

# PENANCE

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WE do not understand what we are, and we do not understand what our life on earth means, unless we realise that we are, by our very nature and of necessity, servants of God. We exist to serve and praise our Creator. Besides being servants, God has made us sons also, giving us a share in His divine life, so that, having lived here in this world in a manner befitting our relationship with God, we should be admitted to a still closer union with Him and the divine life throughout eternity.

## FREEWILL AND SIN

But, though this is our destiny, we are not forced to fulfil it. Among the natural gifts which go to make up our human dignity is that of free will. We have power to make a choice and can do good freely. On the other hand, we may know what is right but refuse to do it, and deliberately choose to do what is wrong. It is God's plan that we should win merit for ourselves and give honour to Him by doing His will freely. If we refuse to carry out our chief duty of giving reverence and obedience to God, our Creator, we commit sin. I am speaking of sin in its strict and proper sense, namely, grave personal sin or offence against God. I exclude, therefore, Original Sin, which has been already treated in other pamphlets, and what is called venial sin, which is a lesser offence and not the definite revolt against God and repudiation of His authority, which mortal sin is.

As mortal sin is unnatural and entirely evil, we must expect serious consequences from it. The results of sin are the loss of supernatural life and of that special son-ship which sanctifying grace gives, and the loss of God's friendship. If the sinner dies in the state to which sin has reduced him, he must suffer the loss of God and of all good for ever.

When a creature has thus fallen away from God and lost such precious possessions, is there any hope for him? Is restoration possible? We already know the answer to that question. We know that God, in His infinite goodness and mercy, came to the rescue of man. He sent His own Son, who took our nature, and thus was able, as being both God and Man, to act as Mediator and bring about reconciliation between sinful man and the majesty of God. "It has pleased the Father to reconcile all things to Himself through Him . . . making peace through the blood of His cross" (Col. i., 20).

## A SACRAMENT OF FORGIVENESS

In order that the grace through which we can obtain forgiveness of our sins might reach our souls, Our Lord instituted a special sacrament. We have already seen that, in order to incorporate us in one Body, which was to be a kind of extension of the Incarnation, and to provide for our varied spiritual needs, Christ instituted outward, visible rites, whose significance we could understand, capable of producing spiritual effects in our souls. We have already studied the sacrament of baptism, which first brings us supernatural life; the sacrament of confirmation, which effects a further consecration of the soul to God, and a special strengthening, in view of the fight which must be waged against all that is hostile to supernatural life; and the sacrament of the Blessed Eucharist, which provides the daily nourishment and support of supernatural life. Now we come to another sacrament, which has the power of restoring supernatural life to the soul if it has been lost after baptism. Sin means death—spiritual death—for the soul; but, through the redemptive grace of Jesus Christ, we can be raised from death and live again.

The sacrament of penance is, therefore, for human beings who are weak and liable to fall into sin, a gift of incalculable value. It is like a rope by which we may escape from a deep crevasse into which we have fallen, or a lifebuoy to save us from drowning. The resurrection which it effects is a greater boon than if one whose dead body was awaiting burial were called back to life again.

## ITS INSTITUTION

It was—very fittingly—on the day of His own glorious Resurrection that Jesus Christ instituted this sacrament. On the evening of Easter Sunday He appeared to His apostles and said to them : "As the Father has sent Me, so I send

you." After that He breathed upon them and said : "Receive the Holy Spirit : whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall refuse to forgive are not forgiven " (St. John xx., 20).\* By the words, "Receive the Holy Spirit," Christ made it clear that He was conferring a supernatural power, and the words which followed, " Whose sins . . .," could hardly be understood in any way but one. By these words, as the Catholic Church has always taught, Christ gave to the priests of His Church the power of forgiving sins and of withholding forgiveness. This involved a corresponding obligation on the part of the sinner to submit his sins to the authority of the Church if he wished for forgiveness. The introductory words, "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you," showed that Our Lord was commissioning His Church to carry on a work which He came on earth to do.

The sacrament of penance, then, as Jesus Christ established it, takes the form of judicial process, in which the penitent is at once the accused and the accuser, and the priest exercises the functions of judge. Through the absolution which the priest pronounces, divine grace is poured into the soul of the repentant sinner and he becomes once more the friend of God. Thus we have, as in every sacrament, the outward rite, with its special signification, and the interior effect which, through the power of God, it produces in the soul.

### PENANCE IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

In the very early days of the Church the use of this sacrament was not as common as it is today. The custom of using the sacrament to obtain remission of venial sin and strength against temptation had not yet grown up; and the necessity of having recourse to the sacrament in the case of grave sin was expected to be of very rare occurrence. So high—and rightly—was the appreciation of the dignity conferred by baptism, and of the holiness which the Christian vocation demanded, that grave sin, with the consequent necessity of the sacrament of penance, was expected to be something quite exceptional. Some early Christian writers tell us that they are reluctant to mention penance, lest they seem to be making light of sin and even encouraging Christians to sin. Such was the high standard which they had in those days. For the same reason very severe penalties were inflicted on repentant sinners in the early Church

The views—sound in themselves—about the serious nature of sin committed by a baptised person explain the origin of the false opinions held by some heretical sects which wished to abolish or limit the power of the Church to forgive sin. Against such false opinions the Church always steadfastly maintained one unchanging doctrine, namely, that the Church has power to forgive every sin; and Catholic writers never failed to refute the contentions of the heretics. For example, St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona, who died about the year 390, wrote: "Christ excepted nothing at all. He said, `Whatsoever'" (Epistles iii., 12). And St. Augustine, who died in 430, wrote : "There are some who said that penance was not to be allowed to certain sins; and they were excluded from the Church, because they were heretics" (Sermons, ccclii., 3).

### HAS THE CHURCH CHANGED HER TEACHING?

For those who acknowledge the authority of the living, Church which Christ established to teach mankind, no citation of ancient authors on the subject of the sacrament of penance is really necessary. But for those who, owing to the outbreak of new heresies during the last few centuries, have been led into error and robbed of this sacrament, some quotations from early Christian writers will be useful and enlightening. The following passages should be sufficiently clear without comment :—

St. Cyril of Alexandria (died 444) thus distinguishes the sacraments of baptism and penance : "The men who have received the breath of the Holy Spirit [the reference is to the passage of St. John quoted above] forgive sins in a twofold manner, either by admitting those who are worthy to baptism, or by forgiving the penitent children of the Church."

St. Augustine (died 430) answers those who question the Church's power : "Let us not listen to those who deny that the Church of God has the power to forgive all sins. These unhappy people, through not recognizing in Peter the rock, and being unwilling to believe that the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given to the Church, have themselves lost these keys from their hands."

\* *The second part of this quotation is more familiar to us in the old Douay version, "Whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." We do not use "retain" in this sense in modern English.*

St. John Chrysostom (died 407) calls attention to the wonderful nature of this power given to man : "Those who are living on earth . . . have a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels . . . Whatever priests do below God ratifies above, and the Lord confirms the decision of the servant. . . . For He said, 'What sins you remit are remitted, and what sins you refuse to remit are not remitted ' What power could be greater than that The Father has given all judgment to the Son.' And I see them entrusted with all this by the Son."

St. Ambrose (died 397) appeals to the words and authority of Christ : "They say [the Novatians, who were among the heretics who wished to deny or limit the power of the Church to forgive sin] that they are paying reverence to the Lord by reserving the power to forgive sin to Him alone. In reality, none do Him a greater wrong than those who wish to nullify His commands and reject the gift He offers. Seeing that the Lord Jesus Himself said in His Gospel, ' Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you forgive,' and so on, who honours Him more, those who obey His commands or those who resist?" And again : "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance. But Christ granted this to His Apostles, and by them it was transmitted to the office of the priesthood. Therefore, that which seemed impossible has been made possible."

St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona (died about 390), already quoted, combats the contention of the Novatians that "the Church cannot forgive mortal sin." He asks who taught this doctrine; was it Moses, St. Paul, or Christ? No, he says, but Novatian, "almost three hundred years after the Passion of Our Lord." And he asks by what authority he introduces a new Gospel, and a new law.

St. Athanasius (died 373) compares baptism and penance : "As one who is baptised by a priest is illuminated by the grace of the Holy Spirit, so he who confesses in penance receives forgiveness through the priest because of the grace of Christ."

Lactantius (writing soon after the year 300), though not always a high authority in matters of doctrine, agrees with his contemporaries in assigning the sacrament of penance as a mark of the true Church : "Since each of the heretical sects thinks that it is the Catholic Church, we must understand that the true Church- is that in which there is confession and repentance, which cure effectively the sins and wounds to which the weakness of the flesh is subject."

St. Cyprian (died 258) urges Christians to seek absolution in this sacrament : "I beseech you, dearly loved brethren, let each one confess his sin while he who sinned is still in this world, while his confession can be admitted, while the satisfaction and the remission granted through the priests are acceptable with God."

#### OTHER EVIDENCE.

From the beginning of the third century we have clear testimony of the teaching of the Church in the prayers used at the ordination of priests and the consecration of bishops. The following (dating from the beginning of the third century) is an example :—

"Give, Thou knower of the heart, Father, unto Thy servant whom Thou hast chosen for the Office of bishop, that he may feed Thy flock and minister as priest to Thee without blame, serving Thee continuously by day and night, supplicating to see Thy face worthily that he, may offer Thine oblation in Thy holy Church in the spirit of the fulness of priesthood, having authority to forgive sin according to Thy commandment and give the ordination of Thy ordinance and loose all bonds of iniquity according to the authority which Thou gavest to Thy Apostles." (R. H. Connolly, in *The So-Called Egyptian Church Order*, in the Cambridge series of Texts and Studies, pp. 16-19).

#### CAN THE CHURCH ERR?

Though it is true that not all the doctrines of the Church were set forth from the beginning with the fulness and explicitness to which we are accustomed to-day, we have quite sufficient evidence to show that the Church from the beginning claimed and exercised the power of forgiving sin by the authority of Jesus Christ. There are some who maintain that the common teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the sacrament of penance is a later addition to primitive doctrine. What does such a view imply? That the Church which Christ promised would never teach what was false, has, through century after century, taught false doctrine to the faithful. If the Church has fallen into error, the Spirit of Truth, who was to live in her and guide her, has failed, and the promises of the Son of God have not been fulfilled. Such a thing is, of course, impossible. Therefore, quite apart from any evidence we can produce from the

early centuries of Christian history, we are assured that whatever the Church teaches us today is the truth which she has been commissioned by Jesus Christ to hand on to us. With that we can be content.

## SUMMARY

1—Sin and the effects of sin. 2—Means for forgiveness of sin. 3—The institution of the sacrament of penance, and the nature of this sacrament. 4—The sacrament of penance in early Christian times. 5—Testimony of early Christian writers : St. Cyril of Alexandria (444), St. Augustine (430), St. John Chrysostom (407), St. Ambrose (397), St. Pacian (390), St. Athanasius (373), Lactantius (300), St. Cyprian (258). 6 Other testimony. 7 The Church can never teach what is false.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE.

1—It remits the guilt of sin, both mortal and venial, committed after baptism. 2—It gives back sanctifying grace if it has been lost, and increases it if it is already in the soul. 3—It remits entirely the eternal punishment due for mortal sin, and also the temporal punishment, wholly or in part, according to our dispositions. 4—It enables one who has committed mortal sin to receive Holy Communion again. 5—It strengthens the soul by giving it a right to special helps from God, called actual graces, to enable it to avoid those sins of which it has repented. 6 It restores the merits which were lost through grave sin.

### The Necessity of Repentance.

If anyone wanted to know why Catholics believe that they can obtain pardon of their sins through the sacrament of penance we should give the following reasons : — (1) Jesus Christ established a Church, and gave it authority to teach all mankind in His name. This Church assures me that the sacrament of penance has this power. That reason would be quite sufficient, even if I knew no other. (2) We read in the Gospels that on the day of His Resurrection Jesus Christ appeared to His Apostles and said "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." Then He breathed upon them and said : "Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall refuse to forgive are not forgiven." Are these not plain words that anyone can understand? (3) We can show that from the earliest times the Church which Christ promised would be guided by the Spirit of Truth, has administered the sacrament of penance, and taught that it brings forgiveness of sin. No evidence need be adduced from later history, because, though some controversy can be raised about very early days, no one can reasonably doubt that from, say, the time of St. Augustine the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church have been substantially what they are to-day. If St. Pacian was so indignant because the heretic Novatian and his followers had wished to introduce new ideas between two and three hundred years after the time of Christ, what should be thought of those who, after sixteen hundred years, turned their backs on the whole of Christian tradition and robbed so many souls of God's great gift of mercy? Might we not repeat what St. Augustine wrote 1500 years ago, in words already quoted : "These unhappy people, through not recognising in Peter the rock . . . have lost the keys of heaven"?

## THE FOUR PARTS OF THE SACRAMENT

The sacrament of penance contains four elements or parts—contrition, confession, absolution and satisfaction. The sinner must be truly sorry for his sins, he must confess them to a priest who has authority to absolve him, and he must be prepared to perform whatever good work is imposed as a penance for them; he then receives absolution, which brings sanctifying grace to the soul and remission of sin.

Of these four parts the priest is responsible for one, the giving of absolution. He receives the power to forgive sin through his ordination; but he needs, besides, jurisdiction, which is given by the competent ecclesiastical authority. This jurisdiction—like the jurisdiction of a civil judge—is ordinarily confined to a certain territory, and may be restricted to certain classes of persons; certain sins, also, may, in exceptional circumstances, be exempted from the jurisdiction given.\*

\* *These are called "reserved sins." The reservation to a higher tribunal, or to a priest who has special faculties, of the power of absolving certain sins has as its object to bring before the faithful the serious nature of these sins and the necessity of making special efforts to avoid them.*

## THE PART OF THE PENITENT

The other three parts of the sacrament concern the sinner, or the penitent, as one who comes to the sacrament of penance is called. It is important, therefore, that those who are preparing to receive this sacrament should understand clearly what is required of them in order that they may profit by it. We will consider in turn the three parts of the sacrament which concern the recipient—contrition, confession and satisfaction. Of the three, contrition is the most important. Confession and satisfaction, in certain circumstances, are not necessary; but without contrition there can be no forgiveness and no sacrament of penance. The grace of the sacrament of baptism can be conferred, as we know, on an infant---on one, that is, who does not co-operate actively in any way, but is merely passive. It is quite different with the sacrament of penance. Whereas supernatural life can be given to us in the first instance without our co-operation, it cannot be restored to us, if we have lost it through grave sin, without an act of repentance on our part.

When John the Baptist began his preaching, which was to prepare the way for the public ministry of Jesus Christ, his message was : "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." And when Jesus Himself appeared and sent His disciples before Him, the message was again the same : "Do penance; repent." On one occasion, when His disciples had drawn His attention to the terrible fate of some of their countrymen who had been massacred by the Roman Governor, He gave them the solemn warning, " Unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way" (Luke xiii., 2).

## MEANING OF REPENTANCE

The sacrament of penance, then, to be efficacious, supposes repentance on the part of the recipient. The meaning of repentance, or contrition, is clearly shown by the Greek word which the writers of the Gospels used, *metanoia*, a change of mind or disposition. When we sin we choose something that is wrong and contrary to God's will; when we repent, we withdraw our will from the evil which we chose, in order to turn it once more towards God and put it into conformity with His will. Repentance does not consist in feeling, though feeling may accompany it. It is an act of the will, through which we say, in effect, "I did wrong; I offended God. I wish I had not done it; I won't do it again."

## SORROW MUST BE SINCERE

There are certain qualities which sorrow for sin must have, if the sin is to be forgiven; and of these the first is that it be sincere. True repentance is not an affair of words only. We must detach our will from the wrong to which it had attached itself, and must really wish that we had not committed sin. It is precisely in this that the difficulty of repentance consists. It will, therefore, be realised that true sorrow implies a determination not to commit sin again. I cannot, of course, say with sincerity that I am sorry for hurting a person if I intend to commit the offence again. Therefore, I cannot sincerely hate sin and wish I had not committed it in the past if my will is not now set against it for the future.

Even if I have reason to doubt whether my present opposition to sin will remain firm in the future, as it is now, I can still have a true determination and resolve to avoid sin. A person learning to skate may have reason to fear still further falls before he is perfect in the accomplishment; but there is no doubt about his determination, each time he rises, to remain on his feet as long as he can. A batsman may know that a certain bowler is a danger to him, but still he intends to keep up his wicket and make as many runs as he can. It is not necessary for me to be sure that I shall succeed in avoiding sin, but it is necessary for me to be fully determined to do my best to avoid it.\*\*

## SORROW MUST BE SUPREME

In our sorrow for sin we must regard sin as the greatest evil. In this sense our sorrow must be supreme. A person might conceivably be sorry that a certain act or course of action offended God, and yet refuse to give it up because that would be too great a sacrifice. In this case there is something else which is regarded as a greater evil than sin. Such sorrow is not sufficient, because it does not give to God His proper place in our esteem. We must be prepared for any sacrifice rather than commit sin. In our estimation, sin must be the greatest of all evils. At the same time, it is not  
*\*\* These illustrations are meant to make clear the distinction between a judgment about the future and an intention about the future. They must not be understood as suggesting that we have not the power to avoid sin. We can always avoid grave sin, if we wish, with the help of God's grace.*

prudent to put hypothetical cases to ourselves, and ask ourselves whether, in such or such difficult circumstances, we should be prepared to make the necessary sacrifice in order to avoid sin. If God ever calls on us for an heroic act He will then give us the necessary grace. All that I need concern myself with here and now is to detest sin above all things, and be determined to let nothing come between me and the doing of God's will.

#### SORROW MUST BE SUPERNATURAL

Sorrow for sin must also be supernatural. This implies two things : (1) The act must be inspired and assisted by divine grace. That depends on God; but as long as we do our part we can be sure that God will not fail us. (2) Our sorrow must be based on a supernatural motive, one connected with God or what He has taught us. It is not enough, for example, to be sorry for sin because we have made fools of ourselves, or got into trouble, or lost money, or injured ourselves, or wounded our self-respect. The motive must be one of this kind : that we have lost the friendship of God, or deserved His punishments, or sacrificed the eternal rewards which He will give to those who obey His law, or shown ingratitude towards our greatest benefactor, or sinned against a Being who is infinitely perfect and lovable.

#### SORROW MUST BE UNIVERSAL

Another quality which true sorrow must have is universality, in the sense that it must cover all grave sins that have been committed. The reason for this is easily understood. If a man is sorry for an act of dishonesty because he has been found out, he need not necessarily be sorry for another act of dishonesty which has not been found out. The motive for sorrow in one case is not present in the other; it does not cover all acts of dishonesty. But if a man is sorry for an act of dishonesty because it is a grave sin, he must, if conscious of another act of dishonesty which is also a grave sin, be sorry for it, too, because the motive which makes him sorry in one case is equally present in the other. Therefore, if a man is sincere in saying that he is sorry for a sin because it is a serious offence against God, he must also be sorry for any other sin which is likewise a serious offence against God. Otherwise, the motive he is giving for his sorrow is not the true one.

#### PERFECT AND IMPERFECT CONTRITION

Among the supernatural and sufficient motives for sorrow for sin a distinction can be made between perfect and imperfect ones; and according to this difference of perfection in the motives we divide contrition itself into perfect and imperfect: If we are sorry for sin for a motive which, though good and supernatural, contains a greater or less admixture of selfishness, as, for example, when we are sorry because of the serious consequences to ourselves which the loss of God's friendship entails, our contrition is said to be imperfect. Such contrition, provided it has the qualities already mentioned, is sufficient for the sacrament of penance.

If, however, we are sorry for sin primarily for God's sake, because of His own goodness and His supreme rights, then our contrition is called perfect. The use of the term "perfect" does not imply that our contrition itself could not possibly be better, or that there are not degrees of perfection even in contrition which is called "perfect." Our hatred of sin may be greater or less, and our love for God more or less intense; but the contrition receives the name of "perfect" because the motive which inspires it is the highest one, the goodness of God Himself.

An act of perfect love of God (that is, when we love God for what He is in Himself, and not for the sake of the advantages we may gain by loving Him) has, in practice, the same effects as an act of perfect contrition, because when we truly love God we necessarily hate and set our wills against what would offend Him. Both in an act of perfect contrition and an act of perfect love we set. God, in our appreciation, in His proper place above all created things, and acknowledge as our supreme obligation the doing of His will.

#### THE POWER OF PERFECT CONTRITION

Forgiveness of sin, then, is obtained by confessing it to a priest and receiving absolution from him in the sacrament of penance, provided the sinner has true sorrow, either perfect or imperfect in the sense explained above. That is the plan and will of Jesus Christ. But a further important difference has to be noted between perfect and imperfect contrition. Imperfect contrition is effective in recovering for us God's grace and friendship only when joined with

actual reception of the sacrament of penance. But itself it is not sufficient. But where the contrition, or sorrow, is perfect, sin is forgiven and the grace of God restored even before the sacrament is received, though it still remains obligatory to confess the sin and receive absolution. It would not, therefore, be exact to say simply that perfect contrition suffices for the remission of our sins without the sacrament of penance, because perfect contrition necessarily involves the readiness and desire to do all that God demands of us, and consequently the intention to receive the sacrament of penance according to the ordinance of Jesus Christ.

We have already seen something similar in the case of baptism. God has ordained that supernatural life should come to us through the sacrament of baptism. But an act of perfect love of God (in one capable of eliciting such an act), including as it does, either explicitly or implicitly, the desire for the sacrament, can win this supernatural life even before baptism is actually received. In the same way, though the sacrament of penance is necessary and obligatory for the remission of grave sins committed after baptism, an act of perfect sorrow or love, containing an explicit or implicit resolution to receive the sacrament, will obtain for us forgiveness of our sins even before the sacrament is received.

A Catholic; therefore, who has not the opportunity of receiving the sacrament of penance may escape from a state of sin and recover God's grace by an act of perfect contrition or perfect love of God, with the intention of going to confession. And a non-Catholic, who does not even know anything about the sacrament of penance, or of the obligation to receive it, may also be freed from sin by a similar act. In this case he implicitly desires the sacrament, even if he does not know it, because he desires to do all God's will, and God's will includes—though again the non-Catholic may not know it—the reception of the sacrament of penance.

#### A HABIT THAT SHOULD BE ACQUIRED

It is important for Catholics to cultivate the habit of making acts of love of God and submission to His will, and of sorrow for sin based on the highest motives. Not only are these acts good and holy and pleasing to God, but they enable those who have committed grave sin to escape from a state of danger and of estrangement from God without having to wait till they get an opportunity of going to confession. Moreover, should the urgent necessity for perfect contrition arise through the sudden approach of death while they are in a state of sin, so that their salvation depends on their power of making an act of perfect contrition, the habit already formed will stand to them in their hour of need.

It is even more important for non-Catholics to learn to make, and to form the habit of making, these acts of perfect love of God or of sorrow for having offended Him, because, as those who are outside the Catholic Church have been robbed of the easier means of obtaining forgiveness of sin which Jesus Christ has provided in the sacrament of penance, they have no hope of saving their souls, if they commit grave sin, except through an act of perfect contrition or perfect love of God.

#### A MOTIVE FOR ZEAL

The possession of the sacrament of penance in the Catholic Church makes the forgiveness of our sins easier and surer. This is not the least of the benefits which our Catholic faith confers on us. The loss to those outside the Catholic Church is correspondingly great. Catholics should always be zealous, by means of good example and sympathetic encouragement, to help our separated brethren to find their way into the true Church. Sin is the only evil in the world that need be really feared; it is the only thing that can make human life a failure; it is the only thing that prevents men reaching everlasting happiness. For that reason we should be ready to make any sacrifice in order to put within men's reach the means of protection against sin and of release from sin which Jesus Christ in His mercy left to a sinful world.

#### SUMMARY

1. Why we believe in the sacrament of penance. 2. The four parts of this sacrament. 3. What the penitent has to do. 4. Meaning of repentance. 5. Qualities of true sorrow : (a) Sincere; (b) Supreme; (c) Supernatural; (d) Universal. 6. The difference between perfect and imperfect contrition. 7. The special power of perfect contrition, and its connection with the sacrament of penance. 8. The importance of forming the habit of making acts of perfect contrition. 9. The unhappy lot of those who do not possess this sacrament of mercy.

## Going to Confession

### I.

SINCE, of the three parts of the sacrament of penance, which concern the penitent, the confession of sin is, if not the most important, at least the most prominent, the sacrament of penance is popularly known as "confession," and "going to confession" is the common expression for receiving the sacrament of penance. As it is of the greatest importance to understand how to make a good confession, we will consider how we must prepare and what we must do in order that our confessions may be good and profitable.

#### FIRST OF ALL

The first thing which we should do before confession is one which can easily be overlooked. It is to ask God's help. We are going to do a supernatural work--to receive a sacrament, and we need the help of divine grace that we may make the right preparation and receive the sacrament with the right dispositions. We can have the satisfaction of knowing that, if we ask earnestly and with confidence, we shall receive the grace which we need, for Our Lord has promised that when we ask for what is really good He will hear our prayer. Since, therefore, we need God's grace in order to make a good confession, and since we can be sure of getting it if we ask, let us be careful not to neglect this preliminary part of our preparation for confession.

#### EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Before confession we must know what sins we have to confess, and for that reason we examine our conscience. This examination is not meant to be a harassing and worrying thing. Ordinary reasonable care is all that is required. The trouble the examination of conscience will entail varies, of course, with the length of time a person has been away from the sacrament. For those who go to confession regularly and frequently, as good Catholics do, the examination of conscience is an easy matter and may be very brief. They know their chief weakness and the sins which they are most liable to commit; and if they had committed some sin out of the ordinary they could not easily overlook it.

The matter for confession, or the sins to be confessed, may be divided into two classes, obligatory and optional matter; or, what we are strictly bound to confess, and what we may confess or not as we please. The first class comprises all grave sin. We are strictly bound to confess every single sin that has certainly been committed and is certainly a grave (or mortal) sin committed after baptism, and not previously confessed and absolved in a good confession. It is not of obligation to confess anything else. The second class, optional matter, comprises venial sin and, besides, any sin which has already been confessed and forgiven. The sacrament of penance offers us an easy way of obtaining forgiveness of venial sin; but we are not bound to confess it, and forgiveness may be obtained in other ways. Sin already forgiven, whether mortal or venial, may also be confessed; it is sufficient matter for the sacrament. That is why a person who has committed no sin whatever since the last confession is nonetheless able to receive the sacrament again, by confessing (and being sorry for) past sin already forgiven. We can always accuse ourselves of this again before God, renewing our sorrow for having offended Him, and receive an increase of grace and strength to resist sin. But those who have never committed any sin cannot receive the sacrament of penance. Thus, children who have not come to the use of reason are not fit subjects for this sacrament, because they are incapable of committing sin. The Blessed Mother of God could never have received this sacrament, either, because she never committed sin.

#### DOUBTFUL SINS

This division of the matter for confession into sins which I must confess and sins which I may confess or not as I please is clear in itself. But a difficulty may arise when a person is not sure to which of these two classes his sins belong, whether they are sins which he is bound to confess, or sins which he is not bound to confess. In a word, they are doubtful sins. What is the obligation with regard to doubtful mortal sins?

A mortal sin may be doubtful in one of three ways : (1) A person is not sure if he ever actually committed some particular grave sin or not. Did he on such and such an occasion in the past make a bad Communion, or miss Mass, or act dishonestly? He is not sure. This is not a very practical case for one who goes to confession regularly, and it raises no particular problem. (2) It may be certain that a sin was a grave sin; but there may be reason to think that it has

already been confessed, though this is not certain. (3) The third case is the most common and practical, when a person is not sure whether the sin committed was mortal or not, and this requires some further elucidation.

### WHAT MAKES A GRAVE SIN

It should be recalled that three conditions must be fulfilled before a sin is a grave sin. First, the matter must be serious. Thus, it would not be a mortal sin to steal a penny; it would be a mortal sin to steal it. Second, the person who commits the sin must know at the time that he is doing something that is seriously wrong. To do something that is in itself wrong, without knowing it to be wrong, is not a sin; and to do something that is seriously wrong, without knowing that it is seriously wrong, is not a grave sin. Nor will subsequent enlightenment make a past sin worse than it was at the time it was committed. Each sin must be judged by the state of mind of the person who committed it, at the time it was committed. The third condition for grave sin is that the person who commits it must advert at the time to the fact that it is a grave sin, and commit it with full deliberation and consent.

A person, therefore, who comes to confession may be doubtful if a sin he has committed was a mortal sin, either (1) because he is not sure that the matter was serious enough to constitute a mortal sin (in which case, of course, he is bound to clear up the doubt with a view to his future conduct), or (2) because he is not sure that he had sufficient knowledge at the time, or (3)—and this is, perhaps, the case most likely to happen—he is not sure if he committed the sin with full deliberation.

What, then, is the obligation regarding doubtful sins, whether the doubt concerns the fact of the sin, its previous confession, or its gravity?

### IS IT OBLIGATORY TO CONFESS DOUBTFUL SINS?

The answer is simple. Strictly speaking, there is no obligation to confess doubtful mortal sins. The Church tells us exactly what we are bound to do, and that is, to confess every single mortal sin that we are certain of, committed after baptism, and not previously confessed and absolved in a good confession. We are not bound to confess anything else. Of course, as a matter of advice, we would say that if the sin is doubtful let it be confessed as doubtful, and thus further worry and trouble will be saved, and the danger of self-deception avoided. But still, for the sake of those who are inclined to be worried and anxious about the completeness of their confessions, it is well to be clear that we are, strictly speaking, bound to confess only those sins that are certainly grave sins.

### IS THERE ANY RISK?

But here a difficulty might be put by one of those persons who are inclined to be anxious. Suppose I do not confess those doubtful mortal sins, because I am told that I am not bound to do so; and suppose that in fact they were actually committed, or were never confessed, or were in reality grave sins, though I am not able to make up my mind with certainty on these points. Do I not run a great risk by not confessing them? The same difficulty arises in regard to forgotten sins. Some people get worried because they are afraid that they may have forgotten to confess some grave sin, and they are always wanting to go back over the past in order to make sure that they have not overlooked anything. They are frequently told not to go back, and not to be afraid. But, they object, if there were grave sins which I had, at a time of my life when I was careless, omitted to confess, do I not run a great risk if they remained unconfessed? The answer again is simple: no risk whatever. It is worth understanding why this is so.

When we make a good confession (and I mean by this, when we take ordinary reasonable care, confess all the sins which we consider at the time we are bound to confess, and have true sorrow), then we receive sanctifying grace into our souls, and grave sin, if there is any there, must necessarily disappear. Grave sin and sanctifying grace are mutually contradictory and destructive; they cannot both be in the soul at the same time. It will be seen, therefore, that a good confession can be the means, indirectly, of obtaining forgiveness of sins which have not been confessed, and which may have been completely forgotten; and that it would be a great mistake to think that only those sins that are confessed can be forgiven through the grace of the sacrament; or to think that one mortal sin could be forgiven and another remain on the soul; or to think that a person could go to confession with the right dispositions and come away in the state of grave sin.

## HOW SIN IS FORGIVEN

The explanation is that it is not precisely the confessing of sin which blots it out, but the grace which is given through the absolution of the priest. Let us invent a parable. A woman brings a tablecloth to a laundry and, pointing out a certain stain, asks if washing will remove it. She is told that it will. The tablecloth is washed, and when it comes back the woman finds the stain gone. But on further examination she discovers another stain of the same kind which she had not noticed before. She goes back to the laundry to complain. "Was this tablecloth washed?" she asks. "Yes, it was well washed," is the answer.

Why, then, is this stain there?" "Oh, you never pointed that one out." Would such a story be accepted as anything but fanciful? If a thing is washed, all the stains that washing will remove will disappear, whether pointed out beforehand or not. In a somewhat similar way, when we go to confession with the requisite dispositions and do our best, our souls are washed with the precious blood of Jesus Christ and every stain of grave sin' must disappear.

Suppose (to take an extreme and improbable example) that a man goes to confession and confesses three venial sins, and has true detestation of everything that would offend God, and especially of grave sin; and suppose that there are twenty mortal sins on his soul which he has completely forgotten. The twenty sins would be forgiven as certainly as any which he had confessed. Of course, if he remembers afterwards a grave sin which was not confessed, he is bound to confess it—not in order that it may be forgiven, for it has, in our supposed case, already been forgiven, but because we are bound to submit all grave sin to the authority of the Church. If he refused to obey God's law in this respect he would commit a new and grave sin; but the others would be gone, and could not, of course, return.

That is why I said that, though we are bound to take reasonable care to make our confessions complete, once we have taken such care there is no cause for anxiety or worry.

## SETTING RIGHT A BAD CONFESSION

Is it ever necessary to go back over past confessions? Yes, in one case : if we have ever been unfortunate enough to make a bad confession and have not set it right. A confession is a bad one if a person deliberately conceals (that is, refuses to confess) a mortal sin in confession, or deliberately goes to confession without having sorrow and the willingness to perform the penance enjoined and the intention of avoiding sin in future. To make a bad confession is a peculiarly foolish sin, because no benefit whatever can come from it. One who makes a bad confession has still on his soul all the sins he had before, and in addition a grave sin of sacrilege, through the abuse of a sacred thing, the sacrament of penance.

Can a bad confession, then, be set right? Certainly. All that is necessary is to make a good confession covering the time since the last good confession; in other words, to go back to the last good confession and take up from there. Every grave sin committed since the last good confession, including, of course, the sacrilegious confession or confessions.

When the devil has induced a person to make a bad confession he will do his utmost to keep the unfortunate one from setting matters right. He will put vividly before the sinner the difficulty of getting out of the unhappy position in which he now is, with the object of keeping him permanently the slave of sin. And so it is necessary to insist that, even if many bad confessions have been made, it is a simple matter, through God's mercy, to put things right. True sorrow and a good confession covering the period since the last good confession are all that is necessary; and grace for this will be given by God to those who desire it and ask for it. Many who have made bad confessions and have had the courage to go back and set things right have been surprised how easy God made it for them and what consolation He gave them.

## VOLUNTARY GENERAL CONFESSIONS SOMETIMES USEFUL

Apart from this case of necessity, it is sometimes useful to go back over past confessions, and accuse ourselves of our past sins and renew our sorrow for them. It is particularly to be recommended when a person is entering on a new stage of life, for example, when about to be married. Many people have the habit of going back periodically, perhaps over the past year, or over the time since the last retreat or mission. Sometimes, when a person begins to realise that he has been slipping back spiritually, even if no grave sin has been committed, he is helped to pull himself up by making

a confession covering the period of carelessness. It often happens that those who have felt habits of sin creeping upon them, and whose resistance to temptation is becoming weaker and weaker, have been enabled to shake off this spiritual listlessness completely and rise superior to their difficulties by going back and making a frank confession of their weakness and failings. The explanation is that the act of humiliation involved wins the favour of God in a special way; and the consideration of all the carelessness and infidelity of the period under review is calculated to rouse deeper sorrow and a more firm determination of amendment—all which means better dispositions for the reception of the sacrament, and a consequent increase of the grace it confers.

But there are people who have to be forbidden to go back over past confessions—those who are worried and anxious without reason. They have frequently made general confessions, perhaps, but they are never satisfied, and they think that if they are permitted to make just one more general confession all will be well. There is only one cure for this state of mind, and it is a safe one. It is for such persons to do exactly what they are told by their confessor. It may sometimes be necessary for them to sacrifice their desire to feel satisfied, and be content to obey their spiritual director. They can have this consolation, that God will never blame them for being obedient.

### CHIEF PART OF PREPARATION

By far the most important part of preparation for confession is to excite true sorrow for sin. The meaning of sorrow, and the qualities it must have, have already been explained. Here we want only to insist on the importance of this part of our preparation for confession. Without sorrow confession is, at best, mere waste of time; and if the want of sorrow is deliberate, or due to grave carelessness, the confession will be a bad one and grave sin committed. We might write out a complete list of all our sins, as far as we could discover them, and confess them to the Pope himself, and receive absolution from him; and if we had not sorrow and a true determination to avoid sin in future it would do us no good whatever.

There are two chief dangers for Catholics with regard to the sacrament of penance—one, of finding confession too hard, and the other, of finding it too easy; and of the two the second, perhaps, is the greater danger. The difficulty of finding confession too hard may keep some Catholics away from confession, or even at times lead them to make bad confessions. This danger is an obvious one, arising from the nature of the obligations which the sacrament imposes. It will be dealt with presently. But the other danger is a more insidious one. Just because confession is ordinarily so easy, it is possible to get into the habit of going to confession in the routine manner, without sufficient attention to that part of the preparation which matters most. Sufficient time and attention may be given to examination of conscience, but not enough to the essential work of exciting within us sorrow for the sins which we are going to confess.

### THE REAL DIFFICULTY OF CONFESSION

Of course, without sorrow there can be no sacrament, and if a person deliberately went to confession without sorrow (even if there were only venial sins to be confessed) it would be sacrilege. But, apart from this, want of proper attention and care in the matter of contrition will mean that those who have not grave sin to confess will get little profit from their confessions compared with what they might get if their dispositions were more perfect. For those who, unfortunately, frequently commit grave sin the danger is more serious. They know, of course, that true sorrow is necessary; no Catholic, in spite of what enemies may say, ever looks on confession as a kind of licence to commit sin. Neither does he look on it as a mere penalty for committing sin, as if committing sin would be in some way permissible provided you were willing to pay the penalty of confessing the sin afterwards. But for one who is in the habit of committing grave sin it may not be an easy thing to have that true sorrow and real determination to give up sin which are absolutely necessary. Such a person has an attachment to sin. That attachment must be broken; the will must be—detached—in many cases dragged forcibly away—from sin; and this requires, besides the grace of God, a very real effort and change of disposition on the part of the sinner who is coming to the sacrament of penance. There lies the real difficulty of confession—not confessing the sin, but having true repentance for it. And it cannot be too much insisted on that without true repentance confession is useless.

For the profitable reception of this sacrament, therefore, careful preparation is necessary. At the same time, there is no reason for discouragement or scrupulosity. While guarding against negligence, we must not make the mistake of

going to the other extreme and becoming victims of unnecessary anxiety. God has given us this sacrament in mercy, and He will certainly give us the grace necessary to receive it well if we trust Him and do our best.

### "BUT I ALWAYS HAVE THE SAME SINS TO CONFESS"

Sometimes people are worried because, as they nearly always have the same sins to confess, and these not very serious, they fear they may not have true sorrow. A word may be said in answer to this not uncommon difficulty. First of all, the fact that this anxiety about having the proper dispositions exists is a very good sign that nothing requisite is missing; for one who is anxious will be likely to take too much care, rather than too little. But reasonable care, with the help of God's grace, is sufficient. Further, it is to be noted that it is not surprising that many people find that they have nearly always the same sins to confess. If these were grave sins, there would be just cause for considering whether there were genuine repentance, seeing that the sins are so often repeated. But we are considering the case of those who lead a good life, whose sins are not grave, but faults due to human weakness and inattention. As people's characters change only slowly, and the circumstances of their daily lives generally remain much the same, it is not surprising that their daily faults should always be of the same kind.

In order that there may be no doubt about the sufficiency of their sorrow, such people, when preparing for confession, should not confine their attention to the smaller sins which they have committed since their last confession, but make this an opportunity for renewing their sorrow for all the sins of their lives. Frequent renewal of sorrow for past sin is pleasing to God, increases divine love in our souls, and is an excellent safeguard against future sin. It is only when we let our hatred of sin and sorrow for past sin die away that fresh sin becomes possible. This abiding sorrow for sin is particularly efficacious when joined with the sacrament of penance, on account of the graces which this sacrament confers. Those who thus go to confession with sorrow for everything by which they have ever offended God, and accuse themselves, at least in a general way, of all their sins, need have no fear about the sufficiency of their sorrow.

### SUMMARY

1. The first and most important thing to do when preparing for confession. 2. Examination of conscience not difficult. 3. Division of sins into two classes—what we must confess, and what we may confess. 4. Three ways in which a mortal sin may be doubtful. 5. What is necessary that a sin may be grave? 6. The obligation regarding doubtful sins. 7. Is there risk concerning doubtful or forgotten sins? 8. How sin is forgiven (which answers the preceding difficulty). 9. How a bad confession can be set right. 10. Even general confessions that are not necessary may be useful, though they may also be harmful. 11. What we must chiefly attend to when preparing for confession. 12. The difficulty about always having the same sins to confess.

## II.

HAVING considered what we must do before confession, we now turn to the second section of this subject to see what is to be done at confession.

We must accuse ourselves humbly and simply of our sins as our conscience represents them to us. We do not go to confession to defend or excuse ourselves, but to be our own accusers. The priest will help us by asking questions, if he judges it necessary, and we should not be afraid to ask him for help if we need it; but, as far as possible, our self-accusation should ordinarily be such as will make questioning unnecessary.

### HOW TO CONFESS OUR SINS

We are bound to confess each individual mortal sin. If we do not know the number exactly we must give as close an estimate as we can. We are bound to make clear if the sin has been a grave one; and we are also bound to make clear the kind of sin which has been committed. It would not be sufficient merely to confess telling a lie, if it was a lie that had done grave injury to a person's character. The lie in that case becomes a grave sin and not merely a violation of truth, but also a sin of injustice. Grave sins of thought, word, and deed are different in kind, and within these three classes there are many subdivisions. As every Catholic knows, the confession of sin should be brief and businesslike.

Rambling stories and unnecessary details are not wanted. Only those circumstances need be mentioned which must be known in order that the gravity and precise nature of the sin may be understood.

I have already said that finding confession too easy is perhaps a greater danger for the average Catholic than finding it too hard. But the difficulty of confessing sin may be a real one in some cases, especially for those who are young or of a naturally timid disposition, or who, having led an innocent life heretofore, are betrayed into some worse sin than usual. The devil is always ready to take advantage of our character or of special circumstances to lure us into the wrong path.

#### IS IT SO HARD?

We need not be surprised, therefore, if for any reason we sometimes find the duty of confessing our sins repugnant to natural feelings. But there are many considerations calculated to give us confidence. First of all, in confessing our sins to God's representative we are really confessing them to God Himself, who is infinite in mercy. Even if we had committed far greater sins—even if we were a thousand times as bad as we really are, we could still come to God without a shadow of doubt about His readiness to forgive. When we come to confession we come to Jesus Christ, who was called "the friend of sinners," and did not reject the title. If, then, we are sinners, that gives us a claim on Christ's friendship, provided we are truly repentant. If we read and ponder on the story of the Prodigal Son, told in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, we shall surely gain more confidence in God's mercy and firm assurance regarding the kind of welcome we may expect from Him when we return in sorrow to Him

On what easy terms God forgives our sins ! These sins have offended and dishonoured Him, and yet the conditions which, He lays down for forgiveness are so easy. Suppose there were a doctor who could cure all diseases, without operations or troublesome treatment, provided sufferers explained what their complaint was and sincerely desired to be cured. Would that not be considered a great boon, and would not people throng to such a doctor to be cured? Yet all the sins which are the cause of death to the soul can be removed at once if they are confessed with sorrow. If a man offends against the laws of the State he is brought before the court and the evidence of his guilt is set forth in the hearing of all, and published in the papers for the world to read; and a heavy sentence, perhaps, follows. But no matter how serious are our offences against God, an acknowledgment of them by ourselves to His representative, in secret, accompanied by true repentance, is sufficient to obtain immediate and complete forgiveness.

We are not asked to confess our sins before a crowded court or before a whole congregation, but to one person in the most absolute secrecy. The priest is bound by the most solemn of obligations to preserve secret every sin which has been confessed in the sacrament of penance. This point need not be laboured. No power on earth, civil or ecclesiastical, can oblige a priest to violate the seal which guards the secrecy of confession. Under no conceivable circumstances, not even to save his life, would it be lawful for him to reveal the least sin that he has heard in confession. Confessing our sins, therefore, is like dropping them into a deep well; there is a little splash on the surface for a moment, and then they are gone, out of sight and out of hearing for ever.

#### SHAME

The devil may suggest to a timid person that the priest will be surprised at some particular sin that has to be confessed. There is no foundation for such a fear. The priest has such a knowledge of human nature and of human weakness as will prevent him from feeling surprised. Moreover, every sin that could be committed has been, unfortunately, committed over and over again. They are all known and catalogued. Neither will the priest despise the sinner—another possible suggestion of the devil. No doubt it is a shameful thing to commit sin; but to repent and offer to God the reparation of a good confession is not something to be ashamed of. Our Lord has told us that there will be joy in heaven over the repentance of one sinner more than over ninety-nine just that do not need penance And no consolation could be greater for a priest than to be allowed to help a sinner back to happiness and to the grace and friendship of God.

#### PITY THE CONFESSOR

Sometimes it may happen that a priest in the confessional will be wanting in patience, kindness, or sympathy. He is

wrong and blameworthy, because in this he is not like Jesus Christ whose place he is occupying. But a penitent who would allow himself to be turned against the sacrament of penance on account of the fault of a priest would also be wrong.. You go to confession, not for the sake of the priest, but in obedience to the will of God and to gain remission of your sins. If the priest offends you by his manner, that is no reason why you should offend God by neglect of the sacrament. Furthermore, allowance should be made for the priest. He may have to sit for hours in a cramped position, perhaps in an ill-ventilated confessional, straining to hear the low voices of his penitents, striving to give the same individual attention to each, ready to apply his mind to any problem which may arise. The work is monotonous and wearisome, a point which may easily be overlooked by the penitent, who has only one confession to make, whereas the priest has very many to hear. If, in these circumstances, he were on occasion to be wanting in patience or kindness, he would undoubtedly be wrong, but he would have excuses. Therefore, if one confessor does not suit you, find another, if you can; but do not let the defects of any priest turn you away from God's sacrament.

#### ADVICE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DIFFICULTY

God has given us the sacrament of penance to be a healing and soothing remedy for our souls. We should, therefore, do our best to put away all thoughts of fear and timidity. If there is something which, for one reason or another, we find it hard to mention in confession, let us not put it off. It has been wisely said that " putting off an easy thing makes it hard, and putting off a hard thing makes it impossible." There is no hope of a bad egg improving with keeping. A piece of advice which is worth having in mind for our own use or for the help of others is this : if a person has a great difficulty in going to confession, let him ask God's help and then, without thinking at all of what he has to confess or how he is going to confess it, let him go to confession and simply tell the priest that he finds it hard to come to confession, or is in difficulty, or wants special help—just that and nothing more. Experience has shown that the difficulty will be found to have melted away.

#### ASK ADVICE

Sometimes it is not a matter of sin at all. It might happen that a person would keep some trouble of conscience to himself for years, and then take heart to speak about it, only to find that there was no real ground for worry all the time. It is a great mistake to keep subjects of worry on the mind unnecessarily, seeing that a little courage can bring so much peace of soul. Though the sacrament of penance is primarily for the confession and forgiveness of sin, it affords a useful opportunity of getting spiritual advice; and counsel sought in time may save much sin and sorrow. This point is of special importance for young people who are just growing up and are meeting with new difficulties and temptations.

There are sometimes doubts to be cleared up—what is right and what is wrong in some matter, how to act in certain circumstances in order to please God, how best to avoid certain dangers, how to deal successfully with temptations. Open the windows and let in the light. When the devil is laying traps he loves to work in the dark.

#### SACRAMENTAL PENANCE

At confession some good work is imposed upon us by the confessor as a penance for our sins, and after confession there remains the obligation of performing this penance. Though our repentance has been genuine, and therefore sufficient for the remission of the guilt of sin, there may not have been such a perfect and generous turning to God as would make full satisfaction for our sinful self-indulgence; and so some penalty or punishment may still be due. The penance given in confession, because it is part of the sacrament, which gets its special efficacy from Jesus Christ, has much greater power of atoning for our sins than the same good works done of our own accord independently of the sacrament. For this reason we should value our sacramental penance and should be careful in performing it. The obligation to perform it is a grave one if it is a serious, or heavy, penance imposed for serious sin. If we forget, through no fault of our own, we lose the additional benefit we should have gained by it, but the grace given by the absolution which we received is not, of course, lost.

#### OBLIGATIONS REMAINING AFTER CONFESSION

There may remain other obligations after confession. When a sin against justice has been committed— theft, for

instance, or injury to another's character—the sin cannot be forgiven unless there is the intention to make good the wrong as far as possible; this intention is a necessary part of the repentance. After the sin has been forgiven in confession this obligation of restitution or reparation remains, and binds under pain of sin, whether mortal or venial, according to the gravity of the injury to be repaired.

### THE FUTURE

True repentance, we have already seen, involves a real determination to avoid sin in future, and consequently calls for the adoption of practical means to this end. No man can say that he sincerely intends to avoid sin if he is not willing to avoid what he knows already leads him to sin. For this, we cannot trust ourselves and our good resolutions only; we need the help of God's grace, which will be given to us if we ask earnestly for it. Many a relapse into sin is due either to a failure to take the practical steps necessary in order to avoid sin, or to a failure to realise that our own strength will not suffice to save us, but that we must be earnest in begging God for help. We can ask for this help with all the more confidence because the very sacrament which we have received already gives us a new claim to special assistance from God, as need arises, to resist temptation and avoid sin. This assistance is one form of what is called actual grace.

### A GREAT GIFT

We could never be sufficiently grateful to God for this most precious sacrament. We are told in the Gospels of the crowd of sick people who were always waiting at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem for the moving of the waters by an angel, because the first person who entered the water after this was cured. Our Lord found one man who had been there for thirty-eight years, and in mercy gave him the healing for which he had waited so long in vain. But in the sacrament of penance Christ dispenses His graces for the healing of all who come. No one is more privileged than another. Catholics should show their appreciation for this great gift by receiving the sacrament of penance frequently and with the best dispositions possible. In this way they will be enabled to keep their souls pure, and get grace to lead a holy life in a world where sin and evil influences are all around them.

"Unless you repent you will all perish." These words of Jesus Christ are a warning which cannot be disregarded. The man who has committed grave sin and has not repented of it lives in perpetual danger, and if he dies in that state nothing can save him. He does not escape from the guilt of sin by merely forgetting it. Neither will the mere abandonment of sin, or growing out of habits of sin, suffice to save him. It is true that an act of perfect contrition—that is, an act of sorrow for sin inspired by the highest motive, namely, pure love and respect for God will bring remission for sin even for one who does not know of the obligation of confession. But it is just those who need repentance most, those who are under the domination of their passions and frequently commit grave sin, that will be strangers to acts of love of God and will find it hardest to reach the dispositions necessary for perfect contrition. For such the easier way to forgiveness which Jesus Christ has in mercy provided in the sacrament of penance is, ordinarily, their only hope. For this reason alone, if for no other, it is of vital importance that we should do our utmost to open the eyes of all to the truth of the Catholic Faith and the authority of the Church which Christ established for the salvation of mankind.\*

### SUMMARY

How to confess our sins—number and kind. 2. Considerations which make confession easier : (a) God is infinitely merciful; (b) Every kind of sin can be washed away in confession; (c) How easily the offender against God's laws is treated compared with the offender against the laws of the State; (d) There is no publicity (as there will be at the day of judgment); (e) The priest will not be surprised at any sin, nor will he think badly of the sinner. 3. Folly of keeping away from confession because once a priest spoke to me sharply. 4. What to do when there is a great difficulty. b. Do not be afraid to ask advice. 6. The meaning and obligation of the penance imposed. 7. Other obligations that may remain to be fulfilled after confession. 8. Two means of keeping the necessary resolution to avoid sin in future. 9. A great gift, and a motive for zeal.

\* G. K. Chesterton has written: "*When people ask me, Why did you join the Church. of Rome?' the first essential answer . . . is, To get rid of my sins.*" (*Autobiography*, p. 329).