

Tract 4:

Rekindling Attraction for the Sacrament of Penance

One has to be advanced in years to remember the long lines of penitents outside confessionals that were once common on Saturday afternoons in the most ordinary parishes. These were usually not great sinners, naturally. The high incidence of confessional practice simply reflected a healthy comfort with the sacrament as a source of grace. The awareness in faith of a divine act taking place in the words of absolution, the certainty that God touched the soul in that brief encounter, was an unquestioned Catholic assumption. It seems today, however, that for the vast majority of Catholics, even for those who attend regular Sunday Mass, the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, as it is now called, is infrequently used, and sometimes not at all. This in itself is a significant sign of decline in the post-Vatican II era. The reasons for the disappearance of confessional practice in the last decades are no doubt various. Unfortunately, priests played their part and contributed to the devaluing of the sacrament when they no longer preached the need in the case of grave sin for repentance and a sacramental confession before receiving the Holy Eucharist and no longer provided easy access to confessions with predictable times. To this day too many parish bulletins advise that confessions are available only by appointment. In former days, one did not need to make a reservation to seek the solace of the confessional box.

There are other telling factors in the abandonment of confessional practice in the Church. Almost forty years ago, in his very fine 1984 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *On Reconciliation and Penance*, Pope St. John Paul II stressed a link between the loss of God in the modern world and a loss of a sense of sin. A tragic effect of the absence of God in lives is typically a collapse in moral clarity. Without God in one's personal life, without consistent prayer, it is almost inevitable that an insensitivity

about moral matters takes hold. When serious sin is no longer considered an offense against God that cost Jesus Christ the terrible hours of his crucifixion, the seductive appeal of sensual pleasure and self-centered pursuit is likely to prevail. Sometimes, conversely, it happens that a breakdown in personal morality in the years of youth, even with a background of religious upbringing, becomes the catalyst to the loss of God. People turn from the Church or lose their faith because they do not want a God to exist who would judge their lifestyle as sinful and worthy of condemnation. Clearly, religious faith and moral uprightness are complementary in their mutual reinforcement of each other, but they diminish together as well. When Catholic commitment falters or is indecisive, personal morality usually becomes at best a confused amalgam of subjective determinations.

This connection between faith and personal morality, between loss of God and an incomprehension of the true nature of sin, is on display in the sparse contemporary use of the sacrament of Penance. The general indifference to the sacrament, even worse, the refusal to acknowledge its necessity in the case of mortal sin, is symptomatic of a progressive shift in our era to purely subjective modes of engagement with religious truth. An imbalanced turn to excessive subjectivism in religious matters implies always a susceptibility to error. The loss of a sense of sin that St. John Paul II decried amounts to a withdrawal from objective religious truth. Mortal sin is no longer perceived in its actual reality as a serious offense against God with grave consequences for the life of the soul. In many lives the subjective sense of the unimportance of particular grave sins—a presumption that cannot be separated from a person's understanding of God—is formed in tandem with the continuing indulgence in these sins. In some cases, the same people still retain religious commitments, or even attend Mass and receive the Eucharist with consistency. However, they live their Catholic life with the accompaniment of objectively grave sins which are no longer acknowledged as such or, in some cases, are justified as permissible or necessary in their private or public circumstances. The pro-abortion Catholic politicians are an egregious case in point, but it would seem that many people exercise a similar callousness.

Confusion about the proper role of conscience, and its necessary formation by the Church's clear moral teachings, contributes significantly to this problem. The overconfident claim of a conscience at ease with morally grave choices is common today. Disregard for the Church's moral teachings is then accompanied by disrespect for the sacredness of the Church's sacramental life—in the presumptuous reception of the Eucharist and in the failure to seek the sacrament of Penance. Despite grave sins, no need is

felt for recourse to a *sacramental* grace received by means of a priest's absolution. Instead, some form of self-exoneration worked out in the isolation of private ruminations replaces the objective necessity for a sacrament of the Church. One would guess that people who never seek the sacrament of Penance despite grave sins have convinced themselves over time, by voluntary willfulness and vague sentimentality, that no great wrongdoing is present in their lives. This failure of recognition that mortal sin requires repentance, a firm resolution, and the absolution of a priest is a serious departure from Catholic doctrinal teaching on the sacrament of Penance. As a habitual attitude, moreover, it is a formidable block to any possible conversion. Worse, it ignores the costly truth of a crucified Savior who suffered in great agony on a Roman cross for these same sins. Most significantly, it is a risk to the eternal salvation of a soul.

If we are to begin to recover the importance of the sacrament of Penance in the Church, an essential Catholic truth needs to be taught explicitly today, namely, that the sacrament of Penance cannot be separated from the divine gift of the Eucharist. Lack of respect for the necessity of confessional practice impinges directly on Catholic faith in the reality of Our Lord's divine Presence in the Eucharist. The loss of confessional practice among Catholics in the last decades has coincided with a breakdown of Catholic faith in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Indeed, the sacrament of Penance is valued properly only when the sacredness of the Eucharist is a deep conviction of faith. The reception of the Eucharist at Mass demands not only faith in the invisible Presence of Our Lord in his actual Body and Blood, Soul, and Divinity under the appearance of bread and wine. The privileged encounter with the person of Christ and his sacrificial offering in the reception of the Eucharist requires, as a matter of reverent respect for God, that a soul receive him in a state of sanctifying grace. Catholic teaching affirms that the gift of sanctifying grace inhabits the soul in a permanent manner as long as no mortal sin has been committed which has not yet been confessed and absolved in the sacrament of Penance. In former days this teaching was acquired as a basic catechetical truth taught to youngsters, but it seems all too clear that the same cannot be said today.

On this point, it is striking to realize how quickly the early Church, under the guidance of St. Paul, and long before the doctrinal development of the teaching on grace, embraced the profound responsibility entailed in consuming the Body of Christ and drinking his Blood. St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11 are exacting and even stern, implying a necessary remedy to reverse a condition of unworthiness to receive the Eucharist. Perhaps,

sadly, the serious tone of warning in these ancient words is why the Church in our time dropped them from any reading at Mass during the course of the Church year. We seem to live in an era when the reality of a soul standing nakedly before the judgment of God is generally avoided.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves. (1 Cor 11:27–29; NRSV)

These words of St. Paul urge the understanding that the Church comprehended in due time. The sacredness of the Eucharist as an encounter with our divine Lord is a primary reason for the existence of a sacrament of healing for the soul that would otherwise be deprived of the great gift of Christ's Body and Blood. Unworthiness is not a terminal state of being. The loss of sanctifying grace as a consequence of mortal sin is never a hopeless condition. Never is a soul abandoned after serious sin to live out a spiritual tragedy for the rest of life. Always in this life the invitation is present to return to a state of grace by recourse to a concrete means of reconciliation with God. And always this return of a soul to a friendship with God after a sacramental absolution has its true purpose in allowing a soul to step forward subsequently to a worthy reception of the Eucharist.

The contemporary tendency of many to turn to subjective approaches in relations with God, forgoing the necessity of sacramental graces, is certainly contrary to Catholic tradition. We can observe a striking contrast in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote a commentary on the sacrament of Penance at two different times in his life. They can be found in the last questions of the third part of the *Summa theologiae* and in the early questions of the *Supplement* to the third part, a section gathered after his death from his early commentary on book IV of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. In both treatments, he maintains a strongly *objective* mode of response in his replies. This is worth noting because the nature of confessional practice, involving a priest and a solitary penitent, has a sacred dimension of privacy that depends much on subjective dispositions, as is true of all serious prayer. Yet Aquinas keeps a clear eye on normative issues of confessional practice that do not tolerate private interpretations or arbitrary approaches. The indispensable necessity of the sacrament and the vital requirements for its effectiveness on the part of the priest and penitent

are his primary focus. The one question that overlaps in the two treatments is precisely the question of the sacrament's necessity for salvation, a rather important consideration in an era like our own that has shown great neglect for this sacrament and, as well, for the immortal salvation of the soul. The question of the sacrament's necessity for salvation parallels the necessity of being in a state of grace if we are to receive the Holy Eucharist worthily. But here we can observe an even more significant link. Indifference to the sacrament of Penance cannot be separated from an apathy and unconcern for the risk of suffering eternal damnation.

St. Thomas Aquinas's insistence on the sacrament's necessity for salvation assumes the context of a sinner in mortal sin, in the case of which a person *must* seek recourse to the sacrament. No one can be saved except by the power of the Savior's redemptive act of sacrificial offering on the Cross. This power of Christ's Passion is encountered through the sacraments. The fundamental truth of all sacramental actions is to allow the Passion of Christ to exercise a direct effect on the soul by means of a sacrament. Aquinas states in regard to sacramental confession: "The power of Christ's Passion operates through the priest's absolution and the acts of the penitent, who cooperates with grace unto the destruction of his sin" (*ST* III, q. 84, a. 5, corp.; my translation). Just as we need the power of Christ's Passion to be saved, so too it is at the risk of salvation that a soul in mortal sin neglects to seek out a priest when a priest can be approached for confession. This requirement of confession in the case of mortal sin is of Divine Law (*ST* Suppl., q. 6, a. 2, corp. and q. 6, a. 3, corp.); no one can be dispensed by any authority, even by the Pope, from its necessity in the case of mortal sin. St. Thomas affirms: "Penance . . . is a necessary sacrament, even as Baptism is. Since therefore no one can be dispensed from Baptism, neither can one be dispensed from confession" (*ST* Suppl., q. 6, a. 6, corp.)."

Aquinas, interestingly, does not advert in his discussion to the act of perfect contrition, which had been taught at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The magisterial teaching is that an act of perfect contrition does return a soul to a state of sanctifying grace prior to a sacramental absolution, and indeed would permit reception of the Eucharist prior to a sacramental confession. Nonetheless, subsequent recourse to a sacramental confession, without great delay if that is possible, must be intended as a condition for the genuine quality of perfect contrition. The necessity of confessing mortal sins and a sacramental absolution of these sins from a priest *always* remains even after an act of perfect contrition, which may be why Aquinas does not in any explicit manner bring perfect contrition into his discussion. It might also be asked, given the necessity of the sacrament

of Penance for salvation, whether a soul can have hope of salvation without an opportunity for confession, and of course the answer is yes. The soul in distress at its state of sin when near death is capable of drawing the infinitely merciful condescension of the Lord. The saving act of God in that case takes place in an analogous manner to Baptism by desire; in effect, the repentant person nearing death who appeals to God's mercy can be restored to grace by a type of Penance by desire.

In addressing the spiritual dispositions of the penitent which the sacrament of Penance demands, St. Thomas Aquinas upholds again a standard of notable objectivity. The very personal act of confessing sins is effective and graced only on the condition that it fulfills clear requirements. The first of these is the willingness to give up the privacy of one's own self-judgment and submit personal sins with their possible shame to the sacred tribunal of a sacramental confession. Contrition for sins is not just personal sorrow and regret, which can be variable in people depending on emotional factors. Contrition imposes a demand upon a penitent to be open and transparent in the revelation of all categories of mortal sins. This need for a clear manifestation of specific mortal sins without concealment or vague obfuscation is sign of respect for God, who naturally is fully aware of the sins clinging to the depths of the soul. Moreover, it is required that a penitent is sincerely contrite for each mortal sin, not just sorrowful in a general sense for sin. A problem for sinners can be that shame for sin keeps them from confessing clearly because they are thinking not so much of God but of the discomfort in speaking sins to a man. Needless to say, the value of anonymity by means of a confessional screen between priest and penitent is a safeguard and encouragement to good confessional practice. Confession requires a contrition that is animated by an awareness that God listens to our heart and soul as we confess, a truth that we ordinarily teach young children who are preparing for a first confession.

Contrition likewise requires, by its very nature, the penitent's sincere resolution not to continue in any mortal sin that has been confessed. In the case of a person mired in a vice, this means at the least a resolution to struggle against all temptation to this sin and to avoid the occasions that can provoke these temptations. The so-called "law of gradualness" of St. John Paul II acknowledges that the struggle to overcome a pattern of indulged sin can sometimes take time once a person has decisively entered the path of conversion. The sacrament of Penance is essential as a person walks the path to renunciation and removal of a sin from a personal life. On the other hand, a confession of a particular mortal sin in which a person fully intends to resume this sin or to continue it unchecked elicits an invalid

absolution, if an absolution has been given. The refusal of an absolution may not be so unusual. An unmarried couple living together in a sexual relationship might for some reason have a desire for confession, such as to receive Holy Communion with their families at a Christmas Mass. But they cannot be absolved if their intent remains to continue in their current state of cohabitation. The inability of a priest to grant absolution in such a case has nothing to do with an arbitrary decision, but simply responds to the factual reality. A clear intention against the continuance of a mortal sin is obligatory for a valid confession. A spiritual truth is evident in this need for a spirit of strong resolution when we exit a confessional. The importance of a sacramental confession is not simply to free a soul from the painful burden of guilt for sin, but also to strengthen a commitment to the pursuit of virtue and the love of God. Admittedly, a release from the discomfort of subjective guilt may draw people to sacramental confession. While this motive is sufficient for the reception of the sacramental grace, it can be somewhat self-centered and perhaps does not produce the fruit of a strong resolution against repeating a sin. Rather, we should seek confession, even in confessing venial sins, with an awareness of a wound inflicted on the heart of Christ by our personal sins. The desire not to wound him provides the proper incentive in love not to repeat the failures that we have just confessed.

The centuries-old Catholic teaching regarding the seal of confession has a beauty that extends beyond simply a strict discipline imposed on the priest as confessor. St. Thomas Aquinas writes that the priest hears what he hears not as a man, but as God hears. Likewise, he knows what he knows of sins not as a man, but as God knows them (*ST* Suppl, q. 11, a. 1 ad 2; a. 3, corp.). Aquinas uses that principle to defend the right of the priest to refuse any inquiry under any circumstance that would question him or probe for information about matters heard from a penitent in confession. Since what he has heard belongs in its privacy to God alone, he is free to deny even under oath any information or knowledge that he may have received as a man from a penitent's confession. The seal is inviolate without any possible exception and a priest must suffer even death rather than reveal what he has heard regarding the penitent's sins or the sins of others who were accomplices in those sins. Martyrdom for the sake of the confessional seal took place during the last century. In Mexico, St. Mateo Correa Magallanes was shot to death in 1927 for refusing to reveal the confessions of Cristeros, and during the Spanish Civil War Blessed Filipe Ciscar Puig and Blessed Fernando Olmedo were executed in 1936 after hearing confessions and refusing to speak to their interrogators. The magnitude of the

seal derives from the sacred context in which the words of the penitent are pronounced. We speak to God as though face to face with him within this sacramental boundary and we receive from God his own silent touch of mercy upon our soul.

A last word might be addressed to the very real Catholic phenomenon of people seeking the sacrament of Penance after long years of not practicing their Catholic faith. Priests stationed in urban settings are accustomed to this not unusual reality of souls returning to God after decades away from the Church and the Eucharist. It is likely not primarily a burden of guilt that brings such people finally to confession, but a mystery of grace. And what is the source for such an extraordinary, often shocking, grace? The only legitimate Catholic answer is that many hidden souls pray and sacrifice for this intention. The quiet cells of cloisters and monasteries have always burned with this desire for souls in grave danger to come back to God. Those who pray the Rosary every day join by the thousands in a plea to our Mother in heaven to “pray for us now and at the hour of our death.” The desire of the Lord’s holy Mother to see souls return to her Son and the state of grace is immeasurable. She does not inspire souls in danger with a thought simply to exercise a private act of repentance. She leads them to the sacrament by which the power of her Son’s Passion will wash clean their souls.

It is worth noting finally that a sacramental confession can easily be the catalyst to a strong reawakening of faith in our lives. This is precisely what occurred in the life of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. In October, 1886, when he was still in a condition of unbelief and spiritual distress, he sought out a well-known priest in Paris in the one place where Abbé Henri Huvelin could likely be found, in the confessional at the Church of Sainte-Augustin. Charles approached the confessional and told the priest initially that he wanted only to talk, not to confess, but the priest insisted that he kneel down and confess his sins. Charles did so and spoke of this confession and the absolution he received as a moment of truth when his faith stirred alive again in an undeniable manner. The story should not be thought so remarkable. We place ourselves in the immediate proximity of God himself and his power to touch our soul when we confess our sins. The sacrament is always capable of being used by God as an instrument to change our lives, sometimes in dramatic ways. N.V