

The Acts of the Penitent: 2c. Confession

Dear Parishioners,

We continue our consideration of the confession of sins in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Today we consider the confession of venial sin. First, we look at what the Catholic Catechism states in its last paragraph on the act of confession:

Paragraph 1458 (CCC) :
Confession of Venial Sin:

Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful:

'Whoever confesses his sins...is already working with God. God indicts your sins; if you also indict them, you are joined with God. Man and sinner are, so to speak, two realities: when you hear "man" - this is what God has made; when you hear "sinner" - this is what man himself has made. Destroy what you have made, so that God may save what he has made... When you begin to abhor what you have made, it is then that your good works are beginning, since you are accusing yourself of your evil works. The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. You do the truth and come to the light.'

(St Augustine)

Comments:

1. What is venial sin ?

"One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or without full consent."
(Catholic Catechism, 1862.)

In other words, venial sin is any sin less serious than mortal sin.

2. What are the effects of venial sin ?

'Venial sin weakens charity; it manifests a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However, venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly reparable. "Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness." (JP II).

"While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call "light": if you take them for light when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope ? Above all, confession..." (St Augustine)
(CCC 1863)

3. Confession of venial sins is not strictly necessary:

Let us be very clear on this, if we have been misinformed in the past. The Church clearly tells us, and for centuries has said the same thing in its defined teaching, that it is not necessary to confess our venial sins in the sacrament. God can forgive these daily sins in other ways.

In response to the question "What are the ways in which venial sin can be forgiven?",

John Hardon SJ writes:

"The forgiveness of venial sins is a very important part of our Catholic faith. First of all, there are two things that can be forgiven for the commission of venial sins. The guilt can be forgiven, which means the grace lost through venial sins can be restored. Secondly, the punishment due to venial sins can be remitted, either entirely or partially.

Given the above premises, venial sins can be forgiven in all the ways that we can obtain grace from God. Thus every reception of Holy Communion, every participation at Mass, every adoration of the Holy Eucharist, every reception of the sacrament of penance, every indulgence gained, every prayer said, every act of piety performed in the state of grace - are all means by which venial sins are forgiven as described above.

One more proviso should be added. We obtain remission of our venial sins in the degree that we are united with God by His grace and perform a good work with an awareness and a willingness to do God's will. The more generous we are in doing God's will in our lives, the more our guilt and penalty for sins are remitted."

Understood in the context of love and of the God who is Love, the above response can assist us in our spiritual life.

4. Why it is good to confess venial sins in the sacrament of Penance:

Paragraph 1458 from the Catholic Catechism, quoted above, gave us the following reasons for confessing venial sins:

1. It helps form our conscience.
2. It helps us fight against evil tendencies.
3. We allow ourselves to be healed by Christ.
4. We progress in the life of the Spirit.
5. We are spurred to be merciful to others, as God the Father is merciful to us.

Those who regularly use the sacrament well for the forgiveness of venial sin will be able to attest to the truth of the above reasons given in the Catechism.

On this topic Pope Pius XII had the following comment:

"...It is true that venial sins may be expiated in many ways which are to be highly commended. But to ensure more rapid progress day by day in the path of virtue, ..the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be earnestly advocated."

(Pius XII, "Mystici Corporis".)

Further, he enumerated the benefits of such frequent confessions, which we call confessions of devotion:

1. *Genuine self-knowledge is increased.*
2. *Christian humility grows.*
3. *Bad habits are corrected.*
4. *Spiritual neglect and tepidity (lukewarmness) are resisted.*
5. *The conscience is purified.*
6. *The will is strengthened.*
7. *A salutary self-control is attained.*
8. *Grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself.*

To use the sacrament of Penance regularly for the confession of venial sins is for the above reasons strongly recommended. Such good use of the sacrament is a powerful aid in our spiritual life. We are each called to holiness of life, we are each called by God to be a saint. Frequent confession is an excellent means to assist us. Pius XII reminded us that the practice of frequent confession was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who loves us and who desires to achieve our sanctification.

We remember the Church's teaching on the non-compulsory nature of confession of venial sin, and we approach the sacrament in a spirit of freedom, valuing it as one of God's great gifts.

We may find confession difficult for one or various reasons. The thoughts of Leonard Cheshire may be of interest.

In conversation with Port Morseby's former Archbishop, Virgil Copas, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, Great Britain's most decorated pilot in the World War II Battle of Britain and one of this century's most outstanding figures, had this to say of the sacrament of Reconciliation:

"Of the six Sacraments Christ gave to the laity, the one I value most is the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation... In the other Sacraments Christ does most of the giving; in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I, in a way, do most of the giving... I publicly and in sorrow admit I am a sinner; I must share those sins with a man, Christ's representative the priest. Then my sins are forgiven by God himself, through the power he shares with his priest."

Cheshire has a point, though Christ certainly does most of the giving. The forgiveness we receive in the sacrament came through His suffering and death on the cross. With Cheshire, we can look at the effort involved in a good confession as our little contribution to Jesus who loves us so much that He died for us.

Next week we shall look at the third of the acts of the penitent, satisfaction (penance); and, finally, absolution.

Venial sins are venial:

One useful thing to remember about venial sins is that being "more easily pardoned" they can be forgiven apart from the sacrament of Penance.

This would probably have solved the dilemma of a small boy mentioned by Mgr. Hallet in his book *The Priest, Friend of Christ*.

The small boy presented himself for confession on Saturday night, and the priest said:

"Didn't you hear me say that the children were to come in the morning?"

"Yes, Father, but I didn't commit my sin till this afternoon." 😊

- F.H. Drinkwater, Third Book of Catechism Stories

