

The Acts of the Penitent: 2b. Confession

Dear Parishioners,

Last week we looked at the Church's teaching on the confession of mortal sin. This week we continue with the act of confession, looking at the Catholic Catechism's next paragraph on the confession of sin:

3. Paragraph 1457: Some general matters:

** 'According to the Church's command, "after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year."*

** Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion, even if he experiences deep contrition, without having first received sacramental absolution, unless he has a grave reason for receiving Communion and there is no possibility of going to confession.*

** Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time.'*

Comments:

a) Annual confession:

This command of the Church to go to the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation at least once a year applies only to those who are conscious of having committed mortal sin. For all others, there is no such obligation to use the sacrament.

The command is a Church rule, not part of the moral law. The Church, to whom Christ entrusted the power of binding and loosing, uses its divine authority to enact this law for the good of persons in the state of mortal sin. The chief concern of mother Church is the eternal salvation of its members. The purpose of this Church command is not to enslave but to strongly encourage its wayward members to repentance and conversion.

b) Mortal sin and holy communion:

It is seriously sinful, mortally sinful, to go to holy communion if one is in the state of mortal sin. It is the sin of sacrilege. One must go to confession first and receive sacramental absolution before going to communion. One must be in the state of grace, the state of friendship with God, to receive Our Lord in holy communion.

"In the Eucharist there is special necessity for purity, which Jesus expressly emphasised at the last supper. When he began to wash the feet of his disciples, he certainly wanted to give them a lesson in humble service, because with that gesture he responded to the dispute that had arisen among them as to who was the greatest (Lk 22, 24). But while he enlightened them about the way of humility, inviting them by his example to set out courageously on his way, he further intended to make them understand that, for the Eucharistic meal, there was also a purity of heart necessary, which only he, the Saviour, was able to give. He then acknowledged this purity in the Twelve, except for one among them: "You are cleansed, though not all" (Jn 13,10). The one who was preparing to betray him could not participate in the banquet except with hypocritical sentiments. The evangelist tells us that, from the moment that Judas received the morsel given by Christ, 'satan entered his heart' (Jn 13,27). In order to receive into oneself the grace of the Eucharistic food, certain dispositions of soul are required, in the absence of which the meal risks being changed into a betrayal.

St. Paul, witness of certain divisions that scandalously showed up during the Eucharistic banquet in Corinth, issued a warning intended for the reflection of not only those faithful but of many other Christians: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the Body and Blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first, only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognising the Body eats and drinks a judgement on himself." (1 Cor 11, 27-29)

Before approaching the eucharistic table, the Christian is therefore called to examine himself to see if his dispositions permit him to receive communion worthily. Of course, in a certain sense, no one is worthy to receive as nourishment the Body of Christ, and those who take part in the eucharist confess, at the moment of communion, that they are not worthy to receive the Lord into themselves. But the unworthiness of which St. Paul speaks means something else; it refers to interior dispositions that are incompatible with the eucharistic banquet, because they are opposed to welcoming Christ.

To better assure the faithful about the absence of such negative dispositions, the liturgy provides a penitential preparation at the beginning of the eucharistic celebration: the participants acknowledge that they are sinners and implore divine forgiveness. Even if they habitually live in the Lord's friendship, they are aware of their faults and imperfections and of their need for divine mercy. They wish to present themselves at the eucharist with the greatest purity.

This penitential preparation would therefore be insufficient for those who have a mortal sin on their conscience. Recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation is therefore necessary in order to approach eucharistic communion worthily. "
(JP II, 20/6/'83)

"Communion is a bilateral tie. We should say, therefore, that not only do we receive Christ, not only does each of us receive him in this eucharistic sign, but that Christ too receives each of us. In this sacrament he accepts man always, so to speak; he makes him his friend, as he said in the Upper Room: 'You are my friends' (Jn 15,14). This welcome and acceptance of man by Christ is an extraordinary favour. Man feels very deeply the desire to be accepted. All man's life turns in this direction, that he may be welcomed and accepted by God; and the eucharist expresses this sacramentally.... The eucharist is, in a certain sense, a constant challenge to man to try to be accepted, to adapt his conscience to the demands of holy divine friendship." (JP II, 13/6/'79)

The Catechism recognises that there may be grave reasons for going to communion before having had the possibility of going to confession. Such instances would be rare. They would presume sincere sorrow of charity ('perfect contrition') on the part of the communicant, with the intention of confessing every mortal sin of which the person is conscious, when the opportunity offers.

Some instances of such grave reasons would be:

- Urgent danger of death; e.g. in war.
- Danger of profanation of the blessed sacrament.
- If one abstains from receiving holy communion, one incurs grave infamy or causes grave scandal.
(In ordinary cases this scandal or infamy is not to be feared or exaggerated.)

c) First Reconciliation before First Communion:

Children are to make their first confession before their first communion:

"The age of discretion both for confession and for Communion is the age in which the child begins to reason, i.e. around the seventh year, either before or after. From that time begins the obligation of satisfying both the precept of confession and of Communion..."

'..St. Paul's admonition (cf 1 Cor 11:28) truly establishes a directive norm which regards even children. Therefore these also, before receiving the Holy Eucharist, should examine themselves. But often the child is not able to examine his conscience clearly and surely by himself. This will be done more easily and safely if he avails himself of the help of a priest confessor. In fact there are many children who feel troubled by small and unimportant things, while there are others who ignore and pass over more serious faults....

'...One must also keep in mind that many fine pastors have learned from their catechetical and ministerial experience the great usefulness and saving power which first confession has in the life of children if it is carefully prepared, properly adapted to their age and their capacity to perceive spiritual things, and carefully administered.

'When he arrives at the age of discretion, the child has the right, in the Church, to receive both sacraments. It would be an absurd and unjust discrimination and a violation of his conscience if he were prepared for and admitted only to Holy Communion. It is not enough to say that children have the right to go to confession if this right remains practically ignored.

'When children are sufficiently instructed and are aware of the special nature of these two sacraments, it will not be difficult for them to go first to the sacrament of Reconciliation which - in a simple but fundamental way - arouses in them the awareness of moral good and evil and aids them to bring a more mature disposition to their happy meeting with Christ. The basic persuasion about the need of the greatest purity for receiving the Eucharist worthily, if prudently instilled in children right from the time of their first Communion, will accompany them for the rest of their lives and will lead to a greater esteem for, and a more frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation...'

("Confession and First Communion of Children", Sacred Congregations for the Sacraments and Divine Worship and for the Clergy, May 1977)



"G.K.Chesterton used to say that one of the main reasons why he became a Catholic was to get rid of his sins, and that the Church of Rome was the only religious system that professed to do so. He went on to explain:

"It is confirmed by the logic, which to many seems startling, by which the Church deduces that sin confessed and adequately repented is actually abolished; and that the sinner does really begin again as if he had never sinned. When a Catholic comes from Confession, he does truly, by definition, step out again into the dawn of his own beginning, and look with new eyes across the world... He believes that in that dim corner, and in that brief ritual, God has already remade him in His own image. He is now a new experiment of the Creator. Thus the Sacrament of Penance gives a new life, and reconciles a man to all the living, but it does not do it as the optimists and the hedonists and the heathen preachers of happiness do. The gift is given at a price, and is conditioned by a confession. In other words, the name of the price is Truth, which also may be called Reality; but it is facing the reality of oneself." "

G K Chesterton, *Autobiography*, London 1937 p 329-330. See Thomas J McGovern, *Priestly Identity*, Dublin 2002, p 252. (Annals July 2002)