

Frequent Confession

Benedict Baur

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Frequent Confession

Its place in the spiritual life

Instructions and considerations for the frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance

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Introduction

"May you succeed in being, during this Holy Year, in a particularly willing and generous way, the ministers of the sacrament of Penance."¹

This was an appeal of the Holy Father in his 1983 *Letter to Priests* on the occasion of Holy Thursday. It follows the many references to the sacrament of Reconciliation in the documents issued in preparation for the Jubilee, as well as the urgent invitation made by him, several of his predecessors, and the Second Vatican Council to make priests more and more aware of their irreplaceable role in the ministry of sacramental forgiveness.

In this context, a new edition of Abbot Baur's *Frequent Confession* is certainly welcome. The book is considered by many people such a spiritual classic that it may seem unnecessary to write an introduction to this edition. However, the practice of frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance has been so neglected in recent years and so discouraged in certain places among the young and the not-so-young that it is imperative to emphasize that it is not true that frequent confession is an outmoded practice or a fad of the 1950s or an expression of post-World War II fervor, like the baby boom or young college graduates joining contemplative orders, which weren't fads either, but two concrete and visible expressions of a true Christian outlook on human life, something well worth pondering in these days of abortion and scarcity of religious vocations.

Responsible voices in the Church have spoken about the decline in the use of the sacrament of Penance. 'You are surely as aware as I am,' said Cardinal Oddi, "and even more aware because of your daily pastoral cares, that the number of confessions among the faithful has declined appreciably over the past decade and a half; while it is reported simultaneously that, despite the small number of confessions, almost everyone at Sunday Mass goes to Holy Communion. The implication of this phenomenon is obvious, and the opposite of healthy."²

Pope John Paul II himself made reference to this fact in his address to the American bishops during his visit to the United States in 1979. "In the face of a widespread phenomenon of our times, namely, that many of our people who are among the great numbers who receive Communion make little use of Confession, we must emphasize Christ's basic call to

conversion. We must also stress that the personal encounter with the forgiving Jesus in the sacrament of Reconciliation is a divine means that keeps alive in our hearts and in our communities a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, and that actually brings forth, by the action of Jesus and the power of his Spirit, fruits of conversion in justice and holiness of life. By this sacrament we are renewed in fervor, strengthened in our resolves, and buoyed by divine encouragement."³

In a famous passage of the 1943 encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ, which Abbot Baur quotes and which Magisterial documents (particularly Pope John Paul II's) have repeatedly referred to in the last forty years, Pope Pius XII warned about "the opinions of those who assert that little importance should be given to the frequent confession of venial sins." He stated in very clear words that "to ensure more rapid progress day by day in the path of virtue, we will that the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be earnestly advocated." He cited some of the benefits to be derived from it: "Genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the sacrament itself."⁴

The Holy Father was echoing, with the firmness of the highest authority in the Church, the constant teaching of the masters of the interior life and, as Paul VI said in his first encyclical, "the interior life remains the great source of the Church's spirituality, her own proper way of receiving the illuminations of the Spirit of Christ, the fundamental and irreplaceable manifestation of her religious and social activity, an impregnable defense as well as an inexhaustible source of energy in her difficult contacts with the world."⁵

Pope John Paul II has reminded us that "the ways on which the Council of this century has set the Church going, ways indicated by the late Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical, will continue to be for a long time the ways that all of us must follow."⁶

If we want to have interior life we must use the means, and frequent confession is one of the important means, very much related to others—humility, the struggle against venial sin and lukewarmness, self-discipline, openness to the sources of grace. In one of his homilies Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer said: "The virtue of hope assures us that God governs us with his all-powerful providence and that he gives us all the means we need. ... And our conviction that we are nothing (it doesn't take a high degree of humility to recognize the truth that we are nothing but a row of zeros) will turn into irresistible strength, because Christ will be the one to the left of these zeros, converting them into an immeasurable figure! ... To win the battles of the soul, the best strategy often is to bide one's time and apply the suitable remedy with patience and perseverance. ... Our all-powerful and merciful Lord has granted us the precise means with which to conquer. As I have already mentioned, all we have to do is to use them, resolving to begin again and again at every moment, should it prove necessary. I would like to see you going to the holy sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of divine forgiveness, every week, and indeed whenever you need it, without giving in to scruples. Clothed in grace, we can cross mountains (cf. Ps 103: 10), and climb the hill of our Christian duty, without halting on the way."⁷

The concluding words of Pius XII in the paragraph of his encyclical quoted above were strong enough to settle the issue: "Let those, therefore, among the younger clergy who make light of or lessen esteem for frequent confession realize that what they are doing is alien to the Spirit of Christ and disastrous for the Mystical Body of our Savior."⁸

But he found it necessary to discuss the subject again. In the 1947 encyclical on the liturgy, he insisted: "Since the opinions expressed by some about frequent confession are completely foreign to the Spirit of Christ and his immaculate Spouse and are also most dangerous to the spiritual life, let us call to mind that with sorrow we wrote about this point in the encyclical on the Mystical Body. We urgently insist once more that what we expounded in very serious words be proposed by you for the serious consideration and dutiful obedience of your flock, especially to students for the priesthood and young clergy."⁹

The mind of Pius XII on the matter was expressed again in his 1950 apostolic exhortation to the clergy, where he spoke of the importance of

frequent confession for priests and where he repeated the very same list of benefits to be obtained from it that he had given seven years earlier.¹⁰ Saints and popes before Pius XII had spoken about the subject. To quote only one, who was both a pope and a saint, Pius X in a 1910 encyclical wrote about the means for spiritual growth that Jesus Christ so lavishly communicates to his followers, "especially prayer, sacrifice and the sacraments. ... False reformers, however, despise these means. ... In this respect the false reformers of former days are even surpassed by their modern followers. These latter, wearing the mask of religiosity, discredit and despise these means of salvation, especially the two sacraments which cleanse the penitent soul from sin and feed it with celestial food. Let every faithful pastor, therefore, employ the utmost zeal in seeing that the benefits of such great value be held in the highest esteem. Let them never permit these two works of divine love to grow cold in the hearts of men."¹¹ Let us recall that to the pontificate of this saintly pope belongs also the decree on the first reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist,¹² which became of current interest in the seventies, as we will see later.

What about more recent times? Has the Church of the sixties, the seventies, and the eighties, the Church of the twentieth-century council and the post-council, the Church of Popes John and Paul and the two John Pauls spoken concretely about frequent confession? Has it not been in the post-conciliar years that the practice has been abandoned by so many people? The answer is that the Church has spoken often and clearly.

In the 1959 encyclical on the Cure of Ars, Pope John XXIII spoke passionately about the work of St. John Vianney as a confessor. His words show perfect continuity with the teaching of his immediate predecessor on the matter and in the following he quoted the three references of Pius XII mentioned above. "Stirred by the example of the Cure of Ars, let all directors of souls see to it that they devote themselves generously and be equipped with the proper knowledge to this duty of such great importance, since it is here particularly that the divine mercy emerges victorious over human malice, and here that, freed from their sins, men are reconciled with God. These same men should also remember that 'with very serious words' our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, reproved

the opinion of those who belittle the frequent use of the sacrament of Penance when it is a matter of venial sins. ... And likewise we are completely confident that priests, before others, will faithfully obey the prescriptions of canon law which command them piously and at definite times to receive themselves the sacrament of Penance which is so necessary for the attainment of holiness. We are also confident that, as is fitting, they may have the highest esteem for and make use of those urgent exhortations which this same predecessor of ours more than once imparted 'with sorrowful soul.'"¹³

The Holy Father practiced what he preached. Pope John, who has sometimes been misrepresented, liked to write those retreat notes that have become after his death, together with many other things, an expression of his soul. In 1961, at age eighty, he wrote: "First of all: 'I confess to Almighty God.' During my whole life I have kept faithful to my practice of weekly confession. Several times during my life I have renewed my general confession."¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council used more than once the expression "frequent reception of the sacraments,"¹⁵ obviously referring to the only two sacraments that can be received often, namely, the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance, and insisted, as we will see later, on the availability of priests to hear the confessions of the faithful, in the spirit of Christ the Shepherd, making themselves altogether and always ready whenever the sacrament is reasonably sought by the faithful. That is, using a happy expression of Pope John Paul II, "what the Spirit said to the Church through the Council of our time."¹⁶

Post-conciliar documents on the subject are abundant, directly from the popes and from different sacred congregations of the Holy See, always promulgated by the authority of the pope. The number of confessions has decreased in recent years. A priest here and there may have not encouraged, perhaps even discouraged, the practice of frequent confession. As a matter of fact, in a 1983 article on "How often should Catholics go to confession?" in a popular Catholic weekly, while several priests were quoted who stated the unchanging Magisterial teaching on the usefulness of frequent confession, nevertheless the author reported that "most priests interviewed for this article said that 'devotional confession,' the practice of going to confession weekly or monthly 'even in

the absence of serious sin,' was not a good idea."¹⁷

I don't know how many priests were interviewed—five? five hundred? It would be useful to know this. But evidently those who did not think frequent confession to be a good idea either were ignorant of or chose to disagree with the statements on the subject made by Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II, all of which go back to the well-known teaching of *Mystici Corporis* quoted above. Interestingly enough—and sadly enough—the article was published less than two months after Pope John Paul II spoke to all the priests of the world about their "being, during this Holy Year, in a particularly willing and generous way, the ministers of the sacrament of Penance."¹⁸

We can certainly say that the teaching of the Church on frequent confession has not been any less frequent in the post-conciliar years. Shortly after the Council Pope Paul spoke about the need for penance in a long document that included the unchanging divine command of penance, the need for external expressions of penance, the unbreakable relationship between the internal spirit and the external acts of penance, and the specific recommendation that "it is very desirable for bishops and other pastors of souls to promote zealously more frequent use of the sacrament of Penance, and to promote extraordinary works of penance for the sake of expiation and impetration, especially during the Lenten Season."¹⁹

It is interesting that Pope John Paul II has referred to this document in very explicit terms: "In the Church...there must be a lively-felt need for penance, both in its sacramental aspect, and in what concerns penance as a virtue. This second aspect was expressed by Paul VI in the apostolic constitution *Paenitemini*. One of the Church's tasks is to put into practice the teaching

Paenitemini contains; this subject must be investigated more deeply by us in common reflection, and many more decisions must be made about it in a spirit of pastoral collegiality and with respect for the different traditions in this regard and the different circumstances of the lives of the people of today."²⁰

A 1970 decree from the Congregation for Religious is quite straightforward: "Religious...should value highly the sacrament of Penance. ... Religious should likewise hold in high regard the frequent use of this

sacrament by which true knowledge of self is deepened, Christian humility is strengthened, spiritual direction is provided, and grace is increased. These and other wonderful effects not only contribute greatly to daily growth in virtue, but they are highly beneficial also to the common good of the community." So far the decree includes much about frequent confession that can be beneficial to all Christians, young and old, insights that teaching sisters could have shared with their students, instead of discouraging them—as has happened here and there, to the dismay of parents—from the practice. If the teachers could not see the parallel between this teaching and that of Pius XII in 1943, the decree itself refers to the encyclical of the Mystical Body. As for religious themselves, teaching sisters included, the Congregation for Religious is specific: "Therefore, religious, in their desire to strengthen in themselves union with God, should strive to receive the sacrament of Penance frequently, that is, twice a month. Superiors, on their part, should encourage this frequency and make it possible for the members to go to confession at least every two weeks and even oftener, if they wish to do so."²¹

The publication of the 1971 *Catechetical Directory* opened a new chapter on the subject. It is a painful chapter that deals explicitly with the question of First Confession and First Communion and, necessarily related to it, with the topic of frequent confession, as well as the reality and nature of sin and similar matters. The *Catechetical Directory* declared that "keeping in mind the common and general practice which per se cannot be derogated without the approval of the Apostolic See, and also having heard the Conferences of Bishops, the Holy See judges it fitting that the practice now in force in the Church of putting Confession ahead of First Communion should be retained."²²

Some catechetical "experts" did not like it. The whole thing did not fit in with their outlook. Those who had criticized old legalisms became all of a sudden gold medalists in the gymnastics of the new legalism: Is this a binding norm? Does the *Directory* have the force of ecclesiastical law? Can children be compelled to go to confession? It is obvious that terms such as compulsion and regimentation should not enter into a positive and constructive preparation for the fruitful reception of the sacraments. The

child will fruitfully and happily receive the sacrament of Penance before First Communion if he is encouraged and gently led to do so by parents, priests, and teachers who have the right and the duty to open to the child the sacramental channels of God's grace.²³

In this context the Directory wrote that "one should also keep in mind the usefulness of Confession, which retains its efficacy even when only venial sins are in question, and which gives an increase in grace and charity, increases the child's dispositions for receiving the Eucharist, and also helps to perfect the Christian life."²⁴

Whatever experiments contrary to the practice of Confession ahead of First Communion were allowed, such permission was discontinued by a joint 1973 Declaration of the Sacred Congregations for the Sacraments and for the Clergy.²⁵ In the 1975 letter sent on Pope Paul's behalf by his secretary of state, Cardinal Jean Villot, to the Italian National Liturgical Week, it is stated that "the Holy Father lays particular stress on the Confession of children, which must always precede First Communion, even if separated from it by a suitable interval." The same letter made a reference to the importance of frequent confession: "His Holiness also wishes to recall the attention of all—priests, religious and faithful—to the frequenting of this sacrament. There are people, unfortunately, who set little store by frequent confession: but this is not the mind of the Church. The new rite, too, recommends frequent confession, presenting it as a renewed commitment to increase the grace of Baptism, and as an opportunity and a stimulus to conform to Christ more closely and to become more and more docile to the voice of the Spirit."²⁶

In spite of the above, a 1977 letter of the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship and the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy had to be issued because "discussion and doubt continue to exist in some parts of the Church and at some catechetical centers with regard to the Church's discipline of having children receive the sacrament of Penance prior to First Communion. A number of complaints and petitions on this point have reached the Apostolic See from bishops, priests, and parents." The letter clearly reconfirms the traditional discipline: "The need for safeguarding and fostering a worthy participation in the Eucharist has led the Church to establish it as a norm of its discipline and pastoral practice

that Confession is to precede Holy Communion. In this way the right of the faithful—children as well as adults—to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation is likewise acknowledged." The official response to the question expressly submitted by an apostolic religious institute in this regard was given as an appendix. The letter also mentioned that "if each child is prudently and suitably brought at the time of First Communion to an interior conviction that the greatest purity is required for worthily receiving the Eucharist, that conviction will stay with him throughout life and will foster a much greater esteem for and more frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation."²⁷

A few months before his death, Pope Paul addressed a group of American bishops during their *ad limina* visit: "Today we wish to speak to you, your fellow bishops, and brother priests in America about certain sacramental aspects of conversion, about certain dimensions of the sacrament of Penance or of Reconciliation." He spoke at length about the norms given by the Holy See in 1972 regarding general absolution in cases of grave necessity and asked for faithful observance of these norms. He spoke about First Confession: "Another important aspect of the penitential discipline of the Church is the practice of First Confession before First Communion. Our appeal here is that the norms of the Apostolic See be not emptied of their meaning by contrary practice. In this regard we repeat words we spoke last year to a group of bishops during their *ad limina* visit: 'The faithful would be rightly shocked that obvious abuses are tolerated by those who have received the charge of the episcopate, which stands for, since the earliest days of the Church, vigilance and unity.'" He spoke of frequent confession and he referred to the text of Pius XII: "We believe that conditions in the Church today—in your own dioceses and elsewhere— are ripe for a more diligent and frequent use of the sacrament of Penance. ... Moreover, with regard to the practice of frequent confession, we ask you to recall to your priests and religious and laity—to all the faithful in search of holiness—the words of our predecessor Pius XII: 'Not without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was this practice introduced into the Church.'"²⁸

Later in the same year, addressing a group of Canadian bishops during another

ad limina visit, Pope John Paul II touched on exactly the same points: "At this moment in the life of the Church there are two particular aspects of sacramental discipline that are worthy of the special attention of the universal Church, and I wish to mention them, in order to assist bishops everywhere. These two matters are the practice of first Confession before first Communion and the question of general absolution. ... With regard to children who have reached the age of reason, the Church is happy to guarantee the pastoral value of having them experience the sacramental expression of conversion before being initiated into the Eucharistic sharing of the Paschal Mystery. ... And once again let us assure all our people of the great benefits derived from frequent confession. I am indeed convinced of the words of my predecessor Pius XII: 'Not without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was this practice introduced into the Church.'"²⁹

The last two addresses are mentioned in a footnote of Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, in reference to the lively-felt need for penance in the Church of today.³⁰

As we would expect, the new *Code of Canon Law* confirms this discipline when it states that it is the responsibility of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as of pastors, to see to it that children who have reached the age of reason are given adequate preparation to receive Holy Communion as early as possible, preceded by sacramental confession.³¹

More recently still, as the first group of American bishops made their *ad limina* visit in the Holy Year of the Redemption, the Pope told them: "I would ask once again for your zealous pastoral and collegial solicitude to ensure that these norms [the Holy Father was referring to the norms of general absolution], as well as the norms regulating the First Confession of children, are understood and properly applied. The treasures of God's love in the sacrament of Penance are so great that children too must be initiated into them. The patient effort of parents, teachers, and priests needed to prepare children for this sacrament are of great value for the whole Church."³²

We have mentioned together, without trying to be exhaustive, a number of texts that made reference to the benefits of frequent confession, while confirming over and over again the practice of First

Confession before First Communion. During the same years, the subject of the frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance was mentioned in a broader context. The 1972 norms from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that "priests should be careful not to discourage the faithful from frequent or devotional confession. On the contrary, let them draw attention to its fruitfulness for Christian living (cf. *Mystici Corporis*) and always display readiness to hear such a confession whenever a reasonable request is made by the faithful. It must be absolutely prevented that individual confession should be reserved for serious sins only, for this would deprive the faithful of the great benefit of confession and would injure the good name of those who approach the sacrament singly."³³

The 1973 Rite of Penance includes the recommendation of frequent confession: "Frequent and careful celebration of this sacrament is also very useful as a remedy for venial sins. This is not a mere ritual repetition or psychological exercise, but a serious striving to perfect the grace of Baptism so that, as we bear in our body the death of Jesus Christ, his life may be seen in us ever more clearly."³⁴

During the 1975 Holy Year, Pope Paul VI wrote his Apostolic Exhortation on Christian Joy. Together with the many other reasons for joy, there is always for the sinner the joy of the prodigal son who returns home: "And because ... all of us in fact remain to some extent sinners, we must today cease to harden our hearts, in order to listen to the voice of the Lord and accept the offer of the great pardon. ... What burden is more crushing than that of sin? What distress more lonely than that of the prodigal son, described by the Evangelist St. Luke? On the other hand, what meeting is more overwhelming than that of the Father, patient and merciful, and the son returned to life? ... And who is without sin, apart from Christ and his Immaculate Mother? Thus, by its invitation to return to the Father by repentance, the Holy Year—a promise of jubilation for all the people—is also a call to rediscover the meaning and practice of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Following the line of the best spiritual tradition, we remind the faithful and their pastors that the confession of grave sins is necessary and that frequent confession remains a privileged source of holiness, peace and joy."³⁵

The popes have taught unequivocally. It is up to all of us to ponder this teaching, to put it into practice in our personal lives, and to bring it to others. Abbot Baur's book is good and solid reading to make frequent confession a source of spiritual progress, a means to walk over and over again the path of the prodigal son. Abbot Baur refers to this parable in part II, chapter 6. Pope John Paul II made a moving exegesis of the parable in his second encyclical,³⁶ as spiritual writers have done over the centuries. Monsignor Escriva de Balaguer has written: "Remember the parable which Jesus told to help us understand the love of the Father who is in heaven: the parable of the prodigal son? 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and took pity on him; running up he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him' (Lk 15: 20). That's what the sacred text says: he covered him with kisses. Can you put it more humanly than that? Can you describe more graphically the paternal love of God for men? ... Human life is in some way a constant returning to our Father's house. We return through contrition, through the conversion of heart which means a desire to change, a firm decision to improve our life and which, therefore, is expressed in sacrifice and self-giving. We return to our Father's house by means of the sacrament of pardon in which, by confessing our sins, we put on Jesus Christ again and become his brothers, members of God's family."³⁷

The three synoptic Gospels describe the cure of a paralytic at Caphernaum (Mt 9:1-8; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26). "On one of those days, as he was teaching, there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem" (Lk 5:17). We can picture them on their way to Caphernaum, singly or in groups, many of them curious, some of them talking about the prophet from Nazareth, what they have heard about his amazing teachings or his miracles. "And the power of the Lord was with him to heal" (Lk 5:17).

We do not know what our Lord was talking about that day. All of a sudden his speech is interrupted. "And behold, men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they sought to bring him in and lay him before Jesus" (Lk 5:18). We admire the friendship of these men who have brought the paralytic, their desire to have him touched by Christ's mercy, their trust in the Master. But even more we admire their determination and their daring. "But finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd,

they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus" (Lk 5:19).

Our Lord seems to forget about everyone else for a moment. "And when he saw their faith he said, 'Man, your sins are forgiven you' " (Lk 5:20). We can watch the Gospel scene from whatever angle we want. It is good to learn to play a part in the scenes, to remember that in every one of those happenings we are there, that our Lord gives his teaching and performs the miracles not only for the sake of those who were physically present, but for every one of us. "Make it a habit to mingle with the characters who appear in the New Testament," Monsignor Escriva wrote. "Capture the flavor of those moving scenes where the Master performs works that are both divine and human, and tells us, with human and divine touches, the wonderful story of his pardon for us and his enduring love for his children. Those foretastes of Heaven are renewed today, for the Gospel is always true: we can feel, we can sense, we can even say we touch God's protection with our own hands."³⁸

We can, for the time being, be part of the crowd at the house of Capernaum, each one of us one of those who have come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. There is embarrassment and consternation around us. "And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, 'Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?' " (Lk 5:21).

There is no need for them to speak up. "When Jesus perceived their questioning, he answered them, 'Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven you, or to say, rise and walk?' " (Lk 5:22-23). Both, of course, are impossible to a man. Only God can forgive sins; in this the Pharisees were right. And only God can cure a paralytic. "'But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin'—he said to the man who was paralyzed—'I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home.' And immediately he rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and went home, glorying God" (Lk 5:24-25).

We can relive once more the Gospel scene, taking the place of the paralytic, letting the eyes of Christ rest on us with tenderness, seeing our hearts. It happens every time we go to confession. "That you may know

that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. ..." The risen Christ, he who has authority to forgive sins, told the Apostles: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them" (Jn 20:23). The Church has authoritatively interpreted these words of Christ. "Our Lord instituted the sacrament of Penance notably on the occasion when, after his Resurrection, he breathed upon his disciples, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained' (Jn 20: 22-23). The universal agreement of the Fathers has always understood that by such a striking action and by such clear words the power of remitting and retaining sins and of reconciling the faithful who have fallen after Baptism was communicated to the Apostles and their legitimate successors."³⁹

It happened in the Upper Room, where on Holy Thursday Christ had instituted the Eucharist and, inseparably linked to it, the ministerial priesthood, where he had given the new commandment of charity and prayed to the Father for unity, promised the Holy Spirit, and spoke of friendship. "No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends" (Jn 15: 15). As John Paul II has said, "It was precisely in the Upper Room that those words were spoken, in the immediate context of the Eucharist and of the ministerial priesthood. Christ made known to the Apostles and to all those who inherit from them the ordained priesthood that in this vocation and for this ministry they must become *his friends*—they must become the *friends of that mystery* that he came to accomplish."⁴⁰

It was fittingly in the same setting that the sacrament of Penance was instituted, so that we may keep alive the inseparable bond between the Eucharist and the call to conversion, so that the sacrament of Confession be understood as a purification in view of the Eucharist, as well as a testimony of faith in the dynamic sanctity of the Church and a need of the Church which is wounded in its totality by every sin.⁴¹

"How eloquent is the fact," the Pope comments, "that Christ, after his Resurrection, once more entered that Upper Room in which on Holy Thursday he had left the Apostles, together with the Eucharist, the sacrament of the ministerial priesthood, and that he then said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained' (Jn 20: 22-23).

Just as he had previously given them the power to celebrate the Eucharist, or to renew in a sacramental manner his own paschal Sacrifice, so on this second occasion he gave them the power to forgive sins. During this Jubilee Year, when you meditate on how your ministerial priesthood has been inscribed in the mystery of Christ's Redemption, you should have this constantly before your eyes!"⁴²

It was in that same Upper Room that fifty days later the same Spirit came in the full force of Pentecost and the Church was born. It is good that we identify with the paralytic at Capernaum when we go to confession, making use of our individual right to that encounter with the merciful Christ, and letting Christ exercise his right as our Redeemer, as the Holy Father reminded us in his first encyclical, referring specifically to the cure of the paralytic and the forgiveness of the adulterous woman: "In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the sacrament of Penance—the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction—the Church is therefore defending the human soul's individual right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ, with Christ saying through the minister of the sacrament of Reconciliation: 'Your sins are forgiven' (Mk 2: 5); 'Go and do not sin again' (Jn 8: 11). As is evident, this is also a right on Christ's part with regard to every human being redeemed by him: his right to meet each one of us in that key moment of conversion and forgiveness."⁴³

Every time we receive the sacrament of Reconciliation we can have in front of our eyes the Gospel scene at Capernaum and take the place of the paralytic. But it is also necessary for many in the Church today to relive that scene taking yet another part, that of the friends of the paralytic. They brought him in, met obstacles, and overcame them. They didn't say: "Sorry, we have tried, but there is a big crowd and there is no room. ... The Master is busy, we do not want to bother him. ... You wouldn't want us to bother him. ... Let us take you home. ... Perhaps another day. ..."

Precisely because confession has been neglected and frequency of confession even discouraged—the popes have said so, as we saw in some of the quotations above —there is a need for an intense apostolate of the confessional, whose duty falls on everyone. There is a duty to encourage

others, gently of course, to bring them to the forgiving Christ as the friends of the paralytic brought him.

The apostolate of the confessional is, above all, the duty of priests. The Second Vatican Council said: "[Priests] are united with the intention and love of Christ when they administer the sacraments. This is true in a special way when in the performance of their duty in the sacrament of Penance they show themselves altogether and always ready whenever the sacrament is reasonably sought by the faithful."⁴⁴ It does not seem that the bishops of the Council were one bit worried about priests being too busy to spend their time hearing confessions. They thought that priests should make themselves available to administer the sacrament of Penance whenever any of the faithful reasonably seeks it, be it Saturday afternoon or any other afternoon, morning, or evening, since confession should, within reason, be available at any time of the day.

In another Council document, addressed primarily to bishops, it is said that "[pastors] should labor without stint that the faithful be nourished with spiritual food through the devout and frequent reception of the sacraments and through intelligent participation in the Liturgy. Pastors should also be mindful of how much the sacrament of Penance contributes to developing the Christian life, and therefore, should always make themselves available to hear the confessions of the faithful."⁴⁵

Pope Paul VI taught perseveringly the same idea. In 1975 the Vatican secretary of state wrote that "His Holiness directs a word especially to priests so that they may love this sacred ministry, prepare their faithful in its catechesis, and be always ready to hear their Confessions. The new rite offers many possibilities to enhance the sacrament, especially in the context of a celebration of the word of God. But nothing will be so important as the willingness of pastors of souls to maintain regular attendance at the confessional."⁴⁶

The Holy Father himself put it, a few years later, in even stronger terms: "We ask you, the bishops, to help your priests to have an even greater appreciation of this splendid ministry of theirs as confessors. The experience of centuries confirms the importance of this ministry. And if priests deeply understand how closely they collaborate, through the

sacrament of Penance, with the Savior in the work of conversion, they will give themselves with ever greater zeal to this ministry. More confessors will readily be available to the faithful." In case there was any doubt, in case some priests might think that other activities already occupied their time, the Pope continued: "Other works, for lack of time, may have to be postponed, but not the confessional." Priests have a great tradition to follow and the Holy Father concluded by saying: "The example of St. John Vianney is not outmoded. The exhortation of Pope John in his encyclical *Sacerdotii nostri primordia* is still extremely relevant."⁴⁷

After quoting the above, Pope John Paul II told the Canadian bishops: "In the name of the Lord Jesus, let us give assurance, in union with the whole Church, to all our priests of the great supernatural effectiveness of a persevering ministry exercised through auricular confession, in fidelity to the command of the Lord and the teaching of his Church."⁴⁸

On the occasion of Holy Thursday, at the beginning of the Holy Year of Redemption, the Pope said: "My dear brothers in the priesthood of Christ! During the Jubilee Year may you succeed in being in a special way the teachers of God's truth about forgiveness and remission, as this truth is constantly proclaimed by the Church. Present this truth in all its spiritual richness. Seek the ways to impress it upon the minds and consciences of the men and women of our time."⁴⁹

As the American bishops began their *ad limina* visits in the Holy Year, John Paul II reiterated his wish that the sacrament of Penance be given special priority: "We are truly called to proclaim the reconciliation of humanity with God. ... Proclaiming reconciliation means reviving a sense of sin among our people. ... Proclaiming reconciliation means insisting on the greatness of God's pardon and on his compassionate love. ... To proclaim reconciliation means in a particular way promoting the sacrament of Penance."⁵⁰

Then the Holy Father, making frequent references to the address of Paul VI to the New York bishops five years before, asked them to make sure that the norms for general absolution and for the first confession of children "are understood and properly applied," and called for renewed catechetical efforts, "frequent penitential celebrations including the

individual confession and absolution of sins," and greater availability of confessors.

In 1983 the Holy Father came down to practical details: "The availability of confessors, emphasized and publicized in different ways, such as church bulletins, can give a great impetus to the faithful to go to confession, since God's grace has already awakened a desire or need for the sacrament in the hearts of many."⁵¹

Every priest can make an easy calculation: so many thousands of people in the parish, so many priests available for confessions for so many hours per week. Is it enough? Granted that some of the parishioners may go elsewhere, but the relative number of those will almost always be small. Granted that a few may seek Confession at any time "by appointment." However, as the late Cardinal Medeiros pointed out in a Lenten pastoral letter, "it is pastorally important for us to make ourselves available in the confessional on a regular basis at a designated time which is convenient for those seeking the sacrament. It is never sufficient for us merely to announce that we are available by appointment. Most parishioners are hesitant to take that kind of initiative and look for us. Even if few take advantage of the opportunity, our continuing presence in the confessional speaks eloquently of our own faith and conviction regarding the centrality of this priestly ministry to others. It is a witness to Christ's availability and readiness to forgive. He came to save sinners at any time and at all times!"⁵²

Catechesis on confession and availability for confessions were constant themes of the Holy Year and must continue after the Holy Year. Many different aspects of the sacrament of Penance have to be emphasized, rediscovered, and, if need be, discovered for the first time. It may be necessary to return to basics, such as explaining with clarity, for example, what is meant by "integrity of confession," what is meant by "kind, number, and circumstances that change the nature of the sin," to spell out without ambiguity the criterion given in so many of the post-conciliar documents and in the new *Code of Canon Law*⁵³ that no one who is conscious of having committed mortal sin, even if he believes himself to be contrite, should approach the Holy Eucharist without first making a sacramental confession, except in rather unusual circumstances. All this

will require an explanation, with concrete examples if need be, about the two kinds of actual sin: mortal sin and venial sin, about formation of conscience, and so on.

We may have to speak again about the advantages of frequent confession, since the sacrament of Penance is both a means of conversion and a means of spiritual progress. We may have to speak about the benefits of having a fixed confessor and the smooth transition from frequent confession to spiritual direction.

We may have to speak about the value of the confessions of children and repeat the norms regarding the First Confession. The experience of Monsignor Escriva, who loved the apostolate of the confessional and helped many souls to love it, was heard a few months before his death: "I have upon my conscience—and I say it with pride—having dedicated many, many thousands of hours to hearing children's Confessions in the poor districts of Madrid. I would have liked to have gone to hear Confessions in all the saddest and most abandoned slums of the whole world. They used to come to me with runny noses. First you had to clean their noses, before cleaning their poor souls a little. Bring children to God, before the devil gets them. Believe me, you will do them a lot of good. I speak from experience, from the experience of thousands of souls, and from my own experience."⁵⁴

The apostolate of the confessional is also the duty of others: parents, teachers, friends. It can never involve pushing or forcing, because any true apostolate is incompatible with that, and also because the reception of the sacrament of Penance requires freedom. It is rather a question of example and encouragement, backed by prayer and the conviction that those who exercise this apostolate and any other apostolate are only instruments of God's grace.

Any time is a fitting time for the apostolate of bringing others to the forgiving Christ as the friends of the paralytic brought him. The Lenten season offers a special opportunity every year. Every Jubilee by its very nature brings another such opportunity, as Pope Paul reminded us in LG75.⁵⁵

In all the documents written in preparation for the Jubilee of the Redemption, the Holy Father insisted on the role of confession. In his address of December 23, 1982, he said: "The approaching Jubilee is intended to make people more aware of the celebration of the Redemption. ... Its specific purpose is to call to a more profound consideration of the event of Redemption and its concrete application in the sacrament of Penance."⁵⁶

It is not enough to consider the objective reality of Redemption. Each one of us has to "touch" Redemption or, perhaps better, Redemption has to "touch" each one of us. In the same address, Pope John Paul II continues: "The sacrament of Penance is the sacrament of reconciliation with God, the encounter of the misery of man with the mercy of God personified in Christ the Redeemer and in the power of the Church. Confession is a practical exercise of faith in the event of Redemption. The sacrament of Confession is therefore repropounded, through the Jubilee, as a testimony of faith in the dynamic sanctity of the Church. ... It is repropounded as a need of the ecclesial community. ... It is repropounded as a purification in view of the Eucharist."⁵⁷

The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee contained several clear references to the sacrament of Penance. "In order to return to the state of grace, in ordinary circumstances it is not sufficient internally to acknowledge one's guilt and to make external reparation for it. Christ the Redeemer ... established that the salvation of the individual should come about within the Church and through the ministry of the Church (cf *Ordopaenitentiae*, n. 46). ... It is true that the ways of the Lord are inscrutable ... but the 'way' that Christ made known to us is through the Church which, by means of the sacrament, or at least the 'desire' for it, reestablishes a new personal contact between the sinner and the Redeemer."⁵⁸

The Holy Father recalled that "it is a demand of the very Mystery of Redemption that the ministry of reconciliation entrusted by God to the Shepherds of the Church (cf. 2 Cor 5: 18) should find its natural accomplishment in the sacrament of Penance"⁵⁹ and stated that "certainly the Fathers of the Synod will, together with me, devote particular attention to the irreplaceable role of the sacrament of Penance in the saving mission of the Church."⁶⁰

Finally, in the portion of the document devoted to the "gift of the indulgence, proper to and characteristic of the Jubilee Year," the Pope reminded us that "the indulgence is inseparable from the power and sacrament of Penance"⁶¹ and that "individual and complete sacramental confession, wherein takes place the encounter between man's misery and God's mercy," is one of the conditions for gaining a plenary indulgence.⁶²

In his letter of January 25, 1983, to all the bishops of the world on the occasion of presentation of the working paper for the Synod, "since one of the main purposes of the Holy Year of the Redemption is to ensure that the renewing power of the Church's sacramental life be lived especially intensely, and indeed, if necessary, to ensure that this power be rediscovered," the Holy Father said: "All of you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, will have to make a special effort to present and put into practice an ever more appropriate strategy regarding the sacraments. This will include devoting very special attention to the sacrament of Penance." He then encouraged the use of all pastoral means available, including "the presence of priests in the main churches who will ensure that at any hour of the day individuals can receive the sacrament of Penance."⁶³

It is not possible to collect here all the references to the sacrament of Penance made by Pope John Paul II throughout the Jubilee of the Redemption, including the series of nine General Audience talks given at the end of the Holy Year (February 22 to April 18, 1984),⁶⁴ which constitute a complete catechesis on the sacrament. Nor is it possible to discuss here the interventions of the participants in the 1983 Synod of Bishops.

If the Year of the Redemption was meant "to leave a special imprint on the Church's whole life,"⁶⁵ we cannot underestimate the part to be played by the sacrament of Penance. Perhaps we can venture to say that our fidelity to the graces of the Jubilee will be measured to a great extent by our commitment to exercise for and with Christ a persevering apostolate of the confessional.

And yet this cannot be an apostolate that springs from norms and regulations but, much more radically, from a deeper awareness on the part of the People of God, both priests and laity, of the meaning and practice of the sacrament. It needs to be a grass-roots apostolate. Perhaps this is one

of the areas where the movement has to be "from below,"⁶⁶ beginning with the individual parish and the individual Catholic.

Mary is, Pope John Paul II has reminded us, "the Mother in whom we trust" and "we who form today's generation of disciples of Christ all wish to unite ourselves with her in a special way. ... We do so at the urging of the deep need of faith, hope and charity."⁶⁷ We can certainly entrust to her this urgently needed apostolate of the confessional. As the Holy Father said in the first year of his pontificate, "she is the refuge of sinners. ... If we are oppressed by awareness of sin, we instinctively seek him who has the power to forgive sins (cf. Lk 5: 24), and we seek him through Mary, whose sanctuaries are places of conversion, penance, and reconciliation with God. She awakens in us the hope of mending our ways and persevering in good, even if that may sometimes seem humanly impossible. She enables us to overcome the multiple "structures of sin" in which our personal, family, and social life is wrapped.

She enables us to obtain the grace of true liberation, with that freedom with which Christ liberated every man."⁶⁸

S. M. Ferigle Boston, June 25, 1984

Author's Foreword

In recent years, in connection with the liturgical movement and other new developments pertaining to Catholic piety, there has been much written and also much discussion about the frequent Confession of venial sins or, as we commonly say, Confession of devotion. In his encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ (*Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943), Pope Pius XII turned his attention to frequent Confession, defended it against those who were belittling it, and recommended most earnestly that "pious practice, introduced by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." The Pope sets out clearly the Church's attitude to frequent Confession: "Therefore those among the young clergy who are diminishing esteem for frequent Confession are to know that the enterprise upon which they have embarked is alien to the Spirit of Christ and most detrimental to the Mystical Body of our Savior" (CTS translation, London 1952, par. 87).

There are, unfortunately, not a few, including even some Catholics, who have expressed opinions against frequent Confession and who seem to believe that it should not be recommended—indeed, that people should hold back from it. How different is the attitude of the Church; for the Code of Canon Law (1917) makes frequent Confession a duty for candidates for the priesthood (canon 1367.2), for all clerics (125.1), and for religious (595.1,3)!

Since the first edition of this work appeared in 1922, as a result of the difficulties raised against frequent Confession, many new and important points of view on this matter have emerged. From various sources there have come many good and practical suggestions as to how frequent Confession can be made a more vital element of the spiritual life. Therefore it seemed to me to be necessary to undertake a thorough rewriting of the earlier editions, which would take recent developments into account and incorporate these new ideas.

Frequent Confession has been written especially for the many souls in the priesthood and the religious life who are earnestly striving after sanctity and for the many good people who are sincerely trying to work out their salvation in the world. I am firmly convinced that among all these today

there is a real need for frequent Confession—and so made as to be fruitful and life-giving, not merely a "practice," not mechanically done, nor done only because it is prescribed by Canon Law or one's religious rule. Hence this book has as its aim to set the practice of frequent Confession on solid foundations, to give it new vigor, to lead to better understanding of it, and to show its high value in the spiritual life.

Abbot Butler of Downside wrote: "The more that educated and intellectual Catholics in their practical religious life throw themselves into the great stream of living Catholicism and partake with simplicity of heart, each one according to his individual spirit, bent, attraction, in the ordinary devotions and pious practices of the poor, the higher will they rise in the religion of the spirit" {Benedictine Monasticism, London 1919, p. 306). It seems to me that these words can be applied also to frequent Confession, seeing that it is practiced so much in the Church and that it is so strongly recommended by the Church's highest authority. —PENTECOST, 1945

PART ONE: FREQUENT CONFESSION

CHAPTER ONE : The Meaning and Purpose of Frequent Confession

A person may receive the sacrament of Penance frequently for the reason that over and over again he falls into mortal sins and wants to obtain forgiveness for them from God. We are not speaking here of frequent Confession in this sense. What we have in mind is the frequent and regular Confession of a person who in general does not commit mortal sin but rather lives a life of union with God and is bound to him by love. Such a person may, nevertheless, be guilty of many disloyalties and failings. He may have various weaknesses and bad habits and perverse inclinations, and he may have to struggle hard with his inordinate desires and his self-love. It is not a matter of indifference to him that here and there he has acted against his conscience, even though it be in nonessential matters. He is anxious to purify his soul from every stain of sin and from every fault and to keep it pure and to keep his will steadfastly directed toward God. For this reason he goes frequently to Confession, possibly every week. He seeks inner purification and strength of will, new strength to strive after perfect union with God and with Christ.

He knows well that he is in no way bound in conscience to confess the venial sins that he has committed. He knows—for it is the explicit teaching of the Church—that venial sins need not be told in Confession: and this because there are many other means by which they can be forgiven. Such means are all acts of true supernatural contrition, all petitions for the forgiveness of sin, all works undertaken and sufferings borne in a spirit of penance and atonement, all acts of perfect love of God, all works of Christian charity toward neighbor that spring from a supernatural motive—in a word, every work that is done and every sacrifice that is made out of supernatural love. Other means still are the right use of what we call sacramentals, for example, holy water and various liturgical prayers, such as the Confiteor. There is, especially, assistance at Holy Mass and the reception of Holy Communion: for, as the Council of Trent says, through Holy Communion we are "purified from our daily faults" (Session XIII, ch. 2). For the soul that is honestly striving, God's mercy has indeed made it very easy to atone for past faults and failings.

If there are so many ways in which the soul can be cleansed from venial sin without recourse to the sacrament of Penance, what meaning or what value has the confession of venial sins? Wherein exactly lies the "profit" of such confession, of which the Council of Trent speaks? For the Council says: "Venial sins, which do not separate man from God and into which we frequently fall, are rightly and with profit accused in Confession, as is the practice of pious Christians" (Session XVII, ch. 5).

(a) The Advantages of Frequent Confession

The "profit" of the confession of venial sins comes above all else from the fact that when we go to Confession, we receive a sacrament. The forgiveness of sin takes place by the power of the sacrament, that is, by the power of Christ himself. In the sacrament of Penance, says the Council of Trent, "the merits of the death of Christ are applied to those who have sinned after Baptism" (Session XIV, ch. 1). It should be noted too that it is not upon the sins committed themselves that the action of the sacrament falls but rather upon our interior aversion of heart from sin; it is this that the power of the sacrament takes hold of, as it were, and elevates in order to unite us to God through grace.

Since it is exclusively venial sin that is in question here, the grace bestowed by Confession is not, as in the case where mortal sin is confessed, a new life of grace, the "state of grace"; rather, it is the strengthening and deepening of the supernatural life already existing in the soul and an increase of the love of God. In these circumstances the sacrament is primarily positive in its effects: it strengthens the supernatural life of the soul, increases sanctifying grace, and, along with this, gives actual grace, which stimulates our will to acts of love of God and of contrition for our sins. Such sentiments of love tend to uproot venial sins and cast them out of the soul, just as light dispels and does away with darkness.

The value of the confession of venial sins lies furthermore in this: that the power of the sacrament not merely blots out these sins but also undoes their evil consequences in the soul more fully than is the case when venial sins are forgiven outside Confession. Thus, for instance, when venial sins are forgiven in Confession a greater part of the temporal punishment due to them is forgiven than would be outside the sacrament

with the same sentiments of contrition. But especially the sacrament of Penance cures the soul from the weakness that follows venial sin and from the weariness and coldness toward the things of God and the inclination toward worldliness that venial sin brings; it delivers the soul from its reawakened inordinate inclinations and instincts and from the domination of concupiscence: and all this by its sacramental power, in other words, by the power of Christ himself. Moreover, the confession of venial sins gives the soul an interior freshness, a new aspiration and impetus toward self-surrender to God and toward the cultivation of the supernatural life: results that are not usually produced at all when venial sin is forgiven outside Confession.

A very important advantage of the confession of venial sins is that as a rule our examination of conscience and especially our acts of contrition, of purpose, of amendment, and of resolution to atone and do penance are much more carefully made when we go to Confession than is the case of the extra-sacramental forgiveness of venial sin, for example, by means of an ejaculation or by the pious use of holy water. We know quite well what an effort it takes to formulate properly the accusation of our sins for the priest and how intent we must be to elicit a good act of contrition and purpose of amendment and to form the intention to do our penance and atone for our sins. We must consciously and of set purpose apply ourselves to making these acts well.

Indeed, it is only right that we should take this trouble. For these acts of interior aversion from our faults are required not merely as a psychological predisposition for the reception of the sacrament of Penance; they are essential constituent parts of the sacrament. They are necessary for the very existence of the sacrament, and the measure of the effects of the sacrament—of the increase of divine life and of the remission of sin—is determined by them.

Apart from the sacrament of Matrimony, Penance is the most personal of the sacraments. The personal dispositions of the penitent—his personal expression of sorrow, of accusation of sin, and of the desire to atone for it—are absolutely necessary for this sacrament. Its efficacy depends essentially on our personal attitude to the sins we have committed and on our personal turning back to Christ and to God. In the

sacrament of Penance these personal acts of penance of ours are elevated; they no longer remain purely personal but are linked with the sufferings and death of Christ, from which the power of the sacrament comes. Here, indeed, we see clearly the great value and advantage of the sacrament of Penance.

What we call the sacramental grace of the sacrament of Penance—the grace that belongs to this sacrament and that is not given and cannot be given by any other sacrament—is sanctifying grace with the special power and function of remedying the debility of soul and the lack of vigor and courage and energy, caused by venial sin, and of strengthening the soul and removing the obstacles that the working of grace encounters in it.

Another important value and advantage of frequent Confession is that in it our venial sins are confessed to the priest as the representative of the Church and thus, in a sense, to the Church itself, to the Christian community. It is true that the person who has committed venial sin remains a living member of the Church. But by his venial sin he has offended not only against God and Christ and against the good of his own soul; he has also acted against the interests of the Christian community, the Church. His sin is a spot and wrinkle (Eph 5: 27) on the garment of the Bride of Christ, an obstacle preventing the charity poured forth in the Church by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5: 5) from flowing freely in all the members. Venial sin does a wrong to the community of Christians and is a failure in charity toward the Church, in which alone are the sources of life and salvation for the Christian. Therefore, it can be atoned for in no better way than by being confessed to the representative of the Church, absolved by him, and expiated by the penance he imposes.

(b) Positive Aim of Frequent Confession

The usefulness of frequent Confession is not confined to the fact that in this sacrament the faults of which we have been guilty are forgiven and the interior weakness of our soul is cured. Frequent Confession looks not only backward to what was, to our past failings; it looks forward also to the future. Precisely by its frequency it aims at an eminently positive goal: at strengthening and invigorating our will in the struggle to acquire true Christian virtue, to become perfectly pure and pleasing in God's sight, to put the supernatural man in full control, to

make the spirit reign over the impulses and passions and weaknesses of the old man.

Frequent Confession helps us to foster ever more within ourselves a Christlike disposition and especially a Christian hatred of everything in us that displeases God. It helps us to develop a spirit of Christian penance and atonement and the desire to make satisfaction for our own sins and for those of others. And from a genuine disposition to do penance there grows a readiness for all the sacrifices and sufferings and difficulties and trials that the Lord may allow to come upon us. These are some of the precious things that the devout and frequent reception of the holy sacrament of Penance will bring us.

:) Frequent Confession and Spiritual Direction

1. As a further advantage of frequent Confession many lay stress on the spiritual direction given by one's confessor. It is a fact that for those who are striving to attain a high standard in the Christian or religious life spiritual direction is highly desirable and useful, if not, indeed, often morally necessary. Today most people look to their confessor for their spiritual direction. And rightly so. One big reason why the Church prescribes frequent and even weekly confession for priests and seminarians and religious must surely be because by this means the spiritual direction of those who are bound in a special way to seek after Christian perfection is most easily and securely provided for.

According to St. Alphonsus Liguori, one of the principal duties of a confessor is to give spiritual direction to his penitents. However, it would be a mistake to think that spiritual direction is essentially something connected with Confession or with frequent Confession. Nor is it correct to associate Confession with spiritual direction to the extent of almost overlooking the sacramental nature of Confession and putting its usefulness as a means of directing souls in the first place, as indeed sometimes happens. It may be noted too that for religious, both men and women, a good deal of spiritual direction is normally provided by their common religious life, regulated as it is by their rule and by the prescriptions of superiors. The way of life laid down by his rule for the religious is the way he must travel in order to come to God; normally it

is along that way that he will find all the means that are necessary to reach the goal of religious life and attain sanctity.

2. Can a person confess again sins—mortal sins or venial sins—that he has already duly confessed? We have already remarked that what is taken hold of by the sacramental power of Confession and elevated is not the sins that we confess but the interior acts of the will by which we turn away from these sins: our sentiments of contrition, of desire to make atonement, and so on.

Now, once a sin has been committed it remains a fact always that sin has been committed, even after it has been fully pardoned. And it is possible for a person again and again to turn away interiorly from such a sin, to condemn it, to be sorry for it, to resolve to avoid it for the future and to amend his life, to do acts of penance for it.

There is no reason why such interior dispositions, as often as they are present, should not be elevated by the power of Christ in the sacrament of Penance and made fruitful of grace. For also in this case, where sins that have already been confessed and forgiven are confessed again, the sacrament produces its essential effects: it increases sanctifying grace, which, from its very nature as the fruit of the sacrament of Penance, blots out sin if such happens to be on the soul. The grace produced by the sacrament of Penance cannot be conceived without reference to sin: to the sin it would take away were the soul in a state of sin. Therefore, the words of the priest, "I absolve thee," have their full meaning even when they do nothing but increase grace and do not actually take away sin for the simple reason that there is no sin there to take away. Hence the Church teaches that sins that have already been confessed are "sufficient matter" for Confession (Code of Canon Law, 1917, canon 902). And Pope Benedict XI in 1304 declared that it is "salutary" to confess again sins that have been confessed previously (Denzinger, *Enchirid. Symb.*, no. 470).

3. What we mean by frequent Confession should be clear from what has been said so far. Frequent Confession is Confession that is adapted to the effective realization of a twofold aim: the purification of the soul from venial sin and, at the same time, the confirmation of the will in its

struggle to attain perfection and closer union with God. This aim is ordinarily pursued by weekly or fortnightly Confession or by Confession every three or four weeks. The Church also reckons with the fact that people may go to Confession even oftener than once a week {Code of Canon Law, 1917, canon 595}; while, on the other hand, she permits us to gain all indulgences, even those for which Confession is prescribed as a condition, without going specially to Confession each time, provided we either confess at least twice in the month or receive Holy Communion daily or almost daily (ibid., canon 931).

It follows from all the above that frequent Confession presupposes and demands an earnest striving after purity of soul and virtue and after union with God and with Christ, in other words, a real interior life. The person who is satisfied with merely avoiding mortal sin, who cares nothing about and pays no attention to venial sin and definite unfaithfulness and failings, who has not made up his mind to struggle earnestly against these: such a person is not likely to profit by frequent Confession. In other words, frequent Confession is incompatible with a life of tepidity; indeed, from its very nature it is one of the most powerful means of overcoming tepidity and of keeping it far away. If it is properly practiced, it necessarily forces one to strive after virtue and perfection and to fight against even the smallest deliberate sin or unfaithfulness or negligence.

Perfect souls seek and find in frequent Confession the strength and the courage needed for the pursuit of virtue and for a life lived for God and in union with him. Such people seek before all else perfect purity of soul. They feel deeply sorry if they offend their loving Father by unfaithfulness of any kind. They have always before their eyes Christ, the Bridegroom of their souls, full of beauty and unspotted purity and holiness. They want to share his life, to live it with him, to continue it, to be other Christs. Urged on by their love of the Father and by their love for Jesus, in whose likeness they wish to grow daily, they go frequently to Confession. It is the holy love of Christ and of God that impels such souls to receive the sacrament of Penance frequently. Frequent Confession is, indeed, a necessity for them.

Less perfect souls seek and find in frequent Confession an excellent means to make effective their fight against imperfections, against daily failings, against inordinate inclinations and practices, and especially against spiritual weariness and the danger of discouragement. As a result of their frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance these souls feel that somebody stronger than themselves is fighting and winning in them and with them: Christ our Lord, who has overcome sin and who can and will mightily overcome it in the members of his Mystical Body too.

We can well end this chapter with the words of Pope Pius XII in his encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ, issued on June 29, 1943: "It is clear that in these deceptive doctrines [of unsound quietism] the mystery of which we are treating becomes directed, not to the spiritual profit of the faithful, but to their unhappy ruin. Equally disastrous in its effects is the false contention that the frequent confession of venial sins is not a practice to be greatly esteemed, and that preference is to be given to that general confession which the Bride of Christ, together with her children united to her in the Lord, makes daily through the priests who are about to go up to the altar of God. That there are many very laudable ways in which these sins can be expiated is perfectly true. But for a constant and speedy advancement in the paths of virtue, we highly recommend the pious practice of frequent Confession, introduced by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; for by this means we grow in a true knowledge of ourselves and in Christian humility, bad habits are uprooted, spiritual negligence and apathy are prevented, the conscience is purified and the will strengthened, salutary spiritual direction is obtained, and grace is increased by the efficacy of the sacrament itself. Therefore, those among the young clergy who are diminishing esteem for frequent Confession are to know that the enterprise upon which they have embarked is alien to the Spirit of Christ and most detrimental to the Mystical Body of our Savior."

CHAPTER TWO : The Practice of Frequent Confession

The question as to what precise method we should follow in the actual making of our frequent Confessions is not an easy one to answer. Here, as in so many other matters, what is good for one is not necessarily good for everybody. We must first of all distinguish two different classes among those who practice frequent Confession.

Many of those who confess frequently live in the midst of the turmoil of life: in the family, the office, the factory, teaching or exercising some other profession, carrying on their work amidst hurry and bustle and fuss. They do, indeed, make an honest attempt to lead a good life and please God. They keep themselves all the time in the state of grace and remain friends of God. But they continually fall into faults of every kind. They go every week or at least every month to Confession. They are truly sorry for their faults and, with the very best dispositions, contritely accuse themselves of them, as well as they can, though perhaps not in an entirely perfect way.

Are we going to say that such confession has no advantages for these souls? Are we going to disturb them on account of the clumsy and awkward way in which they make their confession or, without real necessity, force them to make it otherwise? Should we not, rather, try to help them to make earnest and practical resolutions and to keep up their courage and push forward in spite of failure and so advance in the spiritual life?

The same advice should normally hold good in those years of religious life when more serious faults and failings and unfaithfulness, perhaps even fully deliberate venial sins, still occur. During these years it is to be recommended that Confession should be closely linked with the daily meditation and with the examination of conscience, both general and particular.

Normally, however, as we make progress, a simplifying process goes on continually in our whole spiritual lives. This is true with regard to meditation and examination of conscience and with regard to our whole effort to acquire virtue and lead a life of prayer. Our way of approaching the sacrament of Penance is also subject to this process of simplification.

As we advance in the spiritual life, fully deliberate venial sins become less and less frequent and, as a rule, we fall into scarcely anything more than what are called sins of frailty. But now practical difficulties with regard to Confession begin to arise and, indeed, the more the soul grows in purity and union with God, the greater they become.

The following details regarding the method of practicing frequent Confession hold good for both these classes of souls of which we have spoken. We shall begin with the purpose of amendment.

(a) Purpose of Amendment

If frequent Confession is to be made not only validly and worthily but in such a way as to be of real positive value for the growth and development of the interior life, there is one guiding principle that must be observed. Whatever faults we tell in Confession, these we must have firmly made up our minds to overcome. Consequently, our purpose of amendment is a point of central importance in the practice of frequent Confession.

1. A purpose of amendment is inseparable from genuine contrition; it follows it with absolute necessity as its natural fruit. Being really a part of contrition, the purpose of amendment, like contrition itself, is an essential and strictly necessary constituent part of Confession.

It is worthwhile distinguishing between an explicit purpose of amendment and a purpose of amendment *implicitly contained in contrition*. This latter is not a new distinct act of the will, separate from the act of contrition. And it is sufficient for the valid reception of the sacrament of Penance. Therefore, if a penitent, before confessing his sins, makes merely a sincere act of contrition without thinking about a purpose of amendment and without formulating such a purpose, his Confession is good and valid because the necessary purpose of amendment is contained implicitly in his contrition.

However, if a person wants his Confession to be really fruitful and so become for him a means to interior progress and sanctity, then an explicit purpose of amendment, distinct from the act of contrition, is desirable. Such an explicit purpose of amendment can be either *general or particular*. It is general if it extends to all venial sins or, at any rate, to all the venial sins confessed in the present Confession. The

particular purpose of amendment, on the other hand, means a resolve to avoid or at least to fight earnestly against this or that particular venial sin.

When only venial sins have to be confessed, as far as the purpose of amendment goes it is sufficient for the *validity* of the confession to be resolved to avoid or to strive against those venial sins that have been accused or even against one of these. Also it suffices to resolve to refrain from a particular kind of venial sin or to avoid as much as possible semi-deliberate venial sins (sins of frailty, as we call them) or at least, through greater fervor, to try to lessen their number. Our purpose of amendment need not be to avoid venial sins absolutely, as it has to be with regard to mortal sins; it is enough to have a purpose to fight against them or to take measures at least to diminish their frequency.

2. Many who practice frequent Confession make the great mistake of having no real purpose of amendment regarding many of the sins they confess. St. Francis de Sales says that it is an abuse to confess a sin in Confession unless one's mind is made up to avoid it in the future or at least to strive earnestly against it (*An Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 2, ch. 19). Unfortunately, this abuse frequently becomes a habit, especially in that kind of routine thoughtless Confession in which the same things are confessed time after time without any real effort to make progress, to lessen the number and variety of venial sins, to turn away sincerely from sin and increase in fervor and virtue. There must, indeed, be something wanting here. What is wanting is a purpose of amendment. The penitent has got into the habit of confessing this or that venial sin without ever seriously thinking of striving energetically against it. No doubt he always has a general purpose of amendment or, at any rate, a purpose of amendment implicit in his contrition, and consequently his Confession is valid. But such Confession can scarcely be very fruitful or help very much to build up and develop an interior life. Here, indeed, confessors have a responsibility with regard to those who confess frequently, but the responsibility is not theirs alone; first and foremost it rests on the penitents themselves.

In view of all this, holy souls who are advancing in the spiritual life should not confess in their frequent Confessions any failings or

unfaithfulness or sins of frailty that they are not fully resolved to avoid or at least to strive against. Now, it is quite impossible for a person to persevere in concentrating his full powers and attention on a big number of failings and weaknesses at the same time. Therefore our guiding principle here should be: a little, but well done; a little done earnestly and with purpose and perseverance. *Divide and conquer!* People such as those of whom we are speaking should limit their purpose of amendment to very few points, often to one single failing against which they are determined to strive; they should confine it to one particular thing to which they are resolved to pay special attention and on which they wish to concentrate all their energy. In the first place, let them choose that which at the moment is most necessary or important, that which in the circumstances matters most for them. A great deal depends on whether this purpose of amendment is well chosen and well formulated.

These advanced souls must be careful too to have a *positive* purpose of amendment, that is, one that is directed to the practice of some particular virtue. We do not overcome small faults and weaknesses by being continually busied about them and fighting against them but rather by keeping our gaze directed on what is positively good and holy and consciously striving after that. Souls that are really trying to advance aim above all else at developing a pure new love for God and for Christ. And love for God implies love for one's neighbor: a tolerant, forgiving love that tries to help and serve others and make life pleasant for them. These souls strive after purity of life and try to have right motives in all their daily actions; they aim at continual prayer, through which they bring to God and to their Savior everything that befalls them. Love of God and of the Savior makes them strong for the daily sacrifices, big and small; it enables them to be patient and truthful, to bear the burdens of community life, to submit humbly to the Cross in the form of difficult circumstances—sickness, their own weakness and insufficiency, their frequent failure, the trials of the interior life, dryness, interior emptiness and coldness, weariness, indisposition of body, disinclination to pray.

Love is what makes all the difference. "Charity is patient, is kind; charity envieth not, dealeth not perversely, is not puffed up; is not

ambitious, seeketh not her own, is not provoked to anger, thinketh no evil, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Follow after charity" (1 Cor 13: 4ff.). In other words: seek after a holy love of God and of Christ, for with love goes every virtue.

Our purpose of amendment must always be something *practical*. And here many fall into error. A person makes a resolution like this, for instance: "I will never again be distracted at prayer." Or "I will never again lose my temper"; "I will never again be irritable"; "I will never again entertain proud thoughts"; and so on. These are resolutions it is quite impossible to carry out, and the person who makes them is only increasing his troubles.

It is much too much to expect that men and women here on earth should not be subject to distractions at prayer or should never lose their tempers, that they should never become irritated by unpleasant or unfair treatment, that they should never be troubled by proud thoughts. What can be expected is that they should not deliberately give way to distractions or irritation, for instance; that as soon as they become conscious of such things they should fight against them. With this in mind, a purpose of amendment that is really practical can be formulated; for example, "As soon as I recognize that I am distracted, I will recollect myself"; "As soon as I recognize that I am becoming irritated, I will make an act of patience or of conformity with God's will"; "Whenever I experience something unpleasant, I will go to our Lord and say 'Lord, help me,' or 'For love of thee, Lord, I will bear this.'" If a person attempts more than this, his purpose of amendment is doomed to failure, and only disappointment and discouragement will result.

Our purpose of amendment must be *adapted to actual circumstances and needs*. It ought to concern a fault that causes trouble, the overcoming of which is important. And it should take into consideration too the interior attraction of grace, which very frequently is connected with some special mystery of the life of Christ or of the liturgy or of the liturgical year, or with some special experience one has had, or with meditation, spiritual reading, or interior illumination.

Our purpose of amendment *need not be*, indeed should not be, *changed* in every Confession. But if it is not changed, it should be renewed and made more firm and more solidly established in every Confession. As a rule, the same purpose of amendment should be retained and renewed in each Confession until the fault against which it is directed has been energetically attacked for some time and its dominance notably shaken. Often it may be necessary to keep the same purpose of amendment for a very long time, as long as certain external circumstances remain unchanged. Certain exterior failings, such as curiosity of the eyes or breaches of silence or uncharitable conversation, must be fought by a special purpose of amendment against them until the contrary habit has been developed. And for this the particular examination of conscience and our daily meditation can help a great deal too.

Our purpose of amendment can also be *directed to certain means* that we wish to take against a particular fault. Thus, in order to overcome distractions in prayer better, one could resolve to be more faithful in making one's meditation; in order to overcome impatience and criticism of others and want of charity, one could resolve to keep more in the presence of God and to control one's senses.

Let it not be forgotten that our purpose of amendment implies that we have *good will and the resolve to amend at the time we make it*. but that this is quite compatible with the fear, even with the knowledge, that we shall probably fall again, at least into indeliberate faults. We must always take into account the important truth of faith that, even when in the state of grace, we cannot "avoid all venial sins during the whole of life, without a special privilege from God, such as the Church holds our Blessed Lady received" (Council of Trent, Session VI, ch. 23).

The important thing for us is not so much that we never again fall into any faults but rather that we never become indifferent and careless about our faults and failings or about their roots and causes, that we sincerely turn away from them and never come to terms with them, that we always keep on climbing upward to the holy heights of God's love.

b) Confession: Telling Our Sins

1. The Council of Trent emphasizes the fact that venial sins need not be confessed. "Venial sins may rightly and with profit be told in Confession; but they can also be withheld without any fault and expiated by various other means" (Session XIV, ch. 5).

Sins alone can be matter for Confession, and only sins that have been committed after Baptism. What is not a sin cannot be matter for Confession. Thus venial sins that have been freely and knowingly committed can be confessed—deliberate venial sins, as we call them. What we call sins of frailty are also matter for Confession: the sins of which we are guilty in rash moments, on account of some passing excitement, from want of reflection, through forgetfulness or thoughtlessness: sins that are committed without full attention or full deliberation. The number and the aggravating circumstances of venial sins need not be confessed; but it is a good thing in the case of our more serious and deeply rooted faults to make such a reckoning about them and to include it in our accusation. An instance of exaggerating circumstances would be, for example, to show oneself uncharitable immediately after Holy Communion or to show oneself uncharitable toward a benefactor.

The question used to be discussed whether one can or should confess "imperfections"—for example, when we defend ourselves in a situation where it would be more perfect (though not of strict obligation) to remain silent; or when we allow ourselves something it would be better to do without. At present it is customary to confess imperfections also, at least for the reason that generally some negligence underlies the imperfect action and that consequently the knowledge of this latter is useful to the confessor for the direction of the penitent. But really indeliberate and involuntary distractions in prayer, manifestations of impatience, uncharitable thoughts and feelings, aversions, rash judgments, and such things, insofar as they are really indeliberate and involuntary, they are not matter for Confession.

2. Souls devoting themselves earnestly to the spiritual life and especially religious—who by their vocation are pledged to a life of Christian perfection—will generally, once they have left the initial stage of the spiritual life behind them, as a matter of principle confess those

sins and faults against which they have made up their minds to strive deliberately. They will of set purpose, therefore, not confess any and every failing and imperfection into which they may have fallen but only those against which their purpose of amendment is directed. Purpose of amendment and confession (accusation) run parallel. And here also the principle holds: not much and of many different kinds but, rather, a little and well done. *Non multa, sed multum*. Out of their various daily faults and unfaithfulnesses and transgressions such persons will choose one or the other: that which tends to hold its ground obstinately, that which is more consciously and deliberately indulged in, that which causes annoyance to those around them, or that which results from some disordered practice or some inordinate inclination or passion.

This limited accusation is to be specially recommended to those who, in spite of all their striving, forget themselves now and then and are guilty of faults committed through force of habit or faults of a more serious kind arising from their individual temperament. It is to be recommended to those who feel sluggish and languid and without the inner strength and the real desire to strive after virtue; to those who are in danger of becoming lukewarm and careless; to those who have great difficulty in ridding themselves of certain faults; and, finally, to those who easily become worried by doubts as to whether they have had sufficient contrition for the sins they have confessed.

"We only substitute our own notions for the law of God insofar as we consider it our duty to recite a whole litany of venial sins with all particulars and details. To go into all these details is quite unnecessary. All that results from it is the anxiety and scruples that come entirely from having omitted, when it was impossible to do otherwise, something that could have been passed over without any fault whatsoever on our part" (Lehen, Weg zum inneren Frieden). In the effort to confess all our venial sins, there is, besides much ignorance and lack of understanding, a good deal of self-seeking and pride. The penitent wants to be satisfied with his performance and wants to be able to convince himself that he has told everything that could be told. Thus many souls deceive themselves by thinking that once a thing is confessed, everything is all right. What a pernicious error!

Knowledge of the root causes of venial sins, especially of one's predominant fault, and of the occasions of certain faults can be useful for the confessor. It is a good thing to speak of these matters in Confession from time to time.

3. In practice there are many ways of making our accusation well and fruitfully and of simplifying our practice of frequent Confession and giving it more solid foundations. A penitent may confess all or at least the more important failings of which he has been guilty since his last Confession. Many do this and indeed rightly and with profit.

For more advanced souls, however, who are earnestly striving after holiness, either in the world or in the priesthood or in the religious life, we believe some of the following methods are advisable.

(i) The Confession can be made to center on one definite fault that has occurred since the previous Confession, taking a form something like this: "I have deliberately judged and spoken uncharitably. During my whole past life I have sinned much against fraternal charity in thought and in word by uncharitable judgments and I now accuse myself of all these sins of my whole life. I accuse myself also of all the other sins and faults of which I have been guilty before God." This is a simple and very fruitful way of confessing, provided the penitent takes the trouble to excite himself to sincere contrition. From such contrition will come the clear and concrete purpose of amendment: "I am going to see to it that I overcome this habit of (deliberately) judging and speaking uncharitably and that I get rid of it altogether."

(ii) A second method of confessing is to make the accusation center on one of the commandments or on some inordinate passion or practice or inclination: on some one particular point that at the moment is important for the interior life. Then we can proceed something like this: "I am easily irritated. I lose my temper quickly with other people over various things. I talk and criticize and allow aversions and bad humor to develop in me. I accuse myself also of having sinned often in this way in my past life. And I accuse myself of all the other sins and failings of which I have been guilty before God." This, likewise, is a simple and fruitful way of practicing frequent Confession. It presupposes and

demands that the penitent for a fairly long time devote his attention and efforts to one definite fault or to the root cause of certain faults or at least to some point that is important for his interior life. Here also contrition is of the greatest moment. This second kind of accusation makes it relatively easy for the confessor to give the penitent individual treatment and help him along in his efforts.

(iii) Finally, Confession can take the form of accusing oneself of all the sins of one's life, against such and such a commandment, for instance: "I have sinned frequently through impatience, lack of self-control, sensuality, acting from caprice. I accuse myself also of all the other sins of my whole life, mortal and venial." From what has been said it follows that the person who wants to practice frequent Confession properly and get the best results from it must keep good order within the household of his soul. He must be clear as to what is important or essential for him. He must know his weak points and purposefully get to work on himself. If then the confessor for his part, with understanding and with a holy zeal for the spiritual development of his penitent, purposefully cooperates and helps him along, frequent Confession will become a most valuable means for advancing in the interior life and growing in the likeness and spirit of Christ.

(c) Examination of Conscience

1. Our examination of conscience for the reception of the sacrament stands in the closest relation to the practice of examination of conscience in general.

The masters of the spiritual life, from the time of the ancient monks right up to our own day, have always regarded daily examination of conscience as an essential element in a life of true Christian piety. Nevertheless, in certain Catholic circles today there are those who want to hear nothing about detailed examination of conscience and who have no time at all for the "particular examination of conscience," as it is called. For this latter they would substitute just "a simple glance" at the state of the soul. They overlook the fact that, at least for beginners, it is absolutely necessary to go into details if they want to know their faults and the cause of them, if they want to get to know their various passions and inordinate interior dispositions with a view to correcting them. It is precisely

beginners who are liable to the danger of being satisfied with a superficial glance that leaves inordinate passions and practices undisturbed.

As St. Pius X once remarked: "What a pity if in this connection also the words of Christ were to the point: 'The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light!' With what diligence do we see the latter attending to their affairs! How frequently they compare their profits and their losses! How exact and careful is their bookkeeping!"

The Church makes daily examination of conscience obligatory for clerics and religious (Code of Canon Law, 1917, canons 125 and 592) and expressly rejects the tenet of Molinos that "not to be able to reflect on one's own defects is a grace from God" (Denzinger, *Enchirid. Symb.*, no. 1230). And it was Madame de Guyon, the Quietist, who believed that it was enough simply to "let God's light shine on oneself." It is significant too that many modern writers strongly urge a kind of natural particular examination of conscience as part of a purely natural and human self-formation.

2. Writers on the spiritual life rightly emphasize that examination of conscience is absolutely necessary for the purification of the soul and for progress in virtue. Without regular examination of conscience we never get to know our faults properly. Rather, they increase; evil inclinations and inordinate passions become stronger and may seriously threaten the life of grace. Especially, it will be impossible for charity to develop fully in us.

There are many different ways of practicing examination of conscience. It can have as its aim the discovery of those venial sins—we prescind here from mortal sin—that are fully deliberate. Or it may aim at the discovery of our less deliberate or barely deliberate sins of frailty. Or, finally, it may try to find out how we could and ought to correspond better with God's graces. It is clear in any case that we can make our examination of conscience well and fruitfully only with the help of divine grace.

The general examination of conscience passes under review all the happenings of the day that has gone by: thought, feelings, words, and deeds. When this examination of conscience is made regularly it is not very difficult; a person usually knows his customary failings, and so he discovers without much trouble whatever faults he may have committed in the

course of the day. If any unusual lapse has occurred to one who is earnestly striving after virtue, it will stand out and worry him continually. People who are genuinely trying to lead a holy life need in no way be petty in this self-examination. The act of contrition in our examination of conscience is much more important. It is through it that our examination of conscience can always be improved and invigorated. From true contrition will come a purpose of amendment; and this purpose of amendment will generally go to form part of our purpose of amendment in Confession.

The general examination of conscience is supplemented by the particular examination of conscience. This latter concerns itself over a fairly long period with some particular fault that one wishes to eradicate or with some particular virtue that one wishes to acquire. In selecting faults for attack, we ought to begin with exterior faults by which those around us are annoyed or irritated. Then we can proceed to interior faults: our own faults of character, the weak points in our makeup. When we reach the stage at which the fault occurs only very seldom or only on certain special occasions, we ought to change our examination of conscience to reckoning up positive acts of some virtue.

As we make progress in the spiritual life our particular examination of conscience will tend more and more to take on this positive form; its practice will mean the confirmation of our will in the pursuit of a certain virtue, together with prayer to God for constancy and perfection in this virtue, for example, love of God, fraternal charity, the spirit of faith, humility, prayerfulness. Usually too our purpose of amendment in Confession should have some relation to the subject of our particular examination of conscience. Consequently, we can see that the particular examination of conscience is most important for all pious and zealous souls, especially in the positive form just mentioned, which continually keeps the will active in the practice of virtue.

3. It is not enough only to get to know the acts in which we fail. It is equally important, even more important, to explore our interior attitudes and dispositions. For this purpose the so-called "habitual" examination of conscience is to be recommended: a quick look at our interior state, often repeated; a glance to see what feeling or inclination of heart is predominant at the moment.

Among the many feelings that crowd the human heart and assail it, there is always *one* feeling that dominates, that gives the heart its direction, so to speak, and determines its mood. At one time it is the need for recognition by others, at another time fear of blame or of humiliation or suffering, at another time jealousy or embitterment on account of some injustice suffered, at still another time some suspicion or some disordered desire regarding our work or our health. Or again it may be a certain state of spiritual inertia and discouragement on account of certain difficulties or some failure or some other experience.

This predominant feeling can, however, also be a movement of love for God, a compelling desire to make sacrifices, a glowing zeal for God's interests. It can be joy in the service of God, in submission to God, in humiliation, in the desire for mortification and self-surrender to God. "Where is my heart?" What is the prevailing disposition that determines its attitude, the real mainspring that keeps all the rest of its movement going? It may, perhaps, be some long-existent tendency: some attachment or bitterness or aversion. It may be just a momentary impression, but one so deep and strong that it has affected the heart for long afterward. In the "habitual" examination of conscience we ask ourselves: "Where is my heart?" And thus, often during the day, we uncover the disposition and inclination of our heart at the moment and so penetrate to its central core, from which our various words and deeds and activities issue. We discover the chief wellsprings of good and evil within ourselves.

This discovery is very useful for our general and particular examination of conscience and for our examination of conscience in preparation for Confession. It shows us what is important or essential in our pursuit of perfection; it keeps us continually contrite; it fills us with thankfulness if we find that our interior dispositions are rightly ordered; it makes us pray for grace and strength. We discover what we ought to accuse ourselves of in Confession and what our purpose of amendment ought to be. In general, we come to understand how, by means of this habitual, oft-repeated interior examination, we can set on solid foundations our general examination and our particular examination.

4. Our examination of conscience for frequent Confession need not extend to all our faults since our last Confession. First and foremost we should consider the purpose of amendment made in our last Confession and the subject of our particular examination and see whether and how well we have tried to carry out our resolves. Should it be that in the course of the week (or whatever time has elapsed since our last Confession) something very unusual has happened, some rather serious fault has been committed, this will stand out in our conscience. And our daily general examination of conscience will ensure always that we do not overlook our ordinary daily faults. Consequently, it is not necessary in our examination of conscience for Confession to search out in detail each and every venial sin since our last Confession. In saying this, of course, we are taking it for granted that our examination of conscience for frequent Confession presupposes and indeed requires the practice of the general and particular examinations and the above-mentioned "habitual" examination, as well.

"Venial sins can be withheld in Confession without any fault and expiated by various other means" (Council of Trent, Session XIV, ch. 5). If, then, venial sins need not be confessed, it follows that we are perfectly free not to confess them at all or to confess only those we wish. And so, if I have only venial sins on my soul, strictly speaking I have examined my conscience sufficiently as soon as I discover any venial sin at all committed at any time in my life. I have no obligation to examine my conscience with regard to all the venial sins committed since my last Confession. Catholic moral theology teaches that in the examination of conscience before Confession an extraordinary diligence is not necessary "even if such diligence would discover more sins." Moreover, "if a person knows that he has not committed any mortal sin since his last Confession, he is not strictly obliged to examine his conscience at all; it suffices that he finds sufficient matter for absolution" (Gopfert, III, no. 119).

In examining our conscience it is important that we distinguish between what is more necessary and what is less necessary, between what is essential and what is not essential, between what is important and what is unimportant. In the course of a particular week some one matter may happen to become of great importance. It may be something that is the occasion of a fault for us, or it may be an especially strong inordinate

impulse or some situation that demands special watchfulness or that is the cause of bitterness, aversion, and so on.

The more our examination of conscience is confined to important points and brought into realization with our purpose of amendment and our accusation, the more fruitful it will be. Therefore those who confess frequently have no need to examine their conscience every time on each and all of the Ten Commandments of God or on all the items in the "Examination of Conscience" usually found in prayer books.

(d) Contrition

1. As regards the question of contrition when we confess only venial sins (together with, perhaps, other venial or even mortal sins that have been confessed previously), the same principles hold as for contrition for venial sins in general. Without contrition there can be no forgiveness.

The matter to which the contrition required in frequent Confession extends can only be that which is matter for accusation and for absolution, namely, sin, the known and deliberate transgression of the law of God. What is not a sin cannot be matter for contrition—even though, perhaps, it can and should be regretted.

For the valid and licit reception of the sacrament of Penance, what we call attrition, or imperfect contrition, is the least that is required, and it suffices. This contrition springs from supernatural motives: the motive of the fear of punishment in this life (for example, withdrawal of graces, failure to reach the stage in the spiritual life we could and should reach) and hereafter (postponement of our admission to Heaven and a lesser degree of eternal happiness than we could otherwise have had).

It would be an exaggeration to say that in general we can neglect these imperfect and rather selfish motives of contrition. But we should not remain content with them; we should rather try deliberately to have perfect contrition. This latter rises above considerations of self and of one's own gain and loss and advantage and disadvantage and thinks only of God: God, whom we wrong by sinning and whose commandments, honor, interests, and desires we put in the second place, second to our own inclinations and whims, when we commit even venial sins. We should

remember always, of course, that the important thing in contrition, perfect or imperfect, is not our feelings but our will—so that our attitude is: "Would that I had never sinned. Would that I had never thought or said or done or omitted such and such a thing."

2. When a person has only venial sins to tell in Confession, the Confession is valid if he has contrition for one single venial sin that he confesses or for one particular kind of venial sin, even though he mentions other venial sins for which he has no contrition. Furthermore, it suffices to have contrition in a general way for the negligence and carelessness with which one has given way to venial sins or for taking no notice of semi-deliberate faults and not trying to prevent them. However, the penitent who confesses frequently is not concerned merely with making a *valid* Confession; he wants especially to make a good and fruitful Confession that will help him effectively in his pursuit of holiness. If frequent Confession is to fulfill this purpose for him, he must take very seriously the axiom that without contrition there is no forgiveness of sin. And from this there follows another axiom that is of fundamental importance for him: only those venial sins should be confessed for which one has real and sincere contrition.

There is what we call "universal contrition." By this we mean sorrow for and loathing of the sins of our whole past life. This universal contrition is of the very greatest importance in the practice of frequent Confession. In every Confession we must deliberately try to extend our contrition to each and every sin, mortal and venial, of our whole past life, and make every effort to excite ourselves to a really good act of contrition for them all. This contrition should be sovereign, even with regard to the smallest sins and unfaithfulness, in the sense that we look on sin of any kind as the greatest of all evils and that we detest it, more than anything else, with the whole force of our will.

It is obvious, of course, that we can excite ourselves to contrition again and again for sins of which we have already repented and for which we have been forgiven. Indeed, in a certain sense, it is our duty to be continually sorry for our past sins; for, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, "it must always remain a source of regret to us that we have sinned" (*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 84, art. 8). If we were ever to sanction our past sins or

approve of them, we should thereby, as he further remarks, sin again. Therefore, whenever we go to Confession we ought to consider it most important to excite ourselves to a deep and sincere contrition extending to the sins of our whole past life. The more seriously we try to this contrition, the more surely shall we arrive at that state of compunction of heart which is so important for the interior life and which precisely should be the fruit of frequent Confession. Such universal contrition is to be recommended most strongly to those who confess frequently and this for a twofold reason.

First of all, it will ensure that we make a real act of contrition. Some little failing since our last Confession or some single venial sin of our past life that we tell over and over again is, very often, scarcely enough to make us recognize the full meaning of sin and awaken in us intense and perfect sentiments of sorrow for having offended God. But it will be quite otherwise if in one glance we see all the sins and failings of our whole past life together. We can then easily excite in ourselves sentiments of loathing and hatred for what we have done, sentiments of sorrow for having treated God so badly and for having been so ungrateful to him, and sentiments of aversion from sin with the firm resolution to avoid it in future and to make atonement for it.

A second reason for recommending this universal contrition so strongly is that it is not in keeping with the reverence due this holy sacrament to confess, along with venial sins for which one is really sorry, others for which there is no real contrition.

It is clear, of course, that with this universal contrition for all the sins of our life we must combine contrition for the single sins and failings to which we are particularly prone at the moment and about which we are most concerned: contrition for faults against charity, for other more serious failings, for deeply rooted obstinate faults that stem from our predominant passion or from some very strong disordered inclination or habit. Contrition such as has been described will help greatly to give life and depth to our practice of frequent Confession and will be a safeguard against routine.

3. The sacrament of Penance is a most personal sacrament. And this is true too in the sense that in Confession our personal realization of our sins and faults plays a decisive role. The more we raise ourselves up to God, the more we shall acquire a knowledge of our secret faults and of the latent impulses of our corrupt hearts. As the soul becomes more closely united with God it begins to understand better the saying of St. John: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1: 8). It acquires a deeper understanding of God's holiness and purity and develops a most delicate sensitivity regarding the slightest departure from God's will or from what God desires or claims. It becomes very conscious of the way it has injured others spiritually by word, deed, or omission. It recognizes what sins of omission are and in what innumerable ways we can sin by omission. It comes to understand what it means to misuse a grace and recognizes that if those misused graces had been properly used the whole Church and many souls would have benefited.

The tender conscience of a holy soul is something great and noble. On such a soil contrition will thrive— sentiments of compunction that will make the frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance a necessity and a blessing.

(e) Satisfaction: Sacramental Penance

1. Satisfaction is the undertaking of penitential works (prayer, fasting, almsgiving) with the purpose of obtaining remission of the temporal punishment due to sin. When works of penance are imposed by the priest in the sacrament of Penance they become a sacramental satisfaction that remits the temporal punishment by the power of the sacrament. Such sacramental satisfaction is better and more effective than non-sacramental penance, that is, penance imposed or freely undertaken apart from the sacrament of Penance. The greater penances we have imposed on us in the sacrament of Penance and are ready to undertake, the more securely and fully we shall cancel the debt of temporal punishment that generally remains after the guilt of sin has been forgiven and the more we shall shorten Purgatory for ourselves.

2. As regards the acceptance and performance of our penance, the same principles hold for frequent Confession as for any other Confession. They are as follows:

(i) The penitent is bound in conscience to accept the penance imposed by the confessor and to perform it.

(ii) It is not necessary that the penance be performed before absolution is given, nor even that it should be performed before receiving Holy Communion after Confession.

(iii) Even if a person yields to deliberate distractions while reciting a prayer given as a penance, he nevertheless fulfills the penance imposed and performs the sacramental satisfaction.

(iv) If one, either culpably or inculpably, forgets what penance was given him, he is not obliged to repeat the Confession. If he thinks that the confessor still remembers the penance, he may go back to him and ask him what it was, though he is not obliged to do this. However, the holy zeal that impels us to practice frequent Confession will impel us also, in a case where we cannot return and ask the confessor, to impose a suitable penance on ourselves.

(v) If the confessor forgets to give us a penance— and this can happen— we should remind him. Otherwise, we should impose a penance on ourselves.

3. It is in keeping with the spirit of frequent Confession that we should accept and put up with the suffering and sacrifices of daily life and the burdens that our work and the fulfillment of our duty entail, with the express purpose of making satisfaction for our sins. In the sacrament of Penance we become, according to the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "united with our Lord suffering for our sins." When we go to Confession we want to share in the death sentence that our Lord underwent on account of sin; we want to carry out this death sentence on ourselves and have it carried out on us by actual death with Christ. This death with Christ is accomplished by means of a constant spirit of penance with regard to our past sins, for which we wish to make satisfaction.

But this spirit of penance is at the same time directed toward the future insofar as it makes us strong and ready to bear bravely the privations and sufferings and difficulties and troubles of life and to accept the crosses that come to us in a spirit of atonement and in union with the expiatory suffering and death of Christ our Lord. Such a spirit of penance means that we have a continual sorrow of soul for the sins we have committed, together with the desire to make atonement for them and to rise in spite of them to the heights of virtue and of the love of God. This disposition to do penance and to feel intensely displeased at our past sins and to take pains to overcome sin is of fundamental importance for a truly Christian life.

"Do penance!" (Mt 3: 2; Mk 1: 15). Penance is the road to the Kingdom of Heaven and the entrance door thereto, and without it we can neither get to Heaven nor enter therein. Penance makes us humble and reverent toward God. If the spirit of penance is strong in us, our prayer and our reception of the sacraments will be more zealous and more reverential and more effective. We shall grow ever more grateful to him who forgives us and lifts us up out of sin. We shall understand the truth of Christ's words: the creditor will be loved most by that debtor "to whom he forgave most" (Lk 7: 43). The spirit of penance makes us humble toward others also and gentle and kind and ready to forgive. It creates in us a delicacy of conscience and a steadfastness against every kind of sin and disorder. If the spirit of penance is alive in us, it will open up the sources of joy and interior freedom for us.

"By their fruits you shall know them" (Mt 7: 16, 20). "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit" (Mt 7: 17). The good tree is frequent Confession. Its fruit is the spirit of penance, the disposition to do penance. From this the confessor, as well as the penitent himself, can tell in any particular case how the practice of frequent Confession is succeeding: whether the Confessions are being made well and fruitfully or whether they are not being made well. Whenever frequent Confession is properly understood and practiced with full earnestness, it always produces the spirit of penance and impels us to works of atonement and satisfaction in union with our Lord, who made atonement for our guilt.

CHAPTER THREE: Spiritual Director, Confessor, and Penitent

1. As a rule, all those who practice frequent Confession are seeking, as well as the essential fruits of the sacrament, direction in the spiritual life. And rightly so. We all feel, indeed, that some spiritual direction is necessary for us. "Beginners who are just coming out of Egypt and trying to free themselves from their inordinate passions need a Moses to lead them. The more advanced, who are following Christ closely and wish to taste the freedom of the children of God, need somebody representing Christ whom they can obey in simplicity of heart" (St. John Climacus).

Who would wish to be his own guide along the paths of the interior life, paths that are full of difficulty and responsibility and at the same time so mysterious and dark? "The man who is his own teacher is the pupil of a fool" (St. Bernard). Indeed, many zealous souls have fallen into error owing to lack of guidance: for the ways of the interior life are not clear and obvious to everybody. Besides, the more perfectly the Christian life is lived, the more sacrifice and renunciation and effort are called for, and, consequently, the greater is the danger of deception that it brings. The soul needs a trusty guide who will keep its courage up, urge it on anew, solve its doubts, and help it along in time of discouragement and difficulty.

The interior life consists especially in having the right spirit in all our actions and thoughts and in our whole attitude to life. It consists in the readiness to see everything with the eyes of faith and to act always from supernatural motives. But the great weakness even of pious and zealous souls is that they easily allow themselves to be guided by purely natural reasons and judgments and by merely human motives. Therefore, they generally need guidance to keep their minds directed all the time toward the heights known to us only by faith and to ensure that they act from truly supernatural motives. Nowadays, this guidance is obtained normally from the confessor in the sacrament of Penance. We know, however, that ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who guides the soul. The spiritual director plays the same role with regard to the penitent as the mother who stretches out her hand to the tottering child who cannot yet walk properly, in order to help him to keep his balance. The director urges on the penitent

and stimulates him to heed the attraction of grace and to follow it, and he sees to it that his penitent does not turn aside from the way of grace and go on a wrong path.

2. There are different kinds of spiritual direction, suitable for different circumstances. The spiritual direction of beginners is not the same as that of those who are more advanced; and the spiritual direction of the latter will differ again from that of very perfect souls. One kind of spiritual direction is called for in dealing with scruples, another in dealing with interior trials, questions of vocation, and so on. "Hardly anyone is a good director for all, and not often for one person all his life long" (F. W. Faber, *Growth in Holiness*, London, 1936, p. 309). A suitable spiritual director is, indeed, a great blessing for a soul.

In general, changing spiritual directors is a bad thing. But at the same time it is an exaggeration to represent such changing as the greatest evil in the spiritual life and to say that it is tantamount to eternal perdition for the soul! Father Faber is quite right when he expresses the opinion that it is by no means desirable that we should depend too scrupulously on our spiritual director. "When we have lost our liberty and ease with him, he has lost his grace for us; and all this without fault on either side. Spiritual direction must be free as air and fresh as the morning sun. Neither temptation nor scruple, neither mortification nor obedience, must be able to infuse into it one element of bondage. The moment they do, let us break the direction and take the consequences. For the end of spiritual direction in all stages of the interior and mystical life is one and single and invariable, and it is liberty of spirit" (*Growth in Holiness*, p. 311).

3. The penitent owes his director a holy reverence, for the latter is for him the representative of God, clothed with God's authority with regard to the holiest and most intimate interests of his soul. Such a holy and supernatural reverence will be a safeguard too against any interior or exterior disorder that could creep into the relationship between the spiritual director and his penitent.

With this spiritual and childlike reverence there should go a childlike trust and complete candor, which will lay bare to the director all the good and evil of one's interior life. Furthermore, the penitent should be docile

and obedient to his director. Nevertheless, the obedience due to a spiritual director is not at all the same as the obedience a religious subject shows to his legitimate superiors. A false conception of the obedience due a spiritual director has often misled souls, causing them to indulge in a false feeling of security, almost as if they had handed over their consciences entirely to the care of the director and had no further need to take any initiative in spiritual things themselves. Such people behave as if they themselves were free from all responsibility, as if they could make their confessor responsible for things that really have to be settled between themselves and God, as if they could and must now give up all independence and merely follow the instructions of their confessor in everything.

That a person should consult his director about important matters of the interior life goes without saying. Our sins and imperfections, the strength of our passions, our disordered inclinations, the temptations and secret whisperings of the evil one, our daily order of time, our interior disturbance, and so forth: we should submit all these to him insofar as is necessary to enable him to judge the state of our soul and advise us and help us. But at the same time each one must face up to the ordinary decisions of everyday life and must be willing to take the responsibility for them on his own shoulders.

Our dealings with our spiritual director should be confined to that which is really necessary. We should not trouble him with things that have nothing to do with his office. Nor should we submit our ideas to him until we have fully discovered whether they are well founded and whether we can justify them before God and in conscience. We should not prolong our consultation or our confession more than is necessary, nor should we try to induce our confessor to talk a great deal. The spiritual life develops slowly, and there is no need for new advice every day—unless we are the kind of people who strike out in a new direction every day and so turn their so-called spiritual life into a constantly changing game in which new experiments are all the time being made.

We should guard against taking up too much of the confessor's or spiritual director's time, especially when there are still others waiting for his help.

Do not talk about your confession or your confessor. The latter is most strictly bound to silence. What he has laid down for his penitent to meet a very special situation is often repeated by the latter out of its context. Talk of this kind degenerates all too easily into unfair treatment of the confessor and causes much harm.

4. "St. Paul was quite willing to solve problems of conscience, but he did not regard it as a Christian ideal that we should be continually putting questions to others and relying on their authority. A constant desire for direction, an irresolute outlook that is always hankering after decisions by ecclesiastical authority, an uneasy clinging to the stole of one's confessor or director: such attitudes would be for him proof that a person had not yet come of age and lacked a sense of responsibility. To be like that may be natural in a child, but it is unworthy of an adult Christian.

"In the Epistle to the Ephesians St. Paul sets out as the aim of all pastoral work 'the perfecting of the saints [that is, of Christians] for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; until we all meet into the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ; that henceforth we be no more children tossed to and fro, but may in all things grow up in him who is head, even Christ' (Eph 4: 12-15). This maturity of which the Apostle speaks refers of course to the energy and moral steadfastness with which we must face the world around us. But it refers even more to the independence of judgment and sure knowledge of Christian teaching that protects the individual from errors and distorted ideas. The Apostle of the Gentiles is, therefore, no supporter of that shortsighted spirituality which sees in dependence in religious matters a specially clear expression of the spirit of 'thinking with the Church' (*sentire cum Ecclesia*) and which thinks it a good thing that the penitent should turn to his confessor for advice in every little difficulty" (Adam, Spannungen).

CHAPTER FOUR: Conscience

We have within us what we call our conscience. We know it as a holy and inviolable power to which we must bow; as a mysterious voice that tells us what we must do and what we must avoid, what is allowed and what is not allowed; a voice that authorizes and approves our decisions and actions, or that, on the other hand, repudiates and condemns them and reproaches us whenever we have acted against its dictates.

1. Conscience lays down a law for us, a definite norm and rule for our moral life. This law is, ultimately, the expression of the law-giving will of God, and it binds therefore under strict obligation. It tells me what is required of me by God's holy will, what is allowed or not allowed by God. It tells me that I must do such a thing or not do it, that I must do it this way or some other way. It sets down an eternal, unchangeable law, ordained by God: a law that orders my every action toward God as toward my final end. This eternal law (*lex eterna*) is the wellspring and source of all other laws: of the natural law; of the positive divine law of the Old Testament and of the New Testament; and of positive human law, ecclesiastical and civil, made by man, in which the natural law and positive divine law find their completion.

Law is an exterior and objective norm of behavior. There is, however, an interior proclamation of the law in every man's heart, telling him each instant what he must do or leave undone; and this proclamation is made by our conscience. It is a judgment pronounced by the practical reason; not a judgment about an event or a fact, but about whether we ought or ought not to do something—about whether we may or may not do it. Because it is a judgment of the practical reason, conscience is an intellectual act. That, however, does not prevent it from being influenced by other factors also: by our various inclinations and passions and instincts and feelings and by the will. Nevertheless, conscience in its essence remains always an act of the practical reason telling us authoritatively what we have to do or avoid here and now.

Conscience is holy and inviolable: like a consecrated altar or a consecrated chalice. It is, therefore, something before which we must stand in awe. Why is it holy? Because it is most intimately connected with

God. It is God's voice within us, calling us and admonishing us, warning us or urging us on, commending us or reproving us. Therefore, conscience binds us, puts us under a strict obligation, so that it is not lawful for us to disobey its commands or prohibitions. It orders us and binds us with the authority of God, who speaks through it. The man who acts against his conscience or who induces another to do so acts against the majesty and sovereign rights of God. And conscience itself, because it is holy, must condemn such usurpation of the rights of another.

2. Here we must touch on a difficulty that is frequently brought up. Conscience is holy and always binding; yet at the same time it can be erroneous. If conscience were the direct voice of God, certainly it could never be wrong. The basis of conscience, namely, the innate capability of the practical reason to apprehend the first principles of morality, is indeed not subject to error. It is perfectly clear to everybody that "we must avoid evil and do good." From this basic principle, with the help of experience and instruction and study, we build up gradually a system of morality, and what we call conscience develops; that is, we make individual judgments on the morality of our personal actions here and now and feel ourselves under obligation with regard to them.

Because both the system of morality thus built up and the individual judgments of our conscience depend on human sources of knowledge, which are subject to error, they both are themselves subject to error in many ways. Consequently, a person's conscience can be so badly deceived about something that he has no chance whatever of dispelling his error: what we call "invincible error."

There is also such a thing as "vincible error," error that a person can dispel if he takes reasonable trouble. In this case, as well as in the judgment regarding the licity or illicity of the action, there is at the back of the mind a suspicion that one's conscience is wrong, a feeling that the matter ought to be examined further. Here, consequently, we cannot simply regard the dictate of our practical reason as the voice of God and stop there. What must we do? We must dispel the (vincible) error insofar as this is possible: by reflecting further, by asking somebody, by prayer.

But it is a different matter when the error is invincible. Here too the principle holds: "All that is not faith is sin" (Rom 14: 23), that is, anything one does that is not justified by a sincere personal conviction that it is right and lawful is sinful. One may and, indeed, must follow an invincibly erroneous conscience. For the person in error it can make an objectively good action morally wrong; and it can make what is objectively sinful not only allowable but even obligatory.

To act morally right a person must always be sure that what he has decided to do is lawful; in other words, he may never act when he is in doubt as to the licity of a proposed action. Should it happen that, when one is trying to form a judgment as to whether a certain action is morally lawful or not, serious reasons present themselves both for and against the licity of the action, then he is not permitted to act in this state of doubt. A person doing so would be deliberately putting himself in the danger of sinning. He must first of all "form a certain conscience," that is, he must arrive at a judgment that is certain with regard to the licity or illicity of the action under consideration. A person can generally do this by earnest reflection on the matter, by imploring God's help in prayer, by asking advice from conscientious men, or by seeking enlightenment in books.

3. Conscience is a judgment of the practical reason. This latter includes our natural reason, which draws its knowledge from the world around us and from our own experience, and our reason as enlightened by faith and by the knowledge drawn from supernatural revelation. Insofar as conscience depends on knowledge— both natural knowledge and the knowledge provided by faith—it can develop in breadth and depth and clarity and sureness. Insofar as it is a question of conscience applying universal truths and universal laws to the actual details of daily life, there is also great scope for development. It should be noted that our conscience, in its perceptions and judgments, is always subject to the influence of our feelings and desires, of our moods of joy or of anxiety, of our aspirations and fears. We all know from our own experience and from that of others how easily human feelings and longings can lead us in another direction from that in which conscience tells we should go. It is very important that our conscience, even insofar as it is subject to the influence of our feelings and of the will, should be formed and developed

so as to judge our actions with the greatest possible correctness and objectivity.

The formation of development of our conscience may be said to have two different stages. At first conscience functions in a rather negative way, chiefly in connection with our "examination of conscience." In this stage it is concerned primarily with guilt and sin, though it takes cognizance too of the motives and roots from which our sins spring. But anyone who is really in earnest about the interior life will want to do more than this. He will endeavor to develop his conscience in such a way that it will give him positive guidance in every department of his life. For this purpose he will aim at attaining a high level of Christian wisdom in his moral knowledge and at cultivating his sense of duty to a degree of conscientiousness that will be ready for every sacrifice. Or, approaching the matter in another way, he will make Christ our Lord, the incarnate image of the living God, his model in all things and the all-holy will of God the guiding principle of his life.

This development of conscience is an essential part of the religious and moral formation of a Christian. It goes on almost unnoticed, unsystematically, day by day: in prayer, spiritual reading, study of the Scriptures, and in the reception of the sacraments. Nowadays, however, many religious and moral truths and principles almost necessarily fall into oblivion under the pressure of the worldly, secularized, unchristian way of thinking that prevails around us, and the image of the God-man whom we should keep before us as our model is very liable to be obliterated by the business of the day. Consequently, in our time, a more regulated and systematic training of conscience is called for.

This can be achieved through regular examination of the state of our conscience. We can put together, in a kind of scheme for self-examination, the more important duties of the Christian life: something like the Ten Commandments, only framed in a positive way and from a strictly Christian point of view. In recent times many have suggested basing such a scheme on the petitions of the Our Father or on the "great commandment" of love of God and of neighbor. Others suggest that, especially for young people, conscience can be trained best by consideration of the nobility of the life to which Christ calls us and which is

possible for us in him. The heart of the young Christian will leap up with joy at the thought of the splendor of the Christian life; he will want to thank God for all the great and noble deeds and sacrifices that are possible with the aid of grace. But he will understand too how far off he still is from the heights of sanctity now unveiled before him. And this realization, while making him feel small and humble before God, will also spur him on to struggle courageously toward the heights, relying on God's grace.

A detailed examination of the state of one's conscience should be made at least at certain times in the course of the year: for instance, on recollection days or at the beginning of Advent and Lent.

- ¹ John Paul II, Letter to Priests, March 27, 1983, no. 3
- ² Cardinal Silvio Oddi, "The Priesthood of Today and Tomorrow," address at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia for the 150th anniversary of its foundation (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1983) p. 20.
- ³ John Paul II, address to American bishops, October 5, 1979, no. 9
- ⁴ Pius XII, encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943 (NCWC edition), no. 88.
- ⁵ Paul VI, encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, August 6, 1964, n. 38.
- ⁶ John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 7.
- ⁷ Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God* (Dublin, London, New York, 1981), nos. 218-219. A number of references to the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei on the sacrament of Penance are given in the article "The Pardoning Sacrament," published in Bulletin No. 5 on the life of Monsignor Escriva. Copies of this and other issues can be obtained in the United States from Bulletin on the Life of Msgr. Escriva, 330 Riverside Dr., New York, N.Y. 10025, and from Ireland, from Harvieston, Cunningham Road, Dalkey, County Dublin.
- ⁸ *Mystici Corporis*, no. 88.
- ⁹ Pius XII, encyclical *Mediator Dei*, November 20, 1947 (NCWC edition), no. 177
- ¹⁰ Pius XII, apostolic exhortation *Menti nostrae*, September 23, 1950.
- ¹¹ Pius X, encyclical *Editae saepe*, May 26, 1910
- ¹² Decree *Quamsingulari*, August 8, 1910.
- ¹³ John XXIII, encyclical *Sacerdotii nostri primordia*, August 1, 1959 (NCWC edition), no. 56.
- ¹⁴ *Journal of a Soul* (New York, 1965), pp. 304-305.
- ¹⁵ Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, *Christus Dominus*, no. 30; see also Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 59.
- ¹⁶ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 3.
- ¹⁷ Maggie Grevatt, "Confession: 'How often should I go to confession?' Priests debate," in Catholic Twin Circle, May 15, 1983.
- ¹⁸ John Paul II, Letter to Priests (1983), no. 3.
- ¹⁹ Paul VI, apostolic constitution *Paenitemini*, February 17, 1966.
- ²⁰ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 20.
- ²¹ Sacred Congregation for Religious, Decree on Confessions for Religious, December 8, 1970.
- ²² Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, April 11, 1971, addendum, no. 5

- ²³ See the authoritative article by Cardinal John Wright, "The New Catechetical Directory and Initiation to the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., October 7, 1971.
- ²⁴ General Catechetical Directory, addendum, no. 5.
- ²⁵ Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments and Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, Declaration *Sanctus Pontifex*, May 24, 1973.
- ²⁶ Letter of the Secretary of State, Cardinal Jean Villot, to the 26th Italian National Liturgical Week, which opened in Florence on August 25, 1975.
- ²⁷ Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship and Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, Letter on Confession and First Communion, March 21, 1977.
- ²⁸ Paul VI, address to the bishops of New York State during their *ad limina* visit, April 20, 1978.
- ²⁹ John Paul II, address to a group of Canadian bishops during their *ad limina* visit, November 17, 1978
- ³⁰ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 20.
- ³¹ *Code of Canon Law* (1983), canon 914.
- ³² John Paul II, address to a group of American bishops during their *ad limina* visit, April 15, 1983, no. 5
- ³³ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Pastoral Norms Concerning the Administration of General Sacramental Absolution, June 16, 1972, no. XII; these norms are essentially incorporated in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, canons 960-963.
- ³⁴ Rite of Penance, December 2, 1973, Intro., n. 7.
- ³⁵ Paul VI, apostolic exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, May 9, 1975, part V.
- ³⁶ John Paul II, encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, November 30, 1980, nos. 5-6.
- ³⁷ J. Escriva, *Christ Is Passing By* (Chicago and Dublin, 1974), no. 64.
- ³⁸ J. Escriva, *Friends of God*, no. 216.
- ³⁹ Council of Trent, session 14, chapter 1: DS 1670; cf. canon 3: DS 1703
- ⁴⁰ John Paul II, Letter to Priests (1983), no. 2.
- ⁴¹ Cf. John Paul II, address of December 23, 1982, no. 5.
- ⁴² John Paul II, Letter to Priests (1983), no. 3
- ⁴³ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 22.
- ⁴⁴ *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no. 13

⁴⁵ *Christus Dominus*, no. 30.

⁴⁶ Letter of Cardinal Villot quoted in note 26.

⁴⁷ Paul VI, address of April 20, 1978, quoted in note 28

⁴⁸ John Paul II, address of November 17, 1978, quoted in note 29.

⁴⁹ Letter to Priests (1983), no. 3.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, address of April 15, 1983, quoted in note 32, nos. 3-4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, no. 6.

⁵² Cardinal Humberto Medeiros, pastoral letter for Lent 1981, in *Whatever God Wants: Pastorals and Addresses by His Eminence Humberto Cardinal Medeiros* (Boston, 1984), pp. 317-330.

⁵³ Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 916: "Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of our Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to Confession as soon as possible."

⁵⁴ J. Escriva, February 14, 1975, in S. Bernal, *Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer: A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei* (London, 1977), p. 116.

⁵⁵ Cf. note 35.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, address of December 23, 1982, no. 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 5.

⁵⁸ Bull *Aperite portas*, January 6, 1983, no. 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, no. 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, no. 11.

⁶³ John Paul II, *Letter to Bishops*, January 25, 1983, no. 5.

⁶⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., February 27 to April 24, 1984.

⁶⁵ *Aperite portas*, no. 3; cf. Letter to Priests (1983), no. 4.

⁶⁶ John Paul II, address to priests of the Diocese of Rome, February 17, 1983, no. 3; cf. *Letter to Priests* (1983), no. 4.

⁶⁷ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 22.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, homily during Mass celebrated in the Basilica of Our Lady of Zapotan, January 30, 1979.