

They are right then who insist that the most important element in the remission of sins is, from the human point of view, true penitence or contrition. But I have tried to show that contrition cannot be separated from sacramental absolution, because grace is given through the visible body of Christ. The argument depends on that characteristic property of a sacrament of being both within and yet outside time. Sacraments have their effect on the Christian here and now, yet look back to the cross and forward to the second coming. More particularly, penance looks back to the moment when we are sorry for our sin: but it also looks forward to the moment when new temptations will be felt. That is the sacramental meaning of the 'firm purpose of amendment' which is required of us. Once again this is no mere psychological need; it belongs to the grace of the sacrament, which does not merely give remission of those sins we confess, but if we are prone to commit them, gives us the strength to resist temptation during the time to come. The sacrament of penance must never be thought of as an isolated activity, confined to a few minutes on Saturday night: like the other sacraments, it is a part of that life in Christ which is the pledge of our future inheritance. Understood in this way, Catholics may possibly begin to find it a lighter burden, and an easier yoke.



COUNSEL IN CONFESSION

DOMINIC SIRE, O.P.

THERE is always a danger that emphasis on the primary effect or purpose of any one of the seven Sacraments may obscure our vision of secondary effects and purposes. It is only natural that we should think of a Sacrament in relation to its principal effect, but we must never lose sight of the complete picture. It is as though we thought only of the head in a human body and forgot the unobtrusive little finger or toe. Yet should we lose a little toe we suddenly become aware of being thrown out of balance. If a more important limb—none the less secondary—suffers grave damage we notice it still more. In spite of the fact that we adjust ourselves strangely quickly, we do remain crippled

and unable to take our full share of life. But are we so aware of our loss when we lose sight of the secondary effects of a Sacrament? It is true that any exclusive consideration of the principal effects of a sacrament, exclusive in that it neglects secondary effects, robs the sacrament of its full value, and puts our sacramental life out of due balance.

The Sacrament of Penance or Confession has as its first and obviously all important effect the removal of sin, but it has other and almost equally important work to do. The priest is not just a kind of spiritual scavenger, an official of the cleansing department, when he sits in the confessional. He is a true judge. Yet even as a judge he is not the precise counterpart of a magistrate or judge in a civil court. A judge may advise and even direct the jury in bringing in their verdict, but once that verdict is brought in little is left to his discretion. The penalty may vary in degree but he has to condemn or acquit. The position of the priest is very different. His discretion has far greater scope and moreover it is his office to exhort the penitent. The penitent again is not there to try and get away with his crime through the advocacy of a counsel. He can get away with nothing unless it be further guilt by hiding his sins or their true nature. But if he is to get the true benefit of the sacrament he must expose without any dissimulation the state of his soul so that the priest may truly act both as judge and counsellor. It is principally with this latter aspect of the confessional that this short article deals.

The doctor—and the priest is also very much a spiritual doctor—can only treat his patient effectively and efficiently if he knows as fully as is possible the exact symptoms of the patient. He can only judge whether a cure can be effected or prescribe for the alleviation of the illness as a result of full knowledge. The mere statement by a patient that he is ill is as helpful to the doctor as the statement so often heard in the confessional that the penitent 'has done wrong things.' When the doctor is in full possession of the facts he not only applies the cure where possible but advises the patient how to behave, what things to take and what to leave. Such advice is in no sense an extra but part of his duty. In just the same way the priest is there not only to remove sin but to offer advice and encouragement to the sinner. He should advise him how to avoid his sins and even more important how to get nearer to God. Penance therefore differs from the other six Sacraments

in this important point that whereas in the other six the person of the minister matters little, in this Sacrament it may matter much. It matters little by whom you are baptized, but it matters very much from whom you receive counsel. The priest must be one whose experience, knowledge and sympathy lend authority to his advice, and the penitent must have full confidence in him. It is a mutual affair of considerable consequence. Yet how few people choose a confessor with care and consideration and put themselves entirely under his tutelage and guidance. Nor is it irrelevant to ask how many priests are prepared to be spiritual advisers or directors, and of those who are prepared how many are competent to carry out this duty. Confession both from the priest's point of view and the penitent's tends to become a routine duty to be got through in the minimum of time. People go into church of a Saturday evening and join the shortest queue without considering who occupies the box, beyond the hope that he is quick and does not give you a lecture or ask too many questions.

We are there 'to seek first the kingdom of God', not to fool ourselves that we are already in possession of it. One of the most powerful means in seeking the kingdom of God is the Sacrament of Penance. While the forgiveness of sins is primary the counsel is almost as important. In fact it is functional in the forgiveness, for the latter depends to a great extent upon it. Unless we are directed on the right road, warned against the dangers that we may encounter, encouraged to heroism in face of temptation and in the day to day labour of prayer; unless we are constantly pulled up when we grow slack and tepid by one who knows our weaknesses and our difficulties, our firm purpose of amendment is likely to become progressively less firm, and may indeed in course of time cease in any real sense to be a purpose at all. The priest has a grave obligation to be patient and sympathetic without being lax. The penitent similarly has an equally grave duty of being honest and sincere in his desire to advance on the road to perfection. While therefore it is childish and stupid always to seek to receive Holy Communion only from your 'special priest', it is wise and right to select with care the one who directs you on your way to God. He should know you through and through. But are there not those who make the rounds of half a dozen priests precisely because thereby they know none will ever get to know them? They do not want to be known. In other words they do

not wish to be helped: they are not interested in a sincere search after the kingdom of God. Of course the Church allows the greatest liberty of choice and jealously safeguards this liberty. But before God we are not at liberty to have ignoble motives for even the most noble objects. From this it follows that both priest and penitent must take a sincere and conscientious view of this Sacrament. The priest must take care to be a trustworthy adviser; he must be a man of supernatural patience and sympathy. It is for him to make the Sacrament a real consolation to the sinner, a source of encouragement and advancement in the way of perfection. It is for the penitent to treat the Sacrament seriously and not regard it as a kind of spiritual penny in the slot machine: he must always remind himself that true contrition is the key to the effectiveness of the Sacrament, and that this includes a truly sincere desire for perfection and a humbly submissive attitude to correction. The priest who rants and raves at his penitents forgets Christ's attitude to sinners and that he should be here, if nowhere else, above all another Christ. The penitent who dissimulates in the confessional numbers himself with the hypocrites in the Gospels who tempted Christ with their coins and self-righteous inquiries. He must approach this Sacrament with sincerity and humility remembering the words 'God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble' (Proverbs 3, 34), and 'Be humble in the sight of the Lord and He will exalt you' (James 4, 10). If this be not his attitude in seeking God's pardon it will surely be said of him 'You ask and receive not: because you ask amiss' (James 4, 3).