

## THE CATHOLIC PRIEST AS A CONFESSOR

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T WAS a dramatic and awe-inspiring moment when Christ appeared to His followers gathered in the upper room at Jerusalem. They were confused and afraid. As they reflected on the happenings of the previous week, they were unable to decide what should be done. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem had been an occasion of joy. They thought Christ was to set up an earthly kingdom. And then followed a few days of joyous companionship with the Master which were quickly overshadowed by the disturbing news that the time was at hand when He was to be betrayed by one of them into the hands of wicked men.

After praying that the Holy Spirit would strengthen and comfort them He had ordained them priests. He had given them the power to bring Him down to men as often as, taking bread and wine, they would say these words: "This is My Body" and "This is My Blood." Then followed their sleep-laden vigil in the garden which was terminated by the seizure of the Master. They fled in fright and hid while Christ underwent His passion and death on the cross.

What were the Apostles to think? What were they to do? Suddenly Christ, their Master, appeared in their midst and said, "Peace be to you." After comforting and reassuring them He conferred upon them more power. They had the power of Consecration; now, they were given power over the sins of men, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained" (John, XX, 22-3).

In these few words, Christ commissioned His Apostles and their successors to forgive the sins of men as often as would be necessary. Christ gave to men, themselves sinners, the authority over all the sins that would in the future be committed not only against men but even those directed against God Himself. To what other power exercised by men can we compare this power? The authority of earthly kings and other potentates is exercised only over the bodies of their subjects. They can remit the penalties for crimes committed only against themselves or their state. But in no way, can they free the man who has sinned directly against God.

Consider the power of the priestly confessor. Day after day he

awaits sinners in the confessional. They kneel before him and accuse themselves of every type of sin. After a judgment on the gravity of their sins and their worthiness for absolution, he either absolves or denies them absolution. He exercises the tremendous power of absolving in simple words: "I absolve thee from thy sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." He himself is the judge of their case. This power of absolution from sins is one which has always been considered as pertaining to God alone. We have a striking proof of this in Holy Scripture. A penitent woman had anointed the feet of Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Indignantly Simon wondered if Christ knew the type of woman she was. The Master answered his thoughts by relating to Simon the simple parable, wherein He compared Simon's love for Himself to the love the penitent woman had shown for Him. Then Christ said to the woman: "Thy sins are forgiven" (Luke, VII, 48). St. Luke then continues: "And they who were at table with Him began to say within themselves: Who is this man, Who even forgives sins" (Luke, VII, 49). The Jews always regarded this power as belonging to God alone. It was blasphemous for a man to pretend to be able to exercise it.

Catholic priests, however, do possess this power. They have exercised it for the good of men during the past nineteen hundred years. The Saints have vied with each other in extolling it. In a sermon, St. Maxentius of Tours stressed that God Himself must accept the judgment of the priest: "Such is this judiciary power ascribed to Peter that its decision carries with it the decision of God."<sup>1</sup> In speaking of the priestly power, St. Peter Damian said: "The sentence of the priest precedes, God subscribes to it."<sup>2</sup> Referring to the confessor's power, St. John Chrysostom wrote: "The Sovereign of the universe only follows the servant by confirming in heaven all that the latter decides upon earth."<sup>3</sup> This power of the priest can be more thoroughly understood if we consider the following; if Jesus Christ Himself were in one confessional in one of our churches and a priest in the other, the absolution obtained from the priest would be as efficacious as the one given by Christ Himself. To determine more precisely all that the office of confessor entails, the confessor will be considered as the spiritual father of the penitent, as the judge, as the physician and as a preacher.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Maxentius of Tours: *Sermon on Nativity* of St. Peter, Hom. 3.

<sup>2</sup> St. Peter Damian, *Sermon* 26.

<sup>3</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *De Verbis Isaiae*, Hom. 5.

## SPIRITUAL FATHER

The priest, as we know is ordained to lead men to God and to call God down to men. He is a mediator who acts in God's place. God is our loving Father. The priest, too, must be our father at all times, but especially in the confessional. There the penitent, with a soul filled with sin, steeped in all that is abominable to God, pleads for restoration to the friendship of God. How must the confessor treat him? Christ Himself has shown the example in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

In this parable, Christ told the story of a rich man who had two sons. The older one who remained at home was always dutiful and took care of his father's estate. The younger one asked for his share of the family estate and was given it. Leaving his father's house, he went abroad and met many parasitical friends who helped him spend his fortune. When he was destitute, his so-called friends deserted him, and he sank into the lowest depths of degradation. Then, thinking of his father's house where even the servants lived in a better state than his present condition, he resolved to return home and become a hired servant of his father. As he neared the end of his journey, his father saw him coming. Joyously, the father went and met him. Immediately, he restored him to his former dignity as a son, clothed him in the best garments available, and prepared a feast in his honor. The father forgot about the son's past in his happiness over the son's return to his true home.

This parable is but an example of God's attitude toward the repentent sinner. It should guide every priest in his work with sinners. Whether he is approached by the poor or rich, the ignorant or the educated, he receives all with equal kindness and consideration. He patiently listens to their sins. He sympathizes with them in their troubles, points out how they can improve themselves. He encourages them by speaking of the happiness of those who live in God's friendship in contrast with those who lead a life of sin in misery and unhappiness. He untiringly strives to motivate them to frequent the Sacraments and to live more intimately with God. He exhorts them to live more virtuously so that they will live with God forever in heaven.

## JUDGE

Though the priest as a loving father must always be kind and merciful to the sinner, he must never forget that he is also God's judge. As such he is bound to render just judgments. An examination of the sacrament of Penance proves how truly the confessor acts

as a judge. In an ordinary judicial proceeding a case is presented to the judge, who examines it to determine whether or not it is a real crime and what is its gravity. After a thorough examination of all the facts, he forms and pronounces a judgment. In confession the priest acts in this same manner. The case consists of the sins confessed by the penitent. The priest considers each sin, determines its specific malice and examines the dispositions of the penitent in so far as he can. Then he judges whether or not the penitent is worthy of absolution. If the penitent is truly contrite and is resolved to amend his life, the confessor absolves him. Otherwise, absolution is withheld. This is the most important aspect of the confessor's office. He was ordained to lead souls to heaven. Hence, he must learn the facts necessary to make a just judgment about the sinner. If the penitent is not properly disposed for absolution, the confessor tries to arouse him to contrition by reminding him of God's hatred of sin, the punishment due to it and the happiness of those who repent. The confessor never defers or refuses absolution unless it is for the penitent's spiritual good. To insure the penitent's making at least partial reparation for his sins, the confessor imposes a suitable penance.

#### PHYSICIAN

Besides being a judge of the penitent, the confessor is also the physician, and, as such he tries to cure the sinner's spiritual infirmities. For this reason, he is considered as a spiritual physician. He diagnoses the case presented to him, and tries to determine why the penitent commits a particular sin so often. Is the penitent living in an occasion of sin? Can he avoid this particular occasion? Or do circumstances of living or work necessitate his being exposed to the occasion? Bodily infirmities can be cured by diverse remedies. This is also true of spiritual ills. Skillfully, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, the confessor applies what he knows is the best cure for this particular penitent. Admonishing him to avoid all occasions of sin, he also prescribes fervent prayer, frequenting of the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist which are remedies for all sin. Fervent prayer obtains from God the graces we need to fight against future temptations, to strengthen us in our resolution to amend our life, and to increase our confidence in God's unfailing assistance. Fervent prayer gives man a new outlook—a Christlike outlook on life and makes him desire the things of God. Reception of the Sacrament of Penance is a powerful remedy against sin, because the Sacramental grace secured strengthens us in our warfare against the world, the flesh and the devil. It helps us to avoid our habitual venial sins and

thus renders us more secure from mortal sins. By the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist, venial sins are forgiven if we are sorry for them. We receive into our bodies the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ Himself. Very special graces and aids are bestowed on those who frequently partake of Christ's Body and Blood. Since the confessor's duty is to make the penitent sinners more Christlike, he urges them to partake as often as possible of the sacraments.

#### PREACHER

When the confessor makes his recommendations to the sinner, he is in reality preaching a little sermon to him. The few words of encouragement and advice are all-important to the sinner. They aid him to advance spiritually and to live more intimately with God. Who can truly estimate the value of this humble advice from him, who though a sinner, himself, is divinely guided to help others become more like to God? The confessor who is faithful to this practice will be rewarded abundantly in heaven. The few words of salutary advice will remain long in the memory of the person who really wishes to advance in the knowledge and love of God.

How must the confessor prepare so as to be able to lead souls closer to God? How can he insure his own preparation for the work which lies ahead of him? To be a good confessor, the priest must be holy, prudent, humble, and learned.

Because of their very office, they must be holy. They are dispensers of divine graces. They are *alteri Christi*. "Consider the priest," says St. Ignatius, "as the dispensers of divine graces and as associates of God."<sup>4</sup> Because of their intimate association with God at the altar of sacrifice and in the confessional, everything about them should be holy. Their lips should be holy, because by them they call God down from heaven. By their lips, they pronounce the words of absolution. Their hands should be holy. In them, they hold the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ. With them they bless sinners and consecrate profane things. Their intellect and will should be holy because by them they form intellectual judgments about things divine and will to make men Christ-like. To act in this capacity, the priest must be a friend of God. He must be holy. Before he can sanctify others, he himself must be sanctified. How can he fittingly be a channel of grace for others, if he himself is displeasing to God and in rebellion against him. As St. Gregory the Great said: "The hand that must wash away stains and defilements should not itself be

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<sup>4</sup> St. Ignatius, *Epistle to St. Polycarp*.

polluted.”<sup>5</sup> When writing about confessors, St. Thomas Aquinas states: “Those that are mediators between God and the people, must shine before God with a good conscience, and with a good reputation before men.”<sup>6</sup> According to St. Gregory the Great, the sermons of a priest whose life is not edifying, excite contempt and produce no fruit. And St. Thomas Aquinas adds: “For this same reason all the spiritual functions of such a one are disregarded.”<sup>7</sup>

Sanctity of life in the ideal confessor is accompanied by piety, prudence, humility and learning. Moved by piety, the confessor has equal regard for all sinners as his brothers and sisters. He knows their needs and wants to help them. He realizes what their failings are and he tries to cure them. He remembers that they too are children of God with a right to eternal happiness. He endeavors to help them to reach that goal.

Though the confessor realizes all these things, he cannot aid the sinner unless he is a prudent man. He should seek advice from other saintly and experienced priests, who have given years of service to God and His Church. Fervent should be his meditations and his vigils before the tabernacle throne of his God. He should pray fervently for prudence to do his work properly. God Who called him will aid him if he prays for help.

The more prudent he becomes, the more humble the priest will be. He will realize more fully that the good results of his work are not due to his efforts alone. It is God Who has blessed his work with success. He knows that he himself is only another sinner. He needs God's grace as much as every other sinner. Realization of this keeps him humble and ready to seek divine guidance in the daily work for sanctifying himself and others.

Besides his prayers and meditations, the confessor must study conscientiously each day in order to be well prepared for his work. Church historians are forced to admit that many of the Church's troubles have been caused by ignorant and improperly instructed priests. To prevent similar recurrences, the Church endeavors to educate her priests sufficiently and thoroughly. The priest remembers that studying does not end with ordination. He knows that unless he continues his studies, he will not be prepared to help sinners when they come to him laden with spiritual ills. Neglect of study leads to carelessness about priestly duties. Carelessness about his

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<sup>5</sup> St. Gregory the Great, *Past.* p. 2, c. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., Q. 36, a. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., Q. 36, a. 4.

priestly duties leads to eternal damnation for himself and his flock.

What is Satan's attitude towards confessors and their duties? He, the arch-enemy of souls, does everything in his power to drag souls into hell. Consequently, he does everything possible to prevent confessors from directing souls in the way of salvation. Satan abhors the confessor who is holy, learned and prudent, the one who seeks divine aid before he himself tries to impart it to others. Satan does everything he can to tempt a priest not to use the means of sanctification. But the confessor who prays, meditates and studies daily, who seeks divine aid always, who always keeps in mind his eternal goal and that of the souls committed to his care, will be able to disarm the devil and lead souls to God. Through such confessors will be accomplished the prediction of Pope Saint Pius the Fifth: "Give us fit confessors, and the whole of Christianity will be reformed."