our hearts and minds to Him now.

Our Confessor will want to know what time has elapsed since our last confession. The fear of this question has turned some foolish people away from the very threshold of the Confessional. Clearly, it should have the opposite effect. If the prodigal son has gone abroad into a far country, there is the more reason for hastening his return. This first step may indeed be difficult, but it is a step from the darkness of our past into the light of God's home. And the opportunity, if rejected now, may never return.

Throughout the confession itself, sincerity must be our guiding star. The Confessional is the sincerest tribunal in the world. In any other court there is always the possibility of gaining some sort of benefit by means of deception. But here such a policy could only spell a man's ruin from the outset, for God is the Judge. Similarly, in other situations, one might gain some advantage by a certain affectation of manner, but here it could only impede the flow of grace to the soul, for the divine Court is the audience. As it is impossible to deceive God, there can be no point in veiling the truth from His priest.

When we have finished, there is no more to do for a while but to listen. But it is important that this should be done well. We know that we ought not, with intention, to let our attention wander during a sermon addressed to a congregation, and here the priest is talking to the individual man about his own personal failings. There is nothing here that we can afford to miss.

THANKSGIVING

The devotion imposed upon us by the priest as our penance is a matter of the first importance. It is not 'just another prayer', and even if it were, all prayer is a 'lifting up of the heart and mind to God'. But the matter goes deeper than that. This penance belongs to the Sacrament itself, and is directly related to the punishment due to sins after they have been forgiven. If we remember the sharpness of God's punishments, we are not likely to scorn the road of mercy. Let us be sure that we understand the very little that is asked of us before leaving the Confessional.

Listen attentively to the advice of the priest and make a fervent act of contrition while he gives you absolution. He makes the sign of the Cross at the words : 'I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen'. He adds the following prayer: 'May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the Saints, whatever good you have done and whatever evil you have suffered, gain for you a remission of your sins, an increase of grace, and the reward of life everlasting. Amen'.

Little need be said on this topic, because it is an expression of all that has gone before. If previously we were spiritually lepers, we have become clean and wholesome men; if slaves, the chains of guilt have been broken; if outcasts and aliens, we are restored to the freedom of the City of God, and received by Him as sons. It is our realization of this marvel that must go into the words that we now offer:

'O almighty and most merciful God, who according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies, hast been pleased once more to receive me, after so many times going astray from Thee, and to admit me to this sacrament of forgiveness, I give Thee thanks with all the powers of my soul for this and all other mercies, graces, and blessings bestowed on me ; and casting myself at Thy sacred feet, I offer myself to be henceforth for ever Thine. Let nothing in life or death ever separate me from Thee.

'Mary, Mother of God, be a Mother to me.'

FOR THOSE WHO HESITATE

There are people who fear the Confessional. To many Catholics, who make regular use of the Sacrament, this may seem very strange. Why should a man who is sick avoid the doctor, and a sinner turn away from consolation and forgiveness?

Still, we must face the facts. It is no uncommon thing for sick men to fear medical attention, and for Catholics who know they need a Confessor to turn back from his very door. There is a reason for all things, and I propose to add a few words now on that last-minute hesitancy which might so easily cost a man his soul.

It is certain that in some cases it is due to a fear of being stormed at. This is most common, probably, among those who have badly lapsed, and who are returning to the Church after having wandered long and far from her care. Their minds are preoccupied with the years, the deeds, and the omissions which stand between them and the Catholic way of life, and they just cannot imagine how they will be received; unfortunately, they are inclined to fear the worst.

It is obvious, of course, that even if these fears were fully justified, they should really prove no handicap. Most of us manage, at some time or another, to upset our fellows, and we soon learn that a certain amount of rough and tumble in life cannot be avoided, if we are to achieve anything whatever. And it would surely be worth collecting a few mental bruises and bumps for the sake of complete reconciliation with God. And yet in fact the experience is nothing like so soul-searing as many a lapsed Catholic is apt to imagine.

Consider this matter of conscience. An accusing conscience is the very reason why we confess—a sort of strong tide bearing us towards the Sacrament. It is an absurdity to allow it to become a sudden gale driving us away from it. And it will be a good deal less likely to do so if we keep before us a clear mental view of the priest.

The priest is a man and a sinner, and has his own spiritual difficulties. None of us can afford a lofty view of other people's shortcomings. A priest is probably less likely to lapse from the practice of his Faith than the ordinary man, but this is mainly due to the nature of his calling.

He kneels in Confessionals besides sitting in them, and his own personal acquaintance with sin expresses itself in his dealings with his penitents. Many a man who has expected to meet with mere sharp criticism has found a subtle sympathy and understanding which has melted him. The powers of a priest are remarkable and far-reaching, but there is nothing about them to lift him bodily from the ranks of poor sinners and set him up as a being apart. Further, we

must remember that in this Sacrament the penitent accuses himself, so it is hardly necessary for the priest to do it for him. His work is to lift the burden and to point the way.

The second possible obstacle we might consider is the fear of broken confidence. This is not at all likely to trouble a Catholic, for the reasons which will follow. But to those at present hovering on the threshold of the Faith, this dread might well cause a faltering of the feet and a failing of the heart. Plenty of Pharisees still walk the earth, and a man's past sins might well rise again to overshadow his social life and shatter his business career, if intimate matters confided in the Confessional were allowed to become common knowledge.

Now no good friend would betray a confidence, and the Church is very much more. She is our Mother, and she has no wish to see her children punished to that extent. And there are certain matters which arise between the soul of a man and his Creator, which are the concern of no other man, not even the priest, save only in his capacity of God's minister. And the Church has gone to great lengths to secure this divine and human privacy.

A priest may not speak of these matters, but the law is deeper and wider than that. For example, all men have learned the language of signs, and significant gestures without words are a commonplace. Simple acts like jerking the thumb, inclining the head, pursing the lips, or shrugging the shoulders can sometimes convey a great deal of information. But a priest will not use these methods to convey the secrets of the Confessional, for he must not convey them in any way whatever. Nor will he even pass on knowledge which, although not given to him in the Sacrament, nevertheless grew out of information thus gathered.

In certain circumstances the silence of the priest may involve him in difficulties. It might even endanger his own life or the life of another, but it is more important that the life of the Sacraments should go on unhampered. It might endanger his good name, but the good name of the Catholic Priesthood is of higher importance. Human justice might seem to demand giving up the information, but the rights of God and the needs of man cannot be sacrificed to it. Even if some public disaster might be avoided by his speech, he cannot bring about the greater disaster of hampering the way of men on the road to grace and pardon. And if an oath should be urged against him, the seal of the Confessional must prevail.

In short, any man entering or re-entering the Church is protected on all sides, and the road is clear, definite, and safe. Fears concerning it are unsubstantial shadows — strange ghosts of the imagination, which must never be allowed to arise between us and the full restoration of life with God.
