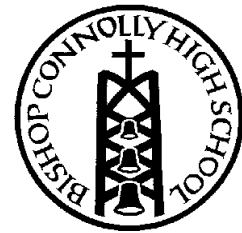


From the Chaplain's Office...

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Chaplain



*Not Only Hearers
but Doers of the Word*

March 2001
Chaplain's Conference #1

The Catholic Understanding and Practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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I. Brief introduction on Chaplain's Conferences in general

- 1) This is the first in what will be a regular series of "Chaplain's Conferences" given to the students by their graduation classes, i.e., freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors.
- 2) Each chaplain's conference will center on a particular theme. The topics will come from a variety of sources: from student suggestions or questions, from current events on which the Church and Church teaching has something very important to say, from a series of issues highly relevant to the students, from faculty suggestions and, finally, from my own read of what would be particularly relevant and important for students at a Catholic high school to know at the beginning of the third millennium. If you have particular topics you would like to see addressed in this forum, please suggest them to me.
- 3) The purpose of these conferences will be to address a series of issues in Catholicism, either in teaching or in the practice of faith, that oftentimes are accompanied by a lot of confusion. My goal will be to try to dispel that confusion. Some issues will regard the sacraments, like today's conference on the practice of confession, or why Sunday Mass is so important, or the dignity of women in the Church; others will consider particular moral teachings, dealing with human sexuality, the death penalty, or bioethical concerns like genetic engineering ; others will deal with some controversial historical issues that come up often, like the Church's action during the horrible period of the Holocaust, or during the Galileo affair. These are all issues that every intelligent graduate of a Catholic High School should have covered from the perspective of the faith.

- 4) These conferences are not meant to replace your religious education classes. Rather they are meant to reinforce them. The surveys that you filled out before vacation show that a majority of students here at Bishop Connolly disagree with the teachings of Christ and the Church on the four last things (heaven, hell, death and judgment), on abortion, on premarital sexuality, on marriage, and on the natural law. There could be a lot of reasons for this: modern American culture, which is so against the Church on so many issues; a student's home situation, where the faith might not be practiced much if at all; some bad experiences a student might have had with the Church; a student's not receiving a good education on these issues before he or she got here; a student's blowing off religion classes while here or not responding to a particular teacher. Whatever the reason be, we owe it to you to make sure you know both what the Church teaches and why. Not every young person is going to accept the Church's teachings, but everyone who graduates from here should know them and have a certain respect for them, because they are not arbitrary, but well-thought out positions that the Church has held, in most cases, for centuries. For students to leave Connolly without a clear grasp of the Church's teaching would be tantamount to MIT graduating people who couldn't add.
- 5) That said, I hope that these conferences will be lively and engaging! I welcome your questions and I ask you to bring your thinking caps with you. This is not supposed to be a brainwashing session, but rather a chance for you to confront the Church's teachings on a deeper level. I ask for simple courtesy and I'll show you the same.
- 6) Over the course of these lectures, I will cite a lot of documents, like the Catechism or papal encyclicals or exhortations, etc. I do this not because I'm trying to turn this into an academic exercise, to show you I've done my homework and can cite footnotes, but so that you will know that when I cite these things I'm not giving you my own opinion, but the clear teaching of the Church. You have a right to the Church's teaching, all of it. If anyone ever comes up to you claiming to be teaching you the Catholic faith and disagrees with what is clear in one of these citations, don't believe that person, whether it be a priest, a nun, a theologian, a catechist or simply a fellow Catholic. You will, over the course of your lives, encounter several Catholics who think they know better than the Church which Christ founded and to whom he confided the Holy Spirit to guide her into all truth and prevent her from erring in a matter relevant to salvation, faith and morals. If they disagree with any of these clear and cited teachings, they're not giving you the Catholic faith, even if they say they are, but merely their own opinions.
- 7) Lastly, I will always write out these conferences, so that (a) you don't have to take notes here; (b) so that, if you were interested in following up on anything I said, it would be rather easy; and (c) sometimes, because of your questions or because of the size of the subject matter, I will not be able to complete the whole conference — those who are interested would easily be able to obtain the rest of the text and read it. Just send me an email to my Bishop Connolly address (rlandry@bishopconnolly.com) and I will gladly email you a copy of any of these lectures.

II. Introduction to this Conference on the Catholic understanding and practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation

- 1) If I were starting these conferences in September and not in March, this would not have been the first Conference I would have done. We are doing beginning with it today for two very practical reasons:
 - a) We are getting ready for our Lenten penance service later this month, so this conference will have great and immediate practical relevance;
 - b) In the February survey, many of you asked, in the question on what you would like to see addressed by the Chaplaincy or Campus ministry, to discuss why it is necessary to confess to a priest. It's obviously important to answer that question before the Lenten penance services, so we'll discuss it here.
- 2) This sacrament is a great gift of God, as I hope to explain, but it's one that so many in the Church have, over time, failed to appreciate. In the February survey, 25% of you say you never go to confession on your own, 28% very rarely (less than once a year), 27% once a year, 17% several times a year and 2% about once a month. Doubtless there are many reasons for this. My hope in this conference would be that you would grow to love this sacrament more and come to meet Jesus in this divine tribunal of mercy more often.
- 3) Two practical notes:
 - a) Several of you in your written comments about what you'd like the Chaplaincy to start doing wrote that you'd like more regular hours for the sacrament of confession. It had always been my intention, once I learned how to balance my

schedule between Espirito Santo parish and the high school to offer them more regularly. Now I can say that confessions will be heard every Tuesday, from 11:15-12:15.

b) Now to the question of where confessions will be heard. In the surveys, in response to the query of how you generally prefer to go to confession, 45% said they prefer to go anonymously behind the screen in the confessional box, 15% said they prefer to go face-to-face and 39% didn't have a preference. For that reason, since it was basically 3-1 in favor of going behind the screen, we've cleaned out the confessionals so that students can start going behind the screen on Tuesday. Those who still prefer to go face-to-face have a couple options. You can come by my office at any time I'm there and I'd be glad to hear your confession. Or you can simply wait in line (if there's a line) outside the box and when your time comes, you can knock on the priest's door and we can go inside the sacristy or inside one of the rooms outside the chapel.

4) For this lecture, I have used a few sources, including the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Karl Keating's *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*.

III. Jesus, his mission, love and desire to forgive sins

1) To understand the importance of the sacrament in God's plan, we first have to focus on Jesus' mission from the Father. Jesus came down from heaven ultimately to save us from our sins by dying to take them away.

"He came to call sinners" — Mass Liturgy, one of the Kyrie intercessions.

1Tim. 1:15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost.

Rom. 5:8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

2) Christ showed that the most important thing he wanted to do was to forgive sins and make the new life of grace and relationship with the Lord possible. When the paralytic was brought to him, he first forgave his sins and showed he had the authority to do it.

Matt 9:2 And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." 3 Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." 4 But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? 6 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — he then said to the paralytic — "Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." 7 And he stood up and went to his home. 8 When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

3) Jesus preached incessantly about the forgiveness of sins, as we see in the extraordinarily beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11ff), in the episode with the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1ff), in the parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1ff), in the episode with the woman who washed his feet with her tears (Lk 7:36ff). He ended up preaching most powerfully about the evil of sin and his desire to reconcile sinners with God by his horrible sufferings and death in order to save us from our sins.

IV. Only God can forgive sins, but forgives through human nature.

1) God is the only one who can forgive sins against Him. This was shown clearly in the response of the Pharisees to Jesus' saying that he forgave the paralytics' sins:

Luke 5:21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

2) Jesus showed he had the authority to forgive sins by then doing what would have been humanly impossible without God's help, healing the paralyzed man of his infirmity: "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — he then said to the paralytic — 'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.' And he stood up and went to his home."

- 3) The God-man forgave the paralytic's sins through his human nature, which both he himself stressed and St. Matthew stressed in his inspired narrative: "that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6), which is why the gospel writer himself explains that God "had given such authority to men" (Matt. 9:8), prompting the crowds to glorify God for this great gift.

V. God wants us to stop sinning and to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ

- 1) We have all sinned and are sinners.

1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

- 2) As a result, we are all responsible for Jesus' death, since he died to take away our sins. He died to take away each of our sins personally.

Nostra Aetate 4: The Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. . . . As the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.

Gal. 2:20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

- 3) Jesus never trivialized sin or rationalized it. No, for Jesus, sin is sin, a violation of love against God and neighbor and is an offense against God.

CCC 1440 Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time it damages communion with the Church. For this reason conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

- 4) However, in His divine mercy, Jesus called the sinner to realize the sin, to repent of it, and to be reconciled with God and neighbor. After forgiving our sins, he wants us clearly to stop sinning and to do what it takes to stop sinning. He's also clear about the consequences of sin.

John 8:10 Jesus straightened up and said to her [the woman caught in adultery], "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She [the adulteress] said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Matt. 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

- 5) Jesus calls us to more than merely stop committing a particular sinful action, but in turning away from sin, turning toward him inwardly. We need an interior repentance, which is first a grace of God to which the human person responds.

CCC 1431 Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

VI. The commissioning of the apostles to forgive sins (why it is necessary to confess sins to a priest)?

- 1) Jesus wanted this ministry of reconciliation to continue after his Ascension into heaven. By his death and resurrection, he made reconciliation with God possible for sinners, but sinners still needed to receive that forgiveness, because God, who created us free, doesn't force us to receive it. Each of us is called to respond.

2) Jesus ordained his apostles with the ability to carry on his ministry for Him in his person. Just as Jesus commissioned the priests to make his body and blood present after his Ascension to heaven (we just can't pray to God in heaven over bread and wine!), so he made the apostles, their successors and those they ordained priests capable of carrying on Jesus' own loving mission of the forgiveness of sins.

3) We see how important the mission of the forgiveness of sins is in God's plan by what he did and said on the evening of the day he rose from the dead.

John 20:19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

4) Just as one of the last things Jesus did before his death and resurrection was give us his flesh and blood in the Eucharist, so one of the very first things he did after the resurrection was enable the apostles to carry out his mission of forgiveness.

5) Jesus clearly identified his own mission as one of forgiving sins and specifically sent out the apostles to carry out that mission. "As the father has sent me, so I send you," he said, then breathed the Holy Spirit on them and sent them out to continue his mission of forgiving sins.

6) The breathing of the Holy Spirit is very important. Only God can forgive sins. Jesus breathed into them the Holy Spirit so that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles would be able truly to forgive and retain sins. There are only two times in Sacred Scripture that we are told that God breathed on man, the other being when he made man a living soul (Gen. 2:7). It emphasizes how important the establishment of the sacrament of penance was to Jesus. Jesus, the Son, breathes His life into His Apostles His priests, so that through them He will "breathe" life into the souls of contrite sinners.

7) This passage also and very importantly implies clearly that the priests would hear confessions. How else would they be able to determine which sins to retain and which sins to forgive unless people told them their sins?

- a) The power given to the apostles by Christ was twofold: to forgive sins or to hold them bound, which means to retain them unforgiven. Several things follow from this.
- b) First, the apostles could not know what sins to forgive, what not to forgive, unless they were first told the sins by the sinner. This implies confession.
- c) Second, their authority was not merely to proclaim that God had already forgiven sins or that he would forgive sins if there were proper repentance. If God has already forgiven all of a man's sins, or will forgive them all (past and future) upon a single act of repentance, then it makes little sense to tell the apostles they have been given the power to "retain" sins, since forgiveness would be an all-or-nothing thing and nothing could be "retained."
- d) If forgiveness really can be partial — not a once-for-all thing — how is one to tell which sins have been forgiven, which not, in the absence of a priestly decision?
- e) You can't very well rely on your own gut feelings when salvation hinges on it.
- f) The biblical passages make sense only if the apostles and their successors were given a real authority.
- g) Jesus does not say, "When God forgives men's sins, they are forgiven." It's hardly necessary to say that. He uses the second person plural, "you," referring clearly to the apostles.
- h) Christ not only declared that sins were forgiven, but really and actually forgave them; hence, the Apostles are empowered not merely to announce to the sinner that his sins are forgiven but to grant him forgiveness-"whose sins you shall forgive".
- i) If their power were limited to the declaration "God pardons you", they would need a special revelation in each case to make the declaration valid.
- j) The exercise of this power in either form (forgiving or retaining) is not restricted: no distinction is made or even suggested between one kind of sin and another, or between one class of sinners and all the rest: Christ simply says "whose sins". The sentence pronounced by the Apostles (remission or retention) is also God's sentence -- "they are forgiven . . . they are retained".

8) There's another passage from St. Matthew's Gospel which reiterates what Jesus did after the Resurrection, in giving the apostles the power to forgive and retain sins.

Matt. 18:15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

9) Therefore, it's obvious that Christ clearly intended that his chosen apostles would be the human means through which God would continue to forgive sins. Since he would not always be with the Church visibly, Christ gave this power to other men so the Church, which is the continuation of his presence throughout time (Matt. 28:20), would be able to offer forgiveness to future generations.

- a) He gave his power to the apostles, and it was necessarily a communicable power, one that could be passed on to their successors and agents, since, obviously, the apostles wouldn't always be on earth either, but people would still be sinning.
- b) Some say that any power given to the apostles died with them. Not so. Some powers, certainly, must have, such as the ability to write Scripture. But the powers absolutely necessary to maintain the Church as a living, spiritual society had to be passed down from generation to generation. If they ceased, the Church would cease, except as a quaint abstraction, like the ability to make present his Body and Blood and the ability to reconcile sinners with God.
- c) Christ ordered the apostles to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." It would take time, much time. And he promised them assistance: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matt. 28:19-20). If the apostles and disciples believed that Christ instituted the power to sacramentally forgive sins in his stead, we would expect the successors of the apostles-- that is, the bishops--and Christians of later years to act as though such power was legitimately and habitually exercised, which is exactly what they did (see below).

10) Sometimes some people insist there is "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). True, but they draw an improper inference.

- a) Christ was at liberty to decide how his mediation would be applied to us. It is a question of fact.
- b) Naturally enough, the one who is offended does the forgiving. When we sin, we offend God, so it is he to whom we look for forgiveness.
- c) But he can arrange his forgiveness either personally and immediately or through an agent.
- d) Which did he declare to be the usual (though not exclusive) way to forgive sins: by direct application to him or by means of confessing to a priest? If the first, then John 20:21-23 becomes unintelligible. The words wouldn't remotely mean what they so clearly seem to say.
- e) For those who in the early Church sought to escape the obligation of confession it was natural enough to assert that repentance was the affair of the soul alone with its Maker, and that no intermediary was needed. It is this pretext that St. Augustine sweeps aside in one of his sermons: "Let no one say I do penance secretly; I perform it in the sight of God, and He who is to pardon me knows that in my heart I repent". Whereupon St. Augustine asks: "Was it then said to no purpose, 'What you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed in heaven?' Was it for nothing that the keys were given to the Church?" (Sermo cccxcii, n. 3, in P.L., XXXIX, 1711).
- f) The Fathers, of course, do not deny that sin must be confessed to God; at times, indeed, in exhorting the faithful to confess, they make no mention of the priest; but such passages must be taken in connection with the general teaching of the Fathers and with the traditional belief of the Church. Their real meaning is expressed, e.g., by Anastasius Sinaita (seventh century): "Confess your sins to Christ through the priest" (De sacra synaxi), and by Egbert, Archbishop of York (d. 766): "Let the sinner confess his evil deeds to God, that the priest may know what penance to impose" (Mansi, Coll. Conc., XII, 232).

11) No Catholic believes that a priest simply as an individual man, however pious or learned, has power to forgive sins. This power belongs to God alone; but He can and does exercise it through the ministration of men. Since He has seen fit to exercise it by means of this sacrament, it cannot be said that the Church or the priest interferes between the soul and God; on the contrary, penance is the removal of the one obstacle that keeps the soul away from God.

VII. The appeal to reconciliation among the apostles and the Fathers of the Church

- 1) St. Paul, who was very conscious of his ministry of reconciliation, considered himself an ambassador of Christ's mercy and appealed with his listeners to be reconciled with God:

2Cor. 5:18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

- 2) The Fathers of the Church (the early Bishop-saints and authoritative "doctors" or teachers of the faith) stressed the importance of confession of sins to God through the priest. We can give some examples here:

- a) St. Gregory the Great (d. 604) teaches "the affliction of penance is efficacious in blotting out sins when it is enjoined by the sentence of the priest when the burden of it is decided by him in proportion to the offence after weighing the deeds of those who confess" (In I Reg., III, v, n. 13 in P.L., LXXIX, 207);
- b) Pope Leo the Great (440-61), who is often credited with the institution of confession, refers to it as an "Apostolic rule". Writing to the bishops of Campania he forbids as an abuse "contrary to the Apostolic rule" (contra apostolicam regulam) the reading out in public of a written statement of their sins drawn up by the faithful, because, he declares, "it suffices that the guilt of conscience be manifested to priests alone in secret confession" (Ep. clxviii in P.L., LIV, 1210).
- c) In another letter (Ep. cviii in P. L., LIV, 1011), St. Leo the Great, after declaring that by Divine ordinance the mercy of God can be obtained only through the supplications of the priests, he adds: "the mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, gave the rulers of the Church this power that they should impose penance on those who confess and admit them when purified by salutary satisfaction to the communion of the sacraments through the gateway of reconciliation."
- d) The earlier Fathers frequently speak of sin as a disease which needs treatment, something drastic, at the hands of the spiritual physician or surgeon. St. Augustine (d. 450) tells the sinner: "an abscess had formed in your conscience; it tormented you and gave you no rest. . . . confess, and in confession let the pus come out and flow away" (In ps. lxvi, n. 6).
- e) St. Jerome (d. 420) comparing the priests of the New Law with those of the Old who decided between leprosy and leprosy, says: "likewise in the New Testament the bishops and the priest bind or loose . . . in virtue of their office", having heard various sorts of sinners, they know who is to be bound and who is to be loosed" . . . (In Matt., xvi, 19); in his "Sermon on Penance" he says: "let no one find it irksome to show his wound vulnus confiteri) because without confession it cannot be healed."
- f) St. Ambrose (d. 397): "this right (of loosing and binding) has been conferred on priests only" (De pen., I, ii, n. 7);
- g) St. Basil (d. 397): "As men do not make known their bodily ailments to anybody and everybody, but only to those who are skilled in healing, so confession of sin ought to be made to those who can cure it" (Reg. brevior., 229).

- 3) Throughout the centuries some people out of shame have been reluctant to confess.

- a) The Fathers, knowing well that one great difficulty which the sinner has to overcome is shame, encourage him in spite of it to confess.
- b) "I appeal to you, my brethren", says St. Pacian (d. 391), ". . . you who are not ashamed to sin and yet are ashamed to confess . . . I beseech you, cease to hide your wounded conscience. Sick people who are prudent do not fear the physician, though he cut and burn even the secret parts of the body" (Paraenesis ad poenit., n. 6, 8).
- c) St. John Chrysostom (d. 347) pleads eloquently with the sinner: "Be not ashamed to approach (the priest) because you have sinned, nay rather, for this very reason approach. No one says: Because I have an ulcer, I will not go near a physician or take medicine; on the contrary, it is just this that makes it needful to call in physicians and apply remedies. We (priests) know well how to pardon, because we ourselves are liable to sin. This is why God did not give us angels to be our doctors, nor send down Gabriel to rule the flock, but from the fold itself he chooses the shepherds, from among the sheep He appoints the leader, in order that he may be inclined to pardon his followers and, keeping in mind his own fault, may not set himself in hardness against the members of the flock" (Hom. "On Frequent Assembly" in P.G., LXIII, 463).

- 4) The only unforgivable sin is when the human person does not entrust Himself to God's mercy. It is unforgivable not because of the offense committed, nor because God cannot forgive it, but because the human person won't allow God to forgive the sin.

CCC 1864 "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss.

VIII. The History of Confession

- 1) The Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraphs 1447-1448) give a concise summary of the practice of confession in the early Church.
 - a) Over the centuries the concrete form in which the Church has exercised this power received from the Lord has varied considerably.
 - b) During the first centuries the reconciliation of Christians who had committed particularly grave sins after their Baptism (for example, idolatry, murder, or adultery) was tied to a very rigorous discipline, according to which penitents had to do public penance for their sins, often for years, before receiving reconciliation.
 - c) To this "order of penitents" (which concerned only certain grave sins), one was only rarely admitted and in certain regions only once in a lifetime.
 - d) During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church.
 - e) From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest.
 - f) This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. It allowed the forgiveness of grave sins and venial sins to be integrated into one sacramental celebration. In its main lines this is the form of penance that the Church has practiced down to our day.
 - g) Beneath the changes in discipline and celebration that this sacrament has undergone over the centuries, the same fundamental structure is to be discerned. It comprises two equally essential elements:
 - 1) On the one hand, the acts of the man who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit: namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction;
 - 2) on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church. The Church, who through the bishop and his priests forgives sins in the name of Jesus Christ and determines the manner of satisfaction, also prays for the sinner and does penance with him.
 - h) Thus the sinner is healed and re-established in ecclesial communion.
- 2) We can flesh out some of the more important details by a scan of some patristic sources (sources from the Fathers of the Church):
 - a) The earliest Christian writings, such as the first-century Didache, are indefinite on the procedure for confession to be used in the forgiveness of sins, but a verbal confession is listed as a part of the Church's requirement by the time of Irenaeus (A.D. 180). He wrote that the disciples of the Gnostic heretic Marcus "have deluded many women . . . Their consciences have been branded as with a hot iron. Some of these women make a public confession, but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing themselves from the hope of the life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between the two courses" (Against Heresies 1:22).
 - b) Slightly later writers, such as Origen (241), Cyprian (251), and Aphraates (337) are quite clear in saying confession is to be made to a priest. Cyprian writes that the forgiving of sins can take place only "through the priests." Ambrose makes things clear, saying, "this right is given to priests only." Pope Leo I says absolution can be obtained only through the prayers of the priests. These utterances are not taken as anything novel, but as reminders of accepted belief. We have no record of anyone objecting, of anyone claiming these men were pushing an "invention."
 - c) Over time, the forms in which the sacrament has been administered have changed. In the early Church, publicly known sins (such as apostasy) were often confessed in church publicly, though private confession to a priest was always an option for privately committed sins. Still, confession was not just something done in silence to God alone, but something done "in church" as the Didache (A.D. 70) indicates. The penances involved in the sacrament also tended to be performed before rather than after absolution, and they tended to be much more severe than those of today (ten years' penance for having an abortion, for example).
- 3) Apposite comments from the Fathers:
 - a) **Tertullian** (d. c. 202)"[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body

- and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness" (Repentance 10:1 [A.D. 203]). . . . [T]he Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge and adjudge" (ibid., 21).
- b) **Hippolytus** (d. c. 235) "[The bishop conducting the ordination of the new bishop shall pray:] God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . Pour forth now that power which comes from you, from your Royal Spirit, which you gave to your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and which he bestowed upon his holy apostles . . . and grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, and by the Spirit of the high-priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command" (Apostolic Tradition 3 [A.D. 215])
- c) **Origen** (d. 254) "[A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, 'I said, "To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity"' (Homilies in Leviticus 2:4 [A.D. 248]).
- d) **Cyprian of Carthage** (d. 250s) "The Apostle likewise bears witness and says: ' . . . Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord' [1 Cor. 11:27]. But [the impenitent] spurn and despise all these warnings; before their sins are expiated, before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at the hand of the priest . . . they do violence to his body and blood, and with their hands and mouth they sin against the Lord more than when they denied him" (The Lapsed 15:1)
- e) **Cyprian of Carthage**: "Of how much greater faith and salutary fear are they who . . . confess their sins to the priests of God in a straightforward manner and in sorrow, making an open declaration of conscience. . . . I beseech you, brethren, let everyone who has sinned confess his sin while he is still in this world, while his confession is still admissible, while the satisfaction and remission made through the priests are still pleasing before the Lord" (ibid., 28).
- f) **John Chrysostom** (d. 407): "Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: 'Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed.' Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding; but they can only bind the body. Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens. Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? 'Whose sins you shall forgive,' he says, 'they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.' What greater power is there than this? The Father has given all judgment to the Son. And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men [Matt. 10:40, John 20:21] The Priesthood 3:5 [A.D. 387]).
- f) **Ambrose of Milan** (d. 397): "For those to whom [the right of binding and loosing] has been given, it is plain that either both are allowed, or it is clear that neither is allowed. Both are allowed to the Church, neither is allowed to heresy. For this right has been granted to priests only" (Penance 1:1 [A.D. 388]).
- g) **Augustine** (d. 430): "When you shall have been baptized, keep to a good life in the commandments of God so that you may preserve your baptism to the very end. I do not tell you that you will live here without sin, but they are venial sins which this life is never without. Baptism was instituted for all sins. For light sins, without which we cannot live, prayer was instituted. . . . But do not commit those sins on account of which you would have to be separated from the body of Christ. Perish the thought! For those whom you see doing penance have committed crimes, either adultery or some other enormities. That is why they are doing penance. If their sins were light, daily prayer would suffice to blot them out. . . . In the Church, therefore, there are three ways in which sins are forgiven: in baptisms, in prayer, and in the greater humility of penance" (Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed 7:15, 8:16 [A.D. 395]).
- h) **Pope Leo I** (d. 461): "With regard to penance, what is demanded of the faithful is clearly not that an acknowledgment of the nature of individual sins written in a little book be read publicly, since it suffices that the states of conscience be made known to the priests alone in secret confession" (Magna indign. 2 [A.D. 459]).
- i) **St. Augustine** (d. 430) warns the faithful: "Let us not listen to those who deny that the Church of God has power to forgive all sins" (De agon. Christ., iii).
- j) **St. Ambrose** (d. 397) rebukes the Novatianists who "professed to show reverence for the Lord by reserving to Him alone the power of forgiving sins. Greater wrong could not be done than what they do in seeking to rescind His commands and fling back the office He bestowed. . . . The Church obeys Him in both respects, by binding sin and by loosing it; for the Lord willed that for both the power should be equal" (De poenit., I, ii, 6). Again he teaches that this power was to be a function of the priesthood. "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance; Christ granted this (power) to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests" (op. cit., II, ii, 12). The power to forgive extends to all sins: "God makes no distinction; He promised mercy to all and to His priests He granted the authority to pardon without any exception" (op. cit., I, iii, 10).
- k) Against the same heretics **St. Pacian**, Bishop of Barcelona (d. 390), wrote to Sympronianus, one of their leaders: "This (forgiving sins), you say, only God can do. Quite true: but what He does through His priests is the doing of His own power" (Ep. I ad Sympron, 6 in P.L., XIII, 1057).
- l) In the East during the same period we have the testimony of **St. Cyril of Alexandria** (d. 447): "Men filled with the spirit of God (i.e. priests) forgive sins in two ways, either by admitting to baptism those who are worthy or by pardoning the penitent children of the Church" (In Joan., 1, 12 in P.G., LXXIV, 722).

IX. The necessity and effects of the sacrament of reconciliation

- 1) The sacrament of reconciliation (confession, penance) is necessary for the salvation of all those who sin gravely after baptism.
- a) The Council of Trent was very clear: "For those who after baptism have fallen into sin, the Sacrament of Penance is as necessary unto salvation as is baptism itself for those who have not yet been regenerated" (Council of Trent, Sess. XIV, c. 2).

- b) Penance, therefore, is not an institution the use of which was left to the option of each sinner so that he might, if he preferred, hold aloof from the Church and secure forgiveness by some other means, e. g., by acknowledging his sin in the privacy of his own mind.
- c) As already stated, the power granted by Christ to the Apostles is twofold, to forgive and to retain, in such a way that what they forgive God forgives and what they retain God retains.
- 1) But this grant would be nullified if, in case the Church retained the sins of penitent, he could, as it were, take appeal to God's tribunal and obtain pardon.
 - 2) Nor would the power to retain have any meaning if the sinner, passing over the Church, went in the first instance to God, since by the very terms of the grant, God retains sin once committed so long as it is not remitted by the Church.
- d) It would indeed have been strangely inconsistent if Christ in conferring this twofold power on the Apostles had intended to provide some other means of forgiveness such as confessing "to God alone".
- e) Not only the Apostles, but any one with an elementary knowledge of human nature would have perceived at once that the easier means would be chosen and that the grant of power so formally and solemnly made by Christ had no real significance.
- f) Again, Christ *could have decided* that sins would normally be forgiven merely through private prayer, but he didn't. He knew the world would grow old before his return. With himself gone, he wanted his followers to have every possible consolation, every possible assurance, every possible help, so he instituted the sacrament through which we are reconciled to God. This is a great gift, coming from his love. Priests and bishops are doctors of the soul and not policemen trying to "bust" penitents!
- 2) Is the Catholic who confesses his sins to a priest any better off than the non-Catholic who confesses straight to God? Yes.
- 1) He seeks forgiveness the way Christ intended it to be sought.
 - 2) By confessing to a priest the Catholic learns a lesson in humility, which is conveniently avoided if one were to try to confess only through private prayer (and how we all desire to escape humbling experiences!).
 - 3) The Catholic receives sacramental graces the non-Catholic doesn't get; through the sacrament of penance not only are sins forgiven, but graces are obtained.
 - 4) This is in some ways the most important: the Catholic is assured that his sins are forgiven; he does not have to rely on a subjective "feeling."
 - 5) Lastly, the Catholic can also obtain sound advice on how to avoiding sin in the future, while the non-Catholic praying in private remains uninstructed.
- 3) What are the effects of the sacrament of Reconciliation? The spiritual effects are (cf CCC 1496):
- a) reconciliation with God by which the penitent recovers grace;

1468 "The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship." [73] Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament. For those who receive the sacrament of Penance with contrite heart and religious disposition, reconciliation "is usually followed by peace and serenity of conscience with strong spiritual consolation." [74] Indeed the sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God, of which the most precious is friendship with God. [75]

- b) reconciliation with the Church;

1443 During his public life Jesus not only forgave sins, but also made plain the effect of this forgiveness: he reintegrated forgiven sinners into the community of the People of God from which sin had alienated or even excluded them. A remarkable sign of this is the fact that Jesus receives sinners at his table, a gesture that expresses in an astonishing way both God's forgiveness and the return to the bosom of the People of God. [44]

1444 In imparting to his apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. This ecclesial dimension of their task is expressed most notably in Christ's solemn words to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." [45] "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of the apostles united to its head." [46]

1445 The words bind and loose mean: whomever you exclude from your communion, will be excluded from communion with God; whomever you receive anew into your communion, God will welcome back into his. Reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God.

1469 This sacrament reconciles us with the Church. Sin damages or even breaks fraternal communion. The sacrament of Penance repairs or restores it. In this sense it does not simply heal the one restored to ecclesial communion, but has also a revitalizing effect on the life of the Church which suffered from the sin of one of her members.[76] Re-established or strengthened in the communion of saints, the sinner is made stronger by the exchange of spiritual goods among all the living members of the Body of Christ, whether still on pilgrimage or already in the heavenly homeland:[77] It must be recalled that ... this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations, which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his innermost truth. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way offended and wounded. He is reconciled with the Church. He is reconciled with all creation.[78]

c) remission of the eternal punishment incurred by mortal sins;

1470 In this sacrament, the sinner, placing himself before the merciful judgment of God, anticipates in a certain way the judgment to which he will be subjected at the end of his earthly life. For it is now, in this life, that we are offered the choice between life and death, and it is only by the road of conversion that we can enter the Kingdom, from which one is excluded by grave sin.[79] In converting to Christ through penance and faith, the sinner passes from death to life and "does not come into judgment."[80]

d) remission, at least in part, of temporal punishments resulting from sin;

e) peace and serenity of conscience, and spiritual consolation;

f) an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle.

4) The formula of absolution that the priest uses summarizes the Church's teaching on the sacrament:

1449 The formula of absolution used in the Latin Church expresses the essential elements of this sacrament: the Father of mercies is the source of all forgiveness. He effects the reconciliation of sinners through the Passover of his Son and the gift of his Spirit, through the prayer and ministry of the Church:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.[48]

X. The distinction between mortal and venial sins and why mortal sins need to be confessed.

1) Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience (CCC 1854).

1John 5:16 If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one — to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.

2) Mortal sin (CCC 1855-61)

a) It destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law;

b) it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. (Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it).

c) Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us — that is, charity — necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation

1) When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object ... whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbor, such as homicide or adultery....

2) But when the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial.

d) For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: Mortal sin is sin

1) **Whose object is grave matter**

a) Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother."

- b) The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.
- c) What this means is that the Ten Commandments specify the categories to which grave matter applies. For example, "Thou shalt not steal" specifies the category of economics as one which, if abused, can have grave matter. "Thou shalt not bear false witness" specifies the category of truth telling, etc.
- d) This does not mean every sin in every one of these categories is objectively grave. The sin can be rendered light through particular circumstance. According to the Church's standard moral teachings, stealing ten dollars from a billionaire who has little need of it would be a light sin, not a grave one, but stealing the same ten dollars from a peasant who needs it in order to avoid starving to death would be a grave sin. In the same way, telling a "little white lie" would usually be a venial sin, but perjuring yourself under oath and sending an innocent man to prison would be a grave one.

2) Which is also committed with full knowledge

- a) This presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law.
- b) It does not presuppose that one might understand all the reasons why it is considered so sinful, but that it is known to be sinful, to be opposed to God's law, in the eyes of the Church.

3) And deliberate consent — This implies a consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice.

- a) It has to be a real choice. If someone is forced under duress to do something, there would likely not be sufficient personal choice. The sin might be venial or there might not be a sin at all.
- b) Feigned ignorance and hardness of heart do not diminish, but rather increase, the voluntary character of a sin.
 - 1) What the Catechism says about feigned ignorance is important. Often times people refuse to investigate something or to look at evidence concerning what God wants of them in an attempt to "protect themselves" from knowing, and thus being obligated to do, something they don't want to do.
 - 2) In such cases, one is feigning ignorance rather than investigating the matter as one should. Only unintentional ignorance diminishes one's accountability for sin.
- c) Unintentional ignorance can diminish or even remove the imputability of a grave offense.
- d) But no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man.
- e) The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders.
- f) Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.
- e) Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself.
 - a) It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace.
 - b) If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back.
 - c) However, although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God.

3) Venial sin (CCC 1862-63)

- a) 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 complete consent.
- b) Venial sin weakens charity;
- c) It manifests a disordered affection for created goods;
- d) It impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good;
- e) It merits temporal punishment.
- f) Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin.
- g) However venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God;
- h) It does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly reparable. "
- i) Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church (CCC 1458)
 - 1) Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience,
 - 2) fight against evil tendencies,
 - 3) let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit.

- 4) By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father's mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful.

4) A short history of the teaching on mortal sins:

- a) The early Church Fathers, of course, were unanimous in teaching the reality of mortal sin. They had to because they also unanimously accepted the essential Christian teaching that "baptism . . . now saves you" (1 Peter. 3:21).
- b) But since in the persecutions some baptized people denied Christ, and since Christ taught that "whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:33), the Church Fathers recognized that it was possible to lose salvation after baptism.
- c) The idea one could never lose salvation would have been unimaginable to them since it was evident from the Bible that baptism saves, that the baptized can deny Christ, and that those who deny Christ will not be saved unless they repent (as did Peter).
- d) We can see two patristic sources:

Jerome: "There are venial sins and there are mortal sins. It is one thing to owe ten thousand talents, another to owe but a farthing. We shall have to give an accounting for an idle word no less than for adultery. But to be made to blush and to be tortured are not the same thing; not the same thing to grow red in the face and to be in agony for a long time. . . . If we entreat for lesser sins we are granted pardon, but for greater sins, it is difficult to obtain our request. There is a great difference between one sin and another" (Against Jovinian 2:30 [A.D. 393]).

Caesarius of Arles: "Although the Apostle has mentioned many grievous sins, we, nevertheless, lest we seem to promote despair, will state briefly what they are. Sacrilege, murder, adultery, false witness, theft, robbery, pride, envy, avarice, and, if it is of long standing, anger, drunkenness, if it is persistent, and slander are reckoned in their number. Or if anyone knows that these sins dominate him, if he does not do penance worthily and for a long time, if such time is given him . . . he cannot be purged in that transitory fire of which the Apostle spoke [1 Cor. 3:11-15], but the eternal flames will torture him. without any remedy. But since the lesser sins are, of course, known to all, and it would take too long to mention them all, it will be necessary for us only to name some of them. . . . There is no doubt that these and similar deeds belong to the lesser sins which, as I said before, can scarcely be counted, and from which not only all Christian people, but even all the saints could not and cannot always be free. We do not, of course, believe that the soul is killed by these sins, but still they make it ugly by covering it as if with some kind of pustules and, as it were, with horrible scabs" (Sermons 179[104]:2 [A.D. 522]).

- e) It was not until the time of John Calvin that anyone would claim that it was impossible for a true Christian to lose his salvation.
 - 1) That teaching (which was not even shared by Martin Luther and his followers) was a theological novelty of the mid-sixteenth century which would have been condemned as a dangerous heresy by all previous generations of Christians
 - a) dangerous because it would either drive people to the despair of thinking they had never been true Christians if they had committed grave sins (followed by anxiety over whether any subsequent conversion was genuine since their first ones had not been genuine according to this teaching)
 - b) or it would drive them into thinking that their grave sins were really not grave at all, for no true Christian could have committed such sins.
 - 2) In time the "once saved, always saved" teaching even degenerated in many Evangelical circles to the point that some would claim that a Christian could commit grave sins and still remain saved.
 - 3) Fortunately, most Christians today reject the teaching error and acknowledge that there are at least some mortal sins — sins which can crush the spiritual life out of the soul and deprive a person of salvation unless he repents. Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals--all acknowledge the possibility of mortal sin at least in some form. Only Presbyterians, Baptists, and those who have been influenced by Presbyterians and Baptists maintain the opposite.

XI. The requirements for an integral confession

- 1) To make a good confession and truly be absolved by God of the guilt of sins against him, three things are necessary on the part of the penitent (the one going to confession):
 - a) **Contrition** (CCC 1451-53)
 - 1) Among the penitent's acts contrition occupies first place.

- 2) Contrition is "sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again."
- 3) When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called "perfect" (contrition of charity).
 - a) Such contrition remits venial sins;
 - b) it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.
- 4) The contrition called "imperfect" (or "attrition") is also a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit.
 - a) It is born of the consideration of sin's ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner (contrition of fear).
 - b) Such a stirring of conscience can initiate an interior process which, under the prompting of grace, will be brought to completion by sacramental absolution.
 - c) By itself however, imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.

b) Confession of sins (CCC 1456-1457)

- 1) Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance.
- 2) "All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession, even if they are most secret and have been committed against the last two precepts of the Decalogue; for these sins sometimes wound the soul more grievously and are more dangerous than those which are committed openly."
- 3) When Christ's faithful strive to confess all the sins that they can remember, they undoubtedly place all of them before the divine mercy for pardon.
- 4) But those who fail to do so and knowingly withhold some, place nothing before the divine goodness for remission through the mediation of the priest, "for if the sick person is too ashamed to show his wound to the doctor, the medicine cannot heal what it does not know."
- 5) 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."
- 6) Anyone who is aware of having committed a mortal sin must not receive Holy Communion (see below), 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.
- 7) Children must go to the sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion for the first time

c) Satisfaction (doing the penance) (CCC 1459-1460)

- 1) Many sins wrong our neighbor. One must do what is possible in order to repair the harm (e.g., return stolen goods, restore the reputation of someone slandered, pay compensation for injuries). Simple justice requires as much.
- 2) But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor.
- 3) Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused.
- 4) Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must "make satisfaction for" or "expiate" his sins. This satisfaction is also called "penance."
- 5) The penance the confessor imposes must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good.
 - a) It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed.
 - b) It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear.
 - c) Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all.
 - d) They allow us to become co-heirs with the risen Christ, "provided we suffer with him."
 - e) The satisfaction that we make for our sins, however, is not so much ours as though it were not done through Jesus Christ. We who can do nothing ourselves, as if just by ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of "him who strengthens" us. Thus man has nothing of which to boast, but all our boasting is in Christ ... in whom we make satisfaction by bringing forth "fruits that befit repentance." These fruits have their efficacy from him, by him they are offered to the Father, and through him they are accepted by the Father.

2) The Catholic teaching consequently is:

- a) that all mortal sins must be confessed of which the penitent is conscious, for these are so related that noone of them can be remitted until all are remitted.
- b) Remission means that the soul is restored to the friendship of God, and this is obviously impossible if there remain unforgiven even a single mortal sin.
- c) Hence, the penitent, who in confession willfully conceals a mortal sin, derives no benefit whatever; on the contrary, he makes void the sacrament and thereby incurs the guilt of sacrilege.
- d) If, however, the sin be omitted, not through any fault of the penitent, but through forgetfulness, it is forgiven indirectly; but it must be declared at the next confession and thus submitted to the power of the keys.

XII. General Sacramental Absolution (CCC 1483-1484)

- 1) In case of grave necessity recourse may be had to a communal celebration of reconciliation with general confession and general absolution.
 - a) 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.
 - b) 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. A large gathering of the faithful on the occasion of major feasts or pilgrimages does not constitute a case of grave necessity.
- 2) For the absolution to be valid in the case of general absolution, the faithful must have the intention of individually confessing their sins in the time required.
- 3) The diocesan bishop (not the priest) is the judge of whether or not the conditions required for general absolution exist.
- 4) "Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession."
 - a) There are profound reasons for this. Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner: "My son, your sins are forgiven." [95] He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. [96] He raises them up and reintegrates them into fraternal communion.
 - b) Personal confession is thus the form most expressive of reconciliation with God and with the Church.
- 5) Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church.

XIII. The necessity of being in the state of grace for the reception of the Lord in Holy Communion.

- 1) Following upon the clear teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, the Church has always maintained that to be fit to receive Holy Communion, one must be "morally certain" that he or she is in the state of grace.

1Cor. 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 27 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. 28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. 30 For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

- 2) How this moral certainty of being in the state of grace has been interpreted practically throughout the centuries of the Church is that one needs to be morally certain that you have not committed any mortal sins since the last time you received Christ's absolution in the Sacrament of Penance.
- 3) The clear and unchanging teaching of the Church regarding worthy reception of Holy Communion was recently reiterated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992):

1385 To respond to this invitation [of the Lord to eat his flesh and drink his blood] we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29). Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.

1415 Anyone who desires to receive Christ in Eucharistic communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive communion without having received absolution in the Sacrament of Penance.

1457 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

4) There were a handful of people upset that in my homily for the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of our Lady I mentioned this teaching. I'd like to review what was said:

- a) I first mentioned that the Fathers of the Church had always taught that the reason why Mary was immaculately conceived was so that she could receive the Son of God within her without any stain of sin.
- b) I mentioned that we, unlike Mary, are not immaculately conceived, but that Jesus has instituted two awesome sacraments — baptism and confession — so that we might be able to receive him in the fullness of grace and the Church has always clearly required us to do so.
- c) I then mentioned several sins:
 - 1) Not coming to Mass on weekends (except for illness)
 - 2) stealing
 - 3) being seriously disobedient to parents
 - 4) sleeping with a boyfriend or girlfriend,
 - 5) looking at pornography on the web, tv, or in magazines,
 - 6) telling serious lies,
 - 7) doing drugs or getting hammered with booze,
 - 8) committing envious actions to harm others, and so forth
- d) Each of these sins has been traditionally considered grave matter by the Church. Unless someone were ignorant that these were not clearly considered serious sins by the Church (which is very hard to believe in a Catholic school where most of the students have been going to Catholic school for 9-12 years) or unless someone were either preventing that person from doing something they should or forcing someone to do something they shouldn't, they would be mortal sins.
- e) As I mentioned in the homily, in order to receive Jesus in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, it is first necessary, if you're aware of having committed any of these sins, to go to Jesus first in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- f) Someone mentioned to a teacher the comment, "Well, if we can't go to Communion, what's the point of going to Mass?"
 - 1) There's always a point in praying, even if one is in the state of sin. God can give the person actual graces which may make total conversion easier or which at least may prevent the person from falling further into sin.
 - 2) The much better question would be why does the person think that the Church's teachings should conform to his or her morality, rather than conform his morality to the teachings of the Church Christ founded. In other words, "What's the point of sinning if it means excommunicating oneself from Christ in the Eucharist?"
 - 3) Jesus taught clearly that there are choices that each of us has to make, between serving and loving Him, receiving his gifts, or between rejecting him. If we reject him in our actions, then we're hypocrites to try to say we're in communion with Him through receiving His body and blood during Mass. If we're faithful to him, then our reception of His body and blood is consistent. Jesus says clearly we need to make a choice between loving God or selfishly serving ourselves.

Matt. 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Matt. 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Matt. 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. **30** And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

Matt. 10:37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; **38** and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Matt. 18:7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! 8 “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

Luke 14:26 “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 11:23 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

James 1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.

- 4) If we find ourselves in the situation of having selfishly served ourselves and neglected him, He’s now waiting for us in the tribunal of his mercy to welcome us back! Let us go!

Luke 15:7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.