

INSTRUCTION ON THE HOLY SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

(Fr. Leonard Goffine's *The Church's Year*)

"Preaching the baptism of penance for the remission of sins" (Lk. 3:3).

What is penance, and how many kinds are there?

Penance, says the Roman Catechism (*Cat. Rom. de Poenit.* 54), consists in the turning of our whole soul to God; hating and detesting the crimes we have committed; firmly resolving to amend our lives, its evil habits and corrupt ways; hoping through the mercy of God to obtain pardon. This is interior penance, or the virtue of penance. The sincere acknowledgment of our sins to a priest and the absolution he accords, is exterior penance, or the holy Sacrament of Penance, which Christ instituted (Jn. 20:22-23), through which the sins committed after baptism are remitted.

Which of these penances is necessary for the forgiveness of sins?

Both are necessary, for unless the conversion of the heart to God, a true consciousness of, and sorrow for sin, the firm purpose of amendment and confidence in God's mercy, precede the confession, declaring all our sins to a priest cannot obtain forgiveness of mortal sin committed after baptism. At the same time a really contrite turning to God will not, without confession to a priest, obtain forgiveness, except when by circumstances a person is prevented from approaching the tribunal of penance. Such a person must, however, have the ardent desire to confess as soon as possible.

Can any one who has committed mortal sin be saved without penance?

No, for penance is as necessary to such a one as baptism, if he wishes not to perish: Unless you do penance, says Christ, you shall all likewise perish (Lk. 13:3, 5).

Is this penance performed at once?

This penance is necessary every day of our lives: that is, we must from day to day endeavor to be heartily sorry for our sins, to despise them, to eradicate the roots of sin, that is, our passions and evil inclinations, and become more pleasing to God by penance and good works.

Why do so many die impenitent?

Because they do not accept and use the many graces God offers them and put off their repentance. If such sinners, like the godless King Antiochus (II Mac. 9) intend to repent on their deathbed for fear of punishment, they usually find that God in His justice will no longer give them the grace of repentance, for he who when he can repent, will not, cannot when he will. "Who will not listen at the time of grace," says St. Gregory, "will not be listened to in the time of anxiety." And it is to be feared that he who postpones penance until old age will not find justice where he looked for mercy.

Can all sinners do penance?

With the grace of God, all can, even the greatest sinners; as a real father, God calls them when He says: As I live ...I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way, and live. Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways: and why will ye die, O house of Israel? And the wickedness of the wicked shall not hurt him, in what day soever he shall turn from his wickedness (Ezech. 33:11-12).

Do all who go to confession perform true penance?

Unfortunately, they do not; for all is not accomplished with confession. If there is no sincere detestation of sin, no true sorrow for having offended God; if the evil inclinations and bad habits are not overcome, ill-gotten goods restored, and calumny repaired, the occasions of sin avoided; if a sincere amendment of life, or, at least, its earnest purpose does not follow, then, indeed, there cannot be the least shadow of true repentance, not even though such persons confess weekly. But alas! we see many such. And why? Because many think repentance consists simply in confession, and not in the amendment of their lives.

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Only those obtain pardon who are truly penitent and perform all that is enjoined upon them in confession. It is well, therefore, to read and carefully act according to the following instructions.

I. ON THE EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

The foundation of true repentance, interior and exterior (see the preceding pages), is the vivid knowledge of our sins. There are many who are unconscious of the most grievous sins in which they are buried; blinded by self-love they do not even regard them as sins, do not confess them, perform no penance for them, and are consequently eternally lost. To prevent this great evil, the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV c.5) ordered a careful examination of conscience before confession, and afterwards to confess the sins which are discovered by that examination.

Why should we examine our conscience?

Because, as St. Ignatius says, no one can become fully aware of his own faults unless God reveals them by a special light; we should, therefore, first of all, daily ask the Holy Ghost to enlighten us; and should then examine our thoughts, desires, words, actions, and omissions since our last valid confession and how often we have sinned in these respects. To know this, we should let our conscience, that is, the inner voice which tells us what is good and what is evil, speak freely, without flattering ourselves, or passing it by negligently.

St. Charles Borromeo says we should place before our eyes the Ten Commandments of God and carefully compare our life and our morals with them; it is well also to examine ourselves on the seven deadly sins, and remember the places and persons with whom we have been in contact, the duties of our state of life, the vices to which we are most inclined, the consequences that were, or might have been produced upon ourselves or others.

At the same time, we should imagine ourselves standing before the judgment seat of God, and whatever would cause us fear there, whatever we could not answer for there, we should look upon as sins, be sorry for, and confess.

Is it a sin not to examine ourselves long and carefully?

Certainly it is a sin for those to examine their consciences carelessly, who live unfaithfully and in mortal sin, and who seldom confess, because they expose themselves frivolously to the danger of leaving out great sins, and consequently they make a sacrilegious confession, committing thereby a new and grievous sin.

Those who daily ask God for enlightenment and examine their conscience at least every evening before going to bed will prepare themselves properly before approaching the tribunal of penance. "Behold, you have a book in which you write your daily expenses," says St. Chrysostom, "make a book of your conscience, also, and write there your daily sins. Before you go to bed, before sleep comes, take your book, that is, your conscience, and recall your sins, whether of thought, word, or deed. Say then to your soul: Again, O my soul, a day is spent, what have we done of evil or of good? If you have accomplished some good, be grateful to God; if evil, resolve to avoid it for the future. Shed tears in remembrance of your sins; ask forgiveness of God, and then let your body sleep."

II. ON CONTRITION

"O man," cries St. Augustine, "why dost thou weep over the body whence the soul has departed, and not over the soul from which God has withdrawn?" The idolatrous Michas (Judg. 18:23-24) complained bitterly because his idols were taken from him; Esau grieved greatly over the loss of his birthright and his father's blessing (Gen. 27:34). Should we not, therefore, be filled with sorrow when, by our sins we have lost God and Heaven?

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What is contrition, and how many kinds are there?

"Contrition is a hearty sorrow and detestation of our sins with a firm purpose of sinning no more" (*Conc. Trid.*, Sess. XIV, can. 4). If this grief and detestation comes from a temporal injury, shame or punishment, it is a natural sorrow; but if we are sorry for our sins because by them we have offended God and transgressed His holy law, it is a supernatural sorrow; this, again, is imperfect when fear of God's punishment is the motive; it is perfect if we are sorry for our sins because we have offended God, the supreme Lord and best of Fathers.

Is natural sorrow sufficient for a good confession?

It is not, because it proceeds not from a supernatural motive, but from the love or fear of the world. A mere natural sorrow for our sins worketh death (II Cor. 7:10). If one confess his sins having only a natural sorrow for them, he commits a sacrilege, because the most necessary part of the Sacrament of Penance is wanting.

What other qualities are necessary for a true contrition?

Contrition should be interior, proceeding from the heart and not merely from the lips; it must be universal, that is, it must extend to all the mortal sins which the sinner has committed; it must be sovereign, that is, he must be more sorry for having offended God than for any temporal evil; it must be supernatural, that is, produced in the heart by supernatural motives; namely, because we have offended God, lost His grace, deserved hell, etc.

What kind of sorrow must we have in order to obtain forgiveness of our sins?

That sorrow which proceeds from a perfect love of God, not from fear of temporal or eternal punishment. This perfect contrition would suffice for the forgiveness of sins when in case of danger of death there should be a great desire but no opportunity to confess to a priest. But the Holy Catholic Church has declared (*Conc. Trid.*, Sess. XIV, can. 4) the imperfect contrition which proceeds from the fear of eternal punishment to be sufficient for the valid reception of the holy Sacrament of Penance.

Who are those who have reason to fear they have aroused only a natural sorrow for their sins?

Those who care little about knowing what true sorrow is; those who often commit grievous sins and do not amend their lives; for if true sorrow for sin had been excited in their hearts, with the firm purpose of amendment, the grace of God in this Sacrament would have strengthened the resolution and enabled them to avoid sin, at least for a time. On account of their immediate relapse we justly doubt whether they have validly received the sacrament of penance and its sanctifying grace.

How can the sinner attain true sorrow?

The sinner can attain true sorrow by the grace of God and his own co-operation. That both are necessary is shown by the prophet Jeremias (Jer. 31:18-19), who prays: Convert me, O Lord, and I shall be converted: for Thou art the Lord, my God. For after Thou didst convert me, I did penance; and after Thou didst skew unto me, I struck my thigh (with sorrow). To which God replies: If thou wilt be converted, I will convert thee (Jer. 15:19).

We see, therefore, that the first and most essential means for producing this sorrow is the grace of God. It must begin and complete the work of conversion, but it will do this only when the sinner earnestly and faithfully co-operates. When God in whatever way has admonished the sinner that he should be converted, let him ardently implore God for the grace of a true conversion, invoke the intercession of the Mother of the Savior, his guardian angel, and like the holy penitents, David, Peter, and Magdalen, let him meditate upon the truth that God is a just judge who hates sin and will punish it in the eternal torments of hell.

Having placed these truths vividly before his eyes, the sinner will reflect further whether by his sins he has not himself deserved this punishment, and if by the enlightenment of God he finds he has, he will

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also see the danger in which he stands: that if God should permit him to die impenitent, he would have to suffer forever in hell. This fear of eternal punishment urges the sinner to hope in God's mercy; for He wishes not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; again, our Redeemer says: I came to call the sinner to repentance, and, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who does penance than over ninety-nine just. He considers the patience of God towards him, the graces bestowed upon him during his sinful life; namely, his creation, redemption, sanctification in baptism, and many others.

He will now contemplate the beauty and perfection of God: "Who art Thou, O my God," he cries, "who art Thou who hast loved me with such an unspeakable love, and lovest me still, ungrateful, abominable sinner, that I am! What is all the beauty of this world of the angels and of the blessed spirits compared to Thine! Thou fountain of all beauty, of all goodness, of all that is amiable, Thou supreme majesty, Thou infinite abyss of love and mercy! I, for one vain thought, a short, momentary pleasure, a small, mean gain, could forget, offend and despise Thee! Could I sell, could I forfeit heaven, and eternal joy with Thee! O, could I repair those crimes! Could I but wash them out with my tears, even with my blood?"

Through such meditations, the sinner, by the grace of God, will be easily moved to sorrow. Without such or similar reflections the formulas of sorrow as read from prayer books or recited by heart, are by no means acts of contrition.

Should we make an act of contrition before confession only?

We should make an act of contrition before confession, and not only then, but every evening after the examination of conscience; we should make one immediately after any fault committed; above all, when in danger of death: for we know not when God will call us to judgment or whether we shall then have the grace to receive the sacrament of Penance with proper preparation.

III. ON THE PURPOSE OF AMENDMENT

The purpose of amending our life is as necessary for the remission of sin as contrition; for how could he obtain forgiveness from God who has not the determination to sin no more? The will to sin cannot exist with the hatred of sin.

What is necessary for a firm purpose?

A firm purpose of amendment requires: the determination to avoid sin; to flee from all occasions that might bring the danger of sinning, all persons, places, societies in which we usually sin; bravely to fight against our evil inclinations and bad habits; to make use of all means prescribed by our confessor or made known to us by God Himself; to repair the injustice we have done; to restore the good name of our neighbor; and to remove the scandal and enmity we have caused.

Who, then, have no true purpose of amendment?

Those who do not truly intend to leave the frivolous persons with whom they have associated and committed sin; to remove the occasions of cursing, swearing, drunkenness, and secret sins, etc.; who have the intention to borrow or to contract debts which they know they cannot pay, or do not even care to pay; to squander the property of their wives and children, letting them suffer want; to frequent barrooms or saloons; fight, gamble, indulge in vile, filthy conversations and detraction; murmur against spiritual and temporal superiors; throw away precious time; and bring, even compel, others to do the same. The saloon-keepers who, for the sake of money, allure such wretched people, keep them there, and what is still worse, help to intoxicate them, participate in their sins.

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IV. ON CONFESSION

Confession is a contrite acknowledgment of our sins to a priest who is duly authorized, in order to obtain forgiveness. This acknowledgment of our sins is an important and necessary part of the holy Sacrament of Penance.

Even in the Old Law, a certain kind of confession was prescribed and connected with a sacrifice, called the sacrifice of Atonement; but the forgiveness of sins was effected only through faith in the coming Redeemer, towards whom this sacrifice pointed (Lev. 5:5-6; Num. 5:7; compare Mt. 3:6). In the new Law, Christ gave to the apostles and their successors power to forgive and to retain sins (Jn. 20:21-23), and in doing so made them judges. Without confession on the part of the sinner, they cannot act as judges and do justice in regard to giving punishment and remedies (*Conc. Trid.*, Sess. XIV can. 6), and as the sinner is but seldom able to make an act of perfect contrition, which obtains the forgiveness of sin without confession, it was necessary that the most merciful Lord, as the Roman Catechism says (*de poen.* 5. 36), through the means of confession to the priest, should provide in an easier manner for the common salvation of man.

Confession, at the same time, is the best means of bringing man to a knowledge of his sins and of their malice. Therefore, even Adam was obliged to acknowledge his sins, and in the same way Cain was asked by God concerning his brother's murder, although God, the Omniscient, knew the sins of both. The desire to ease the troubled conscience seems born in man. Thus, David says of his crime: Because I was silent, my bones grew old, whilst I cried out all the day long (Ps. 31:3); and in the book of Proverbs it is said: He that hideth his sins shall not prosper; but he that shall confess and forsake them shall obtain mercy (Prov. 28:13). Constant experience in life verifies these words, and heretics could not entirely abolish private confession, though they rejected the Sacrament of Penance.

Is confession a human law, or a human invention?

Confession was instituted by Christ Himself; for after His resurrection He appeared to His apostles and disciples, and said to them: Peace be with you! As the Father hath sent me, I also send you; that is, the same power to remit sin which the Father has given me, I give to 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 (Jn.20:21-23; compare Mt. 18:18).

In these words Christ evidently gave to the apostles and their successors the power to forgive and retain sins. This they can do only when the sins are confessed to them; and, therefore, Christ, when instituting the forgiveness of sins, instituted and connected with it the acknowledgment, that is, the confession of sins. This regulation of Christ was complied with by the first Christians in humility of heart, as is proved in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read: And many of them (referring to the Christians at Ephesus) that believed came confessing and declaring their deeds (Acts 19:18). And the apostle James exhorts his own: Confess therefore your sins one to another and pray one for another, that you may be saved (Jas. 5:16). The work founded by Christ must stand as long as the world; and as the apostles and disciples of our Lord died, their successors necessarily continued the work and received the same power from Christ.

This is verified by the whole history of His Church. In the very beginning of Christianity, the faithful with great sorrow confessed to the priest all their transgressions, even the smallest and most secret, after which, they received absolution. "Let us be sincerely sorry as long as we live," says St. Clement of Rome, a disciple of St. Paul (*Ep. 1. ad Cor.*), "for all evil which we have committed in the flesh, for having once left the world there will no longer be any confession and penance for us." Tertullian (†217 A.D.) writes of those who hid their sins, being ashamed to confess them: "Can we also hide from the knowledge of God that which we conceal from a fellow creature" (*Lib. de poen.* 5. 36). Origen (†254), after speaking of baptism, says: "There is still a severer and more tedious way of obtaining remission of sin: when the sinner moistens his pillow with tears, and is not ashamed to confess his sins to the priest of the Lord" (*Hom. 3 in Lev.*). St. Cyprian (†258) writes of those Christians who, during the persecutions of his

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time, had not sinned by openly denying the faith: "Yet because they had but thought of doing so, they make a sorrowful and simple confession to God's priests" (*Sib. de laps.*). Basil (†379) writes: "Necessarily the sins must be made plain to those to whom the power of the mysteries is confided, that is, to the priests" (*In reg. brev. 288*).

Many more testimonies could be brought from the earliest centuries of Christianity which make it clear that Christ Himself instituted confession and that the faithful always availed themselves of it as a means of remission of sin. It would not have been possible for a human being, though he were the mightiest prince, to have imposed upon Catholic Christianity so hard an obligation as confession without the special command of Christ the Son of God; nor could any one have invented it without the faithful at once revolting. It is also well known that in the Oriental Churches, which separated from the true Church in the earliest ages, private confession to a priest is yet valued as a divine institution.

The Catholic institution of confession, with which, in the earliest centuries, there was even connected a public confession before the whole congregation for notorious sinners, is as old as the Church itself, as Pope Leo the Great (†461) proves (*Ep. 136*): "The secret, auricular confession was introduced into the Church as early as the times of the apostles or their immediate successors." It was instituted by Christ, the God-Man, and instituted for the purpose of enabling the apostles and the priests, their successors, to remit in the confessional the sins committed after baptism, if the sinner heartily regrets them, sincerely confesses, and renders satisfaction for them; or to retain them, if he be unworthy of absolution.

From this it is seen that the enemies of the Catholic Church oppose, in rejecting confession, the plain expression of the holy Scriptures and of entire Christian antiquity, and that it is a detestable calumny to assert that confession is simply a human invention. The divine institution of confession always was and is a fountain of sweetest consolation for sinful man, and thousands have experienced that which is said by the Council of Trent (Sess. XIV can. 3, *depart.*): "The effect of this Sacrament is reconciliation with God, followed by peace, cheerfulness and consolation of the heart in those who worthily receive this Sacrament."

What will aid us to make confession easy?

The consideration of the manifold benefits arising from it: first, forgiveness of all, even the most grievous sins, remission of the guilt and eternal punishment; secondly, the certainty of having again been made a child of God; thirdly, the sweet consolation and desired peace of conscience; fourthly, the necessary remedies which a pious and prudent confessor will prescribe for the cure of the diseases of the soul; finally, the prayer and exhortation of the priest which will also add to the complete conversion of the sinner.

What should be done to participate in these benefits?

Besides that which has already been said of the examination of conscience, and especially of sorrow for sin, the confession must be sincere and open-hearted; that is, a correct and exact confession not only of all mortal sins, their kind, circumstances and number, without excuses, or veiling or lessening them, but also a faithful revelation of all other spiritual affairs, fears, doubts, and other wounds of the soul; for a wound which is not shown to the physician cannot be healed. We should not seek those confessors who are only "mute dogs" (Is. 56:10) and give absolution without hesitation, but we should trust the direction of our souls to learned, pious, and zealous priests; and remain under their guidance, as in physical sickness we remain under the care of an experienced physician, and accept their words as if Christ Himself had spoken.

How should the false shame which prevents confession be overcome?

It should be remembered that the priest in the confessional is the representative of Christ, and that whoever lies to the confessor seeks to deceive God Himself, who abominates a lie, and at the Last Day will publicly put such a liar to shame. The confessor takes the place of Christ, and after His example must be merciful to the sinner if, a sinful man himself, he hopes to receive mercy and grace from God.

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At the same time, no confessor is allowed to reveal the slightest thing heard in confession, even should it cost him his life.

It may be considered further that he who conceals a sin in confession, and thus obtains absolution by false pretences, receives no remission; but, on the contrary, commits a new sin, "When man uncovers his sins, God covers them; when man conceals his sins, God reveals them," says St. Augustine. Man can be deceived, but not God, the Omniscient; and who is ashamed to show his wounds to the physician? Why should it be a cause of shame to throw out the poison of sin by a sincere confession? To sin only is shameful, to confess sin is not shameful. But if by all these reflections we are still unable to overcome ourselves so as to confess our sins to a certain confessor, we may seek another in whom we have confidence.

V. ON SATISFACTION AFTER CONFESSION

Satisfaction is the diligent performance of all the works of penance imposed upon us by the confessor. With this, however, a true penitent will not be satisfied; for in our times, on account of the weakness and little zeal of Christians, a light penance is imposed that they may not be deterred from the reception of the holy Sacraments. To avoid relapsing into sin, one must do penance and bring forth worthy fruits (Lk. 13:3), for God will only then give the grace to persevere. We satisfy God by fasting, prayer, almsdeeds, avoidance of the snares of the world, diffidence in ourselves, and especially by patient endurance of the afflictions and sufferings which He imposes upon us. Those who have committed sin must do penance in this life or submit to everlasting penance in the next.

Is the heretic right in asserting that man does not need to render satisfaction since Christ has rendered it complete on the cross?

He is entirely wrong. Christ on the cross did indeed render satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, and man is not capable to atone for one single sin; but it does not follow from this that man is not required to do something. To render satisfaction means to perform a duty which has been neglected. Instead of obeying God, the sinner, by his sins, disobeys Him. Satisfaction for disobedience requires perfect obedience from the sinner: but this, because of his weakness and corruption, no man is able to render; therefore, Christ rendered it for us by His perfect obedience even unto the death of the cross.

But because Christ has been thus obedient for us, must we not be somewhat obedient also? Or which is the same, because Christ for love of us has atoned for our sins by perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father, are we to do no penance for ourselves? It is precisely by this atonement made by Christ that we receive the power of rendering satisfaction. But for this we must, first of all, ask the grace, *i.e.*, pray, to restrain our earthly desires, *i.e.*, fast, and by means of active love (charity) make ourselves susceptible to this grace.

St. Paul the Apostle, who calls himself the greatest of sinners, writes of himself: I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh for His body, which is the Church (Col. 1:24); and to the Corinthians he writes: But I chastise my body and bring it into subjection; lest perhaps when I have preached to others (meaning penance and conversion), I myself should become cast away (I Cor. 9:27).

Christ Himself did not censure the Ninivites for their fasting and their penance in sackcloth and ashes, but gave them as an example (Mt. 12:41). In the Old Testament we find that even after remitting the sin, God imposed a punishment for it. Thus, He let the child of King David die as punishment for his adultery, even though He had forgiven the sin (II Kings 12:13, 14); thus Moses and Aaron, because they once distrusted God, were not permitted to enter the Promised Land (Num. 20:24; Deut. 34:4).

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According to this doctrine of the Bible, the Catholic Church teaches that there remains a temporal punishment which the sinner must expiate either in this world or in the next, though on account of the infinite merits of Christ the guilt and eternal punishment of sin are taken away by absolution. In the earliest times of the Church certain works of penance were imposed which were then very severe, and in the course of time, owing to the indolence of the faithful, were much moderated.