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JMJ

U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls

O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

VOL. 2 = The Penitent Christian

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

### The Choice of a Good Confessor

*“If Thou also hadst known, and that in this thy day, the things that are to thy peace.” Luke 19:42.*

The unhappy state of the perverse Jerusalem drew tears from the eyes of our compassionate Lord Jesus, as he spoke these words. Sinful Christian, “if thou also hadst known!” So the same merciful God often speaks to your heart; if you only knew the unhappy state in which you are, and the graces that are now offered you. I have prepared for you, in the Sacrament of Penance, a necessary, easy, and advantageous means, by which you can save your soul. Woe to you, if you disregard that means, or too long defer its use! The time will come when your enemies will surround you in your death-struggle, and will carry off your despairing soul into the abyss of hell, because you have allowed the time of grace to pass by. Is it not deplorable that, although we can free ourselves from the miserable state of sin at any moment, there are yet so many who do not wish to be converted? Numbers of Catholics approach the sacred tribunal of Penance, yet do not receive that Sacrament validly, either through want of preparation or through choice of a careless confessor. Today, I will speak of the latter point, being prepared to show:

- I. That the true penitent will make choice of a good confessor; and*
- II. That the unrepentant sinner will choose an ignorant or incapable confessor.*

I. Are not all confessors then, the same (you ask), as far as their office is concerned? They all have ears to hear my sins. They have a tongue to give me absolution, and to impose a salutary penance on me. They have all received power from God in their ordination to free me from my sins. That is all very true, but, let us suppose you have on hand an important lawsuit, involving a large sum of money, do you not look out for a clever lawyer to defend your cause? Or if your wife, your husband, or your only child is threatened with a serious illness, do you not search for an experienced doctor to attend the sick person? But is not one lawyer as good as another, one doctor as good as another, at least as far as their profession is concerned? Yes, you say, that is true; but still there is a difference. I wish to get the best doctor or lawyer I can for my money, that I may be all the more certain of gaining my case, or of having him or her, who is so dear to me, restored to health. And you are quite right. Generally speaking, people are so careful in affairs of this kind, that rich men are sometimes not satisfied

with the doctor who usually attends them, but call in, at great expense to themselves, the services of some physician world-famous for skill and experience.

If we are thus careful in things that concern our mortal bodies and our temporal and transitory goods, should we be less so in a matter on which the welfare of our immortal souls and our eternity depend? Your confessor is the lawyer to whom you must entrust your case, or rather he is the judge in the place of God, who has to decide it; and this is the first and chief office of the confessor. He is the physician who has to heal the maladies of your soul, and to preserve you from them in future, prescribing salutary medicines to that effect; and this is the second part of the confessor's duty. In order to fulfill this twofold obligation properly, what great knowledge and prudence, experience and piety, are required.

1. In the first place, he must have the necessary knowledge, so as to be able to pronounce judgment on all sins, and to distinguish their different natures and malice. He must know, in the matter of injustice, whether, to whom, and in what degree his penitent has to make restitution for stolen or unjustly retained goods, for injury done his neighbor's property or character. He must know how to act with those who have been addicted to a certain vice for a long time, or who are still in the proximate occasion of sin. He must also be able to decide whether, when, and how he has to give or refuse absolution. He must know nearly all the sins that are wont to be committed in different states of life; must know how to deal with the ignorant and simple-minded in things that are necessary to salvation and to the reception of the Sacraments, that he may give them the required instruction about absolution, and dispose them to real, supernatural sorrow for their sins. He must know how, according to the sins that have been committed and the circumstances of the person, to give good advice and to suggest means for the amendment of his penitent, and many other things of the kind. Certainly, no ordinary degree of knowledge is required for this and if one has it not, or has forgotten it, how can he be a good confessor, that is, a good judge, teacher, and physician of souls? Be on your guard, says the philosopher, against those physicians who, having but a little learning, kill many; who spend their time in visiting, and know how to pay compliments, but know little of their profession, and are good for nothing but to hurry off the sick man somewhat sooner to the grave. Such is the warning that St. Augustine gives to all Christians. "He who wishes to confess his sins," he says, "must seek out a priest who knows how to bind and loose, or else they will both fall into the ditch."

2. In the second place, a confessor must have great prudence, so as to unite mildness and affability with a holy zeal and earnestness.

3. Thirdly, just as one does not like to entrust a serious illness to a physician who has had little experience, no matter how well he has made his studies, so also, in addition to learning and prudence, the confessor must have great experience in hearing confessions.

4. Finally and principally, he must lead a holy life, so as to do his duty as he ought in the sight of God, and not allow himself to be blinded by human respect or fear in dealing with his penitent. "If a man is bad to himself, to whom will he be good?" He who does not care for his own soul and its salvation will not take much interest in the souls of others. He who is unfaithful to God in other matters of his duty will not trouble his conscience much about how he performs his duty in the confessional.

In the other Sacraments it matters little to the recipient what sort of priest administers them to him. Whether he be learned or ignorant, pious or wicked, as long as he has the necessary power, uses the necessary outward signs, and has the necessary intention when uttering the words of the form, holy and valid is Baptism; holy and valid, the sacrifice of the Mass; holy and valid, Confirmation and Extreme Unction. The sins of the minister cannot hurt him who is baptized, confirmed, anointed, or who hears the holy Mass. But it is quite different with the Sacrament of Penance, in which the confessor must act the part of a learned judge and of a skilled physician. If he be wanting in the necessary knowledge, prudence, virtue, and piety, then, indeed, the unfortunate souls of his penitents have a bad lawyer to plead their cause, and a bad physician to attend to their diseases. "As star differs from star in brightness," says St. Augustine, "so does one priest differ from another," as far as the performance of his duty is concerned.

II. Yet, there are Christians who, when they have sinned, not only do not make the least attempt to choose a good confessor, but actually seek out on purpose the most ignorant and incapable one they can find. If they hear of one who has the name of being exact in his duty, and careful in looking after the consciences of his penitents,

they shun him. If, by chance, they happen on one who exhorts or reproves them, they do not go to him a second time. They run from one church and from one confessional to the other, seeking some one who will speak soft and soothing words to them, according to their own ideas, who will look on the malice of their sins as mere weaknesses, who will excuse their faults, and consider their un-Christian customs as harmless, and approve of them, so that they may continue in them unhindered by remorse of conscience. In a word, they want one who will touch the wounds of the soul so gently as to leave them unhealed. They resemble those whom God by the prophet Isaias has called:

“Children, that will not hear the law of God. Who say to the seers: see not; and to them that behold: behold not for us those things that are right; speak unto us pleasant things, see errors for us” (Isai. 30:9, 10). That is, allow us to go wrong and to be deceived; make the road to heaven broader for us than it is in reality. Like the sick man who says to the doctor: “Give me an agreeable medicine, whether it is good for my health or not; prescribe sugar for me, even if it is the worst poison I could take; allow me to drink good wine, although it will only increase my fever; do you only approve of what I do, and then, in God’s name, let me die!” these penitents show that they have not the least desire for instruction, amendment, or sincere conversion. Blind and unhappy people, who do not wish to have a guard to lead them on the way to salvation! Still more blind and unhappy those who have a blind guide, for they will both fall into the ditch!

Alas! some say, must I disclose my sins to a pious, learned, and experienced priest? I have so many fearful things to tell. What would the good man think of me? What will he think? He will think, with St Augustine, in the humility of his pious heart:

“There is no sin which another has committed too great for me to commit, unless a special grace of God preserves me from it.” His piety will make him more compassionate of your misery, more gentle and charitable in his efforts to save you from the unhappy state of sin. The Saints are severe only towards themselves, while they are full of goodness towards others. They imitate our Lord Jesus Christ, who received sinners with the greatest love. The more pious your confessor is, the more he will esteem you if you tell your sins honestly; and the more grievous and horrible your sins, the more he will rejoice, not, indeed, that you have been so wicked, but because your candor affords him the opportunity of rescuing your soul from the clutches of the devil. He will rejoice like the hunter who kills a large head of game, or the fisherman who lands a large fish. Ah! but he will be horrified, you think. Horrified? The more experienced the confessor is, the less will he be horrified. Is a doctor who has spent a long time in a hospital, or who has served during a war, horrified when he sees a deep wound? Not at all; he has seen so many of them that he is quite accustomed to the sight; it does not inspire him with disgust, so that he attends to his patient without the least repugnance. Do you think that it is a new or alarming thing for an experienced confessor to hear grievous and horrible sins? On the other hand, by a candid confession, you take away from him all fear and dread, for you make him sure that you are disposed for absolution. The greatest, nay the only, trouble of a conscientious confessor is his anxiety as to whether his penitent is well disposed or not; whether he has a true sorrow for sin and a firm purpose of amendment. Well satisfied is he, when his penitent discloses candidly, but with a sorrowful heart, even the most terrible sins, and thus shows that he really wishes to be helped!

Finally, you say: “I am afraid to go to a learned confessor, lest he should probe the very depths of my heart, and bring even the secret details of my wickedness to light. Certainly, he will do that, if he sees that you are not open with him, either through shame, or through ignorance. It is, in fact, his duty to do it, and you ought to be glad of it, if you are in earnest about turning to God with all your heart! Yes; but he will make a sin of many a thing; he will forbid this or that custom, place all sorts of obligations on me, and will insist on my doing, omitting, avoiding, or restoring a host of things that will give me a great deal of trouble. Quite right, again! He will do all that if necessary; and he must do it, if he does not wish to lose his own soul along with yours. The confessor’s duty is not to try to please you, or to win your affection, but solely to save your soul from hell, and to bring it to eternal happiness; and thus do you the greatest kindness that one man can do another. There is no doubt, it would be far easier for him to hold his tongue, to let you have your own way, to absolve you from all your obligations, and thus to win your esteem. What pleasure or profit can it be to him to place restrictions on you, to reprove you, and to make you uneasy by reminding you of your obligations? He certainly would never think of doing such things, if his conscience and the nature of the case did not oblige him to do them.

Hence, if you wish to lighten your confessor's burden, you must tell him candidly how the matter stands with you, and what are your doubts. "See, Father," you should say to him, "I appear before you as before Jesus Christ, my Judge. I have done so-and so. I have followed this or that custom; some say it is not lawful, and therefore I am disturbed about it; what do you think of it? What have I to do in the future? I beg of you, for God's sake (to whom I wish from my heart to be converted), to tell me the truth plainly. Do not flatter me. Remind me of my duty; I take your soul as a pledge of the safety of mine in this business." In that way you would show that you are a true penitent and that you are earnestly resolved to be converted and to save your soul. "There is no fear of my doing that," some one will say; "I know very well that, if I were to speak in that style, I should have to give up certain customs of mine, break off that intimacy, send away that person, restore those ill-gotten goods, and avoid the occasion of sin. But I cannot do that, and therefore I will go to that other confessor; he is a good, easy man, who will not trouble me with questions and exhortations, and will give me Absolution! Aha! so we have found you out at last! We have at length got to the bottom of the matter.

Sinners, if you are of this unrepentant mind, do not, I beg of you, go to any confessor at all. Do not confess your sins, even at Easter; and (if you continue unrepentant to the end), not even on your death-bed. It is better for you to go to hell as you are. Such confessions would only bury you deeper in hell, weighing you down with their sacrilegious guilt. But if you are seriously resolved on doing penance, then I say to you in the words of Tobias to his son, when he was sending him into a distant country: "Go now, and seek out some faithful man to go with thee" (Tob. 5:4). O sinner, you have wandered far from the path that leads to heaven, and are in actual danger of eternal death. Go, then, if you wish to return to God, seek some one who will bring you back to the right road. Seek a learned, prudent, and pious confessor, and opening your conscience to him as thoroughly as you would to the almighty God, follow his advice in all things.

If you have already found one of the kind, however, do not leave him without necessity. Keep to him as long as you can. Some people are constantly changing their confessor. That cannot possibly be good for them. In the first place, they who fall into sin through inveterate habit, or who are in the proximate occasion of sin, must either keep to one confessor or tell their sins again to their new confessor. Otherwise, he will not be able to help them, and their confessions will be invalid. In the second place, they who do not usually commit mortal sins cannot receive proper guidance and direction if they have not always the same guide, who knows their conscience, and can prescribe wholesome remedies for them. He who has been sick of a fever and has been cured by a good doctor, if he gets sick again, will send for the same doctor. Why? Because he knows the sick man's constitution and can prescribe for him at once, which a stranger could not do. So it is also, due proportion being observed, with the maladies of the soul. Therefore, if possible, keep to the one confessor, provided he is a good one, and pray to that effect often, that God may send his good angel to lead you and to keep you from wandering off the right road to salvation (Mach. 15:23). I am sick of soul, O Lord; lead me to a physician who will certainly cure me.

I am blind and ignorant; grant that I may find a guide who will keep me in the right path. Give me a confessor who will oppose my evil inclinations by his instructions, reproofs, and exhortations, and who will cleanse my soul from all stain, that I may be converted to thee with my whole heart, and after this life arrive at that happy place where nothing defiled may enter! Amen.

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