

Why Confession?

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It was a late bitter winter night during World War I. The Superior at Holy Cross Monastery was locking up the house, and had just turned the key in the front door when the bell rang, and out of the storm of wind and snow which was raging through the Hudson valley, a young officer presented himself. He had come from a camp some eighty miles away. He had never been at Holy Cross before, and was unacquainted with anyone in the Order. He had only heard of the place as one where men could find the peace of God. "I have just today," he said, "received orders to sail for France tomorrow. I have a twelve-hour leave. I realize that this is a crisis in my life. I know not what lies in the future, but before I go I know that I must get right with God. Will you help me?" He was prepared for his first confession, received the blessing of absolution, and before dawn the next morning made his Communion, and was away on the earliest train for the ship which was to carry him to he knew not what fate. But the peace of God was in his heart, and nothing else really mattered. No word has come from him since. We still pray for him, living or departed, and we can never forget the joyous light that illumined his face as he said good-bye, starting out on the great adventure, with a hundred unknown perils in his path, but with a heart for any fate because he had got right with God.

His problem is your problem and mine. "How shall we get right with God?" The subject of confession and sacramental absolution is one which arouses many and widely varying reactions. This paper assumes your interest and good will, and proceeds to discuss in a simple and direct manner this question, the most important that could ever be proposed to the mind and heart of man. We all agree on its transcending seriousness. Perhaps we do not agree as to the answer, but let us in a spirit of devout investigation, without preconceptions or prejudice, consider the issue, with a resolution to accept humbly and wholeheartedly the conclusion to which the Holy Spirit may lead us.

"How do we get right with God?" Generally speaking, the answer is that we receive God's forgiveness by placing ourselves in that condition and position where God can act. Our Faith teaches that "a broken and contrite heart" always wins God's full absolution. God longs to forgive us, but we must do our part. God desires that all His children be united to Him, but we must choose to come to Him of our own freewill. That means we have a part to play, before we can receive His forgiveness. Our share is that we must be genuinely sorry for our sins, and we must use the means which God has appointed for the normal reception of His absolution. The particular answer is that we "get right with God" by making our confession in the presence of a priest and from that priest receive God's forgiveness.

In these days of popular biography, we are rightly interested in personal testimony and individual conviction. Let us, then, begin our examination of "how to get right with God" by listening to a statement of "why I make my confession."

I. WHY I MAKE MY CONFESSION

THERE is only one really important reason why I make my confession, and that is because I am quite convinced that God wants me to do so. That is what matters, -- God's will for me. I have come to this conclusion for several subsidiary reasons.

1. In the first place, in the twentieth chapter of St. John, part of which forms the Gospel for the Sunday after Easter (Prayer Book, page 171) I read these words: "The same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when He had so said, He shewed unto them His hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you, And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

After a careful and prayerful study of this passage, using the best commentaries, I have come to the conclusion that these words witness to the institution by our Lord of the Sacrament of Absolution;

and further, that He intended that this Sacrament should be used. Our Lord was lavish and prodigal of His love, but He never gave useless directions. His provision is for all men, that they should confess and be absolved. It is always dangerous for any soul to count itself an exception to the general provisions which God has made for the welfare of all His children.

2. The witness of Holy Scripture to the use of this Sacrament is taken up by the directions of the Book of Common Prayer. A number of passages can be cited. On page 7 in the Order for Morning Prayer, and on page 24, in the Order for Evening Prayer, occur these words: "Almighty God... hath given power, and commandment, to His Ministers, to declare and pronounce to His people being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins."

On page 87, the last line at the bottom of the page, you will find this statement: "And because it is requisite that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore, if there be any of you, who by this means [i.e., private contrition] cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but require further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that he may receive such godly counsel and advice, as may tend to the quieting of his conscience, and the removing of all scruple and doubtfulness."

On page 313 there is a very instructive rubric (or direction in italics): "Then shall [note the 'shall'] the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession, on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God's mercy and forgiveness." In the Prayer Book of the Church of England the words of Absolution then follow: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences; and by His authority committed unto me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Another witness to this Sacrament in the Episcopal Church is taken from the Office of the Ordination of Priests. On page 546 occur these solemn words: "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of His holy Sacraments; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

3. I make my confession because I believe that it is the way which God has appointed for the removal of sins after Baptism. When I was baptized, I was made a child of God and grafted into the mystical Body of Christ. One of the results of this union with God by Holy Baptism was the forgiveness of all sin. But souls do not cease from sin with Baptism. One of the exhortations very frequent in the early Church was the confession of sins. In later days this exhortation was emphasized by canon law. It was an ancient custom of the Church of England that all communicants should make their confessions at least once a year. But whatever the form of the exhortation to contrition, the real compulsion to make one's confession arises from within the soul which has seen the glory of God and desires to possess it.

4. I make my confession because it is God's way of assuring the soul that it is sorry enough to receive forgiveness. One of the privileges which come to us in the Church is that of assurance. I do not have to wonder where God is. The light burning before the Tabernacle says, "God is here." I do not have to search far and wide for the means of life, I know that all power is mine when I receive the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. And, of the hours that souls waste in wondering whether they have been sorry enough to be forgiven! "I have said so many prayers, recited so many psalms of penitence. Have I been sorry enough to be forgiven?" In the Sacrament of Absolution, the priest who receives my confession is responsible for judging my contrition. The Sacrament is the way of assurance of forgiveness. A man once said, as he came to his first confession, "I've wasted too many hours wondering if I had been forgiven, and I've decided no to waste any more, I'd like to make my confession."

5. I make my confession, because I believe that all true life is social in nature, that the Church is the Body of the baptized, and since no man liveth to himself or dieth to himself or sinneth to himself,

some form of apology is due the whole Body of Christ which is the Church. The question is sometimes raised, "Isn't it all right to go to Mass with certain sins in mind, and, when the words of Absolution in the Mass are recited, apply those words to the special sins in mind?" The answer is that "it's all right as far as it goes," but such limited contrition does not penetrate very deeply. An act of private contrition will always bring God's forgiveness for what are called "venial" sins, but there are also "mortal sins," - transgressions of such magnitude that confession to a priest is needed.

No man liveth to himself and no man sinneth to himself. When a baptized soul sins, it hurts all the members of the mystical Body of Christ. Some form of public and social apology is due the Church. The early Church answered this problem by having public confession in the case of certain flagrant sins. Such forms of contrition were open to abuse. So the Church directed that confession be made to a priest who would represent the Body of Christ.

I go to confession because a mere private acknowledgment to God, in the case of grievous sins, is not enough. I should tell the whole Body of Christ of my contrition and desire of amendment. I accomplish this social act of sorrow by confession to a priest who represents the Body of Christ in receiving my sorrow and in presenting the forgiveness of the Whole Body.

6. I make my confession because it is Christ's appointed way of accomplishing union between Himself and the penitent soul. For a long time I delayed making my confession, because "I did not want any man to come between my soul and God." But I have come to realize that all life flows to us through other people, for we are all one Body in Christ Jesus. Just as physical life comes to us through other people, so spiritual life is ours through the Church and its ministers. It is true that in confession a man comes between the soul and God. But the important fact to realize is that the priest is present, not to separate us from God, but to unite us to Him. We call for a physician in time of need, not to bother us, but to assist us. He takes his normal place in our lives in a natural way. So with the spiritual life. It is a matter of our union with God, and in this experience the priest like our cook or our doctor or our lawyer, falls into a natural position. So I welcome God's provision for my spiritual life and "get right with God" through the assistance of a priest in the Sacrament of Absolution.

7. Lastly, I make my confession because it is the way of perseverance in sorrow for sin. The way to God is through ever-deepening contrition and the reception of grace to deal with the stubborn sin and the wilful self which would keep me from Him.

There have been some critics of confession who have thought that some souls go to confession without any idea of amendment of life - perhaps even with the intention of continuing in sin. Of course anything of value can be abused. But there are three considerations to be offered in reply.

First, I do not believe that any soul would continue to go to confession without desire of amendment. Such a hardened person would soon give up his confessions. Secondly, as we have thought before, the confessor is the judge of the penitent's spiritual condition, and would refuse to give absolution if he doubted the penitent's contrition or good-will. Thirdly, - and here we come to the root of the matter, - grace is not magic. Some sins are too deeply rooted in our human nature for God to remove them at once, without injuring our personality. Instead He gives us the grace of Absolution, in order that as often as we fall, we may at once express our sorrow and receive spiritual power to start afresh. The sincere soul continues to seek the confessional to uproot sin, just as the good gardener keeps on pulling up the same old weeds, so that his flowers may grow. I go to confession because I know I need power to meet my besetting temptations. My part is that of perseverance in hope and humility. The confessional is a great aid to the acquirement of these virtues.

II. WHY YOU SHOULD MAKE YOUR CONFESSION

I HAVE gone into some detail to explain why I make my confession, but confession is good not only for my soul, good not only for the soul of the spiritually ill, but good for every soul, - good for your soul. Let us, then, consider why you should go to confession.

Here again, there is only one really important reason. It is because confession is the divinely appointed way to "get right with God." God's will is all that matters. You ought to have this blessed experi-

ence, first of all for God's sake. God created you because He loves you and desires you to be wholly His. Humble confession is the way to God. Secondly, you should make your confession for the sake of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church of God. As we have thought before, "no man liveth to himself." Just as a hurt in one part of a body causes discomfort to the whole person, so one sinful soul causes great suffering to the Body of Christ. For His Body's sake, the Church, you should come into full union with God. And thirdly, you should make your confession for your own sake. It is the way of escape from sin and self; the way of finding spiritual guidance in perplexing problems; the way of growing in holiness; the way of happiness; the way by which we learn to help others. Let us examine these points in detail.

1. In the first place, you must "get right with God." You know there are things which keep you awake at night. The first step in the spiritual life, after we have seen the vision of love in the face of Jesus Christ, is to find release from the things which dog out waking hours. We cannot put away "self" by "self." To try to do so will only result in an increase of selfishness and self-centeredness. But we must get rid of our baser selves. Certainly the psychologists tell us that we must find release from the things which worry us and frighten us. The way of release is not by alcohol, or sin, or self-culture, or the mad rush of modern life, or by suicide, but by confession of sin and reception of Absolution.

Do not wait until it is too late. There may come a time when a soul becomes so enmeshed in selfishness that it loses the vision of God which is the compelling motive to contrition. And there may come an hour when our physical senses are so dulled, as we lie upon our bed for death, that it is well nigh impossible to make an act of contrition. Do not postpone your act of contrition until it is too late.

2. Secondly, you should make your confession because, after you have made your initial act of contrition and all your sins are washed away, there will still remain the "old man" with his many temptations and problems and imperfections. If you need expert medical advice, you go to a physician who will both assist you and observe the seal of secrecy of his profession. If you lack legal information, you go to a learned lawyer who will enlighten you and will respect your confidence. If you need spiritual advice, (and all souls need some guidance until the hour of death) you will find it awaiting you, under the seal of the confessional. Every soul is beset by special temptations, fears, "complexes." The spiritual life is not a trackless wilderness, it has a map all its own. While every soul differs in its particular battles, there is a science of the spiritual life which is yours for the asking. Furthermore, - and this is so very important, that we here repeat this truth previously mentioned, - there is a special power in God's forgiveness thus received, which will enable the penitent soul to meet its own particular temptations. Even if both you and the confessor be ignorant of the real nature of your temptations, God will know. In Absolution He will supply grace to meet your real problems. The devoted soul welcomes this means of receiving spiritual power in this very perplexing life.

3. Then there is the problem of growth in holiness. What the Church needs above all else is a great host of souls thirsting for holiness, - all on fire with the love of God. The confessional is one of the principle aids to the development of sanctity. It is not easy to make one's confession, and it is right and necessary that it should cost the soul much in the way of faith and humiliation. It must be so. It was not easy for our Lord to redeem us and it must cost us dear to enter into the work of redemption.

"It is the way the Master went, shall not the servant tread it too?" St. Augustine, who left the way of sin and rose to tremendous heights of holiness, caught the ideal of self-sacrifice and wrote: *"Pretium caritatis tu," - the price of love is thyself.*

4. You ought to make your confession, because it is the way of happiness. In this world, where there is so much of needless suffering and abysmal grief, the Church labours for the joy of her children. Joy, in fact, is the great hall-mark of true religion, and follows on the gift of love. The Apostle speaks of "love, joy, peace." God has given His children so many ways by which joy comes into their lives, but there is no joy quite like the happiness of a first confession. There was once a boy who after his first confession stood up and said, "Gee Father, that was great." That same experience of joy may be yours.

5. And, after we have learned the way of contrition and the path of illumination through the use of the Sacrament of Absolution, then, having humbled ourselves, we are in a position to try humbly to help others. For the end of the spiritual life is not only the salvation of our own souls. Salvation is the entering into a social experience. It is true that it begins in the individual soul and souls are saved, not by nations, or by armies, but one by one. But each soul, after it has found the way of redemption, realizes that its vocation is to know and love and serve God, and to work along with Him. The most divine of all work is to labour along with God for the coming of His kingdom of righteousness and justice and love and joy and peace. His Kingdom has its frontiers in this world. Find your own salvation, face your own problems, grow in holiness, and when sin and self are met, turn away from yourself, forget yourself in working for your fellows. If this is what you want, your first step is to get right with God.

III. PRACTICAL CONCLUSION

MOST souls want the love and joy and peace which comes from Absolution, but they lack practical instruction as to how to prepare themselves. Here is a very simple way in which to get ready.

1. First of all, go to a place where you can be alone for an hour. A church, and, if it is possible, one where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, is the best place. But it is essential that you be quiet and alone with God. For the first ten or fifteen minutes, think about God. Perhaps you will make a picture of our Lord in your own mind and contemplate Him. Try to see God and understand His great love for you. Try to realize a little of what it cost God to redeem you.

2. Take a sheet of paper and divide it up into sections: your childhood, your later school years, college days, and so on. Then, after asking God to guide and bless you, note down in these divisions all the sins you can remember. A sin is a conscious choice of evil. It is more than the breaking of a rule. Sin is so sinful because it is the misuse of your great gift of choice and because it is personal disloyalty and treachery, doing to death again the Son of God. Remember the difference between temptation and sin. Temptation is the impulse to do wrong; sin is the willing to do it. Note down all occasions you can remember in which you consciously chose to do that which, clearly or dimly, you knew to be wrong.

3. After, - but only after, - you have noted down all the sins you recall, it may be of assistance to you if you will check up your list by referring to the "Examination of Conscience" which appears in Appendix A of this paper.

4. Then seek out an experienced priest and make your confession. When you kneel down, first of all he will give you a blessing. Say: "I confess to God, and before you, Father, that I have sinned." State when you were baptized, and that this is your first confession. In subsequent confessions, state when it was that you made your last one. Then, using the list if it helps you, state simply and clearly your sins. Do not mention the names of others. Do not shift the responsibility, but if there were extenuating circumstances, explain them. When you have finished stating your sins, then say: "For these and for all my sins which I cannot now remember, I am heartily sorry, firmly purpose amendment of life, most humbly ask pardon of God, and of thee, father, penance, counsel and absolution." Listen to what the priest has to say. If he says, "Is there anything you wish to ask about?" ask his advice, if you wish, about your temptations or problems. At the end he will give you a prayer or a psalm or a hymn to say as a penance, and then he will pronounce your Absolution. Return to your place in the church, say your penance, and then remain on your knees for a few moments, giving humble and hearty thanks to your Heavenly Father for His blessing and forgiveness.

Finally we suggest that, just as you observe certain anniversaries in your life, (your birthday, your baptismal day), it may be that you will want to remember, year by year, with a Communion or some other act of thanksgiving, the day of your first Confession.