

V2_16th _after_Pentecost= The Matter of Confession

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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

Volume two = The Penitent Christian

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Matter of Confession

“But they held their peace.” St. Luke 14: 4.

To speak when one should be silent is not right and may be the cause of many sins; to be silent when one should speak is also wrong, and may occasion much mischief. There is a time to speak, and a time to be silent. The Pharisees in to-day’s Gospel, were silent, not from a good motive, but partly because they knew not what answer to make our Lord, and partly because they did not wish to answer him,—because they were filled with hatred and envy of him. In the Sacrament of Penance, the sinner must not remain silent. Therein he must speak candidly, and humbly acknowledge

I. His sins;

II. His own sins; and

III. All his mortal sins.

I. The necessary matter for the Sacrament of Penance is *sin*, and sin that has been committed after Baptism. Other sins do not belong to confession, and are not capable of sacramental absolution. A Jew or a heathen, who is baptized in his old age, although he may have been guilty of every sin that can be committed, cannot make any of those sins the subject of his confession. A Christian, who has not committed either mortal or venial sin, cannot receive the grace of the Sacrament of Penance in confession. The priest who would attempt to give absolution to such a man would commit a grievous sin, together with his penitent. Therefore Mary, the Blessed Virgin and Mother of God, who never had the least stain of sin on her soul, could not have received the Sacrament of Penance. From this it follows, that they act inconsistently who, like the Pharisee, instead of confessing their sins, confess their justices. Such people tell the confessor all about their virtues, their practices of piety, their daily troubles and crosses. Hear what the penitent David says to instruct you on this point: “I will confess against myself my injustice to the Lord” (Ps. 31: 5). Mark you his *“injustice.”* If you have no more sins to confess promptly make an end of your confession.

Some penitents tell what they have not done. They say: “I do not remember anything in particular; I do not curse, or swear, or steal, or speak badly of others, I do no wrong to any one, and am very careful not to injure my neighbor in any way. I sincerely repent of all my sins,” they say at the end. What sins are you sorry for? You have not confessed a single one yet. Have you ever told a lie? “No, Father,” is the answer; “it is wrong to lie.” Have you done this or that? “God forbid; it would be a sin to do that.” And what do you come here for, then? “I come to confess my sins.” What? To confess sins you have not committed? Would not he be thought a fool, who would appear against a man in court, saying: “O Judge, I am this

man's accuser: I do not know anything particularly bad about him. He has not stolen or committed murder, or wronged any one. But it is for you now to pronounce sentence on him"?

There are others who, not satisfied with telling their sins, bring in a lot of things that are not matter for confession at all, so that the confessor has need of all his patience to listen to a long string of useless talk. They could, if they wished, tell their sins in a few words, but that does not suit them. They must needs give the whole history of the sin, describe the time and place in which it was committed, what was going on at the time, what was the consequence, what was the cause of it, the manner in which the thing happened. All these things must be told with the utmost minuteness, as if they had learned it off by heart, and wished to say it as children do a lesson. There are many who make mistakes of this kind when confessing sins against holy purity. They imagine that it is necessary to give a whole history of the temptations and allurements that led them into sin. Many, too, when accusing themselves of sins of anger and impatience describe the crosses and trials they have to bear. Their motive in doing so appears to lessen the malice of their sin, although that does not properly belong to confession.

Do you wish to know what harm you do by your long stories? In the first place, you occasion a loss of precious time, which you could have employed far better for the salvation of your soul. In the second place, you bother your confessor, who has perhaps been already a long time in the confessional; and you are to blame if he is so tired that he is unable to attend properly to the other penitents who come to him. Thirdly, during the time that you waste in unnecessary talk, three or four people might have made their confession, instead of which they have to sit there waiting, and perhaps giving way to angry impatience, instead of exciting themselves to contrition for their sins. Some of them may even get up and go away altogether, thus losing confession and holy Communion. Tell your sins, and listen to the confessor's advice or commands. When that is done, go away and make room for others, who have just as much right as you to confess their sins.

If however, you need special counsel in some case which calls for a somewhat lengthy explanation, choose a time when the priest is not busy. But if many people are waiting for confession, defer asking advice, until some more suitable opportunity. He who goes to confession must confess, not only sins, but also,

II. His own sins.

In this, the tribunal of penance differs from worldly tribunals. The penitent appears in confession as his own accuser, and no one else's. One may sin grievously against his neighbor, and lessen his good name before the priest, in the confessional as well as outside of it, by revealing there the name of his accomplice in a grievous sin. Nothing but Christian charity or the duty of fraternal correction can justify the penitent in disclosing the name of another sinner.

Those err grievously in this point who confess the sins of others, mention the name of the person who led them astray; or who, when accusing themselves of suspicious and rash judgments, say who it was that gave rise to them. Like Adam and Eve in Paradise, they throw the blame of their sins on others whom they name: "The woman whom thou gavest me to be my companion gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (Gen. 3: 12). This very often happens amongst married people. The husband tells his wife's sins in confession, and the wife, as is more frequently the case, the vices of her husband. In the same way, servants accuse their masters and mistresses, while the latter, in turn, complain of the thefts committed by their servants. There are others who complain of the faults of their brothers and sisters, and of their neighbors, with whom they cannot live in peace. Thus, they make others bear the blame of their curses, of their hatred and anger, of their quarrelling and dissension. But what is the good of it all? Why do you come to confession? Is it to tell other people's sins, or your own? For what do you expect absolution? For the sins of others? Let them tell their own sins. "Let every one prove his own work," says St. Paul, "and so he shall have glory in himself only, and not in another. For every one shall bear his own burden" (Gal. 6: 4, 5). Yes, "bear his own burden" to the confessional. If you relate the sins of your relatives, you bring no grace home with you to the guilty ones; all you do is to lessen the good opinion the priest had of them.

If a man has two birds in a cage, and wishes to let one of them free, how does he manage so as not to lose the other as well? He opens the door carefully, and when the bird he wishes to get rid of is out, he shuts it again at once. In the same way, must you act when you go to confession. You have sometimes two kinds of sin shut up in your memory, your own and your neighbor's; you must open your mouth to tell your own sins, but so carefully that, when you have told them, you shut it again at once, lest a word should escape you about the sins of your neighbor. Finally, you must open your mouth to declare

III. *All your mortal sins*

All grievous sins must be declared as they are on one's conscience, as well as the number of times they have been committed, (as far as it is known to the penitent) and the circumstances which change the species of the sin. Doubtful sins must be confessed as doubtful, and certain as certain. A rash oath is a sin against the Second Commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." But if, in addition, that oath injures one's neighbor, it is a sin against the Seventh Commandment as well, "Thou shalt not steal." If, moreover, the oath is a false one, it is also a sin against the Eighth Commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Thus it is a threefold sin, and must be declared with all its circumstances. The difference of the species of sins is principally to be observed in the matter of impurity; namely, what sort was the sinful act, and whether it was committed with a single or a married person, or with a relation, and in what degree of affinity or consanguinity, or with a person consecrated to God, or with a person of the opposite sex. Even in thought, the nature of the sin can change. It is one thing to have a deliberate pleasure in an impure and unlawful imagination; and another, to entertain a willful desire, inclination, or purpose to commit an impure act. In the latter case, I must say what was the action that formed the object of my desire, or the person with regard to whom it was formed; for all these circumstances change the nature of the sin of desire. In a word, I am bound to declare all the grievous sins I have committed and have not yet confessed, according to their gravity, and the number of times I have been guilty of them, as far as my conscience, after a diligent and reasonable examination, is aware of them. What I cannot remember without any fault of mine will be forgiven, by the sacramental absolution with what I confess.

Herein many grievous faults are committed, first, through the pious simplicity of those who, in order to leave out nothing, make a certain of a doubtful sin, and even increase the number of their sins. But you thus declare more than you really have on your conscience, and therefore, your confession is not truthful. Or else, if you cannot remember any particular sins, you accuse yourself in a doubtful way, through sheer ignorant fear and anxiety. "Perhaps I have done that," you say. "Perhaps I have joined in an uncharitable conversation." "Perhaps I have given scandal to others." Would you accuse a man before a worldly tribunal in this way? I accuse Paul: "Perhaps he has committed a theft." Or: "Perhaps, he has killed a man." Who could pronounce a sentence of such a ridiculous accusation? If you have good grounds for doubting whether you have sinned or not, then say to the priest: "I am in doubt as to whether I have consented to temptation in this or that instance."

Others do quite the contrary. They use the word "about" with almost every sin they confess: "I have done that about six times"; "I have cursed about four times"; "I have had bad thoughts about once." What do you mean by that? To say you had them "about once" means that you had them twice or not at all. And as the "about" is appended to nearly every sin, how can the confessor form his judgment concerning what he hears? He must think to himself, either that man does not know the meaning of the word, or he has not carefully examined his conscience, or he does not wish to tell the exact number of times he has sinned. This is especially the case when the "about" is added to the confession of mortal sins that are accomplished in outward act. As if, for example, I were to say: "I have committed impurity *about* three times." Grievous sins of that kind are not so easily forgotten, and one can readily remember the number of times he has been guilty of them. If a person were to come to me with the "about,"—especially when the number of sins is small,—I should say to him: "You are not acting honestly with God and your conscience, nor do you wish to declare the exact number of your sins!"

There are others who do not mention the number at all. They say simply “I have cursed”; “I have been drunk”; “I have sung impure songs”; “I have committed impurity.” Or else: “I have often spoken impurely”; “I have often grievously injured my neighbor’s character.” Thus the poor priest, who, in order not to distract his penitent, has to keep silent till the end, is obliged to tax his memory, and go over the whole thing again, in order to find out the exact number of times the different sins have been committed. Now, if you did not intend to declare what you knew to be the number of your sins, you have made a bad confession, and it would be better for you to have remained away, because you have thus incurred the guilt of a grievous sacrilege. But if you *did* intend declaring the number of your sins as well as you could, why did you not do so without waiting to be asked? Why should you compel the priest to ask you such a number of troublesome questions? The same holds good also with regard to those who, when accusing themselves in confession, say: “I have had impure thoughts very often,” but do not state whether they have consented to them or not, or whether they had a willful desire or intention of doing anything against holy purity. “But,” you ask, “if one does not know anything certain of the number of his sins, what is he to do then?” My answer is that, in that case, you must declare the number of your sins as far as you have been able to discover it in a diligent examen of conscience. But if one is in the habit of sin (as is the case with those who keep up an impure intimacy), then it is, humanly speaking, impossible to remember all the different times that sin has been committed in thought, desire, word, look, and act, so that it is enough for such a one to say that he has lived in unlawful intimacy with a person for so many months or years, that during that time nearly all his thoughts and desires had reference to the object of his passion, and that he was accustomed to commit sinful actions so often during the day, or the week.

There are others who err through grievous and culpable ignorance, when they rely altogether on the questions put them by their confessor. Amongst these are some who confess nothing except what the priest extorts from them, as it were. Nay, they sometimes boast afterwards, and say: “The priest was rather sharp with me, but he was not able to find out everything!” Unhappy souls! Which of you is deceived? The priest or you? Even if the latter succeeded in that way in discovering all your sins, your confession is nevertheless a bad one, if you are determined not to tell your sins as they are on your conscience, without being asked. Christians, do not depend too much on your confessor. Even if he finds out all your sins by his questions, and you had not the intention of declaring them all candidly, that forced confession of yours will help you little to the pardon of your sins. You are bound to repent of your evil disposition, and to confess that you did not intend declaring all your sins, unless the priest asked you about them.

Finally, they who commit the worst fault in this particular are those who, through fear or shame, knowingly conceal a grievous sin in confession. This is a new and a terrible sin, which is the occasion of many bad confessions and unworthy Communion, especially amongst young people. Ah, wretched slaves of Satan! Why do you go to confession, if you do not wish to get rid of your sin? Sinner, do you wish to regain the health of your soul, and to escape eternal death? Then you must declare all your mortal sins in confession; for, if you conceal one of them willfully and persistently, your confession is worthless, and there is no hope of eternal life for you. Dear Christians! I beg of you, make an earnest resolution, saying to yourselves, like that hero who wished to encourage his soldiers to meet the enemy: “Let us either conquer, or die.” We must either conquer our shame of candidly declaring all our grievous sins, or else we must die an eternal death. Amen.

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