

individual satisfactions here and now. Between the Incarnation and the Parousia, the word and the sacraments are gathering mankind into a tremendous *Gestalt* or total pattern of freely-accepted inter-related meanings. In particular, sacramental marriage is not simply a one-to-one relationship, but an entry into the great sign of matrimony cutting across time and space.

But what comfort can these lines of argument bring to people involved in a sacramental and shipwrecked marriage? Only perhaps this, that such a marriage, hopelessly burned-out as regards husband and wife, may still be fruitful for the building-up of the total sign of marriage in the Church, if one or both of the partners is still drawing on the continuing graces of the sacrament. The resurrection makes diamonds from the ashes of love.

The Falling Number of Confessions—Development or Deviation?—I

by Piers Linley, O.P.

As a result of the changes inaugurated by Vatican II our eucharistic experience is now very different from what it was a few years ago. But what about our experience of the sacrament of Confession? Here the shift during these same few years has rather been simply from experience to non-experience. Though statistics are hard to come by and motivation difficult to establish, it seems certain that the number of confessions has fallen.

Now this is not a shift inaugurated by Vatican II. The Council reaffirmed the value of this sacrament and reiterated the principle laid down in Canon Law that priests should 'show themselves entirely and always ready to perform the office of the sacrament of penance as often as the faithful reasonably request it' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, c. III, Abbott translation, p. 561). It seems clear that this does not mean merely the provision of regular times on Saturdays and on the eves of feasts but also urges that priests should respond unhesitatingly to a spontaneous request to hear a confession. Beyond this the Council did not go except to recommend a revision of the rites and formulas of the sacrament—a revision that has not yet been carried out. The falling number of confessions has been brought about, therefore, by the decisions of individuals. This growing feeling within the Church that the sacrament need not be received so frequently must be recognized and respected. It must also be

critically examined. Is it a development, orthodox and legitimate, of the Church's experience of divine mercy? Or, on the contrary, is it an aggressive, individualistic deviation from the sound tradition of the Church? Rather than rush to any such sweeping judgments we must first ask what it is that this sacrament celebrates and what is the previous experience of the Church in this matter.

'God destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will. . . . In Christ . . . we have the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us' (Ephesians 1, 5–8). We might put it this way: of all the persons we know, the three most prejudiced are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They will not be objective about us, us whom they created in their own image. It is just the worthless who so fascinate the Father that when he sent the Son, he sent him not to save the 'righteous' but to save sinners. God is obsessed by just those men who most distort his plan for a garden in which men might live at peace with themselves and all creation. The gospel parables—especially that of the pharisee and the tax collector—make it clear that it is because we are sinners that God is on our side. So there are two dimensions to our recognition of our sinfulness. There will be much of which we are ashamed, of which we speak only with reluctance. But we do not confess our sins in loneliness. God so desired to be on our side that he came in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ, to be completely one with us, to find out what it was like to feel the weight of sin. Jesus came to experience on his innocent shoulders the weight of temptation. It is because he himself suffered and was tempted that he is able to help us when we are tempted (Hebrews 2, 18). Jesus became one with us in all things but sin: he felt our guilt all the more deeply for being himself sinless. This is the Jesus who shares our humanity more deeply than we do and thus reveals to us that the Father's final Word is mercy. It is just when we think that there is no longer hope for us that the mercy of Christ takes hold of us and, like the tax collector, we go down to our house justified.

We do not, therefore, confess ourselves sinners as if we were asking for a forgiveness that might be refused us. God always thinks better of us than we do of ourselves. He is a biased judge, unable to lay aside or hide his prejudice. The goddess of justice on the Old Bailey holds impartial scales and is blind-folded: neither blindness nor impartiality belong to the prejudiced God we worship. Whatever divine justice grants to us is given as our due on account of something which has already come to us as a gift of divine mercy. By his justice God confirms his prejudice of mercy. What have we that we did not receive as a gift? (I Corinthians 4, 7). When we confess ourselves sinners, we undoubtedly need to look at what is blackest in our lives. But we must do this in the sense of the psalm, 'Let us confess to the Lord that his mercy endures for ever' (Psalm 135. Vulgate). We

confess our sins to praise God for having forgiven them. We join in the greater rejoicing that there is over the one sinner who does penance than over the ninety-nine who do not need to repent.

To understand the present situation we must first of all look at how God's prejudice has been expressed in his Church in the past. How have the People of God dealt with the sinner among them? The history of the sacrament has been complicated and difficult: only a selective outline can be given. (B. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, is the most readily available standard history. P. F. Palmer's *Sacraments and Forgiveness* is a valuable collection of relevant texts.)

For St Paul the recognition of one's own sinfulness was a part of the Christian experience and he urged the need for continual repentance. But Paul does not think that the average Christian is perpetually in imminent danger of sinning seriously. We are in God's love securely, not precariously. Nevertheless there were serious sinners in the churches Paul ministered to and he does not hesitate to act officially when it is necessary. The Corinthians had one of their number who was guilty of incest: Paul over-rules their reluctance to act and bids them 'deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (1 Corinthians 5, 5). But someone so treated should not be looked on as an enemy but warned as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3, 15). Excluding him from the eucharistic community is intended to confront the man with his need to repent. The Church excludes only in order to reconcile, binds in order to loose. The Church punishes to bring about the reconversion of the one who is punished. In a later letter to the Corinthians, Paul authorizes the readmission of a sinner—traditionally thought to be the same man (2 Corinthians 2, 5f). Paul seems to have presumed that the Church's action would normally be effective in bringing a man to repentance and that someone excluded would normally be readmitted.

During the post-apostolic age, writers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna make reference to the practice of the Church but without giving any full details of procedure. The general picture which emerges is perhaps best suggested by what Justin Martyr says about the eucharist in his *First Apology*, written about the year 155: 'Bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability' (*First Apology*, c. 67). There is as yet no fixed or standard eucharistic prayer. Similarly, it is the individual bishop who determines how he will cope with the problems of sinners in his own church. The discipline of the Church begins to take a more uniform shape when the rise of widely spreading errors or protest movements necessitate the formation of a common policy. The bishop would be concerned, of course, only with sinners whose offences were immediately recognizable as

presenting grave threats to the well-being of the Christian community.

One basic tension becomes visible in the life and work of Tertullian. During his Catholic period, between 193 and 207, he wrote a treatise *De Paenitentia*. He discusses the nature of conversion and what penance should be done by way of preparation for baptism. He goes on to discuss the second penance that is available for sins committed after baptism but not without first expressing a doubt. 'By upholding the possibility of a second way of doing penance it would seem that I am proving that there is still time for sinning' (*De Paenitentia*, c. 7). Later in his life, for he joined the heretical Montanists about 207, it becomes clear through his rigorism that he never resolved this particular hesitation. Repudiating his former views, he becomes the advocate of a rigorism that would exclude some sinners from reconciliation even on their death bed.

The tension revealed in Tertullian's thought precipitated into a crisis in the middle of the third century. Until the year 250 persecution of the Church had been unsystematic and sporadic. The Emperor Decius, however, began to demand that Christians produce certificates that they had offered sacrifice in the cult of emperor worship. Many obtained such certificates by bribery but there were also many who did actually sacrifice. When these two categories of the lapsed sought reconciliation with the Church, a dispute arose in which Cyprian, bishop of Carthage and later himself a martyr, played the leading part. The principle Cyprian supported against both lax and rigorist extremes was that reconciliation could and should be granted even to these apostates but that long penances should first be endured. In the event of danger of death before the penance had been completed reconciliation should be granted immediately, but the obligation of penance remained if the sinner lived.

The controversies associated with Tertullian and Cyprian manifest truly fundamental tensions within the Church. Are there sins so grave as to lie outside the Church's power to reconcile? How is the balance to be held between leniency and laxity? Is the Church's power to forgive sins identical with God's? That God's prejudice must be the Church's too, that the Church can and should forgive all sins, is a hard-won insight perilously preserved.

Although there were variations from place to place and differences between east and west, the manner of administering penance to the sinner gradually took on a more defined shape. By about the end of the third century the general pattern was typically something like this: The sinner went to the bishop or to a priest delegated by him and explained the nature of his sin and its circumstances. The bishop, taking note of these circumstances and of the sorrow for his sin manifested by the sinner, decided for how long the sinner should take his place among the penitents. The process of confessing sin was secret in that, although it was expected that public penance should be done even for secret sin, the nature of the sin was not thereby

revealed. The bishop then enrolled the sinner among the penitents by means of a public ceremony which usually involved the laying on of hands. The penitents who were doing public penance were a clearly defined group within the local church community. They had to modify their way of life considerably while doing penance. Often they had to wear special clothes—haircloth made of goatskin. They could not hold any public office. If married, they were forbidden sexual intercourse. They might be allowed to attend only part of the eucharist, at which in any case they were together as a group in a specially allotted part of the church building and had to remain kneeling even when others stood as a sign of rejoicing on a feast day. However, the group of penitents was very much an object of concern. Everyone prayed for them and encouraged them and the bishop gave them a special blessing at the eucharist. When Jerome, in his *Dialogue Against the Luciferans*, c. 5, says that the bishop readmits a sinner to the altar only after all the members of the church have wept together, he does not mean it merely metaphorically. Bishop and people alike identified themselves with the penitents, wept with them and prayed with them, shared their fasting and penitential practices and, above all, prayed for them. Eventually, their repentance sufficiently tested, the penitents were reconciled by the bishop and readmitted to communicant participation in the eucharist. However, they were even then expected to persevere in the penitential style of life until death. The sinner might well be required to spend many years in the group of penitents before being reconciled, although the custom did grow up whereby the sinner was enrolled among the penitents on Ash Wednesday and reconciled at Easter. It is important to stress that this public or canonical penance was granted to a sinner only once in a lifetime.

It is clear that the way of life demanded of the public penitent approximated to that of a present-day religious order. The implications of this are important. The majority of Christians were unlikely ever to receive forgiveness of their sins through what we should now recognize as the 'sacrament of penance'. Possidius tells us in his biography of Augustine of Hippo (c. 31) how Augustine prepared himself for death by praying the penitential psalms; there was no reason why it should occur to Augustine to seek forgiveness in any other way.

Obviously the institution of public penance was too demanding for those who were most in need of it. The consequences of this were what we would expect. Sinners needing public penance put off undertaking the heavy obligations of the penitent as long as possible, until death-bed reconciliations became normal. The tendency was for everyone, regardless of the gravity of his sin, to become a penitent when near to death, and reconciliation became a part of the rites for the dying. The arduous practices of the penitent were sometimes taken up not so much as repentance for sin but rather as a special

dedication to a more perfect way of life. Consequently the penitent might well be looked up to as following a superior way.

In the age of public penance, the sinner's fasting, mortification and performance of the stipulated penance was in essence his re-commitment, his second conversion. Penance was often paralleled to baptism and described as a second baptism. Penance was the sign of and the stimulus to a heart-felt sorrow for sin. To see it as a making of recompense to God or to the Church for sin, to see it, that is, as a re-balancing of the scales of justice, would imply a false view of our relationship to God.

Meanwhile, in the east, especially in Egypt, another development had been taking place that was to have considerable repercussions for the Church's care for sinners. The monastic life had begun to flourish. If we study the lives of its great founders such as Antony (he died in 356 and the *Life of St Antony* by St Athanasius was a seminal inspiration) or Benedict, we find that monastic life began as groups of disciples clustering round a spiritual master. If we wish to evoke a scriptural image, we might think of the disciples in St Luke's gospel (11, 1) who ask Jesus to teach them to pray because they recognize that he is fitted to do so by his own experience of prayer. In parallel fashion the aspiring 'monk' took some ascetic for his spiritual guide and prayer-friend who both gave him counsel and interceded for him in his own prayer. This was quite distinct from the institutional, episcopal forgiveness of sins for the spiritual guide was often not a priest and occasionally a woman so functioned. It was not an office to which the institutional Church appointed someone. Rather, a man became a spiritual guide at the instigation of those who recognized his charismatic gifts and demanded just this kind of help from him.

Now this tradition, though native to the Egyptian desert, strongly influenced Irish Christianity. Among the Irish the pastoral charge was for long centred on monks rather than bishops. The monks were great travellers abroad and it was through them that the influence of the desert tradition was felt in Ireland. Moreover the Irish Church, being otherwise rather isolated from the mainstream of ecclesiastical development, had never known the public, canonical form of penance. There was no question in this Church of canonical obligations attached to penance nor was penance a once-only concession. Among the Irish penance consisted of a confessing of sins, the imposition of a penance and then a reconciliation which became something granted immediately and not deferred till the penance had been completed. In the Irish Church this practice and the eastern tradition of 'spiritual direction' had mutually influenced one another. When the Irish began to evangelize abroad they took their penitential practice with them. Columbanus, c. 550–615 is a notable instance. It would seem that a trend had already begun to make penance repeatable and that the Irish influence helped to establish

this as definitive. In 589 the third Council of Toledo insists on the old canonical forms being used because it is aware that in some Spanish churches the custom has arisen of sinners asking for reconciliation as often as they commit sin (Palmer, p. 126). However a Council at Chalon in 644 is already declaring that penance is useful for everyone. A penance should in fact be imposed as often as someone confesses. The old canonical custom—though the Pontifical still preserves it to our own day—gradually gives place to a readily repeatable sacrament. Indeed laws eventually appear requiring that the sacrament be received a specified number of times a year—one, two or three in different legislation.

We must not overlook the various aspects of this shift. Its consequences are far-reaching. It is clear, first of all, that more frequent confession brings it about that what is confessed is no longer only the serious sin. The sorrow for sin that Augustine expressed through the psalms can now be brought to the sacrament. Thus arises what is sometimes called the 'confession of devotion'. Statistically speaking this is the normal use of the sacrament.

A second change is a new stress on the actual act of confessing. This is felt as the sacrament's most characteristic act, and the use of the term 'confession' to refer to the sacrament as a whole originates about the eighth century. The humiliation once attached to the public performance of penance and acknowledgment of one's sinfulness comes to be experienced more privately. It is as if the act of confessing now had something of the value that previously the performance of penance had.

The most radical change, however, is at the liturgical level. Hitherto a group of penitents had been cared for by bishop, priest and people, each performing their own proper liturgical function. Now priest and sinner meet alone. That the priest combines in his action the former roles of all these is true but very far from obvious. The liturgical fullness formerly associated with the sacrament has vanished—a state of affairs still with us. Medieval pre-occupation with the instrumentality of the sacraments (it is at this period that the Church clearly differentiates and enumerates the seven sacraments for the first time) lead to a stress on the priest's action in absolving. The obtaining of absolution becomes more central. The indicative form of it ('I absolve you . . .') is held in the western Church to be definitive and necessary. Thomas Aquinas in his defence of it claims for it an antiquity that it certainly does not possess. For all practical purposes the sacrament has achieved very much its present form. The confessional box seems to have come into general use in the seventeenth century; henceforth the sacrament of mercy is between priest and penitent, and they meet not face to face but through a grille darkly. The sacrament is naturally enough the most likely locus of 'spiritual direction'. A recommendation that religious

should receive it weekly is incorporated in the present Canon Law of the Church.

A few years ago therefore the position was, in the western Church at any rate, that a single threadbare rite had to contain within itself as best it could three functions. It was used for the reconciliation of the sinner whose sin was so grave as to exclude him from full participation in the eucharist. It served also for the 'confession of devotion' wherein the normal sinfulness to which the Christian is prone was confessed and he was confirmed in God's mercy. Finally this sacrament was also a locus of counsel of whatever sort, for problems of great diversity whether they be in prayer, in the moral life or any other area.

Now, the fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215, invoking the image of the good samaritan, bids the priest hearing confessions to give whatever counsel may best help the penitent be healed from his sins. This is a responsibility which priests must be prepared to carry out as best they can, but it would be unrealistic to expect that what is more of a charism than an office would be conferred on every priest equally. Furthermore both the physical environment created by the average confessional box and the shortness of the time available for each penitent would often hinder good counselling. The increasing tendency for the sacrament to be requested and administered outside the concept of the normal confessional box reflects an awareness of these limitations and a desire for a more personalized experience of forgiveness. But, in any case, the ability to give counsel, to listen sensitively, is often more highly developed outside the priestly role. This aspect of the sacrament, important though it is, we must leave aside in order to discuss rather the more narrowly sacramental function of forgiveness of sins and celebration of divine mercy. At this critical period it is these that require our attention more.

We must ask whether the falling number of confessions reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the Church's present law and liturgy. After all, the Church at the moment provides only one procedure for the repentance of offences of whatever gravity. Has this contributed to the priest in the box being seen as a kind of magic man? Furthermore, is this way of seeing the priest not a large cause of the very individualistic interpretation of sin and the sacrament of mercy for sin in recent centuries? We should be able to raise such questions without nervousness. It is clear that the sacrament has been cast in very different forms in different epochs. The experience of God's prejudice is too rich to be confined within the vessels provided for it any particular age. Each change in the Church's life has drawn attention to another aspect of God's revelation: each has also had about it its own particular one-sidedness. So, to understand the situation today, we must attempt to look at the theological principles involved.

(To be concluded)