

CONFESSION AND HEALTH OF SOUL

'FOR our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness.' We see the meaning of the Sacrament of Penance most fully if we see it against the background of the world-struggle between good and evil. The essence of sin is pride, the isolation of the self; the harmony of creation is split into warring fragments; there is no redress until created spirit, responsible for the material world, can emerge from its isolation and return to its Source. 'The whole of creation is in travail even until now.' So the Redemption is given us; that man-in-nature may be made whole again by restored oneness with God—a restoration wrought by the Cross and Resurrection and made accessible day by day in the world through the power of the Church. It is for that restoration of the divine order in the world that we pray when we pray for the coming of the Kingdom; but the coming is postponed, the power of the Church to heal and make holy is curtailed, by the persisting presence and power of evil. Nor can we think simply of a struggle between the members (visible or invisible) of the Church, and the world; it is waged *by* the Church, but it is also waged *within* the Church. And as there is a communion of saints, so there is a solidarity of sin; and the Church's power as a whole is curtailed and its victory impeded by the sins of its sinful members.

Sin then has both a human-social and a cosmic significance. Penitents sometimes say that they feel their sins to be the cause of the present horrors and calamities, and then go on to rebuke themselves for being fanciful. Perhaps they are not as fanciful as they suppose. Rationally no doubt there is no conceivable equation between some purely private and perhaps un-malicious wrong-doing and the vastness of world-catastrophe, and in any case it is not for us to attempt to define particular causations; but we are together in the solidarity of sin; we know that it is from sin that all evils in the world arise; and we should not try to excuse ourselves from a share of responsibility in them. But as through our personal sins we join with evil in fighting against God, so by God's mercy we are given a means of redressing the balance and fighting with greater strength for the good. The Sacrament of Penance has as its first purpose to restore the individual to grace: to bring about his legal re-entry into the community of the Church (when this community has been

lost) and to restore him personally to the mystical Body,¹ so that he may begin again to grow towards the fullness of the stature of Christ. Even so, we must not think of the action of the sacrament in terms of the erasing of a blot upon the soul as a wet sponge can erase a chalk mark upon a slate, leaving it as though no mark had ever been made. Actual sin has an effect on the individual personality like that of the original entry of sin into the world: it disrupts and enfeebles; and it is with the healing of the spirit as of the body: some of the effects of disease may linger on and the full restoration of health may have to be gradual. For that work of restoration the *grace of the sacrament* is intended to give us strength and courage; and here again the sense of guilt can stand us in good stead, for it can help us to increase in humility and love and that fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom.

But Penance has a wider function than this. It is medicinal to the life of the Church as a whole. We retard the Church's work by our sins; we can help it on by our use of the sacrament. The Church (in the sense of the community of Christians) does not exercise in the world the power over bodies and souls which it did in the fervour of the primitive days; yet there is no slackening in divine power and purpose or in the opportunity given us to avail ourselves of it; the fault then must be in our own lack of fervour. In so far as, through the grace of Penance, we build up our own health and our resistance to evil, we are helping to build up the corporate health and holiness of the Body and so to make it stronger for the struggle in which it is involved. •

Here we have to recognise the importance of objective sin as opposed to subjective guilt. We are well enough used to the distinction between, say, murder and manslaughter, where the external event is the same but the difference lies in the question of guilt or imputability. In recent years we have come to realise the extent to which actions, especially in hyper-conscious, unbalanced modern man, may be to greater or less degree determined by factors outside our control. Comparatively modern text-books of moral theology mention among the factors which destroy or lessen the freedom of actions the presence of pathological states such as hysteria; but we have now learnt a great deal about the wide territory which lies between the perfectly free and rational act and the pre-consciously determined and non-imputable act of the psychotic.

¹ It is part of the efficacy of the sacrament to turn attrition (sorrow for sin from motives other than charity) into contrition (sorrow motivated by charity); and when we abide in love we abide once more in God, and God in us.

Two lines of thought of practical importance here suggest themselves. First, the question of habits. We can distinguish three sorts. There is the deliberately (and perhaps laboriously) acquired *habitus* in the Aristotelean and Thomist sense: an acquired facility and readiness to perform acts of a given type, as one may acquire the art of playing the fiddle or become by long and patient practice a consummate liar. Secondly, there is habit in the purely mechanical sense, acquired by the repetition of actions not in themselves deliberate at all; as one may have a habit of sitting in a certain posture. Thirdly, there are habits which are neither wholly voluntary nor wholly involuntary; but which are acquired by actions into which one repeatedly falls through weakness and against one's better judgement; as one forms a habit of irascibility through falling repeatedly into anger. Habits of the first sort increase the voluntariness of actions, unless they are repudiated by a reversal of the will; habits of the second sort are usually in no way voluntary; habits of the third sort at least lessen the voluntariness of actions, unless they are deliberately accepted by the will. Thus there is every possibility, from the consideration of habits alone, that an action may be done which is wrong in itself and yet not wholly imputable and perhaps not imputable at all.

We reach the same conclusion if we consider the influence of psychological maladjustments on human behaviour. An obvious example is provided by kleptomania, where the objective act of stealing is performed but the agent (in this case better described as the patient) is not to be held morally responsible. More important because far commoner is the question of the control of the sexual instinct. Here psychology has taught us a great deal which must be put at the service of theology. In the first place we have learnt to distinguish clearly between a *state* of the personality (what the psychologists call a psycho-sexual orientation) and the *acts* by which such a state may or may not be expressed. We know that to regard the former as morally blameworthy and disgusting is itself blameworthy when the maladjustment is not a fault but a misfortune. The way to help to healing, therefore, is not scorn but sympathy and understanding; the cure itself consists, not in attempting to destroy an instinct which is radically God-given even though its direction is falsified (for destruction cures nothing), but in turning it to other modes of exercise and expression and so utilising it for good. No one will assert that this process of sublimation or transformation is easy; the penitent will rightly look to the confessional for help: to the confessor for understanding of the psychological compulsions, and advice and encouragement in dealing with them, to the grace of

the sacrament for the power to carry out what may seem a more than humanly difficult task.

There is a second thing. Having made the distinction between the psychological state and the actions which may follow from it, and restricted the question of conscious moral guilt to the latter, we have to go on to recognise that these actions themselves may be imputable or non-imputable or part-imputable. Here we are on difficult ground, which demands careful exploration. What follows here is no more than a tentative essay.

The confessor is regarded by the Church as exercising a *judicial* function; the penitent therefore has the right (though indeed we do not go to confession to assert our rights) to expect him to be judicial, but judicial in the sense of objective, not in the sense of cold and impersonal. (It would be a terrible thing to attempt to be harsher than God. Our Lord's attitude is revealed to us surely in the story of the woman taken in adultery; He could be harsh indeed, but his harshness was restricted to those righteous people who would either see no need of confession or if they did consent to go would fail to find anything very damaging to report.) But we cannot expect the priest to decide for us whether or not we have been sinning, or to what extent: he can tell us what is objectively moral or immoral, not what is our particular measure of guilt. And self-deception is easy. Two things seem to be clear. Suppose a penitent who is really suffering from a psychological compulsion. He may then find that the sense of guilt aroused by the actions to which he is compelled dominates his mind and saps his energies and reduces him to a state of scrupulosity and practical despair: he cannot concern himself with the positive love and service of God because of his absorption in this negative problem of fighting an enemy with which he cannot come to grips. It seems wise then to tell him that he must not allow this problem to dominate; he must accept the fact of his disability in this respect and, while taking whatever measures a sane psychological insight may prescribe to deal with it, he must in the meantime attend to the greater and more creative tasks that lie outside it. But, on the other hand, and this is the second point, it seems equally necessary to tell him to avoid the opposite danger of irresponsibility. There is indeed a necessary distinction to be drawn between actions which are really the result of his inner compulsion and others of the same sort which (while being coloured by it no doubt) are deliberately chosen and avoidable. But quite apart from that, he should not attempt to argue himself out of his sense of guilt in general. We return to the ideas from which we started: sin brings about a dislocation of nature, and

equally every dislocation is the fruit of sin. If it were not for the fact of sin this problem would not have arisen. To allow the guilt-sense to fasten on this particular mode of behaviour, in which by hypothesis he is precisely not guilty, is to ensure that the problem shall never be solved: it will lead not only to a false scale of values, but also to a morbid concentration which will only tighten the grip of the disease. But the sense of guilt in itself should no more be destroyed than the instinct in itself should be destroyed. Once again we cannot assign particular causes and effects when discussing the relation between sin and disease; but perhaps there are other personal sins which are all too little recognised; and, even if we can say of a particular maladjustment that its causes lie far behind the time when the possibility of sinning first emerged, we do well to remind ourselves again of the solidarity of sin. *Neither had this man sinned nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.* The evils that I suffer are due to the presence of evil in the world; the presence of evil in the world is due in part to my sins; let me accept even those things in which I am not personally blameworthy as signs of my general sinfulness and use them to repentance.

Let us return to the question of what 'measures a sane psychological insight may prescribe.' Here we must walk yet more warily, for we are on territory which remains largely unexplored: an immense amount of work, of study and co-operation between psychologist and theologian, remains to be done. But a few very tentative suggestions might be put forward, though for the sake of brevity I put them in statement-form.

1. On the part of the penitent there is danger of an infantile spirituality which seeks (perhaps unconsciously) to induce the confessor to shoulder responsibility: to declare, for example, that a given type of action is (for him at least) not a question of guilt; he will then proceed (with unconscious self-deception) to indulge himself with a light heart. (This is quite different from asking advice about the solution of a problem which the penitent feels himself incompetent to solve for himself.)

2. We can distinguish cases which call for the help of a psychological expert (or a doctor) from (a) those which call for no more than a little strength of character, and (b) those wherein there is a real but relatively simple psychological difficulty. The penitent looks to the confessor for help in cases (a) and (b); but has to be careful not to delude himself into thinking that an (a) case is really one of psychological determinism.

3. In dealing with these cases (a) and (b) we have to consider both a long-term and a short-term policy:

- A. *Long-term* : we cannot separate a particular difficulty from the state of the personality as a whole. Anything which helps to creativity and wholeness will help the particular difficulty. Bad habits are not the use of evil energies but the evil use of potentially good energies and instincts. Hence :
- (a) we must make sure that our creative energies have in fact a proper outlet and expression ;
 - (b) we should see whether there is anything in our general way of life the removal or addition of which would give us greater health of body and soul ; in particular, whether our attitude to the world is sufficiently outward-turning and whether our minds are filled with the idea of creative service of God and men ;
 - (c) we should see whether we are unconsciously projecting on to others our own pet failings and so hiding the presence of those failings from ourselves ;
 - (d) we should make sure that we are praying as much and as intensely as we ought ; for prayer above all can turn our personalities Godward and make our lives creative.
- B. *Short-term*. It is easy here to misunderstand the rôle both of the will and of divine grace :
- (a) We use our will-power aright, not by gritting our teeth and saying, ' I won't,' when a temptation to our pet failing arises, but by turning our *imagination* to other things. (The gritting of teeth only makes the hold of the forbidden activity on the imagination stronger and more intense ; compare, on the other hand, the power of absorbing work to distract us from sorrows and worries.)
 - (b) At least with some kinds of wrong-doing it is dangerous to allow ourselves to remain in a sort of no-man's-land in which we feel we have half fallen and half resisted : to have won half the battle may be an inducement to lose the other half. If so, it is important to make a fresh start at once by confession.²
 - (c) We should not expect miracles. It would be wrong and foolish, in cases where there is real psychological maladjustment, to say ' The grace of God is enough : you need no other help than that.' The grace of God is sufficient of course ; but grace works *through* nature. We don't say to a typhus case ' The grace of God suffices, you needn't be medically treated.'
 - (d) But nature is not sufficient *without* grace. Hence we should not assume that we can deal with any difficulty by our own

² The disease of scrupulosity calls for special treatment.

powers or simply by natural means : we are right to pray for actual grace to strengthen and give success to the efforts of nature.

Penance is the sacrament of healing. We have to prepare for the post-war struggle between the scientific humanists and those who believe that the only sane world is a God-centred world, that only the power of God can build it, and that only humility and sorrow can make us fit to work in that power. To prepare is to repent. The Dutch Reformed Church issued in 1941 a moving pastoral : 'We have deserted the only Lord and served other gods in all sorts of ways Too often we do not wish to be reminded of the needs of others. We despise the poor and support the rich. We are careless in the practice of Christian charity. We have not fought strongly enough against the sins of the people as a whole, and we have hardly testified against all sorts of social injustice and suppression.'² When we have thus prayed out of the depths we can look with hope to the future. Only after the Cross the Resurrection ; only after confession and satisfaction the life and power of the living Bread.

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² Cf. Leibholz : *Christianity, Politics and Power*, p. 65.