

12. Confession and Anointing of the Sick

Jesus was once invited to a meal in the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a party which insisted on the strict observance of all the laws of the Old Testament, down to the smallest detail, and despised those who did not keep them. Many of them were hypocrites and snobs. As they reclined at table an incident took place which shocked the host and his guests. It is recorded in the seventh chapter of St. Luke's Gospel.

"And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment."

The host said to himself: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Jesus gently rebuked him and said:

"I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much..."

And he said to her:

"Your sins are forgiven."

Those at table were even more shocked at this and said: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" Jesus said the woman:

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7, 37-50)

It is an ancient tradition that this woman was Mary Magdalene, who stood beneath the Cross with Mary the Mother of Jesus as he died, and that afterwards she lived a life of prayer and penance in the desert in Egypt and drew many to imitate her holy life. She has been honoured in the Church ever since as the patroness of sinners.

What is Sin?

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans gives us a glimpse of the effects of sin. He says that the pagan Romans did not try to know and love God, and so "they were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Romans 1, 29-31).

This is a terrifying picture of the evils of the Roman Empire of Paul's day. It shows us sin at its worst. But it also tells us some other important things. It shows us that sin is a rejection of God and his love. The essential evil of sin, and its beginning, is that a person turns away his whole personality from God. It is clear also that sin is a free act. When a person knows that something is wrong and against God's will, yet freely decides to do it, he commits a sin.

Anyone may be tempted to do evil, and often that is not wrong. He may find in himself a sudden urge to be angry or unkind at home, to be unfair or lazy or lustful or unjust. All this comes from his weak human nature, and for the most part he is not to blame. It is only when he encourages these temptations or actually gives way to them and does not control his anger or is unjust or lustful that he sins.

We must accept the fact that we are weak human beings. The proud man thinks he can do all things by himself without help from God or man. That is the height of foolishness and makes a person ridiculous and lonely. Most of us realize that we are often tempted to do wrong and that we need help to overcome our evil inclinations. We need to learn to control our thoughts and words and actions, and with God's help we can exercise this control. Jesus has overcome sin by his death and resurrection. United to him by faith and love, we share in his victory and know that nothing, except our own free decision, can separate us from the love of God.

Our Freedom

We have said that sin is a free act and we only sin when we freely do something that we know is wrong. However much our freedom may be limited by our upbringing or environment, we retain the power to say "no" to evil. Obviously people whose minds are unbalanced may do wrong without committing sin because they are not capable of a fully free act. There are other people who do evil things but have never been taught, or have never come to realize that what they are doing is wrong. God will never reject them for the wrong they do in their ignorance. He judges us according to our knowledge and freedom. He is a loving Father and is prepared to excuse his children wherever possible. However, he is also a very just Father who knows our motives and our intentions. If in serious matters we freely and knowingly reject his love and his law for mankind, we reject him. If we die in the state of rejection, we separate ourselves from him forever.

Sin is Slavery

Even though we do not specifically think of offending God every time that we sin, our failing remains an offence against God. We want something, regardless of God's plan or God's will. It is not so much that we want to do anything evil; sin is

more often the result of seeking something that seems good to us, e.g. we want to build up our won reputation, so we malign someone's character to draw people's attention from our own shortcomings.

The Bible says that sin is a form of slavery, in the sense that one who sins places himself more under the power of evil.

"When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed?" (Rom. 6, 20-21).

St. Paul often speaks of the struggle that goes on in human nature between our inclinations to do good and our stronger inclination to sin:

"For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me". (Rom. 7, 18-21).

The lustful person is a slave to passion, the bad-tampered person is a slave of his impulses. Sin is not a sign of strength of character. It is a sign of slavery and the abuse of our freedom.

Mortal and Venial Sins

There is a difference in degree about the seriousness of sin. Our amount of knowledge and freedom differs from one situation to another, and the matter involved may be grave or light in itself.

We sometimes divide sins into **mortal** sins and **venial** sins. Mortal sins are those actions that are such a serious turning from God that they exclude the person from communion with the rest of the Church. Venial sins are less serious; they do not cause a break in our relationship with God and the Church, but they show a lessening of our love and make us liable to fall into more serious offences.

It is not always easy to say what is a mortal sin and what is not. Some sins are obviously a serious matter: e.g. murder, abortion, adultery, abuse of sex, blasphemy, etc., but in all these sins, the wickedness depends ultimately on the inner attitude of the sinner. Our Lord reminds us (cf. Mark 7, 14-23) that the true source of sin is the attitude of mind and heart, and not necessarily the external action. "what comes out of a man is that which defiles a man".

Serious sin is the greatest evil in the world. It means a person's hatred and refusal to love God. It is not a trifling matter. People do not commit serious sins by chance or accidentally. Our Lord reminds us that we can sin seriously by omission,, just as much as by commission (cf. Mt. 25, 31-46).

Three conditions have to be fulfilled before a person commits serious sin; it is a serious matter involved: it is done with full knowledge and with full consent of the will. If any of these is lacking, there is no serious sin committed.

Serious sin can lead to loss of eternal life with God. This is a frightening thought which should be enough to move the sinner to some form of contrition.

If a person dies in serious sin, and if his heart is hardened against God willfully and deliberately, then this eternity will be the punishment of being without God. This is what is meant by the Church's teaching on Hell. God judges the inner attitude of people when he judges the good they have done or the sins they have committed. God wants all men to be saved (cf. 1. Tim. 2, 4). He gives to all the grace of repentance and forgiveness. But if this grace is rejected, God will not force a person's free will.

Sin Can be Forgiven

We have painted a rather dismal, but accurate, picture of sin and its effects so as to see more clearly the meaning of forgiveness and the importance of confession.

Every sin, no matter how malicious or vile, can be forgiven. It is only the sin of ultimate obstinacy and rejection of God's grace that is the "unforgiveable sin" spoken of by Jesus (cf. Mark 3, 21). If we don't want forgiveness, God will not force it on us.

Christ Brings Forgiveness of Sins

The "good news" of Christianity is the message of Christ bringing us forgiveness and reconciliation with God. It was not God's will that we live in sin and separated from his love. He wanted to lift this heavy burden from our shoulders.

The gospels give us many stories of Christ forgiving sins, e.g. the woman taken in adultery, the man with palsy, the sinful woman in Simon's house, the good thief, and many others. Our Lord saw that there were two classes of sinners: Those who admitted that they were sinners and those who denied it and pretended that they were just, e.g. many of the Pharisees. Christ saw in sickness and sin the power of the devil, the prince of evil. He was the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world (cf. John 1, 36).

The Prodigal Son

In lesson 2 we have quoted the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is excellent reading in preparation for confession.

The action of the son leaving his Father's house, is the portrayal of our sin by which we leave God's presence in our futile attempt to seek happiness apart from God. The wretched state of the son, feeding on the food of pigs, reminds us of the degradation and misery that sin can cause. The sinner tries to be independent; but he finds that there is no lasting happiness outside of God's will.

The return of the son reminds us that forgiveness demands the sinner's return to God and conversion; but the Father is not reluctant to forgive. He is there always, eagerly awaiting our return. The Father in the parable runs out to meet the repentant son and welcomes him even before the son has time to make his confession.

The parable also stresses that it is not God who has changed but the sinner. God's love is always reaching out. He never turns his back on the sinner, but waits for the moment when we summon up the courage to turn back to him. The parable reminds us that God will restore us to his friendship and love, as if we had never strayed at all.

What Forgiveness Means

We can never make up to God for the sins we have committed. We do what we can to atone, but we know that Christ died for our sins (cf. 1 Tim. 1, 15). When our sins are forgiven, they disappear; they are blotted out. "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow; and if they be red as crimson, they shall be made as white as wool" (Is. 1. 18). God does not hold our sins against us once he has forgiven them. He does not write them down in a little black book. He does not just cover our sins and pretend that they are not there. When he forgives our sins, they are gone forever and we are reconciled to him.

However, we are a little different because we have sinned. Sin always brings damage to us or to other people. For example, if we take away another's good name, the Church forgives us if we are sorry; but the damage is done. Even when we try to make restitution, the effects of sin go on. If a person commits a sin of impurity, he is forgiven by God if he is repentant; but his human nature is weakened by sin. This is why the Church reminds us of the need of a "penance" as a form of satisfaction for our sins. A good work done now (e.g....a prayer, an act of self-denial) can make up for a sin previously committed. The way we live after our forgiveness is the proof of our sorrow and the best way to repair the damage done by sin.

Sin has a damaging effect; it can also have a saving effect. Good can come from evil, through the action of God.

St. Augustine is the classic example of a man who became a saint through his sins. By that I mean that his early youth was accompanied by many sins of pride and lust, but when he saw himself as he really was, he turned back to God, gained forgiveness and began a life of heroic virtue. His sins made him humbly throw himself at the mercy of God; and there he found his strength.

The same thing happens to us. By acknowledging our weakness we can grow in holiness by trusting in God and not our own strength. St. Paul could say, in this respect. "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12, 10). And again "we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Rom. 8, 28).

To have a guilt complex is a sign of psychological disorder; to have a sense of sin and confidence in God's grace is a sign of a healthy Christian life. What we must never forget is the God's grace is greater than our sin.

Confession ---- Sacrament of Reconciliation

The same Jesus who forgave the paralysed man and the penitent Mary Magdalen still forgives sin today, not personally or through his human body, but through his Church. The risen Christ appeared to the apostles after his resurrection and passed on to them the power to forgive sins in his name. Confession is, therefore, a meeting place with Christ. It is God's Easter gift to the sinner.

There are many ways by which we gain forgiveness for daily faults in the Catholic Church. In the Our Father we ask that God will forgive our trespasses; the hearing of God's word has power to forgive sins; and participation in Holy Communion has long been regarded as the ordinary sacrament of forgiveness for venial sins.

But after Baptism, Confession is the great sign of God's forgiveness. It is a sign of God's presence among us, and should really be called the Sacrament (Sign) of Reconciliation with God. Christ has given his Church the power of forgiving sins, especially serious sins, in this sacrament because serious sin is a break with the Church and with God. When we are reconciled with the Church we are then free to go to the Eucharist with the other members of the Church.

Why Confess to a Priest?

If sin is an offence against God, is it not sufficient to express your sorrow privately to God? Why confess to a priest when you can go directly to God?

These are fundamental questions that demand an honest answer.

It is easy for us to say how we ought to have our sins forgiven; but we ought as rather ---- "what is God's will in this matter?" By turning to the gospels (Luk 5, 18-24) we find God's forgiveness bestowed through Jesus Christ, acting as the Son of Man.

"And behold, men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralysed, and they sought to bring him in and lay him before Jesus: but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith he said: 'Man, your sins are forgiven you'. And the scribes and Pharisees began to question, saying, 'Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the man who was paralysed – 'I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home', And immediately he rose before them."

The Jews said: "Who can forgive sins, but God only?" It is the same objection raised to day when the Church claims to forgive sins in the sacrament of penance.

There is a valid point in the objection. After all, as we have mentioned, sin is an offence against God and only he can forgive it; serious sin means the loss of divine life, and only God can restore it. there are occasions when a person cannot make their concession, but can still gain forgiveness.

But the objection ignores a basic element of Christianityi.e. that God has entrusted men with a ministry of forgiveness. When Christ forgave the paralytic, he acted as the Son of man, sent by God. In his manhood, Christ gave absolution and forgiveness; the sign that he could do so was the curing of the paralytic.

Jesus Christ passed on this ministry of forgiveness to others, his apostles and their successors;

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you". And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they retained." (John 20, 21-23).

So when a priest forgives sin today, there is divine forgiveness given through a human minister. The priest does not merely preach forgiveness, he grants it in

the name of God. The ministry of absolution is part of the mission of the Church, as it was part of the apostle's mission.

"Our merciful God wills us to confess in this world that we may not be confounded in the other. Let no man say to himself: 'I do penance to God in private; I do it before God!' Is it then in vain that Christ has said 'whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven? Is it in vain that the keys have been given to the Church? Do we make void the gospel, void the words of Christ?'" (St. Augustine).

In God's plan, then, forgiveness is generally to be given through God's visible representatives and ministers of reconciliation.

True Sorrow

Sorrow cannot be true unless there is a *firm purpose of amendment*, that is, a determination not to commit sin again and to avoid, as far as possible, situations, persons and places which have been the occasions of sin. If a man confesses, even with tears in his eyes, hatred of his fellow man and yet is determined to have his revenge on him, he is not forgiven. If he confesses adultery and intends to commit that sin again, he is not forgiven. Moreover he has made a bad confession and added serious sin to serious sin.

That does not mean that the sinner must be absolutely certain that he will never commit sin again. He may have grave misgivings about his power to resist temptation and know that he is likely to fall again. God demands of him only true sorrow and a determination to do his best in the future, with God's help. No matter how often he falls, he should return to God for forgiveness. St. Peter once asked Jesus: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus replied: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" --- that is, as often as he sins and repents (Matt. 18, 21-22). What Christ told St. Peter to do, he does himself for those who have offended him.

The motives for sorrow

True sorrow does not necessarily involve being emotionally upset. Sorrow is a thing of the intellect and the will. It means to admit guilt and resolve to do better. The sinner might feel sluggish and not inclined to sorrow. He should encourage repentance by thinking of the goodness of God and the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. Fear of punishment in the life to come is not the best of motives, but it is a good one. The three motives for sorrow are summed up in the Act of Contrition which is printed at the end of this lesson.

Satisfaction

The stain of sin is washed away in the sacrament of Penance and the life of Christ is fully restored. But the sinner must continue to make amends for his sins. The remnants and effects of sin still remain after it has been forgiven and the penitent must strive gradually to remove them by prayer, good works and acts of penance. For this purpose, the priest in confession instructs him to say certain prayers or do certain religious acts. This is called the "penance". It must be done in a spirit of obedience and is an important part of the sacrament. Prayers and other good deeds should be added to it and the burdens and sufferings of everyday life offered up to God in reparation for sin, in union with the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

The Seal of Confession

The priest cannot reveal what he has learnt in confession, or even hint at it, even to save his own life. It would be a serious sin for him to do so. In the early days of the Church it was the custom to confess sins publicly but now confession is private. In each parish church there are confessional rooms. These are furnished in such a way as to allow the penitent the choice of face to face discussion with the priest or to remain anonymous behind a screen.

Some people like to confess regularly to the same priest and to seek personal guidance from him.

Devout Catholics confess frequently, some once a month others more frequently, and all are urged to do so regularly.

The First Confession

The first confession might appear to be a difficulty. The following comments are made primarily to help anyone who may be thinking about becoming a Catholic and yet is a little concerned about confession. It is quite understandable that you consider confession difficult, because probably it is the first time in your life that you have laid bare your soul to another person. After the confession, however, you will realize that you have imagined that this sacrament is more difficult than it actually is, and that your sense of relief is great. The simple rule to follow is: be guided by the priest who instructed you.

When you are selecting your first confessor you have a choice. You may either confess to the priest who instructed you, or you may choose a priest who would not know you at all. This is purely a matter of your personal preference. Some find it easier to go to a priest they know, others to one they do not know.

When you are making your first confession, if you feel it an ordeal, you may commence with this, "Father, I am a convert. I am making my first confession. Will

you help me?" The priest with real sympathy for you, and appreciation of your good-will, will ask a series of questions that will cover all the sins that you might have committed; usually all you have to do is answer a direct "Yes, Father," or "No, Father," to his questions.

Such a confession would be quite adequate. A more usual method is to give your own statement of personal sins, indicating the type of sins and the approximate number of times each was committed.

Any prayer book which has a section on examination of conscience is helpful in preparing for confession. There are suggestions for examination of conscience in a later lesson of this course. (Lesson 19).

The Anointing of the Sick

Sickness and pain have always been a heavy burden for people, and somewhat difficult to explain. Christians like other people are prone to such trials but their faith does help them to understand to some extent this mystery of suffering and to bear pain more courageously. They also know that Christ loved the sick and often during his life healed them. Sickness, while it is related to man's fallen nature, cannot be considered as a punishment for personal sins (See John 9:3). Christ Himself was sinless and yet he bore all the sufferings of his passion and understood human sorrow.

The Liturgical Celebration of anointing the sick has now happily been renewed and its former necessary association with dying has been modified. The texts and rites now express more clearly the holy things they signify (Vat. Doc. On Liturgy). Anointing of the sick is a Sacrament of Faith --- faith in the minister of the sacrament and faith for the one who receives it. The kernel of the Sacramental celebration consists of the Priest's Prayer and the Anointing. The formula used, in keeping with the promise made by Christ through St. James in his Apostolic letter, stresses not only prayers for a sick person's forgiveness but also for his "raising up" and salvation. This is clearly seen in the current form:

"Though this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen. May the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up. Amen."

Thus is expressed the care of Christ and the Church for sick people. Christ is working again through the Sacrament with his sympathy and healing, as he did when He was on earth. Sickness and sin go together. This does not mean that a man's personal sins are always punished by sickness, or that those who are sick are more sinful than others. Yet ill-health was introduced into the world by sin and is part of the sinful condition of fallen man. It not only weakens God's gift of

natural life, but also makes it more difficult for a man to live the supernatural life and hinders him in his attempt to lift himself above the things of the world. It can nevertheless be turned to good account. If borne with fortitude it strengthens the human spirit and if it is meekly accepted and offered up in union with the sufferings of Christ, it makes the Christian more like his Master, gives him a fuller share of his life and helps to make amends for sin.

Christ came to eliminate suffering. He came to give fullness of life, both natural and supernatural. It is true that his main purpose was to give supernatural life, but he intends man to enjoy fullness of natural life also. When he was on earth he cured the sick and sent his Apostles out to do the same in his name. When men come to enjoy the full fruits of Redemption in the world to come, there will be no more sickness or death. "Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21,4).

Christ still continues his ministry to the sick. He does it now chiefly through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. This sacrament helps those who are seriously ill to bear their sickness and gives a new injection of his life so that they may lift up mind and heart to God in spite of pain and weakness.

The Sacrament in Sacred Scripture

The fifth chapter of St. James' letter describes the sacrament:

"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5, 14-15).

Here is implied the whole teaching of the Church about this sacrament. It was instituted by Jesus Christ for the benefit of those, not necessarily dying, but at least in some danger of death through sickness. It is administered by a priest who, in the name of Christ, prays over the sick person and anoints with oil the forehead and the hands. Until recently the five senses were anointed. He prays that the sins of the sick person will be forgiven and that, if such be the will of God, his bodily health will be restored.

This sacrament, like the other six, gives an extra injection of Christ's life to enable the patient to face the danger of serious illness and make a special effort to pray and love God at a time when ill-health renders him weak.

Holy Oil

As in the other sacraments, the sign used indicates the effects. Oil gives strength. The athlete anoints his limbs with it to strengthen them for his "agony," or contest. In this sacrament the soul is anointed by the Spirit to enable it to face up bravely to illness and, perhaps, the last agony. Oil also has a healing effect. The sacrament is intended primarily to soothe and heal the spirit, but frequently the spiritual effects flow over into the body. The strength given enables the man to throw off depression, worry and lethargy and, as a result, the body becomes relaxed and better able to respond to medical attention. Priests of long experience will testify that some physical improvement is to be expected after the anointing of the sick, and full recovery is not infrequent. Nevertheless, the sacrament is not faith-healing. Its primary purpose is not to restore physical health but to give a new share of supernatural life.

On the Thursday before Easter the bishop consecrates the oil to be used in the anointing of the sick, and the prayer he uses on that occasion indicates the purpose of the sacrament:

"O God, please send down from heaven the Holy Spirit into this rich oil, which you so kindly produce from the green wood for the restoring of mind and body. Through thy blessing, may all who are anointed with this heavenly medicine be protected in mind and body. May all pain of mind and body, all weakness and sickness, be removed."

When a member of the family is seriously ill, Catholics are as anxious to send for the priest as for the doctor. They know that they should not leave it to the last moment to ask for the anointing to be administered. It is best done when the patient is conscious, able to co-operate with the priest as he prays and administers the sacrament, and with Christ who gives strength through it.

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When St. Matthew, the tax-collector, received the call to follow his Master, he invited many of his friends to a farewell party and Jesus was the chief guest. The Pharisees were shocked and said to his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard of this, he said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt. 9, 11-12).

Sin is the sickness of the human spirit. It distresses it and makes it restless, weakens and even quenches supernatural life. Christ removes sin and gives new vigour in the sacrament of Penance. In the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick he

soothes with the sweet balm of the Holy Spirit, giving comfort and strength at a time when it is badly needed.

He said: **"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"** (John 10, 10). He longs to give it to all men and extends to all the tender invitation:

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11, 28).

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Act of Contrition

My God,
I am sorry for my sins with all my heart.
In choosing to do wrong
and failing to do good,
I have sinned against you
whom I should love above all things.
I firmly intend, with your help,
to do penance,
to sin no more,
and to avoid whatever leads me to sin.
Our Saviour Jesus Christ
suffered and died for us.
In his name, my God, have mercy.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What, in your own opinion, are some of the reasons why people sin?**
- 2. Which incident from the life story of Christ do you consider shows his love of the sinner most clearly?**
- 3. Give some example to show that some sins are more serious than others. What are the three aspects of a mortal sin?**
- 4. What is the reason for confessing to a priest, since sin is an offence against God? Why not just confess to God?**
- 5. What do you consider to be the most important aspects of genuine sorrow for sins?**
- 6. What are the chief effects of the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick?**