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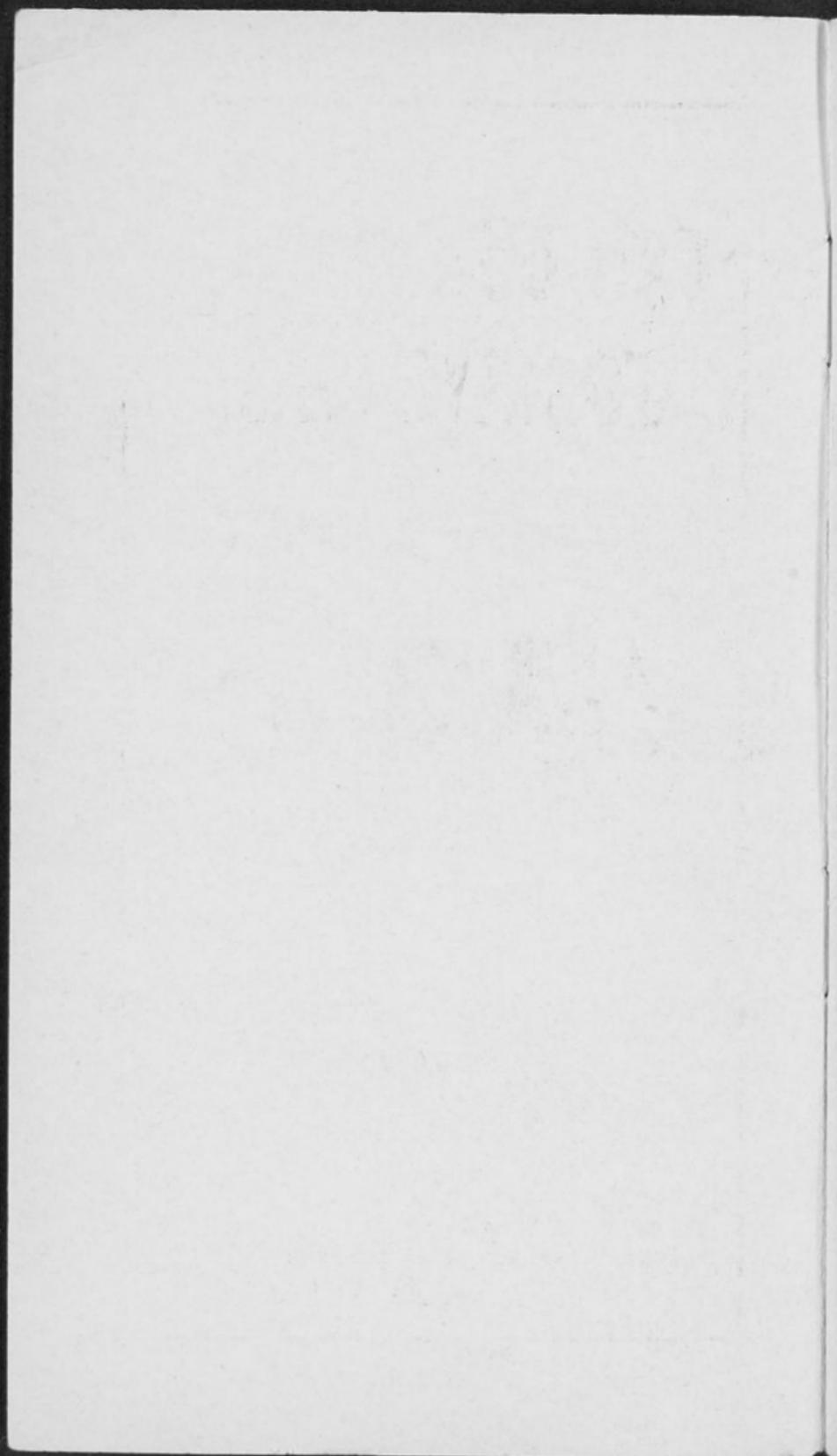
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CAN OUR PRIESTS FORGIVE SINS?

When Dr. John Rathbone Oliver, an Episcopalian minister and psychiatrist of note, was an undergraduate student at Harvard some thirty-odd years ago, his grandfather who was a devout Baptist, became greatly disturbed over John's "Romish practices." One evening he undertook to lecture him on the evil of "auricular confession". Dr. Oliver thus reports the lecture:

"I don't see why your mother lets you do such things," he said; for he thought of me still as a wayward boy. "And I never realized what it might lead to when she insisted on being baptized in the Episcopal Church. I can't imagine what your church is coming to anyhow. Confession!—Nonsense! Poppy-cock!—But I'll tell you one thing, my boy.—No mortal man shall ever come between my soul and my God."

Commenting on his grandfather's prejudice against confession, Dr. Oliver says: "Thirty years ago this

was the general attitude of the average devout Protestant toward what Catholics call the Sacrament of Penance. My dear old grandfather could not see that 'A Man'—'The Man'—God in Man incarnate—had not only come between him and his God—but had made Himself the Way by which the world had been brought back to God—had become the main channel of Man's approach to the Everlasting Father."

A Common View

The writer has presented this incident because it illustrates the common reaction of Protestants and of non-Catholics in general toward the Catholic teaching concerning the power of her priests to forgive sins. While there is a shift in the attitude of some of the leading Protestant divines today, there is no doubt that the great masses of people outside the Catholic Church still look upon confession with misgiving and suspicion, viewing it as an invention of priestcraft and as an unnecessary intrusion between the individual and his God.

In this article I propose to show that this widespread prejudice of non-Catholics against confession is based upon a common misunderstanding of its real nature, and is directly traceable to misrepresentations and caricatures, whose circulation among the general public was so greatly increased during the presidential campaign of 1928. I shall show, moreover, that the doctrine is not only reasonable and free from any just censure or offense, but that it is the certain teaching of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and that it is, in fact, among the most helpful and comforting of all His gifts to weak and sinful humanity. In establishing this truth, I shall appeal not to the authoritative pronouncements of the Church, but to the words of Christ Himself and to the court of our common understanding.

I shall ask of our dear non-Catholic readers but one favor—that they consider the matter not with minds which have prejudiced the case and are closed to all new evidence, but

that they view it with an *open* mind, and with eyes single to the actual facts. I am confident this favor will be granted. For in presenting this subject to congregations in half a dozen Protestant denominations, and in answering questions in the ensuing open forum, I have unvaryingly found a real hunger to know the true Catholic viewpoint about this much misunderstood practice of confession.

Purpose of Christ's Ministry

What, then, is the evidence that priests have the power to forgive sins? Let us begin our answer to this question by asking, What was the dominant purpose of Christ's ministry on earth? Was it not to rescue mankind from the effects of their own sinfulness, and to provide suitable means by which they might advance in spiritual perfection and attain everlasting life? The pages of the gospel are replete with instances showing the mercy and compassion of Christ upon suffering and sinful humanity. He restores sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to

the dumb, and vigor to the paralyzed limb. The evangelist, Matthew, sums it all up when he says simply: "and all that were sick, he healed." (Matt. 8:16) While He poured out His benefactions upon the sick of body, He was even more intent upon the healing of the ills of the soul. This primary purpose of Christ's ministry is indicated in His very name. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus," says the angel, "for he shall save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

Christ Pardons Mary Magdalen

Among the most touching scenes in the Master's earthly ministry are those which reveal His compassion for weak and sinful humanity, fallen by the wayside, but contrite and willing to rise again. Readers will recall how on one occasion the Jews brought to Jesus a woman taken in adultery, and inquired if she should not be stoned to death according to the law of Moses. Jesus said to them: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Then he wrote on the ground. Tra-

dition tells us that he wrote in the dust the secret sins of those who stood about. And one by one they went away. Then Jesus said to the woman who alone remained: "Woman, where are they that accused thee? Hath no man condemned thee? Who said: No man, Lord. And Jesus said: Neither will I condemn thee. Go, and now sin no more." (John, 8:11)

Not less dramatic than the pardoning of the woman taken in adultery is the scene that occurred when Jesus was dining at the home of Simon, the Pharisee, in Bethania. Mary Magdalen, a woman of the streets, looked down upon by the proud Pharisees, enters. With her tears she washes the feet of Jesus, anoints them with ointment from an alabaster box, and wipes them with her hair. The Pharisees appear scandalized that Christ has permitted her to so much as touch Him. They do not wish to be contaminated by her presence. Feign would they have cast her out. Simon is saying: "This man, if he were a prophet, would

know surely who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him, that she is a sinner." (Luke, 7:39)

Does Jesus follow the thought of the Pharisees, and drive her away from Him with looks of scorn and words of condemnation? No, indeed! For that scarlet woman of the streets Jesus has nothing but mercy and words of infinite tenderness. To the proud Pharisees He says, "Many sins are forgiven her, because she hath loved much." Then turning to the weeping Magdalen, He speaks these sweet and comforting words which breathe the spirit of infinite mercy: "Thy sins are forgiven thee. . . go in peace." (Luke, 7: 48, 50)

Bent and bowed under the weight of sin, blinded by tears of repentance, that was not Mary Magdalen alone to whom Christ spoke. It was to all womanhood and all mankind in the centuries still struggling in the womb of time. Mary was but the symbol of the race. Into the ears of men and women everywhere, bent and broken under the weight of mortal sin, blind-

ed by tears of repentance, Christ breathes again those tender words of mercy and forgiveness: "Thy sins are forgiven thee. . . go and now sin no more."

Jesus Receives Sinners

Surely these pictures of the gentle Saviour pardoning the woman taken in adultery, forgiving the sinful Magdalen, with a prayer for the forgiveness of His murderers on his dying lips, must come into the minds of sinners like the breath of eternal spring. To souls that have fallen into the slough of dark despair, these words come as the stars that shine in the blackened vault of a moonless sky. No matter if the soul is covered with sins of lust, or gluttony, or envy, or hatred, or all of them together, Christ still stands ready to wash them all away. "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be as red as crimson, they shall be white as wool." (Is. 1:18) "The bruised reed he shall not break, and smoking flax he shall not quench." (Is. 42:3)

So tender and considerate was Jesus toward sinners, that the Pharisees complained to the disciples saying: "Why doth your master eat with publicans and sinners? But Jesus hearing it, said: They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill. Go then and learn what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. For I am not come to call the just, but sinners." (Matt. 9: 11-13) There we have in the Master's own words, the purpose of His mission on earth—to call the wayward sinners back to Him. To illustrate this truth still more vividly to them, Christ then narrated three parables. The first was the beautiful parable of the Good Shepherd, who leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the desert, and searches for the one that is lost until he finds it. Then carrying it home upon his shoulders he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying: "Rejoice with me, because I have found my sheep that was lost." Then the Master shows the application of the parable, saying, "I say to you,

that even so there shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance." (Luke, 15:7)

The second parable illustrating this truth is about the woman, who having ten groats, loses one. Immediately she lights the candle and sweeps the house and searches diligently until she finds it. Then she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying: "Rejoice with me, because I have found the groat which I had lost." The third parable is perhaps the most beautiful and touching that ever fell from the Master's lips. It is the story of the Prodigal Son. It is familiar to all. With such masterly artistry does it play upon the varied emotions that it seems to strike all the notes on the diapason of the human heart. It reaches its climax when the father seeing in the distance his prodigal son returning, runs to him, embraces him and forgives him. He orders the servants to kill the fatted calf, and wishes all to rejoice with

him "because this my son was dead, and is come to life again: was lost and is found." (Luke, 15:24) That was the picture which the Master drew of Himself in the long ago. That is still the picture of Him today.

Christ's Mission Continued

Is there any fair-minded person who in the face of these clear teachings of Jesus Christ can doubt that the primary purpose of His mission on earth was to reconcile sinners to their God? Is it conceivable that He would not confer upon the Church which He founded, the power and authority to continue the mission which He Himself had come upon earth to achieve? Was Christ interested only in reconciling the sinners of His day, or was He interested in restoring all mankind to the friendship of God? If His divine mission was to all mankind and not merely to the people of His day, then it follows that there must have been provided means whereby people living after Christ in His visible form had left the earth, could still be cleansed from their sins.

This dictate of our common intelligence finds its complete verification in the action of our blessed Lord as recorded in the Gospels. For Christ conferred upon the Apostles the self-same power of pardoning which He Himself possessed. To demonstrate that He Himself possessed this power, He worked a physical miracle. Thus He said to the man sick of the palsy: "Thy sins are forgiven thee." Some of the scribes professed to be scandalized at Christ's claim to exercise such power, saying: "He blasphemeth. Who can forgive sins, but God only?" Whereupon Christ said to them: "Which is easier, to say to the man sick of the palsy: Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say: Arise, take up thy bed, and walk? But that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy) I say to thee: Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house." (Mark, 2:9-11)

Conferring of Power

Now this same power of pardoning, Christ transmitted to Peter and

the other Apostles when He said: "Amen I say to you, whatsoever you shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt. 18:18) Even more specific and in a manner more impressive than the above, was the action of Christ after His resurrection in solemnly conferring upon His apostles this power of pardoning: "As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them; and he said to them: Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John, 20:21-23)

In these words Christ reiterates in plain, literal language what He had previously stated to them in the figurative terms of *binding* and *loosing*. It is to be noted that Christ prefaces the conferring of this power upon the Apostles by declaring the identity of their mission with His own: "As the Father hath sent me, I also

send you." He says to them in effect: As I came into the world to reconcile sinners to their God, so likewise are you called upon to fulfill this same mission.

It is to be observed also that Christ gave them power not merely to announce that sins were forgiven, but actually to forgive them—"whose sins *you* shall forgive, they are forgiven them." If the authority of the Apostles were restricted to the declaration, "God pardons you," they would then require a special revelation in each case to make the pronouncement valid. Furthermore, the power conferred is a judicial one. They are not told to forgive or to retain indiscriminately but judicially, according as the sinner deserves. Lastly, it is to be noted that their authority is not restricted to any particular kind of sins, but extends to all without exception.

Blinding Evidence

Would it be possible to express in a clearer or more unmistakable manner the conferring upon the Apostles

of this power of pardoning than in the plain language and in the solemn manner used by Christ? It would seem that the divine Master wished to eliminate for all time the possibility of any misconstruction of His meaning by reiterating in the plainest and most literal terms what He had already stated to them in the beautiful and rich metaphor of the Aramaic tongue. How is it possible for any Christian who professes to believe in the truthfulness of Christ's teachings to escape the conclusion that He conferred upon His Church the selfsame power of forgiving sins which He Himself possessed?

The attempt is made by people who admit that the Apostles received this power, but deny that it was transmitted to their successors. This view, which would confine the solicitude of Christ to the people of His generation, is flatly contradicted by the statement of Christ showing that He conferred authority upon the Apostles not in their private capacity as individuals, but in their official cap-

acity as officers of a moral corporation, His Church, which was to continue till the end of time. Thus He said to the Apostles: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations. . . And behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world." (Matt. 28:20)

As the Apostles and disciples were all to pass away, it is evident that the authority they possessed was to be transmitted to their successors in office. Otherwise, Christ's Church would have perished with His Apostles. There is the same need today of reconciling sinners to God that there was in the days of Christ and the Apostles. The Catholic Church, founded by Christ, shall continue her divinely appointed ministry of reconciling sinners until the last soul shall be gathered into the arms of its Maker.

An Important Distinction

Let us now consider some of the common objections to this sacrament. A non-Catholic friend voiced a difficulty experienced by many people

outside of the fold when he said to the writer: "I believe that God alone can forgive sins. You priests are not divine. You are entirely human like the rest of us. You have your shortcomings and weaknesses. You have no more power of forgiving sins than I have. In fact, I have as much power to forgive a sin or crime as you or any other human being." Let me now address in a kindly manner to our dear non-Catholic reader, the words I then addressed to my friend:

"Can you pardon a criminal from the state penitentiary at Joliet just the same as Governor Emerson of Illinois?" I asked. "No," replied my friend, "I'll admit I can't do that." "But aren't you a man," I persisted, "and isn't Mr. Emerson a man, the same as you? And didn't you say that you had as much power to forgive a misdeed as any other man?" "Yes," replied my friend, "but I make a distinction. Mr. Emerson simply as a man does not have the power to pardon. It is only because he occupies the *office* of the Governor of Illinois

that he has such authority.”

“Then you admit,” I pointed out, “the same basic distinction which the Church makes, between a priest simply as a human being, and as one who exercises the office of an ambassador of Christ, and exercises power solely by virtue of the office which he holds. I in my private personal capacity as Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones, have no more power than you or any other man. But I, in my *official* capacity as an ambassador of Almighty God, acting in His name and by His authority, exercise a power which far transcends that of a human being and is, in truth, the very power of God Himself.”

An Analogy

This distinction between a man in his private capacity, simply as a human being, and in his official position as an ambassador, is woven into the very warp and woof of our American government. Thus, Mr. Andrew W. Mellon is sent as the ambassador of the United States to the court of St. James in London. When he acts with-

in the limits of his duly accredited jurisdiction as our ambassador, and signs documents affecting the relations of England and the United States, is there behind his signature the feeble strength of but one elderly man? On the contrary, there is behind his signature the power and the strength, and the sovereign authority of 125 millions of citizens of our country. Why? Because he acts as our ambassador, in our name and by our authority.

It is this very distinction that the Apostle St. Paul pointed out in his epistle to the Corinthians when he explained to them the beneficent arrangement of Divine Providence for the reconciliation of sinners. "God," he says, "hath reconciled us to Himself through Christ, *and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.* . . . For Christ, therefore, we are *ambassadors*: God, as it were exhorting through us." (II Cor. 5:18-20)

St. Paul publicly proclaimed his unworthiness and frailty. He had persecuted the Church of God, and

there was given to him a "sting of the flesh, an angel of Satan" to buffet him. Yet he recognized that Christ chose not angels, but weak and sinful men to be his ministers. Every priest receives his priestly power from a bishop, who traces his power back through an unbroken succession of bishops to one of the Apostles, and back ultimately to Christ Himself. That is why a priest as a duly accredited ambassador of God exercises the tremendous power of forgiving sin, a power that comes from God as its ultimate Source.

A General Policy

In delegating priests to act as ministers of reconciliation, Christ is but following the general policy, so clearly recorded in the Gospels, of using men as His ambassadors to administer all the sacraments and to preach and to teach in His name. Thus He commissioned the Apostles to teach in His name, saying: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations." Similar was His commission to them to baptize: "Teach ye all nations; baptizing

them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (Matt. 28:19)

Is it not passing strange that Christians who frankly admit that Christ chose men to be the heralds of His Gospel and the ministers of baptism and the other sacraments should yet seek to exclude from them the one sacrament of reconciliation? Surely the fair minded reader must see that in so doing they are going directly against the plain teaching not only of St. Paul but of Jesus Christ Himself.

Another difficulty experienced by many non-Catholics, arises from their custom of confessing their sins to God privately, and from their belief that such a confession is sufficient to secure forgiveness. Thus a University student whom I was recently instructing in the faith said to me: "Father, I have been in the habit of including in the prayers I address to God an acknowledgment of my shortcomings. I beg Almighty God to forgive me. I have been taught to believe

that God pardons me directly and immediately, without the intermediary agency of any minister or priest. Surely God has the power to forgive me. How do you know but what He does forgive me in answer to my prayers—without benefit of clergy?"

Confession—But Not to a Priest

Let me now address to our dear non-Catholic reader the explanation I submitted to my young friend: It is true God can forgive a person directly and immediately. It is not for us to place limits either to the power or the mercy of an omnipotent and all-merciful Father. We think, however, it is wiser to seek forgiveness through the means which He has revealed to us as the ordinary channel by which His pardon is extended to us, than to demand that He act in accordance with our private whims and caprice. Have you the right to dictate the manner in which God must pardon you? Or has He the right to specify the manner in which His clemency will be extended to you? Surely, God has that right, and He

has exercised it through the revelation made by His divine Son as to the ordinary means by which that forgiveness is extended to mankind. That channel, as the Gospels record, is the Sacrament of Penance, in which sins are confessed to the duly appointed ambassadors of God.

Of course if a person is dying and no priest is available, then the person may confess directly to God, and by eliciting an act of perfect sorrow, receive forgiveness directly from Him. God does not ask the impossible from any person. It is a dictate of reason, as well as the teaching of the Church, that under such unusual circumstances God not only may, but actually does, forgive the penitent in the extraordinary method just described.

A Hollow Mockery?

There would be, however, neither purpose nor meaning to the action of our divine Lord in solemnly delegating the power of forgiving sins to His Apostles and their successors, if people could ordinarily confess to God in secret and receive pardon di-

rectly from Him. No one would care to reveal his shortcomings to another human being, if he could go directly to God and completely disregard the ambassadors accredited by Christ as the ministers of reconciliation. The solemn conferring upon them of the power of binding and of loosing, of retaining and of forgiving, would be hollow mockery of the most foolish and deceptive character.

In reality this objection is by no means new. St. Augustine encountered it back in the fourth century. "Let no one," remarks the illustrious Bishop of Hippo, "say to himself, I do penance to God in private; I do it before God. Is it, then, in vain that Christ has said: 'Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven?' Is it in vain that the keys have been given to the Church? Do we make void the Gospel, void the words of Christ?" (Sermo cccxcii) In these words St. Augustine points out that the question for us is not how God *is able* to act, but how He *has actually chosen* to act. God *could*

have chosen other means for the reconciliation of sinners, just as He could have created a world different from the present one. But it is our concern to discover how God has actually chosen to reconcile sinners, and then to avail ourselves with gratitude of this wonderful gift to weak and sinful humanity.

Christ did not allow the remission of sin to rest solely upon the shifting sands of subjective disposition and the whimsicalities of private emotion. He established a definite objective agency for the certain accomplishment of this all-important end. There is a comfort, an ease, and an assurance of certain pardon which is given by the sacrament of confession which no private confession to God could possibly afford. If you were to ask a Catholic what are the happiest moments in his life, he would tell you that among those are the moments immediately after confession when his conscience enjoys perfect peace because there has been lifted from his soul the burden of mortal sin.

Invention of Priestcraft?

A last objection. It is contended by some that the confession of sins to a priest was not practiced in the infant Church, but represents a development of many centuries later, being an invention of priestcraft to enable the clergy to keep the laity in subjection to them. The answer is simple. In conferring this power of forgiving sins upon the Apostles Christ intended that it should be utilized, otherwise it would be meaningless. That it was utilized, is clearly recorded by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles where he tells us that, "Many of them who believed came confessing and declaring their deeds" to the Apostles. (Acts. 19:18) Why did they confess their sins unless they were instructed by the Apostles to do so? It was this teaching of Christ and of the Apostles to which St. John bears witness when he says: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity." (I John, 1:9)

The significance of these texts of Scripture becomes all the more evident from the writings of the Fathers of the early Church. From the first to the last they insist upon sacramental confession as a divine institution. Let me cite just a few out of an imposing list of such witnesses. Back in the fourth century, St. Ambrose rebukes the Novations who "professed to show reverence for the Lord by reserving to Him alone the power of forgiving sins. Greater wrong could not be done than what they do in seeking to rescind His commands and fling back the office He bestowed. . . The Church obeys Him in both respects, by binding sin and by loosing it; for the Lord willed that for both the power should be equal." (De Poenit, I, ii, 6) He further teaches that this power belongs to the priesthood: "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance; Christ granted this (power) to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests." (op. cit. II, ii, 12)

Testimony of the Fathers

A last witness. Writing in the fourth century, St. Basil compares the confession of sins to priests to the revealing of the secret infirmities of the body to the physician in order to secure a remedy. "In the confession of sins," he says, "the same method must be observed as in laying open the infirmities of the body; for as these are not rashly communicated to every one, but to those only who understand by what method they may be cured, so the confession of sins must be made to such persons as have the power to apply a remedy." (In Reg. Brev., quaest, ccxix, T. II., p. 492) Later on he tells us who those persons are. "Necessarily, our sins must be confessed to those to whom has been committed the dispensation of the mysteries of God. Thus, also, are they found to have acted who did penance of old in regard of the saints. It is written in the Acts, they confessed to the Apostles, by whom also they were baptized." (Ibid., cclxxxviii., p. 516)

In thus testifying to the universal practice of auricular confession in the early Church, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and St. Basil but echo the voice of all the Fathers of both the East and the West. Thus the practice continued unbroken from the days of Christ down to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Indeed it will be a matter of surprise for most non-Catholics to know that Martin Luther bore witness to both the practice and the utility of confession, declaring that "auricular confession, as now in vogue, is useful, nay, necessary: nor would I have it abolished, since it is the remedy of afflicted conscience." (Lib. de Capt. Babyl. cap. de Poenit.)

Christ Still Speaks

In conclusion then, confession is not the invention of priestcraft, not the work of bishops or popes, but the institution of Jesus Christ. It is the sacrament which enables the Church to carry on the essential mission of Christ—"to call not the just, but sinners, to repentance." It is the

living testimony of Christ's undying love for mankind. When we read of the tender mercy and compassion shown by Christ toward the woman taken in adultery, toward Mary Magdalen, toward the thief on the cross, toward His very murderers, we find ourselves wishing that we could have been privileged to have lived in His day to receive from His hand a benediction and from His lips such soothing words of pardon. Then we recollect. Christ still lives in His Church! The centuries have not foreshortened His hand, nor stilled His voice. When the hand of His divinely appointed ambassador in the tribunal of confession is raised in absolution over us, with the eyes of faith we see again the hand of Christ that was raised in benediction over the sinful woman, prostrate in the dust of the street in Jerusalem, while we hear again an echo of that same divine voice that whispered to her, "Thy sins are forgiven thee. . . Go, and now sin no more."



