

The Good Confessor **by Gerald Kelly, S.J.**

Preface

Justice requires that I introduce this little book with a personal acknowledgment. For more than thirty years Father Francis J. O'Boyle, S.J., taught moral theology to the Jesuits of the Middle West, as well as to many from other parts of the country, particularly the South. During this time he periodically gave little pastoral talks on the qualities of a good confessor. Those talks form the basis of and the inspiration for these chapters. And I would gladly put his name as author and mine merely as editor were it not for the fact that in my hands so much of the original has been lost and so much extraneous material added that Father O'Boyle would not recognize my finished product as his own. Much has been lost. Father O'Boyle was a living edition of Newman's description of a gentleman. I could describe him in those words of Newman, or I might give an equally accurate description by saying that he was a man of Christlike serenity. It was the serenity of his appearance that most impressed those who saw him, and the serenity of his attitude that best characterized his classes and particularly his pastoral talks. It was not only what he said, but also and even especially the calm and peace and quiet assurance that he communicated to us that made his talks valuable. With perfect frankness let me confess that I could not catch this note of serenity and put it into my manuscript. Much of it, to say the least, has been lost.

Much has been added. I have included many points which Father O'Boyle did not treat, and I have expanded considerably on those he did discuss. Moreover, as I worked on this material I inserted many suggestions of my own. For these reasons I believe I should assume complete responsibility for the manuscript. But I should not feel honest were I to fail to explain how much I am indebted to Father O'Boyle, as regards both material and inspiration.

Throughout these discussions I am thinking mainly of the young confessor. He needs many detailed helps. Experienced confessors will hardly find anything new in what is said here, but I hope that even they will find it a useful repetition of the old.

I realize that these few chapters do not exhaust the material that should be treated under the title, *The Good Confessor*. But I think that the general principles of good confessional practice are adequately covered; and if I were to await the opportunity of discussing the more specific questions pertinent to various classes of penitents this book might never be published.

The material given here was first published in a series of articles in *Emmanuel* from November, 1949, to December, 1950. I am deeply grateful to the Editor of *Emmanuel* for allowing me to reprint the articles in book form.

GERALD KELLY, S.J.

CHAPTER I - THE CONFESSOR'S VIRTUE

The qualities of the good confessor as enumerated in the Ritual (T. 3, c. 1, De Sacramento Poenitentiae) are goodness, knowledge, prudence, and meticulous respect for secrecy. It is not mere chance that places *bonitas* first on this list. Everything said in the papal encyclicals about the priest's need of sanctity applies with special force to the priest as confessor. No other ministerial work brings him into closer contact with souls; in no other work is he more intimately associated with the Holy Spirit. Other things being equal, the holier he is the better confessor he will be.

A holy life is a life of well-rounded virtue. Our Lord summed it up as a life of love, a life characterized by intense charity toward God and the neighbor. To apply this idea in its completeness to the confessor would require a volume on the cultivation of the spiritual life. For these notes it will be sufficient to indicate certain aspects of priestly holiness that have special reference to the confessional ministry.

Sustained Motivation Needed

A first requisite for carrying on this ministry is a supernatural love of the work. The young priest may concede this without realizing its import. He is idled with a tremendous awe when he finds himself in the place of God and privileged to know the deepest secrets of the human heart. He is consoled by the return of the sinner, inspired by the confession of the saint, and elated by those occasional experiences that manifest in an almost tangible manner that he is the instrument of the Holy Spirit. In a word, the young confessor may readily find the confessional attractive, both naturally and supernaturally; and he will usually undertake this ministry with sincere enthusiasm. The older priest, however, is very likely typified by a friend of mine who once paused on the way to his confessional to make this brief remark: "Remember how Father O'Boyle used to tell us that the real test of the devoted confessor comes only after several years, after the novelty has worn off I'm just beginning to realize what he meant."

Most priests who have heard confessions regularly for several years would immediately appreciate the implications of my friend's remark and would find a sympathetic echo within themselves. They have learned through experience that one cannot preserve his initial enthusiasm without effort. After a few years, dragging tendencies begin to show themselves. Like other holy things, the confessional can become monotonous, even distasteful. The time for hearing confessions comes round with a boring regularity; it "interferes" with other work; it deprives one of pleasant recreations. Long lines of penitents sap one's energies; intervals between confessions fray one's nerves. Listening to the repetition of big sin provokes a sort of disgust, yet on the other hand the frequent recital of small sin appears very drab. And - if I may conclude this list with a spiritual anti-climax - it is not easy to go to the confessional week after week on just the afternoon or evening when one's favorite team is advancing toward a thrilling championship.

Such are some of the dragging tendencies. Any priest might experience one or more of them. If he gives in to them he will very likely come to look upon the ministry of hearing

confessions as "just another job." He will begrudge the time spent in the confessional and will neglect preparation for it. His high-minded resolve, made while he was young and enthusiastic, to keep up his studies will first become a mere velleity, then disappear entirely. The zealous apostle of a few years ago will become a routine, uninspired, and uninspiring confessor - a dull instrument even in the hands of God.

Inspiring Truths

To counteract such harmful tendencies, the priest has to make a deliberate effort to preserve and increase his love of the confessional. Hearing confessions does have its unpleasant aspects, and if a priest begins to think only of these or too much of these he will soon lose his enthusiasm for this ministry. But the confessional also has its inspiring aspects, and these far outweigh any other considerations. If through meditation the priest can appreciate the supernatural value of the confessional, he will always be a devoted and Christlike confessor.

One helpful form of meditation is a consideration of the doctrines that have a special pertinence to the confessional. The meaning of sanctifying grace and its sublime effects in the soul; the reality of the sacraments and their grace-giving efficacy; the special power of the sacrament of penance to destroy sin and its effects and to implant in the heart a barrier against future sin - these great truths must never become mere words to the priest. Yet they are likely to become just that - mere words - if they are not occasionally made the subjects of prayer. The priest who thinks that such truths have become vital principles of his own conduct merely because he was deeply impressed by them in dogma class is bound to face a painful disillusionment. They become such principles only through prayer - and, I might say, through the hard work of prayer.

In meditating on dogmatic truths it pays to translate them into the everyday work of the confessional. For instance, isn't it actually true that the most ordinary penitent who comes to us with the very minimum disposition for a fruitful confession gets something more precious than any earthly treasure when we pronounce the words of absolution. And isn't it true that one hundred souls absolved means one hundred souls who have regained grace or grown in grace through our ministry? In the light of such considerations do not the weariness, the drabness, the pressure of other work, the loss of recreation, and similar things seem very small indeed?

It also helps to consider prayerfully what the confessional means to Our Lord. Of course, He never sat in a confessional. But He lived and suffered and died to take away sin and to make grace abound. The most touching of His parables - the Prodigal Son and the Good Shepherd - concern sinners and show us His own divine attitude toward them. He took pains to announce to us the great joy in heaven over one sinner doing penance. His miracles were often accompanied by the remission of sin. In His own personal contacts with the human heart, He showed a special love for sinners - as is evidenced by the stories of the woman taken in adultery, of Mary Magdalen, of the woman of Samaria, of the good thief, of Peter's denial, and of Thomas's unbelief. But this seemingly special love for the "big sinners" did not dull His devotion to the "little sinners," the good people

with the little faults, whose lives can seem so very dull when one is hunting for the spectacular. There is no indication in Scripture that He was less interested in Magdalen after her conversion than He was in converting her.

Perhaps the best sign of Christ's attitude toward the confessional is found in the story of the first Easter Sunday. After His Resurrection His first gift to the Apostles, and through them to us, was the power to forgive sins. Every time we hear a confession we tell again the story of that first Easter and extend to one more soul that blessed peace that is had only in Christ. "My peace I give to you. As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you. Whose sin you shall forgive..." This story should not be something that we priests use merely for attractive sermon material; it is a powerful source of personal inspiration when our interest in the confessional ministry tends to lag.

A third helpful subject of meditation is the meaning of the confessional to the faithful. It may be true that some seem to have but little appreciation of the confessor's work and that some are even definitely uncooperative; but, if we consider the faithful as a group, we cannot fail to be impressed by their deep faith in our power and their implicit confidence in us. We learn in our moral theology that the confessor is judge, physician, teacher, and spiritual father. Our penitents may have no explicit knowledge of these various offices, yet in their practical, living faith they attribute all these functions to us. They bring us their sin for judgment, and after our absolution they go forth with unburdened consciences. They show us the wounds of their sins and ask us to bind up these wounds and give them the remedies against future sins. They have doubts, puzzling doubts, and they ask us to solve them. They grow despondent, and look to us for comfort; and they treat our kind words as if they came directly from the lips of Christ. For them, our confessional ministry is productive of a deep peace of soul which the rest of the world envies but does not understand.

Meditation on these and similar truths helps the priest to attain and sustain the attitude of a good confessor. In terms of virtue, this is an attitude characterized by deep faith in the supernatural value of the confessional and by an earnest zeal for the salvation and sanctification of souls through this ministry. These are great virtues, powerful supernatural forces that furnish the confessor's motivation. In the actual exercise of the confessional ministry the priest should have this motivation and he should live up to it by practicing many virtues. This practice includes not merely the great virtues, but also, and perhaps particularly, the smaller virtues, virtues in themselves natural.

The Christian Gentleman

According to the Ritual, when the priest is called to hear confessions he should respond promptly and willingly; if he finds the penitent unprepared, he should help him to prepare; and if the penitent is ignorant, he should give him the necessary instruction. Also, the priest is to listen without interrupting; he is to admonish the penitent with paternal kindness, and encourage him to do his duty. In other words, the Church expects every one of her confessors to be punctual, regular, courteous, kindly, and patient - a

perfect Christian gentleman. (As regards punctuality and regularity, a devoted confessor once told me that these are the virtues that bring regular penitents.)

I will not try to teach of these virtues in turn and to give precise directions concerning its practice in hearing confessions. That might be artificial. But in the remainder of this chapter, I should like to give, without following any definite order, a number of suggestions that may help a young priest prepare his soul for the work of the confessional and that will also serve as an occasional examination of conscience in this regard.

The ideal always to be kept in mind in dealing with penitents is Christ Our Lord: His sympathetic attitude toward others, and His ability to see the good in others and to draw it to the surface. One fruit of priestly meditation on His life should be an eagerness to help others, combined with a readiness to practice the little kindnesses and courtesies that mean so much to the human heart. If these things mean much outside the confessional they mean even more in the confessional, where penitents are frequently nervous, frightened, and even despondent.

We should remember that some of our penitents probably have not a friend in the world. The one person to whom they can unburden themselves is their confessor. It is not surprising, therefore, that they may want to tell us many of their troubles that have no real bearing on confession. Just to listen to them is a source of great comfort to them; and the addition of a few kind words is something they will treasure for a long time. I am not referring here to the penitents who are not particularly burdened, but who just want to talk. This latter type must be gently but firmly kept to relevant details. A priest learns by experience how to distinguish between the two; but if he doubts, it is safer to treat the penitent as one who belongs to the first class.

In the confessional, priest and penitent are not on an equal footing. The penitent realizes that the priest is in the place of God, and he cannot "fight back," if I may use such an expression. A priest should never take advantage of this relationship by rudeness, sarcasm, or abusive language. Even the occasional penitent who shows a lack of respect and who may even use abusive language with a confessor should be treated with kindness and courtesy. The Christlike policy will never lose a soul; harshness, on the other hand, can easily drive souls away from this needed source of grace. If we must err, let it be on the side of kindness, and we shall have less reason to reproach ourselves in after years.

When I insist on kindness, I do not mean softness. There are times when we must be firm; we are, as the Ritual says, ministers of God's justice as well as of His mercy. Yet, even when we must be firm in making certain demands of a penitent, we should make it a point never to be sharp or offensive. If we find the confessional work especially trying and we think we are in danger of being harsh, we can ease up a bit on questions, advice, and such things. It is better to be somewhat deficient in such matters than to run the risk of wounding a soul. Also, on such occasions, it may be advisable to leave the confessional and relax for a while.

Occasions for trying one's patience in the confessional are legion. Some penitents seem totally unprepared, and we have to drag everything out of them. This is seldom due to ill will; but even if it were we should try to convert it into good will. Some of these penitents simply do not know how to prepare for confession; some are ignorant not only of the minimum essentials for confession, but also of the minimum requisites of faith; and still others come unprepared because they came to confession on a sudden impulse and realize their unpreparedness only when they begin to confess. In all such cases it is not safe to turn a person away because of his ignorance or his lack of preparation. It is better, even when a crowd is waiting, to try to help the penitent to fulfill the minimum requirements for this confession and then tell him what he should do to prepare himself in the future.

We may feel irritated at the taciturn penitent who leaves everything to us and simply answers our questions with an abrupt yes or no; and we may feel even more irritated when he says "yes sir" and "no sir." We must hold our patience. He does not mean any disrespect. This may be merely his natural way of speaking; or it may be nervousness or embarrassment.

Then there is the penitent who comes just when the priest is preparing to leave the confessional. Sometimes he cannot help this; he may have to work late. But on other occasions the confessor may be irritated because he was free for several minutes and he noticed the penitent in the church all that time; now, when the priest is about to leave, the penitent comes toward the confessional. It is good to keep in mind that there may be some reason for the delay. Yet, even if there is no good reason, patience is still a virtue. It is better to be imposed on now and then than to run the risk of hurting anyone.

Incidentally, the mention of the "last-minute" penitents reminds me of what I might call "first-minute" confessors. I mean those who leave the confessional the first minute that penitents quit coming. The good confessor ought to make the intention, and renew it often, to stay in the confessional to the end of the scheduled time, even though there may be an apparent break some time before the end.

Our moral professor used to caution us against jumping to rash conclusions if we noticed alcohol on the breath of a penitent. "It may be just a 'bracer' that he (or she) took, to get the courage to come to confession," he said. There is wisdom in that advice; alcoholic breath does not necessarily signify either disrespect or incapacity. I say "not necessarily," because occasionally the incapacitated do wend their ways into the confessional; on these rare occasions all that the priest can do is tactfully help them wend their ways out again.

It is well to keep in mind that sometimes the tendency to be impatient with a penitent is merely a sign of one's own inability to handle his case. The very recognition of this fact ought to help us to be calm and kindly, to develop more reliance on God, and perhaps to make a resolution to study a little more.

The foregoing are merely a few examples of the many situations that a confessor may find trying, especially when he does not feel well. Among the other occasions when one

has to be particularly careful to practice patience are the following: children's confessions, partly because there is not much to them, and partly because children often seem to have little or no appreciation of the meaning of confession; a long series of confessions of 'ordinary good people:' because there is very little variety; penitents who speak in such a low voice that the confessor can hardly hear them; penitents - like the scrupulous - who give long-drawn-out and irrelevant details; penitents who insist on being too generic in their accusations; and especially the penitents who want to argue. These, sad similar cases, may "get on our nerves"; hence, we should be on the look-out, and make a special effort to relax interiorly and to be kind exteriorly - and to close the slide gently!

Help for the Confessor

Up to this point my main theme has been the confessor's need of holiness. For the consolation of priests I might conclude the present chapter with a brief indication of the power of the confessional ministry in helping the confessor himself to grow in virtue.

The earnest priest cannot fail to perceive in his own soul the sanctifying influence of the confessional. He deals with souls that are weak, and he is led to pray and to sacrifice himself for them. He must encourage others to do difficult things, and he feels that he must practice a similar self-denial. The mistakes of others teach him to avoid like mistakes; the literally terrible temptations of others show him the goodness of God in protecting him; the sanctity of others humbles him and then urges him to more intense personal efforts. And through it all, there is that ever-deepening impression that in these intimate dealings with the human heart he is but the instrument of God and that his work will prosper and bring greater benefits to souls and greater glory to God in proportion to his own union with God and his own likeness to the Christ whom he represents.

CHAPTER II - HIS KNOWLEDGE

The good confessor must have knowledge says the Ritual. But how much knowledge? What should he know? The Ritual does not give a set rule in this matter. But it does mention in particular that the confessor must be able to distinguish the various leprosies of the soul and to prescribe appropriate remedies for each of them. Also, he should know the cases reserved to the Holy See, as well as those reserved to his own Ordinary; and he should be thoroughly acquainted with the doctrine concerning the sacrament of penance and with everything that pertains to its correct administration. It is my purpose in the present chapter to go beyond the words of the Ritual and to outline rather completely the various kinds of knowledge that are necessary or especially helpful for a confessor. At the outset I should emphasize the fact that this is merely an outline, and for that reason it may not be extremely readable. But I hope that it will prove useful.

Moral Theology and Canon Law

As regards the confessor's knowledge of moral theology and canon law, a general rule often given is that he should be able to solve the ordinary cases likely to be presented to

him and "to doubt prudently" about the more difficult cases. This ability "to doubt prudently" would usually manifest itself in a hesitancy to give a definite decision until the case is checked in appropriate books or through necessary consultation. In greater detail, the ability "to solve the ordinary cases," seems to call for knowledge of the following points:

The requisites for the valid and licit administration of the sacrament of penance, and for the valid, licit, and fruitful reception of the sacrament.

The differences between mortal and venial sin in general, and with regard to individual commandments and precepts; also, the practical signs for determining when subjective mortal sin is or is not committed.

The various specific differences of sins on which moralists agree, and especially those that penitents would be expected to know. To get the "mind of the penitent" in this regard it helps very much to read the popular catechisms occasionally, for it is from these catechisms that the ordinary faithful learn their moral theology.

The ways of estimating the number of sins committed.

The principles for determining when restitution of goods or reputation is called for.

The principles governing reserved sin and censures, and the reservations most likely to occur. In this matter in particular, one must know local legislation. If there is local legislation it will be found in the diocesan statute book or the pagellum facultatum. (Incidentally, I might mention here that statute books and pagella often contain many valuable practical suggestions.)

The matrimonial impediments and the powers of dispensing in urgent cases.

The principles governing occasions of sin, habits of sin, and recidivism; and the more common suggestions that can be made to help penitents who face these difficulties.

The laws governing the reception of Holy Communion.

The meaning and extent of one's special faculties (in case one has such faculties, e.g., because he is an army chaplain, a missionary, etc.), and the rules for the valid and prudent use of such faculties.

The points included in the foregoing outline (except in n. 10) represent the standard equipment in moral theology and canon law for every confessor. Circumstances might call for more extensive knowledge: for example, if one must be the regular confessor of priests, or seminarians, or religious, one should know the special obligations of such people and the special problems they are likely to have.

Ascetical Theology

Instructions for seminaries make it quite clear that the Holy See expects confessors to know at least the fundamentals of ascetical theology. A brief outline of these essentials (adapted from The Spiritual Life, by Tanqueray) may be stated as follows:

The confessor should understand the objective of the spiritual life. This objective is perfection; and perfection, in turn, is the love of God with one's whole heart, not only in affection, but also in deed, by trying to keep all the precepts and counsels. In directing penitents the confessor should never lose sight of this goal.

The means of attaining perfection are interior and exterior. The principal interior means are desire for perfection (without which there will never be sincere and constant effort), knowledge of God and of oneself, prayer, and conformity to the divine will. Exterior means are spiritual direction, a rule of life, spiritual reading and conferences, and the sanctification of social relationships. The confessor who understands these various means will be able to guide his penitents intelligently and to stress one or the other according to the needs of individuals.

It helps also to be familiar with the traditional "three ways," and to be able to catalogue, at least in a rough manner, each of those who seek direction.

The principal function of the purgative way is to do away with sin and its effects. It is marked by discursive mental prayer; by penance, to make up for past faults; by mortification, to secure self-control; and by struggle against the capital sins and temptations.

The special function of the illuminative way is to develop the virtues, theological and moral. Prayer at this stage should usually be affective and rather simple.

The unitive way, as the name implies, perfects one's union with God and one's docility to the Holy Spirit. The Gifts of the Holy Ghost play a large part in this stage of perfection.

All the points in the foregoing outline are well explained by Tanqueray. I might add here that, besides being able to direct souls in the way of perfection by the application of the principles of ascetical theology, confessors should also know something about infused contemplation so that they can at least suspect its presence in certain penitents.

Preserving Knowledge

The knowledge of moral theology, canon law, ascetical (and mystical) theology, is a part of the priest's profession. Ignorance concerning ordinary and fundamental things is lamentable. As a word of consolation, I might add that, generally speaking, a man who has gone through his course of theology with ordinary diligence knows at least these fundamentals, and perhaps much more. This does not mean that he has everything at his fingertips. It is easy to forget things or to become confused.

Knowledge once acquired is not retained without continued repetition. And broader knowledge is not acquired without further study. This brings us to the question: what practicable resolve should the young priest make with regard to keeping fresh his knowledge of the fundamentals I have outlined and to the appropriate extending of his knowledge? There is no set answer to this question. My own suggestion as to a minimum program of reading would be this: Keep repeating the texts of canon law and of moral and ascetical theology you had in the seminary; and read faithfully at least one ecclesiastical periodical that presents and solves practical cases and that makes it a point to keep its readers well-informed on new decisions of the Holy See and on recent developments in theology.

Some might object to my suggestion about continued repetition of the texts used in the seminary. They might say that this makes a confessor a man of "one book," and that being a man of one book makes him narrow-minded and unmindful of the opinions of other authors. I realize that this criticism has merit; yet I think that if most priests were to try to keep up on several texts they would become masters of none. The broadening influence of other opinions can be gained through conversations with other priests and through the faithful reading of a good ecclesiastical periodical, not to mention the mentally active attendance at the diocesan conferences.

My suggestion concerns the minimum; the priest who does less than that is not doing enough to keep up on his canon law and moral and ascetical theology. I prefer to keep it to the minimum and to allow the more elaborate schemes of keeping up - which are certainly possible for many priests - to be planned by the individuals themselves after consultation with experienced priests.

Other Knowledge

The young priest should take it as a standard rule that his power in the confessional will be greatly increased by any study or any experience that gives him a more profound and sympathetic knowledge of the human personality. For instance, he can learn much that is helpful from modern treatises on psychology, mental hygiene, and psychiatry. But it is very important that reading done in these fields should be, at least in some sense, supervised. By supervised, I mean that it should be done only with consultation of men who know these fields and who know something of the use that priests might make of such knowledge. A great part of the literature in these fields could be more interesting than useful; in fact, it might even be very harmful to the uninitiated.

It is advisable for a confessor to take advantage of every legitimate opportunity to know the practical problems of certain classes of people: for example, business men, laboring men, lawyers, doctors, religious, and so forth, because in directing such people, these practical difficulties must be taken into account. Moreover, it is helpful to know something of the theory and terminology of certain professions. For example, if a priest knows some civil law, he is better able to look up a point for himself, and is a more intelligent listener in case he must consult the expert. The same holds for medicine: a little knowledge (of ordinary medicine, of psychic disorders, and so forth) is helpful.

However, for the most part, the priest's use of knowledge of other professional fields should be largely "negative", that is, it should help the priest to suspect cases that ought to be referred to specialists. It is not wise for the priest to assume the specialist's role, for example, by trying to treat the mentally ill.

I would close this chapter with one warning for young priests. They will meet others, perhaps other priests, who will say that all one needs to be a good confessor is "common sense and experience." Both qualities are helpful; but neither of them will inform one about the requirements of positive law or tell one what are the common opinions of approved authors.

The priest who neglects his studies, with the rationalization about common sense and experience, is quite likely to make the same mistakes year after year and thus do great harm to souls because he guides them according to a code of morality that exists solely in his own mind. The Second Council of Baltimore had some very strong words for the preacher who gives his own views instead of the common teaching of approved authors. These words apply with at least equal force to the confessor.

CHAPTER III - HIS PRUDENCE

The third quality of the good confessor is prudence. A full treatment of this virtue would cover the whole range of confessional practice, for there is nothing that does not come under the rule of prudence. However, I shall limit my present treatment to certain general notions and rules, reserving many specific suggestions for the discussion of particular topics.

The exercise of prudence includes personal reflection, prayer for light, and sometimes consultation. Explaining the function of personal reflection, Tanquerey uses this example: "We may illustrate all that has been said by applying it to a particular virtue, chastity. History will tell us what the Saints did in order to remain pure in the midst of the world's dangers; our own experience will recall our past temptations, the means used to resist them and our success or failure. From this we can conclude with a high degree of probability what will be the future result of such or such proceeding, or this or that reading, of such or such association" (*The Spiritual Life*, n. 1021).

This is a good example of how an individual prudently reflects on his own problem. And it is easy to make the transference from this to the manner in which the confessor ought to reflect on his penitent's problem. Before even entering the confessional, the priest is equipped with a general knowledge of human nature and human experience and with general principles built upon this knowledge. During the confession he tries to get a working knowledge of the penitent's character and experience. And from the combination of his general and particular knowledge, he is able to estimate that certain kinds of reading, occupation, or companionship would be harmful to this penitent; that certain devotional practices or acts of self-denial are necessary, or would be helpful; and so forth. Acting in this way, he helps the penitent to plan a course of action that is for his spiritual good.

Meaning of Prudence

The prudence practiced by an individual with regard to his own spiritual affairs is a virtue which "helps one in all circumstances to form a right judgment as to what one should seek or avoid for the sake of eternal life." When we apply this notion to a confessor, we are thinking in terms of the direction of others; hence the "eternal life" we have principally in mind is not the good of the confessor himself, but the spiritual good of the penitent. The word "principally" should be carefully noted; for it is wrong to think that the sole object of confessional prudence is the spiritual good of the penitent. An adequate description of the prudent confessor goes beyond that, and it might be stated somewhat as follows: A prudent confessor is one who is able to handle the various situations that arise in his confessional practice in such a way as to conduce to the greater spiritual good of his penitents, without at the same time harming his own soul or defeating a greater good, such as the good of the Church. If the full meaning of these words is not immediately obvious, I trust that it will clarify as we proceed.

When I say that prudence covers the whole range of confessional practice, I am not inferring that every confession heard calls for carefully pondered advice. That would be quite unrealistic. There are some confessions, even many of them, in which all that a good confessor needs to do is to give a penance, absolution, and perhaps a very general word of advice or encouragement.

Nevertheless, it is evident that a confessor worthy of the name must often do more than this. He must, as occasions arise, give suggestions concerning the overcoming of bad habits and the practice of virtue, instruct people whose consciences are erroneous, warn of obligations to be fulfilled and perhaps indicate ways of fulfilling them, and so forth. Such cases call for the careful sizing up of a situation and for a clear practical judgment of what to say and what not to say. Before giving any final advice to a penitent with one of these delicate problems, the confessor must first answer clearly in his own mind such questions as these: what does this penitent need? how can I help him? what effect might my advice have on others with whom the penitent is associated?

Erroneous Conscience

For example, there is the case of the penitent with an erroneous conscience that needlessly multiplies mortal sins. Instances of this might be found in married people who erroneously think that perfectly legitimate incomplete mutual acts are mortally sinful, and in the unmarried who may think that involuntary thoughts or slight negligences with regard to impure thoughts are mortally sinful. It is certainly for the spiritual good of the penitent to have such a conscience corrected.

Yet, in attempting to give needed help, the confessor should beware lest he increase, rather than remove, the problem. One rule that may help a young confessor to steer a safe course in such matters is this: confine your advice to your penitent's precise problem; do not try to give him the "whole theology" of the subject. By this I mean that, if the penitent's error consists in thinking that involuntary thoughts are sinful, the confessor

should confine his advice to that one point; in other words, he should simply impress on the penitent the fact that thoughts cannot be sinful when they are not willful. Again, should the penitent happen to be a good person who occasionally has impure thoughts that he "tries to get rid of, but doesn't try quite hard enough," and who apparently thinks this conduct is seriously sinful, the confessor ought to handle this one problem directly by showing the penitent that he is negligent and that he ought to try harder, but he is not fully guilty and does not commit a mortal sin on such occasions.

I think this point needs emphasis. A student of theology may finish the treatise on impure thoughts (or any other treatise) and may be able to catalogue his knowledge very handily by means of a few rules: such and such things are mortal sins; such and such are venial sin; and such and such are no sin. He rejoices over these wonderfully simple rules, and he wants to give them to his penitents who have problems regarding impure thoughts. After all, he can give the rules in two minutes! That kind of reasoning is fallacious, and the zeal, though laudable in itself, is misapplied. The student forgets that it took him several hours of class, plus many hours of study and discussion, before he formulated and understood these illuminating rules. The penitent can hardly do the same in two minutes! Hence, I would repeat: follow the rule of brevity and give them only what they need and can use. I believe that is sound advice for all young confessors; as they grow in experience they will become better able to judge for themselves just how much more might be given to certain penitents.

What I have just said applies to occasions when the penitent's false conscience concerns one particular point. There are times, of course, when the penitents ask for, or show they need, instruction on a somewhat wider scale. For instance, they may ask how far engaged persons may go in showing their affection, or what is allowed to married people, or when is it permissible to follow the rhythm. I know a very experienced confessor who always advises young priests to have thought out a clear, simple way of imparting such instruction when it is called for. No doubt, this is excellent advice. But I believe I would add that it might often be worth while to suggest to such people that they talk the matter over, outside confession, with some priest whom they know, or read something helpful on the subject. Even though one has the little talk well thought out, he wants to be sure the penitent grasps it; and this would often be more securely accomplished outside the confessional.

Another point: though we want to remove the harmful false conscience whenever possible, we must realize that in some cases our efforts will be wasted. Some penitents, even after competent instruction, will continue to confess in the same old way, mentioning things as sins which really are not sin. They seem to like it that way. One comes to recognize such penitents after a time; and it seems that, once a reasonable effort has been made to instruct, it is best to let them do it their own way.

It might also be noted briefly that many good people merely seem to have a seriously erroneous conscience. For instance, a devout man may miss Mass because of illness, and he may confess this in such a way that he seems to think he sinned. It is not unlikely, however, that down in his heart he knows he did not sin, yet he "feels better" when he

confesses it. Perhaps some of the penitents mentioned in the previous paragraph belong in this category.

Good Faith

Just as difficult - though hardly as common in confessional practice is the problem of the opposite kind of erroneous conscience. I refer to the case of the penitent who is doing things that are materially sinful without advertent to their malice. It is possible that a priest might notice this in the course of a confession; and if he does he must answer the question: "Should I instruct, or should I leave the penitent in good faith?" Correctly to answer the question calls for great prudence, for the answer can change with almost every added circumstance.

Let me make the possible shifting circumstances more concrete by means of a few examples. Suppose the confessor should discover that the penitent has a serious obligation to pay a debt but is not conscious of this duty. The ordinary rule is to remind him of this obligation. Yet, before imparting the reminder, the confessor ought to ask himself: "Is it likely that he will refuse to fulfill this duty, and thus his present good faith will be converted into bad faith?" If there is good reason to believe that this latter would be the case, then the ordinary rule would be: say nothing about the obligation. However, before a final decision is made, one more factor must be taken into account: the effect of the penitent's conduct on others.

For instance, suppose the creditor knows that the penitent is allowed to frequent the sacraments, despite his injustice, and suppose that because of this knowledge the creditor is himself being alienated from the Church and is indulging in harmful talk. Should the confessor discover points like this, he could hardly refrain from reminding the penitent of his duty to pay the debt. And this would be true even though the penitent might be unwilling to fulfill the obligation; in that event he must at least cease to frequent the sacraments and it would thus become clear the Church was not condoning his injustice.

The illustration indicates the general principle to be followed in all such cases of "good faith." The principle, completely stated, is this: Instruct, unless you judge that greater harm than good will result from the instruction. It is easy to see that great prudence is required for properly estimating the many factors that must be weighed in determining which course is more harmful, especially in cases that affect others besides the penitent.

That some people are saved by ignorance from the subjective guilt, or at least from the complete guilt, of their objectively sinful actions seems to be unquestionable. Some boys and girls do not realize that masturbation is a serious sin; others think it is serious only when complete; others apparently think that immodest fondling is not a serious sin as long as they abstain from fornication. Some Catholics seem to be quite unconscious of the evil of even grossly unjust or uncharitable conduct toward their neighbor, especially where racial differences are concerned. A wife may unjustly, though in good faith, consistently deny marriage rights to her husband. And it seems that even today, after so

much general instruction has been given concerning the sinfulness of contraception, some married people do not realize they are doing wrong when they practice contraception.

In all these cases the confessor could rarely, if ever, leave the penitents in ignorance of their real duties. The ignorance of the young people with regard to purity can hardly last long, and the longer one waits to correct the conscience, the more difficult is the uprooting of the habit, and the greater may be the harm done, not only to the penitents, but to others. Hence, the confessor should tell them the truth, even though he judges that the bad habits will not immediately cease and that thus formal sins will be multiplied. As for those who sin against justice, if, after having been warned by the confessor, they refuse to amend their ways, at least they must cease to frequent the sacraments, and those whom they mistreat will see that the Church does not excuse their conduct. And the same is to be said of the unjust wife. It is hardly possible that she can consistently refuse marriage rights without being a source of very serious danger to her husband and without causing him to wonder how it is that she can receive absolution. Finally, as regards the practice of contraception "in good faith," it is almost inevitable that husband or wife or both will talk to friends and thus create the impression that it is not so bad after all, or that "some people can get away with it, but others can't," or that some confessors are too hard. Instruction, even though failing to reform the penitent, would at least remove the scandal.

In all honesty, let me say that I think it is rather rare that cases of complete and genuine good faith are noticed in confession. For people usually mention only what they know, or think, or suspect is wrong. Nevertheless, what authors write about these things is by no means mere theory. It can happen that this kind of ignorance is brought to the attention of the confessor. When he notices it he must be prepared to act prudently. And though it is generally true that it is better to say nothing than to convert material sin into formal sin, this is not always the case. The prudent confessor will think not only in terms of the spiritual good of his penitent, but of others, too, and especially of the good of the Church.

CHAPTER IV - PRUDENT LOYALTY

The last chapter stressed the point that in seeking the spiritual good of his penitent the confessor must not lose sight of the good of others and particularly the common good. My present theme is mainly that the confessor must keep in mind that others besides himself are sometimes trying to help the penitent and in his own work he must be careful not to weaken or destroy necessary confidence in these others. The following paragraphs outline certain situations in which this caution seems especially appropriate.

First there is the case of the penitent who seems to have wrong notions because of erroneous advice given by a former confessor. This is possible; although it is also possible - and much more likely - that the penitent simply misunderstood the other confessor. At any rate, if the present confessor should judge or suspect that advice given by another was really incorrect (too lax or too rigorous), he must exercise great tact and delicate charity. He must avoid undermining the penitent's faith in the former confessor (unless, of course, it should be a case in which denunciation must be made, or something similar) and especially in confessors in general. Hence, when it is at all possible, he

should indicate that the case might have been presented to the former confessor in a different manner, or that the penitent might have misunderstood the advice; and then he can say that, as the case has just been explained to him, the answer is such and such.

Of course, if there is merely question of something that allows for a difference of opinion, this should be explained to the penitent, and he should be allowed the liberty of following either opinion. It is sometimes said that the faithful are very much confused by differences of opinion among confessors. This seems to be true; yet I believe that much of this confusion can be dispersed if the faithful are told, as occasions arise, that practical cases are not the same as general principles and that some of them necessarily allow for a difference of outlook and opinion. Also, it is well for them to see that slightly different circumstances often greatly alter solutions. I may add that in all this I presuppose the observance of a rule given in the last chapter on prudence: namely, that the explanations should be given in such a way that the penitent can understand and assimilate them.

As regards advice given by other confessors, another counsel is appropriate here. When a penitent comes to confession with what is apparently a difficulty of fairly long standing, it is always advised to ask him whether he has already received some advice in the matter. This procedure has several advantages. For example, if I were to put this question, I might find that the penitent has already received the very same advice I would give him. In this case, instead of merely repeating the advice, I can examine why it was ineffective. If I found that he had failed simply because he had not given the advice a fair trial, I would encourage him to try it now, and with great earnestness; if I discovered that he had not sufficiently or correctly understood the advice, I would supply this deficiency; and if it seemed that the advice was understood and tried and was still ineffective, I would try another approach.

What if the confessor should discover that the penitent had already received different advice from what he would give? He must then decide whether it is really appropriate. If he should judge that it is really good advice and that it has failed merely because of the penitent's lack of effort, it might be best to encourage him to try again, rather than substitute some different counsel. On the other hand, should he judge that the advice is not appropriate for this case, he should correct it - but always without confusing the penitent or diminishing his confidence in other confessors.

Since I mentioned the subject of difference of opinion among confessors, it may be well to include here a remark on the use of probable opinions in confession. When a priest is merely giving advice, he certainly has a choice among various opinions, and he should follow that which he judges to be of greater help to his own penitent. But when there is question of enunciating obligations, one must always follow the rule that an obligation may not be imposed unless it is certain. The certainty here is moral certainty; and my opinion cannot be morally certain as long as the opposite view is solidly probable. Hence, no matter what moral system he follows, the confessor may not positively impose an obligation against an opinion which he recognizes to be solidly probable. But it should be noted that the opinion must be solidly probable. And it should be further noted that even an opinion which seems in itself to be solidly probable is not practically probable when

the following of it would be harmful to the penitent's soul. For instance, a probable opinion permitting Communion without previous confession would not be applicable in the case of a person who would thus be confirmed in a habit of self-abuse.

I have already mentioned that, even when other confessors seem to have given the wrong advice we must protect them as much as possible, while at the same time correcting the penitent's conscience. This same professional loyalty, if I may use the expression, must be practiced with regard to many others besides confessors. For example, it may appear from a child's confession that his mother or one of the Sisters gave instruction that is too rigorous. One should never undermine the child's confidence in his mother or the Sisters by simply saying that they are wrong. Rather one should try a gently disarming approach such as: "Sister means it would be a sin if this or that happened, but in your case it isn't that way"; or "Your mother means that it would be much better if you did this because it would protect you from sin"; and so forth. For the good of the child himself his confidence in his mother and the Sisters must be preserved; he needs their authority for his own security.

Confessor, parents, teachers - all share the common function of forming and directing a child's moral life. That is why I used the expression "professional loyalty" when treating of the proper manner of correcting the child's conscience. And giving a wider meaning to the expression, I might also include cases that involve advice given by other professional men, particularly doctors. If a penitent should say, "My doctor told me this or that," it is obviously imprudent for the priest to reply, "What does he know about it? - particularly if the question is a medical one. In general, the presumption is that the doctor knows more about medical matters than the priest; hence, unless the doctor's advice is clearly unwholesome it should be respected. And even if the confessor should have good reason to disagree with the doctor, he should do so tactfully and courteously.

A concrete instance of what I mean might be the case of the penitent who says that her doctor has told her to practice periodic continence because another childbirth would endanger her life. The confessor may know that some doctors are much too prone to say that further child-bearing would be dangerous. On one occasion, when I was leading a discussion on marriage problems with a group of college women, I put this problem: "You are young, just married a year or so, and have just had your first baby. The doctor tells you that another would kill you. What do you do?" One of the young women promptly replied, "Father, a doctor told my mother that, but she has had nine since then!"

The story may be a digression, but it illustrates what I mean. Any priest might be aware of a number of instances in which a doctor's dire prediction of future danger was unfulfilled. Nevertheless, the priest should not for this reason immediately suggest that the woman and her husband should neglect the doctor's advice. He ought to know more about the doctor, more about his policy with regard to birth control; and he should also consider the difficulty the married people might experience in trying to practice periodic continence, the number of children they have, their desire for children, and so forth.

In general, the very fact that a doctor would recommend periodic continence is a good indication that he is not a "birth-controller." But he may be unduly fearful of future childbirth; hence, the confessor might occasionally have the woman check with another obstetrician before making any final decision. If the confessor can judge from the doctor's reputation or from a check-up with other doctor that there is a really well-founded indication of future danger, he should ordinarily encourage the married people to try to follow the doctor's advice. But this admits of exceptions: for example, when the couple greatly desire children or when continence would be extraordinarily difficult. In some such cases the better course might be to lead a normal married life and to trust in Divine Providence. But obviously departure from sound medical advice in these dangerous cases is a most serious matter. The making of such a decision requires not only great prudence, but also much prayer for the help of the Holy Ghost.

CHAPTER V - SOME PRUDENT DON'TS

Prudence, adequately considered, covers one's entire confessional practice; it governs the correct use of all the confessor's "tools": his knowledge, sanctity, personality, manner of asking questions and of giving advice, and so forth. Preceding chapters have offered a number of illustrations, and subsequent chapters will no doubt contain many more. For the present, I should like to draw my formal discussion of prudence to a close with a series of brief counsels which are best expressed, I think, in the form of don't. (By way of apology, I might add that the very choice of this form of expression seems to lead naturally to the use of the second person when I am explaining some of these counsels.)

Don't ask unnecessary questions. To a great extent the young confessor must learn by experience what questions to ask, what not to ask, how to ask them, and so forth. Nevertheless, it is well to keep in mind from the very beginning that penitents generally dislike questions; hence this "tool" ought to be used sparingly.

One way to keep questions to a reasonable minimum is to understand clearly just why you must ask questions. I believe that the reasons for questions can all be reduced to these: (a) to get sufficient matter, in case the penitent has not clearly confessed anything sinful; (b) to help the penitent make an integral confession; (c) to settle a doubt concerning the penitent's disposition; (d) to determine the degree of subjective guilt in some matters; and (e) to judge what penance or what advice to give. If the confession makes these points sufficiently clear, then is no need of questions.

Don't interrupt penitents unless it is really necessary. If interrupted in the midst of his confession, the penitent is apt to get confused and even to forget what he has to say. However, if you cannot hear the penitent, it is better to ask him to speak a bit more distinctly than to wait till the end of his confession to say, "I just couldn't hear a word you said!"

One form of interruption that may be especially harmful consists in cutting short the penitent's explanation of some problem by suggesting that you know all about it, that it must be such and such, and so on. This can readily put an end to the penitent's perfect

spontaneity and even result in the coloring of the real problem according to the confessor's own preconceived notions.

Don't recognize people. By this I mean that when they come to confession you shouldn't ordinarily show that you know who they are; and outside the confessional you should not give any sign that you know they were at confession. If the penitent indicates clearly that he expects you to recognize him, then you may safely do so; although I believe that even in this case it is safer to be very slow to respond to his recognition.

Theoretically, as authors teach when treating of confessional secrecy, it is permissible to recognize penitents from confession to confession: that is, to show in today's confession that you remember what he said last week. Yet, in practice, this calls for great caution. For one thing, you must be very certain that you are actually dealing with the same penitent. Moreover, many penitents would resent this type of recognition; and some would get the impression that you think too much of their sins. Generally speaking, if you think you recognize a penitent as one to whom you gave certain advice in his last confession, it is better to make the approach by some such question as this: "Have you ever been to confession to me before?" If he says yes, you might then ask, "And did I give you any advice concerning this problem?" If you are regularly directing some penitent, it is often helpful to agree on some sign by which he will indicate that he is the person you are helping on such and such a problem.

Don't guess an answer. If you do not know the answer to a question the prudent course of action is to say so. And if you think you know the answer, but you are not sure, the prudent thing to do is to indicate that you are not certain. Guessing answers is the height of imprudence. If I had to grade errors in prudence according to their potential harmfulness, I think I would put this among the most dangerous. The sincere admission of ignorance does not undermine confidence unless it is extraordinarily frequent. On the other hand, it is evident that great harm can result from trying to solve vital problems by guesswork.

Some confessors are prone to go to the opposite extreme: they never give a definite answer, even when they are reasonably certain about the correct solution. This type of confessor has the same attitude toward his penitents' problems that the scrupulous person entertains toward his own. The latter is always afraid he may be wrong and he finds it difficult, if not impossible, to make himself follow what may be in themselves perfectly reasonable judgments. Similarly, the timorous confessor does not trust his own judgment, and fears to commit himself in the solution of practical moral problems.

Don't evade responsibility. In giving this rule, I am not thinking of the case just cited of the confessor who generally fears to make up his mind. I am thinking rather of occasional exceptional cases in which even confessors who normally make decisions without difficulty are apt to fear responsibility: for example, in determining that someone who rather frequently falls into material sins is not subjectively guilty, or in allowing material cooperation in onanism, and so forth. Such cases are delicate; the gravest consequences can flow from a wrong decision. Yet, for the penitent's peace of mind, and sometimes for

his eternal salvation, a decision must be made. Prudence in these matters should not be confused with timidity, hedging, "not committing oneself," and so forth. Prudence is manifested rather by carefully weighing the circumstances and then giving a decision that is as clear and as definite as the circumstances allow. And I might add that, in some of these delicate cases, it is necessary to impress on the penitent that the solution is given for him, that it fits his case and might not fit another; hence he is to say nothing of it to others.

Don't unnecessarily send penitents to their pastor or to another confessor. Obviously, there are some external forum cases that cannot be satisfactorily settled without the aid of the pastor; and there are some conscience difficulties that you may not be able to treat. Yet, generally speaking, it is well to keep in mind that the penitent may have come to you because he can talk to you; hence always do all you can to save him the trouble of having to approach another and to retell his entire story.

Don't interfere with a penitent's freedom to go to another confessor. This is just the opposite from the fault just explained. There will, no doubt, be some cases in which you will think you can be of special help to a penitent if he will return to you. There is certainly no difficulty about suggesting this to your penitent; but it should not be urged in such a way that he will feel you are displeased if he would go elsewhere.

In this connection, I might add, by way of a not impertinent digression, that bragging about one's "confessional success," and manifesting a sense of superiority or a spirit of jealousy or rivalry with regard to other confessors are entirely unbecoming. It has been said at times that certain retreat masters speak in such a way that their words really seem to mean: "Here I am, God's gift to you. You can tell me anything in confession, even though you hesitate to tell it to others. You can get the best answer to all your problems from me. If you don't come to me during this retreat, or this mission, you are missing the opportunity of your lives." I cannot vouch for the truth or falsity of the charge; nor can I say absolutely that such a method might not have certain temporary psychological advantages. But the individual emphasis seems very inappropriate, and the advantages, if any, seem definitely temporary - for what are the penitents who respond to this invitation going to do when the retreat master has departed?

Don't be too quick to solve "hard-luck stories" that involve others besides your penitent. I am referring to such cases as these: a wife is having trouble with her husband, a religious is having difficulty with his superior or his fellow religious, and so forth. No matter how well meaning the penitent is, you must always face the fact that as a confessor you are getting only one side of the story. You must, as well as possible, try to put yourself in the place of the other party before you direct your penitent. In most such cases the ideal solution is to get the two parties together and then thresh out the problem; but of course this is impossible in the confessional. If you know someone that both parties might be willing to see outside of confession, you might sometimes suggest that the penitent try to bring about such a meeting. This is often possible when there is question of misunderstandings between husband and wife.

Don't overemphasize sex. A young confessor need not be surprised if he feels a strong curiosity concerning sexual matters and perhaps a special interest in women's confessions. Such curiosity is not unusual. If people in general were not exceptionally curious about sex we should not have the huge sale of sex literature that we actually have. (Incidentally, by "sex literature" I mean not only obscene or suggestive things, but also good Catholic books and pamphlets that treat of sex. Interest in sex is not limited to the degrading aspects of the subject or to impure minds; it is also very strong in clean minds and with reference to wholesome aspects.)

But it is one thing to feel curiosity, another thing to indulge it. A confessor would make a serious mistake to allow his interest in sex to lead him to ask unnecessary questions or to give uncalled for advice. The traditional rule - "better to say too little than too much" - is a wise one. Do not ask for useless details of sexual sin, and do not permit a penitent to give such details if you can prudently prevent it. Sometimes, of course, there is nothing one can do to prevent this, because one does not realize until it is too late that the description of sins is to be minute.

The confessional is not the place for instruction concerning the physical aspects of sex. At the most such instruction should be merely incidental to the correct explaining of moral matters. Such things as the nature of the conjugal act or the method of calculating fertile and sterile periods are certainly not to be explained in the confessional.

There is no general presumption that everyone who has been away from confession for a long time must have some sin of impurity to confess. Hence, unless you have some positive suspicion of insincerity, or unless you are helping the penitent to make his confession, do not bring up the subject. Obviously, if you are helping the penitent to make a general confession, you will ask the usual questions concerning purity; but such questions will be asked in their proper sequence and without any special emphasis.

I have heard of confessors who make it a point to ask married people about the practice of birth control, even though the penitents do not mention it. As a justification for this procedure it is said that some Catholics openly boast about the fact that what they do as regards birth control is no business of their confessor. Similarly, some priests think that the confessor should usually take some means of finding out whether boys masturbate, because many boys are prevented by embarrassment from spontaneously confessing this sin. I suppose that I cannot condemn these confessorial practices; yet I certainly cannot recommend them. My personal conviction is that a confessor should not ask questions about these or any other subjects unless something in the confession itself arouses his suspicion or unless, as previously indicated, he is helping the penitent to make his confession.

Don't worry over solutions given in good faith. This is my final point, and a very important one for the confessor's peace of mind. I should think that the confessor who never makes a mistake is a great rarity. It is a very salutary practice for young confessors (and others, too) to examine themselves briefly after having heard confessions to see whether there are some points in which they should improve. This is not an examination

of conscience; it is simply a method of helping to keep interest in this important office and to make progress. The purpose is to have you check on the way you asked questions, sized up a case, and so forth. Faithful observance of the practice will help you to keep up on points that occur frequently in confession and to be alert for certain special problems, should they arise again. Not infrequently when such special problems occur for the first time, you are taken off your guard, omit an important question, or give a solution without having considered a very pertinent detail. The examination I am suggesting is not to engender regret over such lapses but rather to prevent them in the future. In this, as in other matters, progress comes through self-knowledge and effort. And if God were not working to compensate for a certain number of blunders, He would have instituted some other means of remitting sins and directing consciences!

CHAPTER VI - CONFESSIONAL SECRECY

"The sacramental seal is inviolable" With this general principle the Code opens its brief treatment of confessional secrecy. Then by means of negatives it proceeds to outline the confessor's obligation more precisely: he must abstain from everything that would in any way betray his penitent or that would be a source of inconvenience to penitents.

The instruction of the Holy Office of June 9, 1915, was much more detailed than the Code in declaring what constitutes an illicit use of confessional knowledge. The Code simply warns against anything that would be a source of inconvenience to the penitent; the instruction condemns speaking in private conversation or in public sermons, even for the purpose of edifying the hearers, of matters which have been submitted to the power of the keys in sacramental confession, because such speech "cannot fail to offend the ears of pious listeners and to produce in their hearts uneasiness and diminished confidence - a thing which is surely entirely foreign to the nature of this sacrament, through which the most merciful Lord, by the Pardon of His loving mercy, entirely wipes away and quite forgets the sins which through human weakness we have committed."

Later in the same instruction the Holy Office orders local Ordinaries and religious superiors to see to it "that the priests subject to them be taught never to dare mention anything which pertains to the matter of sacramental confession in any form or under any pretext, especially on the occasion of sacred missions or spiritual exercises, nor even incidentally, directly or indirectly, in public or private speech (excepting the case of necessary consultation to be made according to the rules laid down by approved authors)."

These official sources give us clearly the mind of the Church, which is also the mind of Christ, in this matter. Absolute secrecy concerning matters pertaining to confession is one of the priest's most sacred obligations. The slightest deviation from it by way of negligence, or even inadvertence, can do great harm and cause the priest intense regret.

It is not my purpose to present a detailed commentary on the official documents or a complete treatise on sacramental secrecy, such as may be found in the manuals of moral theology. Rather, I wish to emphasize the attitude that should characterize the good

confessor, and to show, through a number of practical examples, how this attitude will govern his conduct. Perhaps at the very beginning I should say that some of my suggestions may seem, and may actually be, stricter than what is absolutely necessary. When possible, I will indicate this, together with my reasons for insisting on the stricter course. I favor strictness because I am deeply convinced that, short of scrupulosity (which is never desirable), a confessor cannot be too careful in the matter of sacramental secrecy.

Principles

During my years of teaching moral theology I have gradually crystallized these two simple rules for the confessor with regard to the use of confessional knowledge:

1. Act as if you had not heard confessions: that is, neither do anything or omit anything that you would not do or would not omit if you had not heard confessions.
2. If, in certain circumstances, you judge it reasonable to depart from the first rule, then be sure that your conduct is neither dangerous, nor odious, nor scandalous.

When I say that I have crystallized these rules over the course of years I am not laying claim to ingenuity or originality. As a matter of fact, the rules are but a brief restatement of what is already contained in the Code and the instruction.

The first rule expresses the ideal attitude. In confession the priest is a different person; he is in *loco Dei*; he hears, in a sense, as one who does not hear. The point is beautifully expressed in St. Augustine's paradox: "I know less about what I hear in confession than I know about those things of which I am entirely ignorant."

Despite the value of the first rule as an ideal, it obviously admits of certain legitimate and even laudable exceptions. For example, it is not only licit but praise worthy for a priest to profit from what he hears in confession to improve his own spiritual life. And it is to be expected that the knowledge of human nature that he gleans from hearing confessions will help him to guide others better. And it is certainly desirable that his realization of his penitents' trials will inspire him to pray and offer sacrifices on their behalf.

Hence, there are exceptions to St. Augustine's paradox and to our first rule. But these exceptions are very much limited in scope, and they must be judged according to a safe principle. The second rule enunciates this principle: no exception is permissible that does not avoid the threefold charge of dangerous, odious, or scandalous.

By dangerous, I mean an indirect (and, of course, a fortiori, a direct) violation of the seal. All conduct which in any way, even the slightest, casts suspicion on the penitent is clearly forbidden.

By odious, I mean the *gravamen penitentis* of canon 890. This expression refers not only to such use of confessional knowledge as would be resented by, or harmful to, the person

who made the confession, but also to any use of such knowledge which would be distasteful to penitents in general and which would, therefore, diminish their confidence in confessors and make confession more difficult if they came to know about it. A good example of such odious use is contained in the second part of canon 890, which declares that superiors may never make use of confessional knowledge in their external government. This prohibition extends to all use of such knowledge in external government, even though the use itself might not be recognized either by the penitent or by others.

Finally, under scandalous I include all the fine points mentioned in the instruction of the Holy Office: namely, even apparent violations of secrecy, and any mention of actual confessional experiences in private conversations, sermons, conferences, and so forth.

This general explanation of the rules will be clearer, I think, if it is illustrated by some practical cases.

Some Examples

In this country, because of the arrangement of the confessionals, it is usually possible for penitents to make their confession without being identified by the confessor. Confessors as well as penitents should be grateful for this arrangement. It is much easier to avoid embarrassment in dealing with people outside of confession when we simply have no confessional knowledge of them. However, it is possible that in certain cases a confessor might be inclined, because of sins confessed, to take some extraordinary means to identify the penitent, for example, by looking out as the penitent leaves the confessional. Noldin calls such conduct reprehensible, but adds that it would not be a violation of the seal. I think that he means it is not a violation of the seal in the strict sense - that is, not a direct or an indirect violation. But it seems to me an illicit use of confessional knowledge; for penitents are usually helped by the opportunity to remain unknown and they would resent it if they thought that a priest would make some special attempt to identify them merely because of some sin they had confessed.

It is a fact, of course, that in some circumstances confessors and penitents cannot avoid knowing one another. What precise rules should govern the priest's extra-confessional conduct with these penitents? Authors usually say that a priest may treat his penitent more kindly because of his confessional knowledge. They allow this, even though the penitent himself might realize that confessional knowledge is the basis for the kindness, provided, of course, that others will not be led to suspect the penitent. Personally, I think that this opinion should be applied with the greatest caution. It seems to me that, except in those circumstances in which it is perfectly clear that the penitent wishes us to use confessional knowledge for his own encouragement, it is safest to follow the first rule: namely, simply act as if the confession had not been heard. This is the best way of avoiding embarrassment and offense.

When penitents are people whom he knows, and especially when they are persons with whom he lives and works and recreates, the confessor needs a very clear grasp of the

principles that must govern his conduct. The moralists make certain distinctions in this matter. For instance - to put it in a general way - they point out that sins and all other facts manifested in confession as a means of explaining sins are strictly confessional matter, whereas virtues, except when manifested with relation to sins committed, are not really confessional matter. We should not conclude from this that we may talk about our penitents' virtues, but not about their faults. Even with regard to virtues it would be clearly contrary to the instruction of the Holy Office to refer our knowledge to confession, for example, by saying: "you can tell from his confession that he's "angel." Moreover, many penitents certainly consider even their virtues to be manifested in confession under absolute secrecy, and they would resent any reference to such things, even when the confessional is not mentioned. The safest conduct, therefore, even with regard to the penitents' virtues, is simply to act outside confession as if one had not heard confessions.

It can happen unfortunately - but, if I may use the expression, humanly, - that a priest who is a certain person's confessor will get involved in an uncharitable conversation about that person. There is no special problem of confessional secrecy in this if the priest is using only his extra-confessional knowledge of the person. However, I think that we might all use the fact that we are confessors as an added incentive for avoiding uncharitable conversation about penitents, for even though we very carefully try to confine our speech to extra-confessional knowledge, it is rather difficult to avoid overlapping, and then we might wonder whether we have not actually been a bit more convincing precisely because of the confessional knowledge.

Almost any priest might find occasionally in the course of his ministry that some penitents are especially troublesome to him, with the result that he is able to do little or nothing for them. In some such cases he might have very good reason for wishing they would go to someone else. Authors are usually quite clear in outlining the correct rules of conduct in such cases; but I think a little more explanation might be of profit.

For example, suppose you know from confession that a penitent is very scrupulous, that he takes a long time, tries your patience to the limit, and that in the end you really accomplish nothing. This person now asks you to hear his confession. Obviously, you may not refuse precisely because of your confessional knowledge. Such a refusal, even though made under some pretense that would hide the real reason from this party would be an odious use of confessional knowledge. On the other hand, after having heard this penitent's confession several times and having tried to help him, you would certainly be justified in telling him in confession that he ought in the future to go to someone else because experience has showed you cannot help him.

Authors suggest a somewhat more subtle aspect of this problem that is not at all impractical. They say that a priest might excuse himself from hearing the confession if he had some other real reason for doing so. For example, you are in the priests' house, either indisposed or doing some important work, and you have already made up your mind that if anyone asks to go to confession, you will have another priest take care of it. (I suppose that another priest is available and that people who wish to go to confession will not be

sent away unheard.) In this case you would not be making use of confessional knowledge, even if the person whose confession you avoided happened to be a troublesome penitent. You are simply following the general rule; you are omitting something that you would omit even if you had not heard the person's confessions previously. I might call attention, however, to the fact that in certain circumstances you might be forced to depart from your general rule: for example, if the penitent would suspect that your failure to hear his confession is based on your confessional knowledge.

The manuals generally say that the mere fact of confession is not matter of the seal and that the priest who speaks of this fact does not violate the seal. A priest must be careful not to interpret this too broadly. It may be true that to say, "John Brown was at confession last night," is neither a direct nor an indirect violation of the seal. Yet, it could be odious and a source of uneasiness to penitents who prefer to be unrecognized by the priest; and, in cases in which the confession was not made during the regular time of hearing confessions, it might even cast some suspicion on the penitent. The safest rule is never to mention this fact except perhaps in some rare circumstances in which it is perfectly clear that no harm and some good can result. For instance, military chaplains in the late war were certainly justified in notifying parents that their boy had been able to get to confession before his death.

In some hospitals and parishes it seems to be customary for the priest who has visited a sick person to check certain items on a chart. I can see a very good reason for checking such items as these: Was visited by a priest... Received Extreme Unction... Received Viaticum." But I see no particular good to be derived from marking on such a chart that the patient went to confession. And in some cases it might be misleading, because, if confession is checked, it must be checked for all who went to confession, whether they received absolution or not. It seems to me much more prudent not to mention confession on such a chart, but to let each new priest who visits the patient find out for himself whether he wishes to go to confession.

The Holy Office very strongly emphasized the fact that confessors are not to talk about confessional cases in private conversations or in public discourses. It helps much toward the strict observance of this rule for the priest to be on his guard concerning two kinds of happenings in the confessional, the amusing and the specially edifying. Funny things can occur in confession, and certainly remarkable instances of the workings of divine grace are not uncommon. Even a very exacting young confessor is apt to be caught off his guard and yield to a strong inclination to narrate such incidents; hence I would say: be particularly careful to avoid speaking of such things.

In declaring such conversations illicit, the Holy Office hardly intended to condemn all discussion of confessional cases among priests. It seems to be quite in keeping with both the letter and spirit of the law for a group of serious-minded priests to discuss their methods of handling certain types of cases: for example, what they have found helpful in dealing with certain problems; but in such conversations one must guard against descending to particulars by such expressions as, "Here's a case I had," "One penitent told me ...," and so forth.

Consultation

The Holy Office made allowance for "necessary consultation to be made according to the rules laid down by approved authors." These rules, together with a few suggestions of my own, may be stated as follows:

Don't consult unless it is necessary. Any priest, particularly a young priest, is likely to encounter occasional confessional cases that he cannot solve immediately, and is likely to make decisions in the confessional that he may later wish to check. The ordinary means of obtaining the desired information should be personal study. One of the purposes of a seminary course is to equip the students to look things up for themselves; and it is well for the priest to form the habit of wholesome self-reliance while he is young. Consultation about confessional matter should always be looked upon as something extraordinary.

Don't ask penitents for permission to consult unless this is really necessary. Some cases, of course, are clearly exceptional. They require technical knowledge of such things as law or medicine or of some very fine points of moral theology. A penitent should readily understand that the ordinary priest is not capable of dealing with such matters and he should be quite willing to give permission to consult. But apart from very exceptional cases it is hardly wise for the priest to ask permission to consult others. He should usually do the best he can without this permission.

The confessor must remember that, if he is to look up a point or consult others about a case, he must be sure of his data. This brings up the delicate subject of asking the penitent whether he would be willing to handle the case outside the confessional. Ordinarily this suggestion should not be made; yet there seems to be no other way of successfully handling some very complicated cases. In such cases it is extremely difficult for the priest to get even essential information in the confessional and especially to remember it when he has had no opportunity of taking notes. Other professional men are not expected to gather their information without the opportunity of talking face to face with their clients and of taking notes. It is hardly reasonable to expect the priest to get all the complicated details in the darkness of a confessional and to hold them in his head while hearing the remaining confessions.

When you do consult without permission be sure there is no danger that the consultant will identify the penitent. There are several ways of guarding against this danger. The first, and by all means the safest, is to go to a priest or other professional man who has nothing to do with your penitents. It is seldom safe to consult a priest who hears confessions in the same church. Another way is to propose the case in a purely hypothetical manner ("What ought to be done in a case like this?"), just as a seminarian would put a question to his professor. Still another way is to disguise the case by fictitious details: for example, present it as a case received in the mail, or change all the circumstances that do not pertain to the essential problem. Such fictions are not lies. The only information really communicated to the consultant is a problem; and it makes no difference whether a character is Titius, Sempronius, or John Brown, and whether he

lives in New York, San Francisco, or Tokyo, and so forth. At any rate, the identity of the penitent should be certainly safe guarded; otherwise one should not consult without explicit permission.

Even when you have permission to consult, reveal no more than is necessary. I add this rule mainly to encourage constant caution. And I might add that consultants usually prefer to know as little revealing material as possible.

Preaching

What about preaching? The preacher may certainly use the knowledge of human nature gained from the confessional to make his message more practical. But he may not relate confessional experiences, even for edification, much less for amusement. And he should not use confessional knowledge in such a way that individuals or groups could reasonably suspect that he is preaching precisely about what they told him in confession. Even when such suspicions have no reasonable foundation they can present a problem; and it is wise for us, when preaching or giving retreats, to beware of certain embarrassing situations. For example, you may have prepared a very practical talk on charity, or obedience, or chastity, but before you give the talk a penitent comes to you with a difficulty that follows the identical lines of your talk. Obviously, if you were to give the talk later there would be no actual use of confessional knowledge; yet this penitent might think you had his case in mind, and he might even suggest to others that you had used confessional knowledge in your talks. Reasonable people, of course, would not act thus; but not all people are reasonable.

Even if all penitents could be presumed to be very reasonable, the situation just described could be a source of embarrassment for the confessor himself. He is apt to feel a certain lack of freedom if he later gives the talk which so closely parallels the confessional problem. One way of forestalling this difficulty is to tell the penitent: "I intend to give a conference on this very point. The conference should help you, but, if you wish, I can give you the main points now so that you can use them for your personal benefit." Another way - and usually the best during retreats - is to plan to give some of the very practical talks, especially anything that concerns the manner of going to confession, before hearing any confessions.

Some Special problems

The preceding material covers the principal points to be observed as regards confessional secrecy. We can conclude this topic with a brief reference to certain situations that may arise in the confessional itself.

Some authors make much of the case of accomplices: for example, a girl confesses first and is followed by her fiancee, who is presumably her accomplice in some sin, yet who does not confess the sin. It is obvious that the confessor may not use knowledge gained from the girl's confession as a handle for questioning the boy. He should simply prescind

from this knowledge and ask only those questions that he would ask if he had not heard the girl's confession.

Should the confessor give absolution if the boy does not mention the sin of complicity? There are not wanting authorities who say that in such a case the priest should merely say a prayer or give a blessing. Whatever may be said of this solution on speculative grounds, it seems to me that it should not be followed in practice. It is based on the supposition that the knowledge gained from the girl's confession makes the confessor certain that the boy is culpably concealing the sin and that the absolution would be invalid. I think that this supposition of certainty is not verified. But even if it were, I should prefer to judge the boy only on the points brought out by his own confession and to give or withhold absolution only on the basis of this knowledge. Confessors who cannot calmly accept this suggestion could give conditional absolution, as some authors recommend.

Suppose the boy confesses the sin of complicity and in doing so refers to his fiancée, obviously presupposing that the confessor knows her sin? In this case, since the priest does not have the girl's permission to speak of her sin, he must avoid any mention of them. This aspect of the problem will not always be confined to consecutive confessions. It might happen that the girl would confess on one day and the boy would come later and say: "My fiancée was here yesterday, and you gave her some advice, and she told me to come and get the same advice." The priest can deftly handle this situation by some such reply as this: "Naturally, I wouldn't know whether your fiancée was here or, if she was, just what I told her. But if you tell me your problem, I can try to help you...."

One final case. The confessor closes the slide on one penitent, and the first thing the next penitent says is: "Father, I heard what that person told you." Perhaps he did overhear the confession or the advice, but one must be careful not to confirm him in anything. The prudent, alert confessor might reply: "Sometimes we think we hear things, yet we do not actually hear them. However, if you did hear a part of the confession you must keep it absolutely secret, just as if you were the confessor."

This last case reminds me of a digression, which can also be my conclusion. If ever you build or remodel a church make special plans for sound-proof confessionals. It is very distressing to be forced to speak continuously in a low whisper and even then to have no adequate protection against being overheard.

CHAPTER VII - THE CONFESSOR AS JUDGE

As the minister of the sacrament of penance, the confessor is obliged to see that all the requisites for valid and fruitful reception are fulfilled. From this principle alone we might deduce many particular duties. These duties are usually explained by moralists when they treat of the fourfold function of father, physician, teacher, and judge. The Ritual mentions two of these offices (physician and judge) explicitly, and it clearly implies the other two. They are not adequately distinct functions; the correct fulfillment of one usually involves some measure of the others. Yet, in the sense that each emphasizes some special duty or duties, they can be treated separately.

Fourfold Office

As spiritual father, the confessor should deal kindly with his penitents, make candid confession as easy as possible for them, and be ever ready to encourage them. I think we have said enough about this in the early chapters, but I should like to emphasize here that an amiable manner, though necessary, is by no means the same as laxity or misguided kindness. It is quite compatible with firm admonitions (though not with harshness), with large penances, and even with refusal of absolution.

Teaching is not a primary function of the confessor; yet, as I indicated in the chapters on prudence, there are many occasions when he must give some instruction. For instance, some penitents do not know how to go to confession; the confessor must help them to fulfill at least the minimum essentials, so that they can profit by their confession here and now. Other penitents, especially those who have been away from the sacraments for many years, are quite ignorant of the Faith, and the confessor may have to deal with them almost as he would with a convert, by instructing them not only in the manner of going to confession, but also in the four essential truths. Then there are the penitents who are unaware of their obligations or who have erroneous consciences that need correcting. These, too, the confessor must teach and admonish, at least in so far as it is required for the fruitful reception of the sacrament. Complete instruction is, of course, impossible in the confessional; hence, penitents who need such instruction should be advised to get it outside the confessional.

As physician, the confessor tries to cure bad habits, to prevent the formation of such habits, and to help in the acquiring of good habits. This supposes that he will keep in touch with sound asceticism and with solid, progressive psychology.

As a judge in the place of Christ, the confessor authoritatively grants or refuses absolution. To exercise this tremendous function reasonably he must make two essential judgments, namely - whether there is sufficient matter for absolution and whether the penitent is properly disposed. I call these judgments essential because an error in either of them can affect the validity of the absolution.

Besides making the essential judgments, the confessor must also help the penitent, when this is necessary and reasonably possible, to make a materially integral confession, and he must judge the kinds of sin committed and the degrees of sinfulness involved in order to give an appropriate penance. These judgments, though important, are not essential; mistakes made by the confessor would not invalidate the absolution.

In this and in subsequent chapters I shall treat in some detail of various points pertinent to the functions of physician and judge, especially the latter. In the remainder of this chapter I shall deal explicitly with two points: the disposition of the penitent, and the absolution. I may add that my present treatment is necessarily rather general. Specific problems will be discussed as the chapters progress.

Disposition

"Is this penitent properly disposed for absolution; that is, has he the requisite contrition and purpose of amendment?" This is an essential judgment; error can affect the validity of the absolution.

A judgment of this kind cannot be mathematical; it is a typical example of a human, fallible judgment. The certitude required on the part of the confessor is described by moralists as *moralis, late dicta*, which means a high degree of probability, a rough estimate, a legitimate presumption based on favorable signs, or at least on the lack of unfavorable signs.

In general, the presumption of a good disposition is in favor of any penitent who says he is sorry, especially when he comes to confession willingly; and the confessor can and should act on this presumption unless there is some positive sign to the contrary. But there are contrary signs; for example, in the case of penitents who have been "forced" to confession by wife, mother, teacher; and in recidivists, as well as those who have remained in voluntary occasions of sin; also in some penitents who excuse everything they do, who want to argue; and so forth. In such cases, the disposition is dubious, and the confessor may not rest content with a mere affirmation of sorrow; rather he must take some more definite means of being sure that the penitent has real contrition and purpose of amendment before he gives absolution. I cannot go into detail here about the various means to be employed, but in later chapters I shall deal more fully with the most difficult problems.

Penitents who are unwilling to fulfill serious obligations (for example, to make restitution when it binds *sub gravi*, to avoid a voluntary proximate occasion of mortal sin, to quit some seriously sinful practice such as contraception) are clearly indisposed. While they are thus indisposed, the confessor cannot absolve them; but he should try to bring them to a better frame of mind before dismissing them.

It is important to note that the lack of the necessary disposition does not always signify bad will. Some penitents simply do not realize the meaning of contrition: for example, many very small children, some adults who confess rather frequently and have very little to tell, some yearly penitents who apparently look upon confession as a sort of bath. St. Alphonsus seemed to think that very few "rudes" confess with the necessary contrition. Although this opinion may be rather exaggerated, it does make us stop and reflect.

How are we going to bring these people of basic good will to the necessary disposition? The solution seems to lie in helping them, according to their own capacity, to realize just what contrition, especially purpose of amendment, means. With small children this is very difficult; and it seems to me that the most effective thing we can do is to impress on them the idea of "trying to do better." We can accomplish this at times by merely asking, before giving absolution, "Now are you going to try to do better?" Or we can ask, "Now when you say you are sorry, what does that mean?" With this latter question we begin to help them figure out for themselves that when a person says he is sorry, it means not only

that he wishes he had not done something but also that he is going to try not to do it again.

I have stressed the idea of purpose of amendment because it is undoubtedly the best practical sign of contrition. And I have stressed the notion of "doing better" rather than "sinning no more," because, in the case of small children (whose sin are usually trifles), the former notion is more realistic. I may say that the same plan is often very helpful in the case of adults who habitually confess only small sins. We can best foster in them a correct notion of contrition by helping them to realize that they ought to want to do better, at least in some way. After all, the will to improve is all that is required in the purpose of amendment for venial sins; and it is more easily understood and more practicable than the "will to sin no more."

The mere will to improve is not sufficient purpose of amendment for mortal sin. Hence, the yearly penitents (who usually have committed mortal sin) must be impressed with the idea that true sorrow for mortal sins must include the firm purpose to avoid such sins in the future.

Absolution

Canon 886 lays down the forthright rule that if the penitent asks for absolution and the confessor has no reason for questioning his disposition, the absolution should neither be denied nor deferred. (This supposes, of course, that sufficient matter has been confessed.) Despite the clear ruling of this canon, some authors still voice approval of a pre-Code opinion to the effect that absolution may be deferred for a good reason even when the penitent's disposition is satisfactory. Authors who now cite this opinion usually qualify it at least to this extent: the absolution should not be deferred unless the penitent consents to it. No doubt this condition saves the opinion from running contrary to the Code; yet, for myself, I can scarcely imagine a case in which it would be wise to defer absolution when a penitent has made a good confession and is properly disposed. I certainly would not recommend ever deferring the absolution in such cases. It seems to me that any spiritual good that might be obtained for the penitent can just as readily be obtained in some other way.

I have already indicated that when the penitent's disposition is doubtful the confessor must try to solve the doubt before giving absolution. Usually this doubt can be removed, but not always; it can happen that even after investigation the penitent's disposition is still questionable. The principle that applies to this case is that he should be dismissed without absolution unless there is some serious reason for absolving conditionally. I believe that in practice conditional absolution should be given as long as some reason favors the penitent, even though he is not certainly worthy of absolution. However, in those cases in which the absolution is conditioned because of doubtful worthiness the penitent should be warned. This warning can be given in some such way as this: "Now, I am going to give you absolution, but I want you to know that it really depends on you whether the absolution is good. If you really mean to try to do the right thing (e.g. give up practicing contraception), the absolution will take effect, and you may safely go to Holy

Communion. But if you are not ready sincere, the absolution will do you no good and you should not go to Holy Communion."

What about the case of small children where the doubt concerns not their worthiness, but rather their capacity for absolution (e.g., because of scarcely sufficient matter, or because of doubt about ability to sin)? Many authors say they may be occasionally absolved conditionally. I think that it is better to give them conditional absolution as long as there is any hope that they can benefit by it; and I do not think that the practice of absolving them regularly is an imprudent administration of the sacrament. It is our custom to encourage these small children to confess frequently, and it is difficult indeed in many cases for the priest to make a clear estimation of their capacity.

Finally, there are penitents who, as the Ritual indicates, are unworthy of absolution. The confessor should try to bring them to a better frame of mind, but if he cannot do so, then he cannot absolve them. In certain rare cases, even after much effort, he must refuse absolution. The refusal need not be blunt; in fact, it is well to let the penitent see that we do not like the task. For example, one might tell him: "I really want to give you absolution, but as things are now I can't do it. If you were willing to ... I could absolve you. But as long as you are unwilling to do that my hands are tied. Maybe you would like to go out and think it over a while and then return?" In other words, let the penitent carry the burden and do the actual deciding.

CHAPTER VIII - SUFFICIENT MATTER

In the last chapter I pointed out that the judgment concerning the penitent's disposition is an essential one: An error could result in an invalid absolution. Another essential judgment concerns the sufficiency of the matter confessed. If the confessor were erroneously to judge that the penitent had confessed sufficient matter when, as a matter of fact, not a single real sin had been included in the confession, the absolution would be invalid.

There is obviously no difficulty in judging sufficiency of matter when a penitent confesses mortal sins that were certainly committed. Nor is there any problem when the penitent clearly confesses some real venial sin or sin, or when he confesses clearly recognizable mortal or venial sin from his past life. In all such cases there is certainly sufficient matter for absolution. But there are problems in such cases as these:

"I had bad thoughts, and I'm not sure I consented to them." In this accusation there may be mortal sin, venial sin, or no sin at all. Something must be added to make the accusation certainly sufficient.

"Since my last confession, I missed my morning prayers and I was impatient with the children; and that's all, Father." A confessor would be rash to conclude with certainty that this penitent is confessing real sin. There is certainly no objective obligation to say prayers in the morning; and there may have been no subjective sin, even though an erroneous conscience, because the omission of the prayers may have been entirely

inadvertent. Moreover, it is not unlikely that the impatience was not a human act. Really, the concluding "That's all" offers no protection against invalidity.

The Devotional Confession

What is to be done in these and many similar cases? To govern his conduct, the confessor must have clear principles concerning the devotional confession: that is, confession made by penitents who have no necessary matter to confess. Some years ago I made a very thorough study of the theological teaching on this point, and the results were published in an article entitled "The Generic Confession of Devotion," in *Theological Studies*, VI (Sept., 1945), 358-79. Later, Father John McCarthy treated the same question under the heading, "Generic Confession of Free Matter," in *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, LXX (June, 1948), 531-33. Both of us concluded that the generic accusation of free matter is certainly valid, and, besides being valid, it is also probably licit. I have seen other studies in recent years which subscribe to the same conclusions and I have seen no recent study that contradicts them. I consider them, therefore, as representing safe teaching - teaching which may be reduced to practice without any hesitation.

On the basis of the studies just mentioned, I suggest these three principles as guiding norms for confessors when they are dealing with penitents who have no necessary matter to confess:

Except for the case of a newly-baptized convert or of a child who has just reached the age of reason, a generic declaration such as, "I have sinned," or "I include all the sins of my life," is certainly sufficient matter for valid absolution. Granted the requisite contrition, a penitent who made such an accusation could certainly be validly absolved.

In practice, penitents who have no necessary matter to confess are not obliged to make any more than a generic accusation.

It is desirable, however, that even in a devotional confession the penitent mention some specific sin or sins, at least from his past life.

The First of these rules may be somewhat confusing to a young priest, for he may have read in some moral manual that, outside the case of necessity, a generic confession of devotion is only probably valid. It is true that some few authors may be cited for this opinion; but the opinion favoring validity is so strong, both intrinsically and extrinsically, that the opposition of these authors may be considered as negligible. Their view does not constitute a solid doubt. The confessor may, without any scruple consider the opinion favoring validity as morally certain and may act accordingly.

The second rule is simply an application of the time-honored principle: *non est imponenda obligatio nisi certo constet*. Some authors still think that, even though the generic accusation is valid, yet the penitent is obliged to make a specific accusation of free matter when he can do so. But there are other good authors, as well as sound reasons, for the opinion that the specific confession of free matter is optional. Speculatively, both

opinions may be labeled probable; in practice, however, the penitent and the confessor may guide themselves by the opinion favoring liberty.

Several reasons may be assigned for the third rule: namely, for the desirability of the specific accusation. One reason is that this seems to be the general practice of the Church. Another is that a specific accusation is an aid to contrition. The best array of arguments, however, is offered by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. Speaking of the frequent confession of venial sin, the Holy Father says that by this practice, "genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are conquered, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, salutary direction is obtained, and grace is increased in virtue of the sacrament itself."

It is obvious that, in enumerating these manifold fruits of frequent devotional confession, the Supreme Pontiff had in mind a specific accusation of venial sin. I feel safe in suggesting, however, that these fruits can be reaped in their fullness only by penitents of more than ordinary spiritual perception and earnestness.

Practical Application

A concrete application of this discussion may be put in the form of a question: what is the confessor to do when a penitent who apparently has no necessary matter to confess mentions only imperfections or dubious matter and uses no concluding formula to include the sin of his past life? I can suggest three ways of solving this problem:

One way is to get the penitent to include the other sins of his life in a merely generic way. For example, you might ask: "And do you include the sins of your past life in this confession?" - or, "And are you also sorry for the sins of your past life?" This is the minimum; you must get this much. But I think I can add without cynicism that in many cases you can get no more.

A second way, better than the First, is to try to get the penitent to make a specific accusation at least of some sins of his past life. To accomplish this, you might begin with the question: "Do you mind if I give you a bit of instruction that may help you?" The penitent will hardly mind; and you may follow up with an instruction similar to this:

"Penance happens to be a sacrament that one can't receive unless one confesses some real sin. You can't get absolution without sin any more than you can start a fire without fuel. The things that you have confessed may not be sin at all, and if I were to give you absolution now it might not do you any good. Because of this, it is always wise to finish your confession by including something from your past life - one or two sins or kinds of sin that you know you're really sorry for. This doesn't mean that your past sins aren't forgiven. It simply means that you can always get more grace by renewing your sorrow for them and mentioning them in your confession. Now, if you can tell me one or two sins of your past life, I'll show you what I mean."

The foregoing is a sample instruction. If the penitent grasps the idea, you have accomplished something. But do not expect too much. Some will not grasp it. The penitent who confessed missing morning prayers may tell you, "I missed my morning prayers in my past life, too, Father." And another penitent, despite your reassuring words, will be startled when you mention his past life and will protest that he has always confessed all his sin in the past. When you see that an approach like this is of no avail, simply revert to the first method and be content with the merely generic accusation.

The third, and best, method is to train penitents to make a more exacting examination of conscience and to make a specific accusation of even their recent small sins. As I remarked previously, I think that only those who are above the average in spiritual perception and earnestness can fully profit by this suggestion. But surely there are some such souls to be found in every parish.

CHAPTER IX - INTEGRAL CONFESSION

The divine law obliges the penitent to make an integral confession. Per se this duty refers to material completeness; but per accidens, granted a legitimate excusing cause, formal integrity suffices for a good confession.

The lack of formal integrity implies a defective disposition on the part of the penitent. The presumption favors the penitent in this matter; and the confessor who acts on this presumption as long as he sees no positive sign of insincerity is acting prudently. But if he has a positive reason for suspecting that the penitent is insincere he must tactfully investigate. For instance, if this impression were created by the penitent's hesitant or nervous manner, the confessor might say:

"You don't seem to feel at ease ... Is there something worrying you - something you find it hard to say - something in which I can help you?... I want you to be satisfied with your confession, to be able to go in peace, and to avoid reason for worry afterwards."

That is the general idea. Each confessor has to work out details of approach for himself. But he must by all means avoid anything like torturing a penitent; hence, once the penitent assures him there is nothing else, the confessor should take his word for it.

Material Integrity

In the present chapter I am speaking mainly of material integrity. Though not essential to a good confession, material completeness is, nevertheless, ordinarily of grave precept. The duty is, so to speak, shared by penitent and confessor; it falls primarily on the former, only secondarily on the latter. In very concrete language this means that the confessor must take reasonable means to help the penitent make a materially adequate confession.

In apparent good faith a penitent might fail to tell the species, or the special circumstances, or the number of his serious sin. For instance, he might simply say, "I

broke the Sixth Commandment." The confessor must help him to make this accusation more definite by asking pertinent questions. One way of doing this is to ask: "Would you mind telling me just how you broke the Sixth Commandment?" Another, and perhaps more standard, approach is the question: "Was this in thought, word, or deed?" Once the priest has discovered by these or similar questions just what was done, he should then inquire about the number of each of the serious sin; and before he dismisses the penitent he ought to instruct him how to confess such sin in the future, should he have the misfortune to break his resolutions and commit the sin again.

When a confession is very long it may be impossible to remember all the points about which a penitent should be questioned. In that case one should note the principal things and ask about them. However, even when the confessor can remember everything it is sometimes better to omit further questions: for example, when such questioning appears to be making the confession odious for the penitent. Moreover, though the confessor would not be justified in telling all his penitents to abbreviate their accusations simply because he has many confessions to hear, yet the fact that he has a long line of penitents is certainly a valid reason for his occasionally omitting some questions.

Penitents who have been away from confession for a long time may want the priest to help them. Even when they ask for help, however, it is best to get them to at least begin the confession, if they can do so. The confessor can often help them to make such a beginning by saying: "Now, first you try to tell me all you can remember, and then I'll help you with a few questions." Another, and perhaps more helpful, way of getting the penitent to start is to suggest: "Suppose you begin your confession by telling me why you haven't been to confession for such a long time." If there is a special reason for the long neglect, the confessor can first deal with that and then ask necessary questions about other matters.

Many textbooks contain long lists of questions to be used on the occasion of a general confession. It strikes me that these lists are usually much too detailed, especially in the sections dealing with purity. I believe that a young confessor can profit by reading over these lists periodically, but I would not recommend that he try to follow them exactly. It is sufficient to follow the main headings until, as one's confessional experience grows, one gradually comes to know the most practical items that apply to various types of penitents.

Questions for General Confession

I am often asked by seminarians and young priests to suggest a list of questions that they might follow when dealing with penitents who have been away from confession a long time and who seem unable even to begin their own confession. As an answer to this request I usually suggest the following:

When was your last good confession? Did you make any bad confessions? Did you realize that you were obliged to go to confession at least once a year?

Did you go to Communion after your last confession? Was this Communion (were these Communions) good? Did you realize that you were obliged to make your Easter duty each year?

Have you missed Mass on Sundays and Holidays? Eaten meat on Fridays and other abstinence days? Failed to keep the prescribed fasts? If you have failed in these things, was this merely because of negligence, or was it through lack of faith?

Have you attended any non-Catholic religious services?

Have you done physical harm to yourself or others? Or hurt others by bad example? Or hurt them by stealing, cheating, speaking evil about them or offensively to them, etc.?

Have you been intoxicated?

Are you married or single?

(If Married) How long have you been married? Is this your only marriage? Have you any children? If not, is this because you have tried not to have them? If you have children, have you fulfilled your duties toward them: Baptism, Catholic education, etc.? if your wife a Catholic? How do you get along? Any sexual sin together? Have you been faithful to your wife? Any other sexual sins?

(If Single) Have you sinned against purity in any way?

Do you have any special professional duties (e.g. doctor, lawyer)?

Is there anything you wish to add: i.e., to ask or talk about?

(Final advice) You may later recall other sins you did not mention in this confession. If you do, then in your next confession you should tell the priest: "In my last confession I forgot to mention this or that."

I do not propose this list of questions as something to be followed with mechanical precision. After all, confession is a human thing, and allowances must be made for personality differences. But, allowances being made for such differences, I think that a young priest should find the outline very helpful. It follows a rather simple pattern: sacraments, precepts of the Church, commandments of God, and state of life. I have found that many experienced confessors use substantially the same outline, with only slight differences. For instance, I know one confessor who thinks it advisable to introduce occasional questions concerning sins that might not be very serious; e.g., using God's name in vain, losing one's temper, and so forth.

Converts

Another question that is frequently referred to me concerns the confessions of converts who are baptized conditionally upon their reception into the Church. Before making a pastoral suggestion, I should like to quote the following words by Edwin F. Healy, S.J.:

"Converts whose non-Catholic baptism was certainly valid (e.g. a Lutheran) are obliged to confess all the mortal sin committed after baptism. If, however, the validity of the previous baptism is solidly doubtful, theologians give strong arguments why the divine law of integral confession does not apply to the sins committed in the period between the non-Catholic baptism and the rebaptism in the Church. In this country however, the positive law demands that such a convert mention in his first confession all the grave sins which he has committed since his non-Catholic baptism." [Cf. *Christian Guidance* (Loyola University Press, Chicago), P. 144.]

The positive legislation to which Father Healy refers is contained in the Councils of Baltimore, II, 242, and III, 122. In view of this legislation, all converts in our country except those who are unconditionally baptized should be prepared to make an integral accusation in their first confession. The priest who instructs them should explain simply and clearly how this is done. But he should also make it clear to them that this duty refers only to sins that they realized were serious when they committed them. This is an important point, for many non-Catholics do not have the same realization of the gravity of sin as do Catholics.

As for the confessor, he should make this first confession as easy as possible for converts. He should make them feel at home by telling them that he understands that this first confession may be a very strange experience for them but he will help them. And in questioning them, it is advisable to begin with certain things that are not embarrassing, even though they are things that do not, strictly speaking, have to be confessed: e.g. "When you were a child, were you disobedient to your parents? Have you lost your temper?" And even as regards the serious things that pertain to the law of integrity, he should remember that it is better to allow some deficiency in this regard than to make the confession odious. Finally, when they have finished their confession, it is well to advise them to return to confession rather frequently, even though they do not have much to tell; for by confessing frequently they will gradually become accustomed to it and will thus be better prepared to benefit from confession when they need it. And in telling them this, it is wise to add the suggestion that, for a while at least, they always tell the confessor that they were recently converted. If they do this they will be much more likely to obtain sympathetic help.

Excuses from Integrity

These pages would hardly be adequate without some reference to the possibility of excusing causes from material integrity. As we know, these are special circumstances in which the obligation of making a complete confession is suspended. Such circumstances are rare, it is true, but they do occur. And the priest should keep in mind that the penitent will hardly know of these legitimate excuses; hence the confessor should see that his penitent gets the benefit of the excuse when it is applicable.

I am thinking particularly of scrupulous penitents and of confessions in hospital wards. Boops often suggest that a scrupulous person be told that he need not confess a sin unless he is absolutely certain that it was mortal, or unless he can swear that it was mortal. I am dubious about the beneficial effect of insisting on this with penitents who have a serious case of scrupulosity. It is much easier, and just as theologically sound, to invoke the principle of excusing causes from integrity. This means that the priest may allow them to confess only as much as he judges they can confess without harm to themselves that is, without aggravating their scrupulosity or preventing its proper treatment. This implies that in many cases a merely generic accusation suffices: e.g. "I accuse myself of all my sins."

As for hospital wards, the ideal thing is to have the sick who wish to confess moved to a private room, but sometimes this is impossible. If the confession must be heard in a ward, and if the confessor judges that there is not the requisite privacy, he ought to tell the penitent that he may, if he wishes, go to confession like soldiers before a battle: that is, by just accusing himself of all his sin in general and then telling them in detail later, when he has more privacy.

Speaking of privacy, let me recall a point I mentioned in a previous article: when you build or remodel a church, provide sound-proof confessionals. I have had to sit in confessionals that so much resembled cracker boxes that I wondered whether anyone who had humiliating sins to tell would really be obliged to confess them.

What I have written here may create the false impression that the confessor must always ask questions to be sure of integrity. Certainly this is not true. When the penitent appears to be well-instructed and to be making his confession frankly, there is no need of questioning for integrity. And of course such questions are not called for when the confession is obviously devotional. Priests are presumed to be well-instructed; and authors generally put religious in this class. I may add, however, that religious sometimes need instruction concerning the manner of making their confession. But that is another question, which does not pertain precisely to our present theme.

CHAPTER X - SACRAMENTAL PENANCES

The fact that the penitent is per se obliged to make a materially integral confession implies that the confessor should judge the kinds of sin confessed and the degree of culpability involved. As I have pointed out previously, this judgment is not essential. The confessor makes only two essential judgments: namely, concerning sufficiency of matter and concerning the disposition of the penitent. The validity of the absolution is not affected when the confessor judges that a sin was venial, whereas it was actually mortal; or that a sin was mortal, whereas it was only venial; or that a sin was against charity, when in reality it was an injustice. Such errors, granted they are not culpably caused by the penitent, cannot render the absolution invalid.

Nevertheless, as prudent ministers of the sacrament, confessors must make reasonable efforts to judge the species and subjective culpability of the sin confessed, especially with

a view to giving appropriate advice and penances. This judgment is made in the form of a "running estimation." As the penitent makes his confession, the confessor notes what commandment or virtue was violated, whether the sin is objectively mortal or venial, and whether the subjective guilt was complete or only partial. Questions are sometimes necessary in order to clarify these points. Frequently, however, they are made sufficiently clear in the course of the confession, and at the end the confessor is able to give a little advice and a proportionate penance with little or no questioning. He knows the objective quality and quantity of the sins confessed, and he may presume that the penitent contracted the corresponding subjective guilt unless he has some reason for suspecting the contrary.

In some cases a doubt about subjective guilt can be cleared up by asking the penitent, "What did you think at the time you did it? Did you think you sinned seriously?" In many cases it is humanly impossible to determine subjective guilt, and the matter must be left to God. And as for suspecting a lack of guilt, or at least a lack of complete culpability, certain types of confessions are almost always open to this suspicion. I refer to such accusations as "missing Mass - eating meat on Friday," when made by penitents who are obviously good Catholics. If one were to ask such people, "Would you mind telling me why you missed Mass, why you ate meat on Friday?" or "Was it your own fault you missed Mass, etc.?" one would almost invariably discover that they were excused, at least partially, but they "feel better" when they confess it.

Suggestions for advising penitents are offered in many of these chapters. It may be profitable to include here a few remarks about penances.

The Law

The Council of Trent made it very clear that the confessor has a strict duty to impose a penance proportionate to the sins; and the essential words of Trent are preserved both in the Code and the Ritual. In estimating this proportion the confessor must take into account many things: the kind and gravity of the sins, their number, the physical and spiritual condition of the penitent, and so forth. My subsequent paragraphs are intended as helps to a young confessor to make this estimation according to the mind of the Church.

In general, penances are of two kinds, medicinal and vindictive. Medicinal penances correspond to the kind of sins, and they are supposed to help the penitent avoid such sin in the future. The Ritual, following the principle that temptations are to be prevented by their contraries, suggests these medicinal penances: almsgiving for the greedy, fasts or other corporal penances for the lustful, humble works for the proud, and devotional practices for the spiritually lazy. It also suggests that those who confess rarely may be given more frequent confession and Communion as a penance.

It is my opinion that a priest can fulfill this direction of the Ritual without assigning these and other spiritual medicines as a penance in the strict sense of the word. By this I mean that the medicinal purpose can often be best attained when certain fitting corrective

practices are strongly advised without being strictly enjoined. For the most part it seems safer and more customary among us to impose certain prayers as the confessional penance; and, though it is true that prayer is good medicine against any kind of sin, yet I think the point that is emphasized in assigning a certain number of prayers is the vindictive element.

A vindictive penance corresponds to the gravity and number of sins confessed, and it is intended primarily as satisfaction, not as medicine. Since we are now considering penances mainly in terms of prayers, a confessor will naturally want to know just how much prayer he should impose in order to fulfill the law of enjoining a penance proportioned to the gravity and number of the sins. The principle to be followed, according to the common teaching of theologians, is this: a grave penance (that is, a penance for mortal sin) must involve the equivalent of something that the Church is accustomed to impose under pain of mortal sin. Therefore, grave penances would be the hearing of one Mass, fasting or abstaining for one day, receiving Communion, going to confession; for each of these is at times imposed by the Church *sub gravi*. In terms of our ordinary prayers, a grave penance would be five decades of the Rosary or other prayers of about similar length.

It is well to note the logical conclusion that flows from the law of proportionate penance and from the commonly accepted standard of a grave penance. It means that if the penitent confesses one mortal sin, and there are no reasons for diminishing the penance, the confessor ought to give him a Rosary or about the equivalent of other prayers, or impose the hearing of Mass, fasting for a day, and so forth. And if the penitent has a number of mortal sins, the penance ought to be increased somewhat, though not necessarily in any strict proportion according to number.

Excusing Causes

There are excusing causes in this matter: that is, legitimate reasons why the confessor may give penances that are lighter, even much lighter, than those just enumerated. Authors suggest many such mitigating causes: for example, the fact that a penitent has already made or is making at least a quasi-satisfaction by making a mission, by enduring a cross, by having waited in line for a long time, by having overcome a great difficulty in getting to confession. All these are legitimate reasons why the confessor, if he deems it advisable, may give less than a *per se* grave penance even to a penitent with many mortal sins.

Another reason for mitigating a penance is the fact that the confessor himself is willing to make some satisfaction for his penitent. Personally, I think that within reasonable limits this is to be highly recommended. A confessor will find it inspiring if he will impose some little mortification on himself or bear patiently with some hardship (such as an especially arduous session in the confessional) for a certain penitent who is having great difficulty. Our Lord's words about the devils that are driven out only by prayer and fasting are as true today as they were when He spoke them.

Although I have not seen this suggestion made in the manuals, I think that a priest is justified in diminishing the vindictive penance somewhat if he has given a penitent some very salutary medicine by way of advice and he feels fairly sure that the penitent will act on it. And it is generally admitted that if the confessor has some assurance that the penitent will gain indulgences, particularly a plenary indulgence, he may give a light instead of a grave penance. And still another reason, of course, is physical weakness or illness on the part of the penitent.

Some authors suggest that if penitents manifest extraordinary sorrow, that is, sorrow so profound that it very likely moves God to be especially merciful in forgiving not only the sin but a great part or all of the temporal punishment, the confessor may diminish the penance. In itself, this certainly seems to be a valid reason; yet we must remember that such a penitent will readily accept, even want, a rather large penance, and that he can get great fruit from it. Because of this last consideration I should not be too ready to recommend lightening a penance because of extraordinary contrition.

"It is better to lead a man to purgatory with a small penance than to hell with a large penance." This maxim, formulated by Gerson I believe, refers to cases in which the penitent's spiritual frailty cannot stand a per se grave penance. It is applicable when the confessor prudently judges that a penitent might not say a large penance, or that the giving of a large penance would make the sacrament odious and would prevent the penitent from returning to confession.

By analogy, we may say that a confessor is justified in giving a rather small penance when he judges that this will be a special encouragement to a sinner to come frequently to confession. Something like this may often be verified in the case of boys; they are frightened by the thought of a large penance, and encouraged to return when they receive a small penance. This practice of giving boys small penances can be overdone, however; and it certainly is overdone when a priest assigns only a slight penance to a boy who is falling frequently into sins of masturbation, unless the priest also gives the lad some good advice which may work like a medicinal penance. Of what good is it to get a boy to return often to confession if the confessor never tries to help him?

Practical Conclusion

These few pages on penances need some kind of practical conclusion. The first point in this conclusion would be this: follow principles when you give penances. In general, there are two principles: (a) per se, a grave penance is the Rosary or its equivalent; and (b) when an excusing cause is present this penance may be reduced. Every time a confessor assigns a penance for grave sins he ought to be acting on these principles. It may be that in most cases some excusing cause is present; yet this would not justify one in falling into a routine of giving the same mitigated penance to everyone who has confessed mortal sins. The confessor must to some extent always judge individual cases, and not only give individualized advice, but also an individualized vindictive penance. Obviously, the leeway is not very large as long as we are pretty much limited to assigning familiar prayers; but there is some leeway and it should not be entirely neglected.

One thing that should deter us from a too universal practice of mitigating penances is a consideration of the value of a sacramental penance for the penitent himself. It is true that we cannot precisely estimate this value, but we do know that it has an entirely special power to do away with the temporal punishment due to sin; and usually penitents with many sin to confess need this. And certainly, in the case of many of them, if they correctly understand the value of a penance they are really glad to accept it.

Some priests fear to give a large penance (e.g., a Rosary) because they do not know how the penitent will react. One approach to this problem is to explain briefly to the penitent the advantage of a large penance in his case, and then give him a choice between the large and small penance. Another approach is, "Would it be too hard for you to say a Rosary - or to attend a Mass on some weekday - and so forth?"

Many authors suggest that the law of proportionate penance may be kept by giving the penitent a few prayers that may be said immediately and then telling him to offer his Sunday Mass or his Friday abstinence as a part of his penance. One special advantage of this practice over the use of excusing causes is that it reminds the penitent that his sin call for a serious penance.

Should one give a penance that will be said before the penitent leaves the church? In general this seems to be the wise policy, for it is easy to forget a penance if it is not said immediately. For this reason, if a Rosary is to be assigned as a penance it seems advisable to ask the penitent first, "Do you have your Rosary with you?" One difficulty against this procedure is that it might embarrass the penitent if he has come to confession with his wife or a friend; hence it is well to commend the recitation of the penance immediately but not to insist on it.

It goes without saying that public acts like the Stations or repugnant acts like apologizing to someone should seldom or never be assigned as penances. However, although I have already admitted that we are usually forced to give familiar prayers, I would certainly commend the confessor who used his ingenuity sufficiently to discover other penances that would be practicable. I once read about a famous confessor who evidently knew the Imitation of Christ very thoroughly and who had the custom of assigning appropriate chapters as penances. It might be difficult to imitate this practice literally in our churches today, but many confessors might find ways of imitating the spirit.

CHAPTER XI - OCCASIONS OF SIN

Moral theologians generally treat in some detail of the problems presented by the occasionarius, the consuetudinarius, and the recidivus. Actually, these problems are usually intertwined, but for the purpose of emphasizing the principles to be followed with regard to each problem it is well to study them separately. The present chapter will deal with the occasionarius; the next will be devoted to the consuetudinarius and the recidivus.

Meaning of Occasion

An occasion of sin is an external circumstance which fosters a temptation to sin and includes at least some danger that the sin will actually be committed. The definition itself suggests the first problem a confessor must tackle when he is dealing with a penitent whom he suspects to be an occasionarius. This problem may be indicated by referring to a case given by Genicot-Salsmans (*Casus Conscientiae*, n. 843). This case concerns a man who has been committing sodomy with two boys who work for him. When the confessor tells the man to discharge the boys and to hire others, the man replies that this would do no good because he has fallen into sin with various boys who worked for him. In other words, the presence of these particular boys does not constitute an occasion of sin for their employer. His difficulty lies deeper. Perhaps it might be solved if he would not employ any boy; and in that case the employment of boys would be the occasion of sin. Yet it might be that even if he did not employ boys he would still seek them out; and if this is the case his real problem is his own personal weakness rather than any external circumstance.

The case just outlined suggests this practical advice for the young confessor: before applying principles pertinent to occasions of sin be sure you are dealing with an occasionarius; and, in case you judge that your penitent is an occasionarius, be sure to determine as accurately as possible just what constitutes the occasion. To make these estimates, ask yourself such questions as these: "Would my penitent avoid this sin entirely, or at least practically eliminate it, if he broke away from such and such a companion, or if he avoided certain kinds of shows or books, or if he gave up his present job, or if he broke off his engagement, or if he kept away from this or that roadhouse, and so forth?" If you can judge that your penitent would stop sinning, or would greatly reduce his sin, by avoiding some rather definite circumstance, then you should treat him as an occasionarius and apply the principles given in this chapter. But if you cannot discern such a circumstance, the principles to be explained here are not applicable.

Let me illustrate my point by an example much more practical and more commonplace than the case cited from Genicot-Salsmans. Suppose that a boy who confesses impure thoughts indulges in these thoughts only when he reads a certain type of magazine. Obviously this reading is an occasion of sin for the lad. But if he entertains impure thoughts at almost any time and under almost any conditions, the only reasonable conclusion is that the source of the trouble is within him: he has an excessive propensity to impure thoughts.

In the examples given thus far I have supposed that the confessor is led to suspect an occasion of sin because of difficulties actually experienced by a penitent. As we know, however, personal experience is not the only way of determining occasions of sin. Another legitimate way is common experience, that is, the usual reactions of ordinary people. For example, we know that attendance at a modern burlesque show would create temptation and danger (even great danger) of sin for almost anyone; and other things, such as certain types of art galleries, would be dangerous for definite classes of people (e.g. adolescents). On the basis of these common estimates we advise and direct people in and out of the confessional, even before they have had any actual experience with these dangers. In the present chapter, however, I am considering primarily the cases of

penitents who have already been sinning, and the confessor's problem in directing them is to find out whether their experience points to an occasion of sin for them.

Perhaps I should also add that I am considering only occasions of mortal sin. Theoretically, many of the notions given here could apply to venial sin. But the same principles would not always be applicable (e.g. about refusing absolution); hence moralists usually limit their treatment of this topic to mortal sins.

Proximate or Remote

Once the confessor does decide that his penitent is in an occasion of serious sin, he must next determine how closely the occasion is linked with the danger of sinning. In other words, he must decide whether the occasion is proximate or remote.

Even a casual reading of the moralists will show that it is not always easy to distinguish between a proximate and remote occasion. Great authorities apparently hold strongly opposed views as to what constitutes a proximate occasion. I would not attempt to give here a speculative solution to these controversies, but I think I can give a young confessor a norm that he can safely follow and thus avoid both rigorism and laxism. Stated in general terms, my practical norm comes to this: take "great danger of sinning" as the standard for a proximate occasion of sin, and then apply this with some flexibility according to special elements presented in each case. Toward the end of the present chapter I shall try to make this rule more concrete by a few illustrations that will bring out what I mean by flexibility and special elements.

Necessary or Voluntary

Even when it is clear that a penitent is in a proximate occasion of sin because some external circumstance very frequently involves formal sin, the confessor is not yet ready to apply the principles pertinent to the occasion. He must first decide whether the occasion is necessary or voluntary. The penitent is obliged to give up a voluntary occasion; and the confessor may, and generally should, insist on this obligation. The reason for this obligation is found in the general treatise on law, where we learn that everyone is bound to take the ordinary means of keeping a law; and certainly the avoidance of voluntary proximate occasions of sin is an ordinary means.

On the other hand, when an occasion is necessary, even morally, the penitent has at least the temporary privilege of trying some other means to protect himself from sin. The reason for this privilege is that the relinquishing of a necessary occasion implies at the very minimum a relatively great hardship. It is therefore considered an extraordinary means of keeping a law; and the use of extraordinary means becomes obligatory only after it is clear that this is practically the only way of avoiding serious sin.

It is fairly easy to form accurate theoretical concepts of necessary and voluntary occasions. An occasion is considered necessary when it is either physically or morally impossible to avoid it. Physical impossibility means that the circumstance is simply

unavoidable: for example, a prisoner in the same cell with a man who leads him to sin. Moral impossibility implies that the occasion can be given up, but only with a proportionately serious difficulty: for example, a girl who finds that her employment is an occasion of sin for her, but who cannot give up this employment without great sacrifice of salary or loss of a fine opportunity to advance, and so forth. Finally, an occasion is said to be voluntary when it can be avoided with little or no inconvenience.

In practice, even apparently simple cases often involve difficult pastoral problems. For instance, when the confessor is confronted with a clear case of a voluntary occasion, he knows that the penitent must give up this occasion; and when he meets a clear case of physical necessity, he knows that there is no obligation to give up the occasion itself. Yet even such clear cases call for prudent handling. In the case of the clearly voluntary occasion the confessor must decide whether it is better to insist on the immediate giving up of the occasion or to use merely persuasion until he has tested, and perhaps strengthened, the penitent's disposition. And in the case of the physically necessary occasion, although the confessor knows clearly that his precise task is to help the penitent to make the danger remote, he may experience untold difficulty in finding a practicable means of doing this. In working on this latter problem it is very important to practice patience and not to give up hope. Often one must work for a long time with such a penitent, and one may be strongly tempted to discouragement. In these difficulties the confessor must hold firmly to the principle that no one is forced to sin. There must be some remedy for a situation like this.

Most acute of all the problems in this matter is the morally necessary proximate occasion. This differs from the physically necessary occasion because it can be given up; and it differs from the voluntary occasion because renouncing it would involve a relatively serious difficulty. The expression, "relatively serious," should be noted, because even the giving up of a voluntary occasion may involve some difficulty, but it is a difficulty that is relatively slight.

From what I have just said it is obvious that, in judging whether an occasion of sin is morally necessary, the confessor is faced with the ever-recurring "intangible" of moral theology, the proportionate reason. He has to compare what the penitent would lose by giving up the occasion with the harm or danger involved in staying in it. As one may note again and again in reading moral theology, the estimation of such things is so difficult that even experts are apt to disagree in their practical solutions. The best course for a young priest to follow is this: get a firm grasp on the principles and then cultivate what is sometimes called the "moral sense" by reading the solutions given by experts in their various case books. In some of these he will find examples of a moderate, lenient attitude; in others he will note a more severe attitude. Any confessor can learn a great deal by studying both these views.

Before suggesting some practical illustrations of the foregoing explanation, I should like to call special attention to a very important point. Even when a confessor justly leans toward severity in interpreting the elements concerning an occasion of sin, he must ever keep in mind that in applying his principles he may be dealing with a very frail human

being. Some people have strong attachments to the things that lead them to sin, and especially to persons. A confessor may see immediately and clearly that a certain companionship must be given up, yet it is not always wise to insist on this immediately. It is sometimes better to follow a more gradual plan.

Following a gradual plan, the confessor would first win the penitent's confidence by showing him (or her) that he realizes that this is a hard problem. Then he would get the penitent to make a good resolution to keep away from the other person for a week and to return to confession next week. And he might continue this strategy for several weeks. Of course, such a plan will not always work - no plan will - but when it does work, the penitent gradually breaks from the occasion without great hardship and gets the needed courage and confidence for the final break, which certainly must come. On the other hand, if one were to begin with the dread alternative, "quit her, or no absolution," many very frail penitents might not have the courage to accept this alternative, and they might thus be lost completely. No doubt, these are delicate cases. They call for a gentle approach combined with firmness in working toward and eventually demanding the giving up of the occasion entirely and forever.

Example

A rather typical example illustrating how the confessor might use some of the notions and principles referred to in this chapter would be the following: The penitent is a young man, unmarried, who has committed several 'Sins of impurity with a young woman, also unmarried. He does not sin with other girls; hence it seems clear that this particular girl is the occasion of sin. They have no intention to marry and then is no other circumstance which practically forces them to be together; hence the occasion seems to be voluntary. They go out together very often, but they do not always sin. Questioned about the relative frequency of the sin, the penitent answers: "sometimes we do; sometimes we don't"; or "about half the time we go out together."

If I were dealing with this case, I would estimate the problem somewhat as follows: "On the basis of his past experience, I am reasonably sure that if this young man continues to see the girl he will commit many mortal sins. In other words, keeping company with her constitutes great danger of sin for him." I would conclude, therefore, that the principle pertaining to the voluntary proximate occasion of sin is applicable to this companionship; and, unless there were some special reason for breaking the news gently to him (as I have indicated above) I would tell him that he must stop this companionship, and I would have to consider him unworthy of absolution if he would not do so.

My solution would be somewhat different if there were question merely of seeing the girl "just once more." There is not the same assurance of sin regarding one act that then is regarding a series of acts. In my opinion, the confessor is not justified in urging an obligation *sub gravi* to avoid even the one meeting unless the history of the case indicates that the boy and girl seldom meet without sinning. The confessor should certainly discourage even the one meeting, and he should insist that if it takes place the boy must

take special precautions to avoid sin; but I do not think the confessor can do more than that unless certain special factors, not included in this case, are present.

There can be such special factors: for instance, in the case of a married man who has frequently committed adultery, or in the case of frequent sin by a priest or a religious. In such Cases, because of the special elements of injustice, scandal, and so forth, I would without scruple follow the stricter interpretation of proximate occasion (namely, a probable danger) and I would insist that the one meeting must not take place.

I trust that these few illustrations will show how a confessor, without taking sides in the controversy concerning proximate occasions of sin, can steer a reasonable middle course. The first solution would hardly involve any controversy, because all theologians would agree that the unnecessary companionship must stop. But there is controversy about the obligation of avoiding even one act. In my second solution I followed the more lenient view in this controversy because there was question of avoiding only an ordinary serious sin - if one may use such an expression. But in the third case, where special elements were involved (the marriage bond, the vows, danger of scandal for the Church) I followed the more severe view. In other words, by these three solutions I have tried to illustrate the practical rule suggested earlier in this chapter: namely, of taking "great danger of sinning" as the standard for a proximate occasion of sin and then applying this with some flexibility according to the special elements presented in each case.

As a postscript to these solutions, may I suggest that readers who are interested in seeing the speculative defense of my practical suggestions consult *Theological Studies*, XI (March, 1950), 64-65.

CHAPTER XII - HABITS AND RELAPSES

The penitent who has contracted a habit of sin presents many problems to the confessor. One problem concerns his subjective guilt. A young confessor should keep in mind that whenever he is dealing with a habitual sinner he must make a special effort to apply the principles concerning diminished culpability. A habit may be so deeply ingrained that many or most of the acts performed under its influence are either inculpable or only slightly culpable.

It is not my purpose to deal here with the problem of subjective guilt. I am primarily interested in suggesting means of helping the habitual sinner to break his habit. And I have mainly in mind habits of serious sin in which the single acts seem, at least in general, to be sufficiently free for grave subjective culpability. The most normally encountered examples would probably concern some form of impurity; but they might also be theft, calumny, drunkenness, and so forth.

The presumption is that a penitent who sins habitually but is not a recidivist is in some sense sincere in wanting to do better. He has at least a general desire to be rid of his habit. But this desire is apt to be hazy, faltering, and inefficacious. The confessor's duty is to

help him make his good will effective; in other words, he must see that the habitual sinner is prepared to take the means necessary for breaking his habit.

In *The Spiritual Life* (nos. 8768), Father Tanquerey suggests the following plan as a remedy for the habit of lust:

deep convictions that the habit ought to be up rooted and that this can be done;

protection against dangerous occasions by avoiding those that are voluntary and by making necessary occasions remote;

self-discipline by mortification of senses and heart and by keeping busy;

prayer and the frequentation of the sacraments.

Slightly different plans might be found in other books; but any plan for removing or avoiding a bad habit will conform substantially to this general outline. It should be profitable, therefore, to keep the outline in mind while reviewing some of the confessor's difficulties in helping the habitual sinner.

Motivation

First, there is the need of conviction that something ought to be done. This is the problem of motivation, the key to proper will-control. As confessors we cannot give anyone convictions. Strong convictions must come from personal reflection and grace. But we can and must propose motives to penitents, for they are apt to lack conviction because their motivation is too vague.

Motives for breaking a habit may be natural or supernatural, negative or positive. Confessors must have a supply of all of these on hand, so to speak, and should propose them to penitents according to the individual's power to grasp and appreciate them. For example, take the case of a boy with the habit of masturbation. A negative natural motive would be the harmful effects of his habit. There was a time, it seems, when much was made over the supposedly harmful physical effects such as insanity, ill health, and so forth. We can be thankful that this type of negative motivation, which was largely without foundation, has become obsolete. Nevertheless, it is true that the habit can have harmful effects on a boy's character, and the confessor may find it advantageous to point this out to him. Yet, I think that even this is best accomplished under a positive aspect: namely, by showing the lad that he is going through a crisis and that his hard work at self-control during this crisis will ennoble his character, win the admiration of others, make him a better man, and so forth. These are natural motives, it is true; but they are decidedly positive and many boys respond to them.

A supernatural negative motive is the thought that one might die in the state of sin and go to hell. This is certainly a fine motive, but it has its limitations. If it is used in a graphic way, it may cause morbid instead of salutary fear. If it is portrayed in a quiet, but forceful

way (the only soundly psychological way), it may not sufficiently impress some penitents, especially the young. Try as he might, a young boy may find it difficult to think of death as a really proximate possibility for him yet the practical efficacy of the fear of hell depends to a great extent on the realization that death may come suddenly.

It seems, therefore, that the most effective form of motivation, natural or supernatural, is positive. This is true even (and perhaps especially) of boys. With many boys the confessor labors in vain, or almost in vain, in helping them to correct a habit of impurity. But among those we do help, most respond to the motive of "following Christ." They are hero-worshippers, and He is certainly a hero. And we should make the most of this motive with a boy of fundamentally good character. And of course devotion to Our Lady is also a source of great inspiration to such a boy. I have stressed the example of the boy with the habit of masturbation. The same general idea should be followed in dealing with all penitents; that is, we should stress the positive. But repeat that the conviction must come partly through their own efforts, and they should be told this and should be encouraged to pray and reflect. Also, it is important to impress upon them that the time of trial is when they most need motives; hence, when temptation comes they must force themselves to recall their motives. Psychologically this is very difficult, especially when temptation is connected with the emotions, because the subject is apt to have a secret desire or half-desire that the motive won't work. In other words, his attachment to the motive may be very weak in time of stress.

It Can Be Done

The second requisite is conviction that something can be done. The habitual sinner will accomplish nothing until he can say to himself, "I can break this habit". Almost any habit, and particularly a habit of impurity, engenders a feeling of diffidence which acts as a tremendous psychological obstacle to this conviction. The sinner comes to feel that he is the victim of the habit, that there is nothing he can do about it. Moreover, since the human mind naturally judges the future on the basis of the past, the sinner, even while confessing, may be hopelessly conscious of the likelihood that he will sin again. In fact, he may often say that he wonders whether he really has contrition because he knows he will fall.

It is very important for the confessor to recognize the genesis of this disposition. It is not in the will. It is partly a judgment, partly a fear. And it is not entirely unfounded; rather, it has a solid foundation in past experience. Yet, we must correct it, or our plan for helping the penitent will not succeed.

How correct it? I believe that it is unwise to try to convince the penitent that his fear is vain, because that is not really true. It is well, therefore, to admit with him that, if all the circumstances of the future would be just the same as the past, his fear might indeed be justified. But the future is not going to be the same. We are going to introduce some new elements into his life, and by working on these new elements he will change the whole picture. The new elements are the various points pertaining to our remedial plan.

No matter how optimistically we may act in trying to build up a penitent's confidence, we know that it generally takes time to break a habit completely. It is only the exceptional character who leaves the confessional and never falls back into his formerly habitual sin. Realizing this, we also realize that in a certain sense the penitent would do well just by beginning to cut down the number of his sins. We must beware lest this realization lead us to use expressions that are doctrinally unsound or dangerous: for example, "See whether you can come back next week and tell me you did that only once," or "Now, let's see whether you can't cut down the number of these sins."

When such advice concerns mortal sin it is not sound, because contrition for mortal sin must include the intention to avoid all mortal sins in the future. We must, therefore, use expressions that combine both sound doctrine and sound psychology. For example, the confessor might say: "You can quit this habit, and quit it for good. But, if you look too far ahead you may lose courage. So try it this way. Make up your mind now that you're going to try to come back to confession next week and be able to say, 'I didn't commit that sin even once this week.' " Or, he might be encouraged to face his problem just one day at a time by resolving each morning that he won't sin that day. This is especially helpful when the confessor is also recommending daily Communion.

Post factum it is always permissible to congratulate a penitent on any real improvement, even though this consists merely in cutting down the number of his serious sins. But advice given for the future should never oppose or endanger the doctrine that the purpose of amendment for mortal sins must be universal.

Removing Occasions

Tanquerey's rule concerning occasions of sin is the standard one that was explained in my last chapter: voluntary occasions should be given up, and necessary occasions should be made remote by taking energetic means to protect oneself against the danger. It is one thing, however, to say that an occasion must be made remote, and it is quite another thing to find the precise means of making it remote. Helping a penitent to accomplish this may tax the confessor's ingenuity to the utmost.

Let us suppose, for the sake of illustration, that a boy who has acquired the habit of masturbation is almost always led to this sin by reading a certain type of magazine that he could easily avoid. The objective here is definite and clear: the boy must give up the magazine. But suppose that he masturbates only when he goes to bed, or only when he takes a shower. These are necessary occasions. He must go to bed and he must bathe. The problem, therefore, is to strengthen him against the occasions and, if possible, to find some circumstance in the pattern of his temptations and lapses which can be changed

When the problem centers about going to bed, the boy may be greatly helped by keeping his Rosary in his hand and by beginning to say it as soon as he retires. This is a good habit even when he has no special temptations. But it may be much more difficult to find a helpful "trick" when the problem concerns bathing. Yet, we must at least impress on the boy that this is the time for recalling his motive and that, with his good resolution firmly

in mind, he must see that he does not loiter in the shower. Let him allow himself enough time for a thorough, business-like cleansing, and that is all.

The examples illustrate what is meant by making an occasion remote. This is accomplished partly by fortifying the will through prayer and self-denial (which are the other points in the general program), partly by recalling and holding fast to one's resolution at the critical time, and partly by changing some circumstance in the occasion so that the temptation itself or the opportunity for sinning will be lessened.

Self-Denial

Tanquerey mentions three things in particular when speaking of self-denial. Two of these, the discipline of the senses and keeping healthily busy, are effective means of checking almost any habit of sin. The third, discipline of the heart, is absolutely necessary when a temptation concerns a sentimental attachment to a person. To these suggestions I would add two others. First, always try, if possible, to get the habitual sinner to substitute good habits for his bad habits: for example, good reading for bad reading, good companions for dangerous companions, and so forth. Secondly, if his difficulty has to do with emotions (lust, anger, and the like), note carefully the things that stimulate the emotion, and have him either remove these or learn to react to them in a less violent manner. This suggestion is perhaps not new; it is contained, at least in a sense, in the directive concerning occasions of sin.

Prayer and Sacraments

We will not delay here on the necessity of prayer - frequent, earnest prayer - for overcoming a habit of sin. But I should like to point out that in the case of some habits, particularly impurity, there is no remedy comparable to daily Communion. Very likely only a relatively small number of penitents can be induced to use his means of grace. But it should be recommended, especially to boys who are of earnest and manly character. Lads of this kind will often break almost instantly with a habit of impurity when they begin to go to Mass and Communion daily. This effect is produced largely through grace, no doubt; but there is also a good deal of sound natural psychology in the process. For one thing, there is the character-strengthening that comes from rising early and going to church in all sorts of weather. Also, the very fact that he receives Communion daily reduces the boy's problem to a matter of "one day at a time." He has but to think of keeping in the state of grace for his next Communion.

I don't wish to be misunderstood in this matter. Daily Communion does not work like magic, as is obvious from the fact that some daily communicants fall into habits of serious sin. But usually, when a habitual sinner who has not previously tried daily Communion takes up the practice, the grace, the self-denial, and the inspiration involved in his new habit solve his problem. And I am inclined to think that this is the only really effective remedy for youthful self-abuse. Not all have the character to take it, but "qui potest capere, capiat."

Thus far in this chapter I have sailed rather breezily through the more or less standard program for overcoming a habit of sin. Lest a young confessor draw any false conclusions from what I have said, let me add a few remarks.

Patience Needed

It is much easier to make use of this entire program when giving extra-confessional counsel than when hearing confessions. In extra-confessional direction there is more time, a better chance to understand a character, and so forth. Yet opportunities to deal with such cases outside the confessional are comparatively rare; most of the habitual sinners whom we are called upon to help are confessional cases.

In confessional practice it would seldom be possible to start with the entire program outlined by Tanquerey. Rather, I think, the confessor would have to try to impress one or two of the cardinal points on his penitents and then see what results would be produced.

In most cases the overcoming of a habit of sin is slow work. A penitent might return time after time, the habit still unbroken. This does not necessarily mean that he is a recidivus. As long as he shows that he is actually trying to overcome the habit his sincerity should not be questioned. But his lack of success may have a psychologically bad effect on his confessor. The confessor may become dissatisfied; he may feel thwarted at his own inability to help the penitent. A similar feeling of helplessness is often experienced when one is directing a scrupulous penitent. And in such cases there is a very human tendency to "take it out on the penitent," to blame him for the lack of success. We must check this tendency and keep patient. Some difficulties are not easily cleared up, and it may be necessary to try several remedies over a long period of time before we discover one that really helps a particular penitent.

The Recidivus

It is only when his relapses are the result of his failure to try to use the suggested remedies that the habitual sinner must be treated as a recidivus. This is a distinct and very difficult confessional problem. The presumption of sincerity that ordinarily favors a penitent does not hold in the case of the recidivus. And it is a wise policy to make an effort to get the penitent to see this for himself. For example, the confessor might say: "Now look, I can't give you absolution unless I can make a reasonable judgment that you really intend to quit this sinful practice. Suppose you were in my place, and a penitent kept coming back to confession with the same story to tell and without showing that he had made any real effort to quit. Don't you think you'd have a strong reason for wondering whether he really had a purpose of amendment?"

That is one method of approach. It has the advantage of forcing the penitent to view his own problem in terms of the confessor's duty. Once he understands the problem and then

expresses what seems to be a sincere intention to take the means necessary to correct it be may be given absolution.

If a recidivus must be dismissed without absolution, he should be instructed how to make an act of perfect contrition and should be told to make this act as soon as he finds his disposition has improved. Also, he should be advised to return to confession when he notices signs of improvement. Finally, as I pointed out when speaking of the disposition necessary for absolution, it is well to throw the burden of refusing absolution on the penitent himself: that is, to let him see that the only thing depriving him of absolution is his own unwillingness to cooperate.

Having outlined the essential points concerning habits and relapses, I can conclude this chapter with one further suggestion.

Sometimes it is evident from a confession that the penitent has a habit of sin; for example, when a person has not been to confession for a long time and has a large number of the same kind of sins to confess. At other times even though the confession itself does not indicate a habit, one may have good reason to suspect it. For instance: a boy was at confession a week ago and has masturbated twice; a married woman confessed a week ago and has committed contraception once since then; or a religious, using the privilege or canon 519 or 522, may come to a strange confessor and confess only one sin of impurity. In themselves, these confessions indicate no habit. And it is possible that each of the penitents may be confessing his or her very first serious sin. But it is also possible, and not unlikely, that in many of these cases the sins are habitual. Hence, there arises the very practical question: should the confessor ask about this circumstance?

It seems to me that there is much to gain and little to lose if the confessor asks these penitents in a kindly and rather casual manner whether the sin confessed concerns some habitual difficulty. For it may be that the penitents do sin habitually but they make it a practice of going to different confessors, and thus they never get any sound advice or regular direction. Obviously, this practice leads to almost irreparable harm to their souls. A kindly and tactfully-phrased question by a single zealous confessor may avert this harm and be the source of great blessings.

GERALD KELLY, S.J.
FLYNN CHAIR IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS
MOUNT SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE
EMMITSBURG MARYLAND 21727