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**THE SACRAMENT
OF THE CONFESSION**

PRO MANUSCRIPTO - NOT FOR SALE

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FOREWORD

While exercising my profession as a physician I have had occasion to receive the confidences of many people, and it has become clear to me how right the Church is in defining man as a threefold creature, in whom the three parts, body, soul (psyche) and spirit are closely interconnected. When one part is sick, the others are always affected, and the person can be truly healed only if treatment is given at all three levels.

Until a few decades ago physical healing was the main concern. Then psychosomatic medicine came to recognize the importance of the person's psyche. However, man's condition is still far from perfect and health, seen as the perfect balance of the whole individual (a balance evidenced by a strong feeling of inner peace), would still seem to be a very distant goal. There is just one solution: we must have the courage to recognize that our spiritual component too has needs which cannot be ignored.

When I ask patients of mine what they most wish, almost all of them express a powerful desire to live a peaceful, quiet life, be it exterior (in the family and in society) or interior (within themselves). Although this need is strongly felt, very few succeed in realizing it, because instead of identifying and correcting their own errors (and there are always some), they tend to blame others for ever negative event.

Experience has taught me that only the person who finds God, His love and His forgiveness can find peace.

Today many people talk about God, but often He is a God adapted to suit our own consumer habits, an inanimate, depersonalized God, very

remote from our own world. This is not the God of Peace, but rather an illusory placebo which many are creating for themselves in an attempt to tranquillize their own consciences.

The God of Peace is Jesus Christ, that same Jesus who was obedient to the Father's will, to the point of dying on the Cross for us; that Jesus who loved everyone, even His own persecutors; that Jesus who instituted the Sacraments and did everything in order that we might see, believe and imitate Him so as to attain, like Him, to the state of "perfect man" (Ep 4,13). Having lost sight of this Jesus, man has also lost his health, his inner equilibrium and his peace.

There is one way only to return to Jesus and to find one's own self again: to ask Him with all one's heart for forgiveness and to promise Him, with the help of the grace which He is continually giving us, not to offend Him again. The voice of St John the Baptist echoes over the centuries, warning us: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand!" (Mt 3,2).

As a doctor, I have on various occasions asked patients to become reconciled with Christ in order to resolve their own physical problems. Those who have done so, and who have adopted the habit of going to Confession frequently, have experienced the joy of living and, gradually, have been marvelously healed.

It is with great joy, therefore, that I recommend this valuable invitation to the Sacrament of Confession. Confession is a Medicine for man and for society as a whole: a society which today stands in special need of healing. Let us not ignore this new invitation of the Father!

Roberto Gava, M.D.

«Everyone who repents will be received by Jesus Christ with forgiveness and immense love».

(John Paul II, at the Audience of 29 November 1979).

PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.’ So he left the place and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound.' He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, 'All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his loose women - you kill the calf we had been fattening.' The father said, 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.'" (Lk 15,11-32)

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

"Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". (Mt 28,19)

"He breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven..." (Jn 20,22-23)

"...in His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations". (Lk 24,47)

JESUS, THE ONE WHO SAVES

The only real evil in this world is SIN, which has removed God from man's heart and has condemned him to death, i.e. to the loss of grace - divine life - and to progressive spiritual and physical degradation.

The heavenly Father has loved us despite our sin and has sent us His Only-begotten Son to save us from the death which we have procured for ourselves by our sin.

“You will name Him Jesus”, the angel told Mary. “Jesus” means “Saviour”; only He, “the Son of Man, has authority to forgive sins” (Mk 2,10).

What did Jesus do to “forgive” sins? He took them upon Himself and cancelled them at the price of His Blood in an infinite act of Love, His Passion and Death: *“...You did not want sacrifices nor cereal offerings, the burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin, and you took no pleasure in them ... we were made holy by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, made once and for all”. (Heb 10,8-10)*

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

By paying the price of our ransom with His sacrifice, Jesus has freed us from the slavery of the devil and regenerated us in His Blood, making us once again children of the Father.

This is the wonderful gift of BAPTISM which makes us a living part of the Divine Family, children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ; *“we are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission”*(Catechism, para.1213).

“Nevertheless, the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of grace they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life” (Catechism, para. 1426).

We can be the losers in this “battle” if we commit serious sin: we thus destroy all the fruits of Baptism and again become enemies of God, slaves of Satan, spiritually dead. Gesù, pagando con il Suo sacrificio il prezzo del riscatto, ci ha liberati dalla schiavitù del demonio e ci ha rigenerati nel Suo Sangue rendendoci nuovamente figli del Padre.

THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION

Baptism can be received only once. How, then, can we return to Life and again become members of the Divine Family from which sin has separated us?

The Father, knowing that we would continue to sin, even after Baptism, and that we would thus fall into slavery and death, has made us another infinite gift: the Sacrament of Confession, so called *“since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament”* (Catechism, para. 1424).

It is also called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the love of God who reconciles; of conversion, because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion; of forgiveness, since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent *“pardon and peace”* (ibid., 1423-1424).

Every time we sin, and if we repent and confess our sin before the Priest, the Father regenerates us by means

of the priest's "absolution", immersing us once more in the Blood of His Son: the miracle of Baptism is thus renewed, because the Sacrament of Confession, by destroying sin once again, restores to us all the gifts we have lost.

Jesus came on earth solely to achieve this, to combat the death caused by sin and to destroy it at the roots: "*Life and Death came face to face in a prodigious duel. The Lord of Life was dead, but now, alive, He triumphs*" (from the Easter Liturgy)

Before returning to the Father, Jesus, victorious, transmits to His Apostles the divine power to destroy sin: "*He breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven*". (Jn 20,23)

CONFESSION, then, synthesizes all Jesus' salvific work. To eliminate Confession is to make the Lord's Incarnation, Passion and Death devoid of meaning.

CONFESSION: SOURCE OF SUPERNATURAL LIFE

In order to make a good Confession, we need to know what Confession is, and what its essential requirements are. What is Confession?

"The exposition or declaration of one's personal sins, committed subsequent to Baptism, made to the Church in the person of a competent Priest, for the purpose of obtaining absolution" (Catechism of St Pius X).

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR MAKING A GOOD CONFESSION?

"In order to make a good Confession, the following are necessary: examination of conscience, sorrow for sins, resolve not to sin again, statement of sins committed, and performance of penance". (ibid.)

- **Examination** of conscience: we have to reflect in depth on our conduct in the light of the Commandment of Love and the Ten Commandments;
- Sorrow for our sins: this means **regret for having offended God**, harmed our spirit and retarded mankind's progress towards God, because each sin of ours has repercussions for everyone;
- Resolve **not to sin again: this resolve should** lead us not only to avoid repeating the sin committed, but also to avoid circumstances that might lead us to sin;
- Self-**accusation** of sins committed: we must make known all the sins committed, of which we are aware, possibly specifying also the number and kind of these;
- Penance: this is the small sacrifice, either the prayer or act of charity that the Priest asks us to perform.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15,11-32) we find all these elements. We would thus do well to re-read it and meditate on it before every Confession.

As to how we should prepare for Confession, especially as regards the examination of conscience, contrition for

our sins and resolve to sin no more, we should like to quote an excerpt from the Memoirs of Sister Lucia of Fatima concerning the last confession of the eleven-year-old Francisco, who with Lucia and Jacinta witnessed the apparitions. He later became seriously ill and was aware that he would soon die. It is more illuminating than a great many words:

“I am going to Confession,” Francisco told Lucia, “so that I can receive Communion and then die. I want you to tell me if you have seen me committing any sin, and to go and ask Jacinta if she too has seen me committing any.” Lucia said that sometimes he had disobeyed his mummy when she had told him to stay at home, but he had run off to be with her, or to hide. “It’s true,” Francisco replied, “I did commit that sin. Now go and ask Jacinta if she remembers anything else.” Lucia returned with the reply; “Yes, before the apparitions began you stole a penny from daddy and, with some friends, threw stones at a group of boys of the same age.” “I’ve already confessed those,” said Francisco, “but I’ll confess them again. Maybe it’s because of them that the Lord is so sad! But I wouldn’t commit those sins again, even if I did not die. Now I’m sorry.”

WHEN SHOULD WE GO TO CONFESSION?

It is absolutely necessary to go to Confession when one has fallen into mortal sin.

However, it is an accepted part of the Church’s teaching that, when we make a good Confession, we obtain many graces for soul and body, graces that are necessary

to achieve our ultimate objective, which is HOLINESS. In his encyclical ‘MYSTICI CORPORIS’, the Supreme Pontiff Pius XII wrote the following in this connection:

“To those who above all cultivate their daily progress in the way of virtue, we most warmly recommend recourse to frequent Confession under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Who helps us to gain awareness of ourselves and our spirit, increases Christian humility and destroys every moral weakness at its root.”

Teachers of the spiritual life, and among these we should like also to quote Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, advise weekly Confession.

Once a woman penitent asked Padre Pio:

“But is it really necessary to go to Confession every week if I have not committed any serious sin?” He replied: *“Try cleaning out a room thoroughly, and then close the doors and windows. Go back after a week and pass your finger over the table; you’ll see the dust...”*

TODAY WE HEAR IT SAID: “SIN DOES NOT EXIST”

The greatest theological “errors” of this century (which seems to bring together all the errors of the past) are, basically, these two:

- the assertion that GOD DOES NOT EXIST: everything is simply matter, and everything ends in

death. This error has been promoted above all by COMMUNISM, especially in the countries of the ex-Soviet Union, where it was taught to children from their very first years at school and was imposed by force, every manifestation of faith being persecuted to the death;

- the assertion that SIN DOES NOT EXIST; the result is practically the same, because it re-moves God from man's heart. This error has been spread especially in the Western world through the mass media, unjust laws, and school teaching based on the same materialistic criteria as those used in the East; all this can be grouped under the name CONSUMERISM.

These "errors" have been prepared for centuries by the "adversary" of our souls and kept in reserve for the apocalyptic encounter which has already begun and which, precisely in our day, is bringing the final head-on clash between good and evil to fruition.

Let us not be fooled by the enemy's cunning; we should remember that all his tricks are exposed when they are confronted by the power of the Spirit, which is manifested in the Sacrament of Confession, whereby sin, the source of all evil, is removed:

"I invite you to turn your gaze, with me, to the Heart of Christ, the eloquent sign of divine Mercy, so as to receive the inner stimulus to detest sin and return to God (John Paul II, Reconciliatio et Poenitentia, 35).

SINS

"I confess to God the Father Almighty, and to you, father, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, deed and omission".

In order to confess our sins we need to have clear ideas about sin. What is sin? How is it recognized? We turn to the Catechism of St Pius X, a masterpiece of synthesis and clarity:

What is sin?

Sin is an offence committed against God by disobeying his law.

What kinds of sin are there?

Sin is of two kinds: original and actual.

What is original sin?

Original sin is the sin committed by mankind in Adam, its head, and which since the time of Adam every person contracts by natural inheritance.

How is original sin cancelled?

Original sin is cancelled out by Baptism.

What is actual sin?

Actual sin is that committed voluntarily by a person who has the use of reason.

In how many ways is actual sin committed?

Actual sin is committed in four ways, viz. by thought, word, deed and omission.

How many kinds of actual sin are there?

Actual sin is of two kinds: mortal and non-mortal (venial).

What is mortal sin?

Mortal sin is disobedience to the Law of God in a serious matter, committed with full awareness and with deliberate consent.

What is non-mortal (venial) sin?

Non-mortal (venial) sin is disobedience to the Law of God in a less serious matter, or also in a serious matter when full awareness and consent are lacking.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE SINNED?

By listening to the voice of our own conscience and, since sin is disobedience to the Law of God, considering our actions in the light of God's Commandments which are, basically, two:

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets too" (Mt 22,37-40; cf. Dt 6,5).

But as man, through sin, has lost his sense of Love and has become brutalized in ever cruder egoism, the Father has given him the Ten Commandments, which are based on the two original ones: the first three teach us to respect and love God, the other seven to respect and love our neighbour and ourselves:

1 - You will have no gods other than Me.

Have you given God the honour due to him? Have you borne witness to Him? Have you placed Him at the centre of your heart and your interests, or have you replaced Him by other "gods" (e.g. money, pleasure, career...)? Have you received Him in the Eucharist to obtain the strength to bear witness to Him? Have you received Him worthily after making a good confession? Are you aware that, if not, you are eating and drinking your own condemnation?

2 - Do not take the Name of God in vain.

Have you used the name of God disrespectfully, as an interpolation or exclamation? Have you blasphemed against His name? Have you blamed Him for your faults? Have you have complained about misfortunes which He has permitted to enable you to grow in love?

3 - Remember to observe Sundays and holy days.

Have you spent every holy day with God, in prayer and love? Have you taught others, by your own witness, that one should not work on holy days? Have you taught your children that Sunday is the day of the Lord, and should

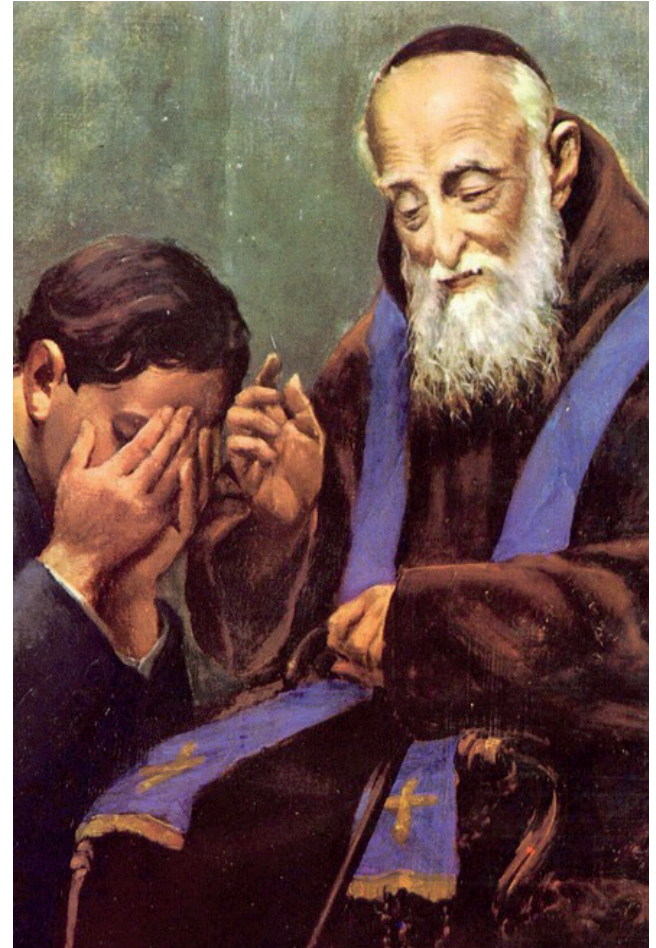
be spent in thinking about God, knowing, honouring and serving him? If you have not done so, you are guilty of a grave sin.

4 - Honour your father and your mother

Your father and your mother are those who have enabled you to experience this splendid adventure of life. Do you love them? Do you honour them? Do you take care of them? Or have you abandoned them in some home because they are a burden and restrict your freedom? If you have, do you at least go and visit them and let them feel the warmth of your love and gratitude for the gift of life? And you, young person, do you honour your father and your mother, or are you continually judging them and saying that they are old and don't understand? If you love them, you will help them also to understand you; if you judge them, you will be killing, because judgement kills love; if you are disobedient, you will be killing their hearts. If you are a parent, do you devote a fair portion of time to being with your children and talking to them? Are you able to establish a relationship of communion and trust with them? Do you set them a good example by your words and by a correct life-style?

5 - You must not kill

If you examine yourself well, you may realize that you are continually killing your neighbour by your looks, your words and your judgements. You are killing your brother



St. Leopoldo Mandic ofm capp.

in your own heart and in the hearts of those listening to you, and this form of murder can be worse than that resulting from a pistol-shot, because it gene-rates lack of love and disunity, which are the evil of the world: “He who does not love his brother is a murderer,” says the apostle James.

Furthermore, do you respect the Highway Code, or do you drive in reckless fashion?

Remember that abortion is murder, and that all who are in any way responsible have to confess this sin: the father and mother, the doctor and nurse who perform it, the legislators who pass such laws, and every person who does nothing to prevent it. Abortion is mass murder, for which everyone will have to pay; it is the most brutal kind of murder, because it is carried out against a human being who cannot defend himself or herself, and, precisely, by a mother against her own child. It is a murder which cries out to God for vengeance. Innocent blood implores that such crimes cease, and begs for mercy.

6 - Do not commit impure acts

Do not commit impure acts with yourself or with others. Nowadays, with the liberalization of sex, nothing seems to be sinful any more, everything is permitted, and it is even maintained that premarital experiences are necessary. Remember that your body is the temple of God and, as such, should be respected; every impure act is a serious offence, because by it God is affronted in His temple,

which is man. When you have examined your conscience closely, make your confession. Have you read pornographic books? Have you seen unseemly films and shows?

7 - Do not steal

Do not steal in spirit or in the material sense; do not appropriate ideas, thoughts and actions that are not your own; do not appropriate goods or money which do not belong to you. Respect other people and their property, just as you want your person and belongings to be respected. Do not permit legalized theft. Resist, and proclaim the truth fearlessly, when you find that theft has become a State law, just as the State sanctioned murder when it legalized abortion. But to do this you have to be a person of integrity yourself. Are you? Or do you connive with the system because it suits you?

8 - Do not bear false witness

Do not bear false witness and do not align yourself with those who do. Do not be afraid to proclaim the truth and, in the case of unjust laws, make it clear that they are unjust. If any-one does evil, tell them plainly that that action is wrong. Judge no one, but have the courage to speak the truth. We risk bearing false witness at any time through cowardice, and we do not realize it. Examine yourself carefully and you will discover that you are living a lie too because you do not dare to look at the Truth, which is God.

9 - Do not covet your neighbour's spouse

If you are a man, I say to you: when you look at a woman and desire her, even when you know that she belongs to someone else, you have already sinned; if you are a woman, I say to you: when you do the same with regard to a man, you have sinned.

10 - Do not covet your neighbour's goods

If you covet something which does not belong to you, and to obtain it you prostitute and sell yourself, you are sinning. This is happening, unfortunately, at all social levels and in all age-groups.

SINS OF OMISSION

Sins of omission are those about which little or nothing is said, which no one knows about and which therefore are not confessed. Yet they are fundamental sins because all the others stem from them.

What are these sins? The word itself tells us: omit = fail to do. Fail to do what the Father wishes. They are admirably typified by the conduct of the servant in the parable of the talents (Mt 25,14-30), who buried and then returned the talent he had received: *"Take the talent from him ... throw him into the darkness out-side, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"*.

Whom did this servant harm? What "sin" did he commit, to deserve such a harsh punishment? He did not make the gift he had received fruitful, thus he failed to do what he knew was his master's will.

What is the Father's will for us? He, the Holy One, wishes us to be holy: *"You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt 5,48).

Holiness, then, is our fundamental objective. But since we cannot achieve holiness without grace, having the means of grace and not using them is the greatest of sins, on which all the others depend: sins of thought, sins of word, which are the expression of thought; sins of deed, which are the concrete realization of words.

What are these means - these "talents" - which have been given us and which we are not using? They are innumerable: the Sacraments, prayer, the Pope as our infallible guide, the guarantee of the Church and her tradition, the example of the Saints, the Word of God in Holy Scripture, the Word of God incarnate in the Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary...

All talents are synthesized in the gift of the Eucharist, which we - in perfect line with the parable of the Gospel - keep closed (and often not so well ...) in the tabernacle, without making it bear fruit.

THE GREATEST SIN OF OMISSION

The greatest sin of omission is that of not being in contact with the WORD OF GOD, the living, true Word, to be found in every tabernacle.

From this sin of omission spring all the others which we are committing all the time. In the new, single Commandment, Jesus commands us to LOVE GOD AND TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOUR. But if we fail to love God by remaining far from Him, it is impossible for us to love our neighbour, and we sin even if we are certain that we are in the Light and are sacrificing ourselves for others.

To give an example: the mother of a family who year after year is at the service of her husband and children, may delude herself that things are all right, but, having omitted to keep in contact with God - the Word of Life - she will be unable to transmit the Word of Life either to her husband or to her children.

We thus see children who are well nourished (because mother feeds them well), well dressed (because mother washes and irons), well brought up (because mother has taught them so many things), but who are not recognizable as children of God because they know nothing of God and the splendour of His creation. And this knowledge of God and His Son Jesus is absorbed from the earliest age in a child's life.

The father of a family who thinks that the Christian education of his children is the task of his wife or the Parish Priest, and believes that he is in the clear because he brings home his pay-packet and maybe buys expensive and sophisticated toys for his children, is committing a grave sin of omission.

Not removing the television set from the home is a grave sin of omission: from their earliest years, the children quietly "parked" in front of the video are being ruined by the subtle, diabolical messages it sends out, well presented and mixed with apparently innocuous messages; whereas instead father or mother ought to be bringing them together, listening to them, speaking with them and telling them about God.

Not praying together as a family is a grave sin of omission.

From these, which are just a few examples of the most common sins, all the others derive, and these can lead to discord between spouses and the break-up of families.

The list could be extended, and it would be long, because it would embrace each and everyone, of every age and condition. Which of us goes to Confession because he has prayed too little, because he has spent too short a time before the Love who speaks to us, because he has told his children little about God, because he has not

witnessed to God at his place of work or study, because he has not been firm enough with his children in making them respect the laws of God? No one! Or at least very few of us, and not always.

Sins of omission compel us to take an in-depth look at ourselves. If we do not carry out this careful examination of conscience now and go to Confession, with the firm resolve not to sin again, we shall have much time in Purgatory to weep over ourselves and our indolence. And let us hope that an eternity of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is not in store for us, where it would then be useless to make an examination of conscience together with the “wicked and lazy servant” (Mt 25,14-30).

The outcome will be that much more dramatic if we have been under the illusion that we have been serious and conscientious Christians all our lives. It all depends on us and on what we start doing right now.

COMING FACE TO FACE WITH LOVE

After having examined our sins of “thought, word, deed and omission” in the light of the Tenth Commandment, let us turn to the one Commandment: “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (Mt 22,37).

If I really love God I will seek Him with all my might, and loving Him will no longer be a commandment but an irrepressible desire of my spirit; I shall seek Him as my food and drink; I shall seek Him as my Way and the Life of my life; I shall seek Him to fill myself with Him and give Him to each of my brothers.

And in this infinite and irreplaceable Love I shall love every person, to whom I shall try to give the Love which comes not from me but from God.

All the commandments will be annulled, and only Love will remain in my life. Then Love will reign, that Love which is “*patient and kind, is never jealous, is not boastful or conceited, is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, does not take offence or store up grievances, does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes*” (cf. 1 Co 13,4-7).

Let us check our lives against each of these words, and then confess our sins. May the Spirit grant us the gift of looking deep into our-selves and making a true start to our conversion.

Let us love and forgive, because forgiveness heals. To the extent to which we forgive, we shall be forgiven, and our liberation from all evil will be accomplished. We cannot say that we have properly confessed if there is not forgiveness in our hearts for everyone and everything.

Let us experience the power of forgiveness and we shall know the joy.

“Tell everyone, with kindness and a smile, that God is Love”
(John Paul II, to the children of Syracuse, 6 November 1994)

COLLECTIVE CONFESSION?

We do not propose here to discuss the community penitential celebration in which the faithful are prepared for individual Confession, but rather the community confession leading to collective absolution, which is the subject of considerable comment these days.

We have read with astonishment and chagrin the final report of the World Synod of Bishops, held in Rome in autumn 1983, on this very subject of reconciliation and penance. Here the collective celebration is described as doubly useful, because it allegedly unites the positive elements of individual and communal Confession... Concerning group absolution, the report reads as follows: *“Even if individual absolution is to be considered the ordinary method of reconciling sinners, nevertheless, in certain circumstances, general sacramental absolution is permitted, for the greater spiritual good of the faithful”*.

And again: *“We cannot ignore the causes relating to the objective limits of the traditional practice, especially those connected with the rapid change in customs and mentality”*.

The relationship between God and man is a personal one, and we do not believe that the action of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments is linked to the “rapid change in customs and mentality”.

Many objections could be raised to the above statements, and they would be very strongly-felt ones, but we think it would be simpler and more helpful to quote what the new Catechism of the Catholic Church has to say about communal Confession, citing the new Code of Canon Law (canons 961 and 962):

“In case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with general confession and general absolution. Grave necessity of this sort can arise when there is imminent danger of death without sufficient time for the priest or priests to hear each penitent’s confession. Grave necessity can also exist when, given the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors to hear individual confessions properly in a reasonable time, so that the penitents through no fault of their own would be deprived of sacramental grace or Holy Communion for a long time. In this case, for the absolution to be valid, the faithful must have the intention of individually confessing their sins in the time required. The diocesan bishop is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist. A large gathering of the faithful on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity.” (Catechism, para. 1483).

To be specific, even when, by way of exception, the Bishop - for grave reasons! - permits communal absolu-

tion, the faithful must go to confession individually as soon as possible, otherwise the communal absolution is not valid. In other words, it is as if there had been no confession.

“Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church” (Catechism, para. 1497).

The chapter on communal Confession closes with this statement, but many poorly informed priests consider it to be an excellent thing because it is convenient and quick. It is much easier to say to one hundred of the faithful: “I absolve you of your sins” than to listen to each one in turn. Even if seven minutes were spent on each - and that would be a fairly rapid rate - 700 minutes, i.e. about 12 hours, would be required... And where is the Priest to find time for this if, in some cases, he has difficulty in finding a quarter of an hour to celebrate Holy Mass and on occasion has no time for his breviary meditation?

JESUS CONTINUES TO SAVE US THROUGH THE PRIEST

Doing away with Confession - and in fact, wishing to make it a “mass” sacrament by the use of communal absolution would be tantamount to doing away with it - means also renouncing the divine power which Jesus has passed on to His Church: *“Proclaim that the kingdom*

of Heaven is close at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the lepers, drive out devils” (Mt 10,7-8).

These few words contain the OFFICIAL MANDATE which Jesus gave His Church, and they should be read in an essentially spiritual context: *“Heal the sick”* in spirit, *“raise the dead”* in spirit, *“heal the diseased”* in spirit, *“drive out devils”* who poison the spirit. In other words: “Go and absolve (from the Latin ‘absolvere’) sins by means of sacramental ‘absolution’.

The Church can carry out this “official mandate” in its entirety only in the Sacrament of CONFESSION, whereby it leads back its “sick” or spiritually “dead” children to the Father’s arms:

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you...” But the father said to his servants, “We will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life ... your brother here was dead and has come to life” (Lk 15, 23 et seq.).

“Everyone who repents will be received by Jesus Christ with forgiveness and immense love” (John Paul II, 29.11.1979).

THE PRIEST IS THE “SALT OF THE EARTH”

We may conclude, therefore, that the institution of the priesthood is entirely in line with the struggle against sin, which the PRIEST alone can cancel out in the Sacrament of Confession.

Consequently, the Priest who does not devote himself totally to administering this Sacrament is frustrating the mandate he has received and no longer has any reason to exist. He undergoes an “identity crisis”, as we say today, and neither social work, building projects, diplomas nor doctorates will be able to help him refind his lost “identity”.

Salt that has lost its flavour (Mt 5,13) no longer has its “identity”, and this explains the fai-lure of some 300,000 priests who have abandoned their ministry since the Second Vatican Council.

To be sure, it is hard being a Parish Priest where hardly anyone goes to church, or living in some little convent where all spiritual life has become extinguished. But Providence has given the Church some luminous examples of the road that has to be taken. We need think only of the famous St John Mary Vianney, St Leopold Mandic, St. Pio of Pietrelcina... Where is there a parish more run-down than the one at Ars? Which convent is more out of the way than was that at San Giovanni Rotondo?

What did the Curé of Ars and Padre Pio do?

They certainly did not attend refresher-courses at the human level; instead, they installed themselves in the church, near the confessional, and the angels brought them millions of “dead” human beings who were regenerated by the power of Life which they absorbed from Confession.



St Pio of Pietralcina ofm capp.

This is the essence of the Priest: to be, in Jesus and with Jesus, a sharer in the Fatherhood of God, in the stupendous work of Redemption, to be an active instrument in the creation of the new humanity which, after being buried in sin, is restored to life with greater splendour in the Risen Jesus. Every sacramental absolution is a resurrection, which has cosmic repercussions in that “duel” between Life and Death which we experience year after year.

Nowadays remedies are being sought for the many evils which beset us, but this search is wearisome and futile if it is not oriented towards God, because the real crisis today is the crisis of the spirit: *“O God, you created man for yourself, and man will not find peace until he rests in you”*, said the great St Augustine to himself and to men of all times.

And God, the God of peace and joy, is awaiting us there, in the confessional, in the person of the Priest, to whom he has communicated the power to “absolve” the bonds of death and despair and to open the gates of Hope and Life.

But where are you, brother Priest?

CRISIS OF CONFESSION, OR CRISIS AMONG CONFESSORS?

The report on the Synod drawn up in 1983 refers to the crisis of Confession. We believe it would be more correct to speak of a crisis among CONFESSORS: a grave crisis

of prayer, and hence of faith, precisely among those who ought to be the foremost witnesses of their ministry.

Is it that people are no longer going to Confession, or that priests are no longer disposed to hear people’s confessions?

How many people are heard to complain that, every time they ask the Priest to hear their confession, they get the reply: “I haven’t time...”; “but you went to Confession only ten days ago...”; “your sins are not grave ones, the act of contrition at the beginning of Mass is enough...”

And, after one, two or three such refusals, the poor people no longer dare to ask and gradually move further and further away from the Source of Life, taking refuge in the psychologist or the psychiatrist, that is, when they do not actually proceed to draw from the sources of death instead. It is no coincidence that there is such a proliferation of “magicians” and “wonder-workers” who, at a high price, are selling smoke, the smoke of hell...

Cardinal Silvano Piovanelli, Archbishop of Florence, recently stated in a detailed survey conducted by the Bishops’ Conference of Tuscany:

“The number of magicians practising in Italy is double that of priests, and their clients are estimated to be in the region of 12 million. The risk of confusing ideas and superstition is evident, with the result that simple souls may enter the sphere of Satan, the author of destruction and death”.

COMMUNION WITHOUT CONFESSION?

The number of the faithful who go to Confession is falling, but - absurdly - the number of those who receive the Sacrament of Communion is increasing.

This too is a grave fault, the responsibility for which lies with those Priests who, while they abandon the confessional, favour or at least permit access to Communion for everyone, forgetting what St Paul says: *“Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily is answerable for the Body and Blood of the Lord ... and is eating and drinking his own condemnation”* (1 Co 11,28-29).

Hell understands the dynamics of grace very well and is aware of St Paul's words. Therefore, to desecrate the Sacrament and people's minds, it uses a “diabolical” technique, sadly with the consent of those who should be to the fore among the witnesses and defenders of the Eucharist. In this way the Sacrament of Life becomes the sacrament of death.

“Be coherent. The Christian faith, our own dignity and the hope of the world today call for this compromise of coherence; it is the fight against sin, that is, the constant, even heroic, effort to live in the state of grace... Live in grace, abide in His Love, putting into practice every moral law, nourishing your souls with the Body of Christ, and receiving the Sacrament of Penance periodically and with due seriousness” (John Paul II, L'Aquila, 30.8.1980).

CHILDREN'S CONFESSION

More and more frequently we hear talk of the futility and inappropriateness of children's Confession, because “they do not need it” and because it could produce “psychological disorders” in them. In some places it has even been decided to allow them to make their First Communion without going to Confession.

In this connection, it is advisable to bear in mind the Church's extremely clear legislation, starting with the Decree *Quam Singulari* of the Holy Congregation for the Sacraments, requested by Pope St Pius X in 1910:

“The age of discretion for both Confession and Communion is that at which the child starts to have the use of reason, i.e. at around the seventh year, or just above or below that age. From that time the obligation exists to satisfy the precept of both Confession and Communion (...). A full and perfect knowledge of Christian doctrine is not necessary for first Confession and first Communion (...)

The obligation for the child to satisfy the precept of Confession and Communion lies with those responsible for the child's care, i.e. parents, confessor, housemaster, parish priest. (...) The practice of not admitting to Confession and absolution children who have attained the use of reason is quite reprehensible”.

In the General Directory for Catechists, published in 1971, Pope Paul VI returns to the subject even more clearly:

“The appropriate age for children to start receiving these Sacraments is considered to be that which is described in the documents of the Church as the age of reason or of discretion. This age, both for Confession and for Communion, is that at which the child begins to have the use of reason. (...) As the child’s capacity to reason gradually develops, so does his moral conscience, i.e. the faculty to judge his own actions in relation to the moral norm. (...) The child who, by sin, begins to offend God, also begins to feel the desire to obtain forgiveness not only from his parents or relatives, but also from God (...) Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance must be presented within the broad framework of purification and spiritual progress, in order to obtain great confidence in God’s love and mercy. With regard to first access to the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, experiments have been carried out in recent times in some parts of the Church which truly cause doubt and perplexity ... it has seemed fit to some to admit children to First Communion without prior reception of the Sacrament of Penance ... Let the Bishops’ Conferences ensure that such experiments are subjected to fresh examination (...)”

The same Pontiff, Paul VI, returned to the subject on at least two other occasions in official statements (24 May 1973 and 20 May 1977), when he confirmed the statements made in the Decree “*Quam Singulari*” and in the General Directory for Catechists.

All parents, confessors and Priests should therefore bear in mind that they are ultimately responsible for “*the grave obligation for the child to satisfy the precept of Confession*”.

REMEDY FOR THE CHURCH’S ILLS

The remedy for so many of the ills being experienced by the Church today could be the following: every Priest should be in church, near the confessional, six hours a day. Then the angels could fulfil their mission by leading people towards the Heavenly Father who is waiting for them there, in that dark corner of the church, where the Light which will give their spirits peace is waiting for them in the person of the Priest - father, benevolent judge and physician.

This suggestion may appear strange, but in reality it is strange that the Priest does not thus implement the mandate he has received: doctors, civic employees, policemen spend their day in the service of their neighbour by remaining for six to eight hours per day at their post, exercising the tasks for which they are competent. Everyone knows that they are there and available at any time, and no one regards this as strange - on the contrary, if such persons are not to be found at their posts they are reported for absenteeism.

Why should not the Priest - the father and physician of souls, the mentor of spirits and the friend of the despairing - remain at his proper post to welcome all who are in need of him?

If he is not available, is this not perhaps absenteeism, is it not a fault?

In courts of law, doctors who have not responded immediately to the first call-out are sometimes charged with failing to provide assistance; are not the health and life of the soul of infinitely greater value than those of the body?

In this connection, we may well reflect on what Pius XII wrote, with prophetic clarity, in *Mystici Corporis*:
“It is clear, then, that the spiritual level of the faithful is not promoted by these false doctrines; on the contrary, they contribute to their perdition. The blame for this lies with those who do not feel the need for frequent confession of venial sins and who prefer the ‘Confiteor’ in Holy Mass to frequent confession ... Let all those who, among the ranks of young priests, endeavour to diminish the desire for frequent confession, reflect well, because, in so doing, they are inflicting harm on the Mystical Body of our Redeemer”.

PRAYERS

BEFORE CONFESSION

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son ... but have mercy on me, forgive me, put the ring on my finger again as a sign that I am your child, and give me your smile, so that I can give it to the world.

ACT OF CONTRITION

O my God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins, and detest them above all things, because they deserve your dreadful punishments, because they have crucified my loving Saviour Jesus Christ, and, most of all, because they offend your infinite goodness; and I firmly resolve, by the help of your grace, never to offend you again, and carefully to avoid the occasions of sin. Lord, have mercy, forgive me.

PRAYER AFTER CONFESSION

Father, give me a profound desire
to love continually;
let me feel, with every moment that passes,
that I cannot live without your love;
instill in me profound suffering
for all the time I have wasted,
and help me not to waste more time in the future.

Father, assist my spirit
to live every instant in your Love,
and, even when my body is distracted,
may my spirit continually love you
and, in you, with you and through you,
may it love the whole universe
and every creature that comes my way.

This only do I desire, Father.
And I do not wish even a shadow of indifference
to cloud my spirit, so that
when I contemplate it at the moment of death
I may be filled with ecstasy
in seeing it shine with your same Light.

Lord, give me Your light,
that I may recognize my sins.
Give me the strength to make
a true assessment of myself
without becoming discouraged by my weaknesses.
I trust in your forgiveness
and in your ability to make me a new person.
Grant me, Lord, the joy
of being reconciled with you,
with others and with myself. Amen.