

Being Reconciled with God

BY FR. DOMINIC SCOTTO, TOR

“The deadliest thing about sin—any sin—is that it blinds as it kills. Long before one’s sin has become mortal, it is more than likely that one’s spiritual perception has become dulled. Thus, those who consistently engage in actions contrary to the objective teaching of the Church would be wise to have some healthy doubts about the life and safety of their own soul.”



CHRISTIAN WRITINGS BETWEEN the apostolic age and the third century are extremely rare. At the turn of the first century AD, both Pope Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch underscore the jurisdiction possessed by bishops over the forgiveness of sins. For most in those early years of Christianity, sin and repentance were simply accepted as a normal part of the average life of every Christian and needed no formulas or procedures to deal with it.

However, in the third and fourth centuries, the rise of certain heresies provoked a greater development and precision on doctrinal matters and practice. This certainly was the case in relation to sin and forgiveness. Approaching Confession became a definitively rigorous and public act. Led by the bishop, the entire

Christian community would be involved as all prayed for the penitent.¹

In the early Middle Ages, Irish missionary monks who came to the mainland brought with them a different form



of the sacrament: private confession—that is, confession strictly between the penitent and God’s representative, the priest. Although the monks were certainly not lenient in the handing out of severe penances, they did

effectively mollify the more terrifying features connected with public confessions.² In short, confessions were beginning to be practiced in generally the same way as they are today. However, though they had undergone significant changes in attitude and procedure, in essence the official canonical features of Confession remained: the honest recounting of one’s sins, the Church sitting in judgment in the person of the priest, the penalty administered, and final reconciliation.

This is not to be marveled at since the Church is as living and dynamic as is Christ himself. She is, after all, the extension of the risen, glorified Christ in space and time. Consequently, the Church has always been able to adapt herself to the special needs of the people of God at a particular time and circumstance. She has therefore periodically changed her approach to Confession—and can possibly change it again in the future.

The Sacrament After the Council

With the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the very first document promulgated by the council, the “Constitution on

¹ J. D. Crichton, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: A Commentary on the Order of Penance 1974* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1974), 21

² Crichton, *Ministry of Reconciliation*, 21–22.

the Sacred Liturgy” declared that “the rite and formulas for the sacrament of penance are to be revised so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament.”³ The revised rite as we have it today is the result of that recommendation.

Vatican II usually gets the credit (or the blame) for most changes that have taken place in modern Catholic life. In some instances, however, changes have taken place which Vatican II had no desire to foster. One of these is the marked decline in individual confessions. So many of our Catholic people are simply not using the sacrament very often. There may be many reasons for this, but certainly one of the key elements in this decline, in Europe and North America at least, is the absence or loss of an authentic sense of sin. Unless people have a genuine feeling of disloyalty toward a personal, loving God, the Sacrament of Penance will hardly attract them.

Recovering the Sense of Sin

So, the problem today is much more than people staying away from Confession. In many cases, they are not confessing their sins to a priest because they are not admitting their sins to themselves. Sometimes they may justify this attitude by feeling that it is sufficient that they admit their sins directly to God alone. But underlying their misunderstanding of the role of the ministerial priesthood in the Church as a whole is another misunderstanding of what is and is not serious sin in their own personal lives. Therefore, before people can accept the proper role of this sacrament in their lives, they must first admit the reality of sin. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and . . . we make [God] a liar” (1 Jn 1:8, 10).

Admittedly, it is not always easy to determine just when one has or has not committed serious or mortal sin—and it never was. It is true that we used to teach clear, objective rules to children, but a lot of reality is simply too complex to fit into simple, clear categories. The Church certainly identifies some specific actions as intrinsically or seriously wrong, and that should be enough to alert a sensitive, believing conscience. But the difficult thing to judge is just how much personal, subjective guilt there is. We have to take

³ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 72.

into consideration such questions as the maturity of the individual, his real knowledge as opposed to surface knowledge, and personal conviction or appreciation of just how wrong something is as

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opposed to only having been told how wrong it is. In other words, actions which may be objectively serious in themselves may not be subjectively and personally acts of mortal sin for the person who commits them. Here is where an honest, sincere, and prayerful examination of conscience,

along with faith in the guidance and love of the merciful Lord, come in.

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This is where prudent, timely, private confession can play a valuable role even in regard to less serious sin. Instead of Confession being based solely on the need to receive absolution from mortal sins, it can also be a sacrament for the prevention of mortal sin and for the continuing clarification, conversion, and purification of mind and heart. In other words, Confession can be used for "preventive maintenance."

The Divine Physician

What we need to better realize today is that the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a medicinal sacrament. It has the power to restore life when the life of grace has been lost. It also has the power to prevent this loss of grace in the first place by protecting us from the gradual, systematic habit of sin that will inevitably lead to a complete estrangement from the Church.

This sacrament can also foster the spiritual life through the ongoing process of knowledge and clarification, along with the

continuing conversion of the heart toward Our Lord, Jesus Christ. This constant conversion entails a radical orientation of one's whole life to God. It involves a turning away from persistent occasions of evil in our lives with a growing repugnance for those same evils. Concurrently, one must have the desire and the strong resolution to effectively change one's life, hoping and trusting in God's mercy and supportive grace.

There is a tendency in all of us to downplay the role of venial sins in our lives. While, strictly speaking, we may not be required to confess these everyday failings in our lives, it is nevertheless strongly recommended that we do so. While individually these sins may not seem significant to our spiritual life, if left unchecked, if repeated often enough, they can coalesce into much more serious sins. By confessing these sins, we are helping to better inform our consciences and to more effectively fight against all evil tendencies in our lives.

Healing and Conversion After Confession

Once our sins are forgiven, a person must still heal and recover his full spiritual health by doing something in addition to making amends for sins. One must also make satisfaction for the expiation of his or her sins, and this is called "penance." In this wonderful process of God's mercy and forgiveness, our friendship with God and with our brothers and sisters has been restored, and we can now look forward to the future with new joy and hope.

On a negative note, we should never frequent the sacrament merely to be "officially" forgiven of a sin with no strong intention or desire for conversion. Similarly, we must avoid scrupulosity. In his great encyclical on the "Mystical Body of Christ," *Mystici Corporis*, Pope Pius XII lists the benefits of going to Confession with some regularity, even when we have no mortal sins to confess: "By [frequent confession] genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased."⁴

⁴ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, no. 88.

In conclusion, we might be familiar with this well-known saying: “to err is human; to forgive is divine.” It seems that we never need God’s grace more than when we are genuinely seeking to give and receive forgiveness and to become reconciled. It is always the case that we will need God’s grace to receive forgiveness as much as we need it to give forgiveness. Our human weakness and insufficiency rarely shows itself more than when it comes to forgiving life’s hurts and repairing damaged relationships. Hence, in this entire process we see the vital importance of continuous prayer for the grace to possess a heart that can both give and receive forgiveness, a heart eager for and open to conversion and reconciliation. This grace can never be underestimated.

Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your
merciful love;
in your abundant compassion blot out my
transgressions.
Thoroughly wash away my guilt;
and from my sin cleanse me. . . .
Behold, you desire true sincerity;
and secretly you teach me wisdom.
Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. . .
A clean heart create for me, God;
renew within me a steadfast spirit.
(Ps 51:3–4, 8–9, 12)

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