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The confession of...  
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# The Confession of Sin

By

Very Rev. John B. Harney, C.S.P.



**THE PAULIST PRESS**  
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VERY REV. JOHN B. HARNEY, C.S.P.



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## THE CONFESSION OF SIN.

**T**HE teaching and practice of the Catholic Church in regard to the pardon of sin, has long been the favorite target of her enemies. They have denounced it as an arrogant usurpation of God's exclusive power; they have stormed against it as a tyrannical invasion of human rights; they have abused it as the foe of virtue and the friend of vice, a corrupter of innocent youth, a hardener of the guilty, a feeder for base passions.

How many there are that make, and that listen with approval to these and kindred charges, there is no way of finding out. It is to be hoped, however, that they are few, for otherwise a just judge will have to give either human intelligence, or human honesty a low rating.

Of late years it would seem that the non-Catholic world has got well away from the bitter prejudice of other days. There are still some, indeed, who hate, and revile, and lie about all things Catholic with noisy zest. However numerous these may be, it is certain that there is a steady growth in the number of those who hold kindlier opinions about the Catholic Church. Thoughtful people have always been able to see that the world owes a tremendous moral debt to Catholicism, and many have asserted that this very practice of confession has been a most efficient agency in the elevation and preservation of moral standards.

Luther himself declared confession useful and necessary. He did not wish the practice abolished, as he



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considered it the remedy of afflicted consciences. Voltaire wrote: "The enemies of the Roman Church who have assailed the salutary institution of confession, appear to have removed the strongest restraint which can be put on secret crimes. The sages of antiquity themselves felt the importance of it." Froude, who was by no means friendly to the Irish people or to the Catholic religion, acknowledged the singular purity of the Irish character, and ascribed it to the influence of the Catholic clergy—an influence exerted largely through the confessional. Not many years ago the *Reichsbote*, the leading Lutheran paper of Germany, strongly advocated in its editorial page the restoration of the ancient practice of confession. "What our church has need of," it said, "as of its daily bread, is the restoration of confession. Whoever has behind him a long pastoral career knows that our church is full of people who desire, yes, sigh to make their confessions. There are thousands of people whom the past pursues like a dark phantom. They would like to blot out with their tears and their blood, the stain which sullies the book of their lives. To heal their suffering souls they require the Divine pardon imparted personally to the sinner through human lips." Still clearer and more solidly-grounded is the testimony of Leibnitz. "The institution of sacramental confession is assuredly worthy of the Divine wisdom, and of all the doctrines of religion, it is the most admirable, and the most beautiful . . . The necessity of confessing sin is sufficient to preserve from it those who still preserve their modesty; and yet, if any fail, confession consoles and restores them. I look on a grave and prudent confessor as a great instrument of God for the salvation of souls. His counsels regulate the sentiments: re-

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prove vices; remove occasions of sin; cause the restitution of ill-acquired property, and the reparation of wrongs; clear up doubts; console under afflictions; in fine, cure or relieve all the evils of the soul; and as nothing in the world is more precious than a faithful friend, what is the value of that friend when he is bound by his functions, and fitted by his knowledge, to devote to you all his care, under the seal of the most inviolable secrecy."

That those who think well of confession have good grounds for their judgment becomes clear the moment one pays attention to the conditions laid down by the Church as required for a worthy reception of the Sacrament of Penance.

It is frequently said, and widely believed, that confession is the one only obligation laid on Catholics in this connection. How grave a calumny that assertion is any one may learn by even a casual study of the catechisms put into the hands of our smallest children. There it is specifically stated that to receive the Sacrament of Penance worthily—and only a worthy reception of the sacrament counts for the soul—one must do five things:

1. Examine one's conscience.
2. Be sorry for one's sins.
3. Have a firm purpose of amendment.
4. Confess one's sins to a priest.
5. Accept the penance (the works of reparation), the priest imposes.

There is nothing empty, or meaningless in these conditions. Our examination of conscience is to be an honest, diligent effort to know and to remember our sins. Our sorrow must be from the heart; must have to do with all our serious transgressions of God's laws; must



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spring from the fact that sin is an offence against a good and loving God, or at least from the fact that it is a barrier between our souls and Him. Our purpose of amendment must be firm and practical, not wavering and vague. Our confession must be full and truthful, setting forth as we see them ourselves, our every sinful thought, word, deed and omission. Our acceptance of the penance imposed must be sincere.

All of these conditions must be fulfilled when there is time and opportunity for their fulfillment. On rare occasion, in exigencies, some of them may be omitted without harm. The wish and the will to comply with them is always necessary, but their actual fulfillment is sometimes impossible. Of them there is one that can never be dispensed with under any circumstances; one without which there is no pardon possible. That one is not, as some might imagine, the confession of one's sins, but contrition for them, a deep, true, supernatural sorrow for having offended God, together with a firm purpose of sinning no more.

From this brief study of what the Catholic Church requires as conditions of pardon, it may easily be seen, I think, that there is no truth in the oft-repeated charge that we make the way out of sin so easy, as to be really guilty of teaching men to look lightly upon serious offences against God; and consequently of encouraging them to continue in their wrong-doing. There is no Protestant church in all the world that does not offer an easier way to pardon. Few, if any, teach so clearly the necessity of sorrow for sin, or insist so strongly on the necessity of purposing amendment. Not one obliges the sinner to lay the lash upon self-love, or to chastise his pride as does the Catholic Church when



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she requires men to humble themselves and acknowledge in detail their disobedience towards God.

The main question which we are to answer, is this: Did God give to men the power of pardoning sin in His name? The final and incontrovertible answer to that question will be given only when we point out the words which prove that Our Lord did bestow that power on men. Before we come to that, however, I would have you consider for a few moments, how great are the blessings which come to men through the practice of confession.

Conscious of sin, dreading punishment, I seek forgiveness. My first duty I am told is to examine my conscience, to try earnestly to discover every sin which stands between me and the friendship of God. I must, therefore, study God's laws, for they are the standards of right and wrong by which He will judge me. I must take them up one by one; make sure that I know what I am therein commanded to do, and what likewise is forbidden. My thought is to be on them alone. The whisperings and excuses of self-love I am to hush; the world's way of looking at things I am to cast aside; God's unerring judgments and sacred will I am to study and to learn. The first blessing, therefore, which comes to me through obedience to the teaching of the Church, is the great, inestimable blessing of knowing thoroughly the holy law of God.

Next to this intimate knowledge of God's commandments, comes the knowledge of my own soul. The work of examining my conscience is only as yet half done. I must now look well into my life; try to bring up in memory all the thoughts, words, and deeds of the past; and, as they rise, I must measure them by God's stand-

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ards, finding out wherein I have failed to obey Him. My sinfulness, of which I was before but vaguely conscious, now is unveiled before me; not in its general outlines, but in all its details. The seriousness of my condition is brought home to me. I begin to see myself as God sees me.

The knowledge is indeed bitter and painful; it cuts my self-love and deals my pride a heavy blow; but oh, how good and blessed a knowledge it is to me. How fruitful! Now that my wickedness stands out clearly defined, my soul begins to swell with grief. I send up to God a more heartfelt cry of sorrow, a more earnest resolve to avoid sin than would otherwise be possible. Not only am I more firmly bent on turning all my energies to the correction of my faults and the rooting up of my vices; the work is made easier for me. I have caught a sight of the snares by which the old enemy has trapped me, and through this knowledge I will be enabled to fight more cautiously and wisely the good fight of faith. Such are a few of the blessings that come to my soul through obedience to the Catholic teaching concerning the pardon of sin.

To human society at large confession is likewise a most fruitful source of good. By it sin is lessened. There comes to the confessional one who is angry with his neighbor. He is asked if he intends to heal the quarrel. Should his reply be in the negative, absolution is refused. Then begins a struggle in his soul. Pride battles with the grace of God. Holy motives are thrown out to help him decide aright. Jesus Christ, praying on the cross for His murderers, is pictured before him, that he may follow His sweet example. He is reminded that God's mercy is given only to the merciful; that if he

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will not forgive the trespasses which his neighbor has committed against him, then neither will God forgive his sins. Not long does the battle last, nor does it often go against the cause of God. The promise to forgive, to treat the unkind neighbor with patience and love, is soon made, and so peace reigns where hate held sway.

Again there comes to confession one who has wronged his neighbor by unjustly depriving him of something that really belonged to him. The theft is confessed. Straightway the sinner is told to restore the ill-gotten goods, or their value, and with sincerity he makes the promise, knowing well that otherwise he must go away unab-solved.

Then, perhaps, comes one who has maligned a neighbor, maliciously spread broadcast untrue stories. Of him also reparation is required; he must do all he can to restore the good name that he has tried to destroy. If necessary, he must openly acknowledge that he has lied. No refusal is accepted; no pleas, springing from hurt self-love are listened to. His neighbor's reputation must be restored; else pardon is refused. In such ways as these does the confession of sin tend to protect the rights of men and to preserve peace.

That it is powerful in repressing sinful inclinations you can easily see from the lives of Catholics around you. Some perhaps there are, who lead unchristian lives. Of them you can safely say that they are rarely to be seen entering a confessional. An exception may meet you here and there. That person is making a mockery of the sacrament, deceiving some priest by insincere promises and lying words. On the part of such a one there is no real confession, no worthy or true reception of pardon. Honest confession of sin and a wicked life do not go

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hand in hand. Either one or the other must and does give way.

The fact that benefits are conferred on men individually and on society, by the practice of confession, does not, of course, prove it to be of divine origin, but that fact does show that it is fit to be chosen by God as His instrument for the pardoning of sin.

That He should pardon sin through men seems probable when we consider the fact that in all things, which come under our observation, we find Him using men as His agents and instruments. Go into your lives; count up as well as you can the manifold favors of God. Hardly will you be able to find even one among them all that has come to you immediately from God Himself. God, indeed, is the primal source of every good gift; but He bestows His blessings bodily and spiritual, through human, and other created channels. Let us look a little to see if it is not so. Foremost among the favors you have received is the gift of life. It came from God through men. Your father and mother were the human channels of divine goodness. Perhaps in early years some disease threatened you. For days and nights there was anxiety in the hearts of those who loved you. At last the crisis was passed; the glow of health came back slowly. To God you sent up your sighs and hymns of thanksgiving. Rightly so, for in truth it was He Who prolonged your life. But how? By coming Himself to apply the needed remedy? No! It was not in this way that He healed your infirmity, but by the things that He has created, by the herbs of the fields from which men had drawn the fitting medicine, by the skill of the physician who discovered your ailment and applied the proper remedy, by the loving, tender, self-

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sacrificing care of mother or nurse, who with sleepless eyes watched you through the long night. All these were God's instruments and agents in the preservation of your life. By just such means has He made your body grow and wax strong; by such agencies has He unfolded, trained, developed, nourished and enriched your mind. Spiritual gifts also He has given to you in like fashion. You know that there is a God, great, wonderful, full of love. That knowledge comforts, strengthens, guides you, is an inestimable boon. God did not come down to plant that truth in your mind and heart by His own Divine lips. No! He taught you through the green fields, through the starry heavens, through your fellow-men. You know much, it may be, of Him and of His holy will; this knowledge you count an unspeakable blessing. These things you have learned, partly from books, written, translated, printed by men; partly from men, who have taught you the word of God. Sorrow for sin, a determination to serve God, a warm, generous love of your Creator and Redeemer—all these holy emotions have thrilled you. God has roused them within your soul by the living lips of men.

He has used men to open the gates of heaven for you through the Sacrament of Baptism by which you were made His children, and given a right to eternal joys. You have lost that spiritual birthright by sin, but you believe that God, our loving Father, will give it to you again. How? Surely by the agency through which He first bestowed it upon you. Would it not be very strange for Him to act otherwise? Your reason, working on what you know of God's ways, bids you look for pardon through some human channel. What reason tells you to expect, the word of God tells you has been done.



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It is the evening of Resurrection day. The Apostles, fearful of the Jews, hoping to see and hear the Lord Who has risen, are gathered together in the upper room. Jesus enters. "Peace be to you," are the sweet, soothing words that fall from His lips. Again He speaks the same words. Then He went on: "As the Father sent Me I also send you." He had been sent to redeem mankind; to tear down the barriers which man in pride and folly had built between himself and God; to reconcile us to our Heavenly Father. As the Father had sent Him, so He would send His Apostles, that penance and remission of sin in His name might be preached unto all nations. Then He breathed upon them, saying, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." A solemn act and solemn words are these.

We all, Catholic and Protestant alike, see and hear them. The Catholic, bending in love and adoration, glorifies God Who has given this power of pardoning sin to men. He remembers Who it was that spoke, and he believes. But the Protestant, the average Protestant, does not believe. He practically turns to Jesus Christ and says: "Though I have heard your words to these men, yet I do not believe that they possess any real power to pardon." Is it not so? Has not Protestantism repeatedly denied that Christ gave the power of forgiving sin to men? Has it not asserted again and again that men should go directly to God Himself for pardon? Yes, you answer, so it has. And it has done this in the very face of Christ's own words.

But you may say, I have never harbored that thought. I know that God can use men if He will to pardon sin.

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I know that He did use the Apostles for that sweet work of mercy. What I want to know now, is whether that power died with them, or was transmitted to other men. Many men have argued that the power was not transferable; was not transferred. Those words, "Whose sins, etc.," were spoken to the Apostles alone. It is arrogant usurpation on the part of other men to claim any share of participation in the power they conferred. Let us see. The words: "Going, therefore, teach ye all nations," were spoken to the Apostles alone; yet other men claim the right to teach—Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians alike—and somehow or other not one of them ever thinks of arguing that he has no such right, because, forsooth, the commission to teach was spoken to the Apostles alone. They all administer baptism; but we do not read in Scripture that this power was given by Christ to any save the Apostles, nor is there any express statement that this power should be transmitted. The same thing may be said with perfect truth about all the apostolic powers which are claimed by the ministers of the various churches. There is, indeed, proof in Holy Writ that the apostolic powers were to be, and were transmitted. The proof, however, be it remembered, applies quite as much to this power of forgiving, as to any other possessed by the Apostles.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came on earth for the salvation of men. He died for our sins as well as for the sins of those who lived before Him or with Him. He preached a gospel which was to be accepted not only by those to whom He and His Apostles preached in person, but also by us and by yet unborn generations. He came to give us all peace; to provide channels through which His mercies might flow into every soul. We were



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as much in his mind and heart as the men that stood around Him. To help, bless and redeem us, He labored. For the blotting out of our sins, He provided a means. His gospel, His institutions, were not to be transitory, fleeting, but were to remain till the end of time as the fully rounded out covenant of God with His people. This truth shines out in all the story of Christ's life, and in every commission given to the Apostles. And, therefore, we hold that His remedy for sin, of which sinful humanity is ever in sore need, is an abiding, perpetual gift to His children.

Some, however, might still be inclined to hold by the assertion, that this particular power of pardoning sin, was not, at any rate to be handed on. It is not easy to rid one's self of deeply rooted beliefs. Holy Writ happily, however, tells us that this very power in question was transmitted. I pass over the case of Matthias who undoubtedly received it when he was chosen into the apostolic band. We come to Paul. He surely did not receive the power on Resurrection night. Yet he possessed it. After proclaiming the truth that God had reconciled us to himself by Christ, he asserted that God had given to him the ministry of reconciliation, had placed in him the word of reconciliation, had made him an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor. v. *et seq.*).

The power of pardoning sin, of uttering the word of reconciliation, was therefore, handed on. From this fact, as well as from the fact of Christ's coming to establish the new and perfect dispensation of God's mercies, we know with certainty that the power was to be transmitted to chosen men until the end of the world.

Another objection to the Catholic teaching is that, though Christ gave men the power of pardoning sin, and

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wished that power to be transmitted in His Church, yet He did not command men to confess their sins.

Let us look at the power He gave His Apostles and their successors, and see if the duty of confession be not bound up in it. The power was judicial; that of pardoning, and of refusing to pardon. It was to be used not arbitrarily, not in accordance with whims or prejudices, but according to right reason. Pardon was to be granted to those who deserved it; and refused to those who were unworthy of it. Now, it is clear, that to act reasonably and prudently in such a matter, one would need to know all the important facts in the case; the charges against the sinner, the nature and extent of his guilt, the dispositions of his soul. The only way in which such a knowledge can be obtained is by a thorough and honest confession on the part of the sinner himself. I alone, among men, know my own sins. Some wrongdoing of mine may indeed come under the observation of men. The external word or act they may know; the internal knowledge and motive, which determine the amount of guilt, is hidden from them. Since the priest from whom I seek pardon must know these things before he can use aright the sacred power intrusted to him, it remains for me to reveal the condition of my soul, thoroughly, clearly, truthfully.

We have seen God's plan and means for the remission of sins. The knowledge is of great value to us, it has a practical bearing on our lives, for we are all of us sinners. In many things we all offend (James iii. 2), even the just man shall offend seven times (Prov. xxiv. 16). If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John i. 8). We have sinned most grievously, rebelling against God. Knowing His holy

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will clearly; we have listened to the world, the flesh, or the devil; we have turned a deaf ear to God's pleadings, promises and threats; we have believed the tempter in preference to God and deliberately disobeyed Him, our Maker and our King. We have dethroned and exiled Him from our hearts which were made to be an earthly home and kingdom for Himself; we have let sin in to reign in His stead. We have despised His goodness, patience and love, sinning the more against Him because of His tenderness and mercy. All this our conscience tells us we have done to God. For these deeds we deserve chastisement. These things are abominable to God. He hates them and us. "Thou hatest all the workers of iniquity" (Ps. v. 6). To God "the wicked and his wickedness are hateful alike" (Wisdom xiv. 9). These things He has very sternly punished and now threatens unreservedly. "The wicked and unbelieving and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, they shall have their portion in the pool burning with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev. xxi. 8). From the wrath to come I seek escape. Jesus Christ I know has died to save me. I know He has prepared a way by which I may flee. He has sent into this world men who have the power of pardoning me. Shall I despise these ambassadors of Christ, these ministers of reconciliation, these dispensers of the mysteries of God? Shall I turn my back on God's way to safety, and seek it in a way of my own choosing? That would be folly, a new and deadly insult to God. He Whom I have disobeyed, has laid down the conditions of reconciliation. It is for my outraged God to dictate the terms of peace; it is my duty to accept and fulfill them.



*"Blessed be those who realize that great work for a new and just order is not possible unless their eyes are lifted to GOD, keeper and ordainer of all human events, initial source, guardian and avenger of all justice and right."—Pope Pius XII.*

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