

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

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Although, if we are to grasp at all the fundamental reasons behind the falling number of confessions, we must not only trace the development of the sacrament but also try to look at the theological principles involved, this could easily divert us away from the urgent problems of the moment into a tedious and complex historical survey. To avoid this we shall restrict ourselves to quoting a suggestive conciliar text, drafted more than eleven centuries ago. In 813 the Emperor Charlemagne, as part of his programme of ecclesiastical reform, summoned a number of councils. One of these met at Chalon, and the following is one of its canons:

‘Some say that sins ought to be confessed only to God but others believe that they are to be confessed to priests: both of which are practised within the Church not without great fruit. And so let us confess our sins to God in so far as he is the Remitter of sins . . . and according to the institution of the apostle, let us confess our sins to one another, and let us pray for one another that we may be saved. And so confession which is made to God cleanses sins; but that which is made to the priest, teaches us how these same sins are cleansed. For God, who is both the author and dispenser of salvation and health, frequently offers this by the invisible ministry of his power, frequently by the work of physicians.’ (P. F. Palmer, *Sacraments and Forgiveness*, p. 157.)

The exact interpretation of this canon is difficult and need not delay us. It is clear, however, that a tension was felt to exist between the confession of sins to a priest and the direct repenting of them in the sight of God. It is clear that this tension is still with us and underlies the falling number of confessions. We must pose the problem: What is the relationship between confession of sins to God and confession to a priest? Are both equally essential for each of us? Or does confession to God suffice? Or perhaps they are options between which a choice is possible? Or does the way we receive forgiveness always have an essential and necessary connexion with the *sacrament* of forgiveness?

Let us consider first how forgiveness is obtained for sin which is so grave as to exclude the sinner from the eucharist. During the early age of public or canonical penance this was the only type of sin submitted to the Church’s jurisdiction in a manner we should now recognize as sacramental in the narrow sense. We cannot simply equate sin which is sufficiently grave to entail exclusion from full

participation in the eucharist with what we now call 'mortal' sin. This latter term is increasingly widely recognized as being inadequately understood in the modern Church. The usual explanation is that for a sin to be 'mortal' there must be grave matter, full knowledge and full consent. In practice, however, the style in which moral theology has been carried on and its manuals written has tended to blur the distinction between the '*objective*' nature of the act and the '*subjective culpability*' involved in performing it. We have tended to use grave matter as the main criterion for 'mortal' sin. But if sin is really 'mortal', that is to say, if it really involves the destruction and not merely the damaging of the life of grace, if it means the severing of friendship with God rather than just a failure to grow in this friendship, then it is the degree of personal commitment involved which is the determining factor. Full knowledge and full consent or—as we should be much better advised to say—sufficient knowledge and sufficient consent are central to the definition of 'mortal' sin. It has, in fact, always been recognized that any matter, however slight, could suffice for 'mortal' sin if a sufficient degree of contempt for God and repudiation of him were involved. If we give full weight to the degree of personal involvement of the sinner, we see for instance that 'mortal' sin is a radical switch in the basic direction of a life's development occurring as part of a pattern of thought and behaviour consistent with a decisive turning away from God and from his people. A sin immediately regretted can hardly be 'mortal', nor can a sin which was fought against until in the end resistance failed through weakness. Our spontaneity under grace, the instinctive reaction of a man who is God's familiar friend, is in the opposite direction to 'mortal' sin. Thus, though we can lose God's friendship by a single act of 'mortal' sin, and though like Paul we recognize an inner cleavage in ourselves, our bias is towards God, not away from him. His prejudice in our favour is matched by our response and our appropriation of that prejudice of mercy. The direction of a life is not too easily reversed and such reversals are unlikely to come suddenly out of a cloudless sky. Sin with the brakes on or committed even when one is fully aware that one is going to seek the earliest opportunity of confession hardly constitute a radical reversal.

Suppose, however, that we consider the case of someone who has so far committed himself to evil as to be excluded from the eucharist. He is, of course, quite powerless to help himself because his decision to sin contains within it a rejection and repudiation of anything that could help him. However, he retains his baptismal 'character' and he is not beyond the reach of the prayers of his fellow members of the Church. These intercessions made on his behalf can bring it about that the Holy Spirit acts upon him to quicken his dry bones (cf. Ezekiel, c. 37) and breathe into him repentance for his sin. The sinner is thereby made sorry for what he has done. Desiring to be reconciled, he comes to a priest to receive the sacrament of recon-

ciliation and he is thereby readmitted to the people of God in the celebration of its eucharist.

Now, during this piece of the sinner's personal history, there must be some one moment in his reconversion when he ceases to be a sinner and becomes again the familiar friend of Christ. It is natural to think that the instant in which God changes the direction of the sinner's life towards himself is the moment of the priest's pronouncing of absolution. But in fact the sinner will be converted at the time God gives him sorrow for his sin and this will normally be before he actually receives the sacrament of repentance. To be sorry for sin is to be already forgiven. Sorrow for sin *is* charity—the love of God and love for others. Having said this, it might seem that when the sinner actually receives the sacrament, there is nothing left for it to achieve in him. But actually forgiveness has been granted him through the sacrament in that his sorrow for sin, although it preceded the reception of the sacrament in point of time, included a decision to receive the sacrament. Furthermore, the sinner had by his sin cut himself off from the people of God at the sacramental level and was excluded from the eucharist. His being turned to God by God is a decision to seek reconciliation with the Church through the sacrament of reconciliation. His recommitment is already achieved, sorrow is given to him even prior to the actual performance of the sacramental sign by him and the Church, but it is so given through his desire for the sacrament.

Perhaps a somewhat parallel situation which has been more commonly discussed by theologians will serve as an illustration of the principle. Suppose that a man as yet unbaptized is in prison for the Christian faith. Clearly while in prison he is the familiar friend of Christ and indwelt by the Spirit. This is so because he has already decided that when he can, he will seek baptism. But he has not in fact yet received the sacrament of baptism—this consists in being buried in the baptismal waters and this he has not yet had. He has received that friendship with Christ which is the fundamental effect normally brought about by baptism. That he is already one with the Church in heart, at the level of commitment, is due to his desiring to be also made one with the Church at the sacramental sign level of actual baptism. If he is released, he will be baptized, confirming him in the conversion he has already received and granting him now in addition the full right to participate in the eucharist.

The Christian who has sinned gravely is through the prayer of the Church given recommitment by God, sorrow for sin and forgiveness. This comes to him through receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. The receiving of this sacrament is an essential part of his reconversion but it is not necessarily nor normally the first in temporal sequence. The whole process of reconversion is a unity, but it is the unity of an historical process which takes place over a period of time.

It is not really a meaningful question to ask: 'Is it sorrow for sin

that forgives or is it the sacrament of penance?' The question falsely assumes that sorrow for sin can be contrasted with receiving the sacrament, that they are alternatives. But within the divine purpose and within the people of God, they cannot be contrasted in this way. Sorrow and receiving the sacrament are parts of the same event. Reconciliation with the Church and renewal of a friendship with God are two descriptions of the same process.

We may better grasp the structure of sacramental recommitment if we consider the nature of human decision in general. Suppose, for example, that I decide I will buy a house. There is certainly a moment which can be singled out as in a sense the moment of decision . . . to wit, the moment at which contracts are exchanged and I become legally the owner of the house. But from the point of view of my personal involvement, this exchange of contracts is far removed from the turning-point in my life which might have been months earlier and which was perhaps merely a fleeting glimpse of the house as a future possibility worth examining. My decision-making, my shift of orientation is a single act of buying a house. But its development and execution are spread over a period of time . . . it has a history, it is an event which, although a unity, has a beginning, a middle and an end. We shall avoid many errors if we try to experience a sacrament not as a thing but as a process, a piece of history, a dramatic event with sequence and dénouement. The decisive moment in receiving a sacrament may—and normally does—precede its actual reception.

Having looked at the Church rejoicing over the return of the one sheep who needs penance, let us consider the ninety-nine. What of those who come to the sacrament of reconciliation conscious indeed of sinfulness but not separated from the eucharist by grave sin? From one point of view there is no problem, for the sacrament that can swallow a camel is not going to strain at a gnat. We are never under any strict necessity of receiving the sacrament for anything less than 'mortal' sin. Even the precept of the annual Easter duty confession binds only those in 'mortal' sin. It is clear that there is no absolute necessity to come to the sacrament at all for our daily faults, the many things in which we all offend. These are not in the full sense to be called sins at all, for the name 'sin' should properly speaking be reserved for 'mortal' sin. Our present terminology only confuses. 'Mortal' sin and venial sin are not 'sin' in the same sense at all. 'Mortal' sin is not a bigger version of venial sin but something radically different in nature. Our daily faults are not reversals of our fundamental commitment; they are hesitations in carrying it out as fully as we might. The sinfulness of our ordinary lives—great though it is in the face of an infinitely loving God—is not a turning away from God and man but rather an omission to respond as fully as we can to the friendships offered us. Our sinfulness is a check on the way

forward, a slow step on the way instead of a fearless stride, a dragging of our feet rather than a confident pilgrimage. This is bad enough and a failure to grow, but it does not need the assistance of the divine mercy in anything resembling the same way that 'mortal' sin does. Our day-to-day failures are not destructive of the life of friendship but rather an insufficiently vigorous and courageous living out of it. Consequently the common sinfulness of our lives can be completely dealt with by any prayer, any loving action which resumes the way forward. Any prayer, liturgical or not, is a rejoicing over the mercy which we continually receive for the many ways in which we all offend. The primary means whereby sinfulness is forgiven is participation in the eucharist.

Is there, then, any point or desirability in receiving the sacrament of reconciliation if we have only the common sinfulness of the Christian to confess? Here too we must begin by stressing that there can be no false contrast set up between forgiveness received in the sacrament and forgiveness received outside it. There is only one reconciliation, one friendship, whether this be received in the narrowly sacramental mode or in some other way. It was the divine purpose to become one of us in the person of God the Son, Jesus Christ. There is no other name whereby we can be saved than that of Jesus. Mercy always has a human shape; forgiveness comes to us in and as human events. God's prejudice is essentially and always an incarnated prejudice of humanly meaningful and tangible gestures. Forgiveness is man-shaped—it is celebrated by the structures of friendship. God's heart has the same rhythm as ours. Now in the living out of a human relationship there are degrees and rhythms of friendship. We do not live out our relationship with a friend at peak intensity all the time; there is a rhythm of approach and intimacy. At the one time we feel the need for the relationship to be some expressive gesture—a meal together, perhaps. At other times the friendship, though no less real, flows less obviously and for the most part in ordinary actions of no particular degree of demonstrativity. But there is no discontinuity between the two levels, no discontinuity between the express gesture, the solemn rites of friendship and the washing-up level. Both are necessary in a due proportion which allows for individual taste and preference, for both the mood of the moment and the necessity of sometimes acting contrary to it. In principle we would expect that it would be the ceremonial gesture that most satisfyingly expresses the heart-level of a friendship. But there may be times when for one reason or another a sense of community may be more fully experienced at the washing-up-together level. Each level includes an awareness of, an openness to and a readiness for the other level of experience and demonstrativity.

Now we can say something similar about that forgiveness of sins through which our salvation is made known to us. Our heart-felt sorrow for our sinfulness may be expressed in the sacrament or

practice un-churches the other. Each style should remain open to the possibility of new experiences within the sacrament when its rites are revised and its forms enriched and varied. Only if the personal relevance of the sacrament were denied *in principle* would there be grounds for concern. Making such a denial might bring one close to the untenable position of wanting forgiveness while rejecting the means whereby it is incarnated. An authentic prayer for the mercy of God must, for the Catholic, always include at least an implicit willingness to receive that mercy sacramentally. But granted that this is present—that the possibility of receiving the sacrament has not been entirely excluded—then this is not an epoch in which we should have any great guilt feelings about our own chosen frequency of going to confession, whatever that frequency is. But whatever frequency we find appropriate to ourselves for the reception of the sacrament, we must try to seek a style of confessing that fits the frequency. Going to the sacrament less often ought to imply a search for a rather different fashion of making its reception profitable.

What criteria can we suggest? Under what circumstances should what has usually been called a 'confession of devotion' be made? It would seem reasonable to say that we should confess as often as this seems to us to be the best way of taking the next step towards becoming a more loving person. Now it is true that sacraments are not profitably received unless they are personally meaningful and relevant, but we must examine more closely what is meant by personal relevance. Clearly some instances present no problem. If I am faced with a crisis of some kind or if I feel myself at a turning-point of my life, and if such situations confront me either with a renewed sense of my own sinfulness or with a fresh appreciation of God's forbearance towards me, these are occasions when I will be able to experience the sacrament meaningfully. Perhaps there is a new task ahead or a sense of failure over one just completed. Perhaps there is something vaguely sensed to be not quite as it should be or an area in which growth seems inhibited in some way not yet understood. All these, in so far as they involve moral guilt on our part, suggest the appropriateness of seeking forgiveness sacramentally. Such occasions of receiving the sacrament are clearly enough also occasions on which we might reasonably seek and expect some counsel to clarify our situation and enable us to face its reality more clear-sightedly. But these are situations when the personal relevance of the sacrament can be felt and experienced in a relatively straightforward way. Perhaps there are other situations less easily recognizable as suggesting a visit to the sacrament.

To belong as we do to a community, the Church, is to imply that personal relevance reaches beyond what is immediately experienced as such. Any community has its ceremonial occasions, its unifying rituals. Some will be of directly perceptible significance to all the members of the community but there may well be official acts of the

community and demands made on the members by reason of their membership which individuals for one reason or another do not in fact perceive as personally moving and stirring. Nevertheless it could be a failure to live up to the obligations of membership to fail to carry them out. If we consider further that, in the case of the Church, it is a community of faith we belong to by means of faith, then we must acknowledge that we cannot simply judge personal relevance in terms of *felt experience alone*. We believe in much which we have for one reason or another not yet discovered as a personally moving factor in our own lives. The preacher is often uneasily aware that he preaches what he does not yet perform and he has to comfort himself perhaps by saying that he must preach faith until he has it and then, because he has it, he will preach faith. Prayer itself is a determination not to be content with the present experience but to reach in faith into darkness in the belief that God is more relevant than he usually seems. As children of the promise we live in the future and we do not feel now what it is we live. By defining personal relevance as no more than immediate experience, as no more than being at this present moment moved by whatever it is we are engaged in, we run the risk of caging ourselves within our own experiential capacity. It is characteristic of faith and the Church to link us to potential experiences that we might not too easily be able to grasp if we were not willing to believe in their possibility before we attain their actuality. God is a future we will not experience unless we are sometimes willing—especially in prayer—to meet our own inability to experience him. Our membership of the Church implies a willing surrender to the necessity of sometimes utilizing the inadequate. Within the Church the inadequate can still link us to ‘areas of Christian truth beyond our own particular experience and ultimately to truths beyond any experience’ (Herbert MacCabe: *New Blackfriars*, Feb. 1967, p. 229).

| The liturgy of the sacrament of penance is at present inadequate: the physical setting within which it is normally administered is heavily against that sympathetic communication between priest and penitent which so much helps to make the sacrament feel like the liberating event it is. We therefore need a richer liturgy but—in the meantime—can there be any motive which will sometimes enable us to find the sacrament meaningful at a level other than that of immediate spiritual uplift? It is a common enough experience that prayer can be dry, even boring—a matter of the will to persevere through drought. We may not feel greatly moved by prayer but we can nevertheless realize that without it something quite basic would have deserted us. The same may be true of the sacramental, liturgical aspects of prayer. Liturgy ought to be such as to be emotionally meaningful and satisfying—but if it is not, this is not sufficient reason for abandoning it. Its necessity lies at a level appreciated in faith. So there may be times when we have to go on receiving a sacrament with

faith in its relevance at a level we do not yet fully grasp. Without any abandoning of the hope that the sacrament of penance will bring a feeling of being forgiven, let us ask whether it can still be meaningful to receive it when it is not so felt.

We should remind ourselves of our persistent temptation to Pelagianism—we are always lured by the hope that our successes may depend on our own effort. But we repent *because* we have been forgiven. God speaks first and we respond. Being sorry is God anticipating us by his mercy. Perhaps for some of us at least we can guard ourselves from the danger of self-righteousness by making the *receptive* gesture—by using the sacrament as an acknowledgment of the gratuitousness of forgiveness, however this is revealed to us. It is after all a feature of the Church that God has chosen the weak—it would be a rejection of the very incarnateness of salvation to accept sacraments only from the hands of worthy ministers. But there is another reason for using the sacrament of penance. The changing eucharist with which we are—sometimes painfully—learning to live has made it possible for us on occasions to feel the eucharist as the focus of our deepest feelings of friendship. But the eucharist has not changed in its essence. This element has always been present even if sometimes half-hidden. May there not be a similar development ahead for the sacrament of penance? Perhaps the special fruit of the sacrament of penance is that it should open us up—bring us to that true self-knowledge which we need if we are truly to know God. At the moment we are, admittedly, normally most conscious of this fruit by its apparent absence. But the fact that the present liturgy and popular teaching on the sacrament tend to conceal it does not mean that it is not there. We must trust that, in the same way that the eucharist's presentation and our understanding of it have begun to shift, there may be a shift in the presentation and understanding of the sacrament of penance. In the meantime we cannot opt out of the practice of the Church merely because that practice is sometimes too scandalously human for us. We find it hard to accept God's view that we are beautiful, but we also find it difficult to accept that he can speak to us through the unbeautiful. The Son of Man in his passion had no beauty to draw our eyes: his liturgy might also have to pass through disfigurement to resurrection.

Whatever our personal decision we must never be purely individualistic about our practice within the Church. We need to criticize our experience by that of the community in which we live. The testing of the spirits to see if they be of God is done by seeing if there is anyone present in the Church who can interpret the inarticulate language. There has been a falling off in the use of the sacrament of penance. This is in itself ambiguous—the individual in his motives may be undergoing development or practising deviation. It would imply an inadequate sacramental theology to generalize too slickly. But we must at least consider the possibility

that if we confess to God alone, we might be in danger of absolving ourselves. At this time in particular, when there is such a temptation to bring a pragmatic attitude of mind to the organizing of our spiritual lives—to keep whatever it is we feel helps us personally and discard the rest—it is necessary for us continually to remind ourselves that none of us is ever alone, that we can only find our way in a crowd, never alone. ‘Even in the sacrament of penance, where we have most lost the awareness of the communal character of the action, the grace of forgiveness of sins is assured to the penitent sinner because the Church, together with Christ, is praying for him. In former times penitential practice threw this fact into sharp relief. Today its obscure but nevertheless still true expression is found in the prayers that precede the absolution. The Church is busy on the penitent’s behalf long before he kneels down in the confessional. Sins are forgiven because Christ, together with his Church, prayed for their forgiveness. Christ and his Church are always ahead of us. In the sacrament this ecclesial prayer is sacramentally identified with the prayer of the Son of God which is always heard’ (Edward Schillebeeckx: *Christ the Sacrament*, p. 81).

We must however avoid the hope of too easy a progress in the development of the necessary spectrum of ways of celebrating God’s forgiveness. Many of us—though not all—find penitential services movingly cathartic and productive of a greater sense of being dependent on God revealing himself to us. But these are not an adequate substitute for individual reception of the sacrament of penance, though they have their place alongside it. If the ‘confession of devotion’ were to disappear so that only ‘mortal’ sin were brought to the sacrament, this would be in effect a disastrous return to many of the disadvantages of the old, canonical public penance.¹

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