

I. WHY I MAKE MY CONFESSION by Karl Tiedemann, O.H.C.

THERE is only one really important reason why I make my confession, and that is because I am quite convinced that God wants me to do so. That is what matters, -- God's will for me. I have come to this conclusion for several subsidiary reasons.

1. In the first place, in the twentieth chapter of St. John, part of which forms the Gospel for the Sunday after Easter (Prayer Book, page 171) I read these words: "The same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when He had so said, He shewed unto them His hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you, And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

After a careful and prayerful study of this passage, using the best commentaries, I have come to the conclusion that these words witness to the institution by our Lord of the Sacrament of Absolution; and further, that He intended that this Sacrament should be used. Our Lord was lavish and prodigal of His love, but He never gave useless directions. His provision is for all men, that they should confess and be absolved. It is always dangerous for any soul to count itself an exception to the general provisions which God has made for the welfare of all His children.

2. The witness of Holy Scripture to the use of this Sacrament is taken up by the directions of the Book of Common Prayer. A number of

passages can be cited. On page 7 in the Order for Morning Prayer, and on page 24, in the Order for Evening Prayer, occur these words: "Almighty God... hath given power, and commandment, to His Ministers, to declare and pronounce to His people being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins."

On page 87, the last line at the bottom of the page, you will find this statement: "And because it is requisite that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore, if there be any of you, who by this means [i.e., private contrition] cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but require further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that he may receive such godly counsel and advice, as may tend to the quieting of his conscience, and the removing of all scruple and doubtfulness."

On page 313 there is a very instructive rubric (or direction in italics): "Then shall [note the 'shall'] the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession, on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God's mercy and forgiveness." In the Prayer Book of the Church of England the words of Absolution then follow: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences; and by His authority committed unto me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Another witness to this Sacrament in the Episcopal Church is taken from the Office of the Ordination of Priests. On page 546 occur these solemn words: "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost

forgive they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of His holy Sacraments; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

3. I make my confession because I believe that it is the way which God has appointed for the removal of sins after Baptism. When I was baptized, I was made a child of God and grafted into the mystical Body of Christ. One of the results of this union with God by Holy Baptism was the forgiveness of all sin. But souls do not cease from sin with Baptism. One of the exhortations very frequent in the early Church was the confession of sins. In later days this exhortation was emphasized by canon law. It was an ancient custom of the Church of England that all communicants should make their confessions at least once a year. But whatever the form of the exhortation to contrition, the real compulsion to make one's confession arises from within the soul which has seen the glory of God and desires to possess it.

4. I make my confession because it is God's way of assuring the soul that it is sorry enough to receive forgiveness. One of the privileges which come to us in the Church is that of assurance. In the Sacrament of Absolution, the priest who receives my confession is responsible for judging my contrition. The Sacrament is the way of assurance of forgiveness. A man once said, as he came to his first confession, "I've wasted too many hours wondering if I had been forgiven, and I've decided no to waste any more, I'd like to make my confession."

5. I make my confession, because I believe that all true life is social in nature, that the Church is the Body of the baptized, and since no man liveth to himself or dieth to himself or sinneth to himself, some form of apology is due the whole Body of Christ which is the Church. The

question is sometimes raised, "Isn't it all right to go to Mass with certain sins in mind, and, when the words of Absolution in the Mass are recited, apply those words to the special sins in mind?" The answer is that "it's all right as far as it goes," but such limited contrition does not penetrate very deeply. An act of private contrition will always bring God's forgiveness for what are called "venial" sins, but there are also "mortal sins," - transgressions of such magnitude that confession to a priest is needed.

No man liveth to himself and no man sinneth to himself. When a baptized soul sins, it hurts all the members of the mystical Body of Christ. Some form of public and social apology is due the Church. The early Church answered this problem by having public confession in the case of certain flagrant sins. Such forms of contrition were open to abuse. So the Church directed that confession be made to a priest who would represent the Body of Christ.

I go to confession because a mere private acknowledgment to God, in the case of grievous sins, is not enough. I should tell the whole Body of Christ of my contrition and desire of amendment. I accomplish this social act of sorrow by confession to a priest who represents the Body of Christ in receiving my sorrow and in presenting the forgiveness of the Whole Body.

6. I make my confession because it is Christ's appointed way of accomplishing union between Himself and the penitent soul. For a long time I delayed making my confession, because "I did not want any man to come between my soul and God." But I have come to realize that all life flows to us through other people, for we are all one Body in Christ Jesus. Just as physical life comes to us through other people, so spiritual life is ours through the Church and its ministers. It is true that in confession a man comes between the soul and God. But the important fact to realize is that the priest is present, not to separate

us from God, but to unite us to Him. We call for a physician in time of need, not to bother us, but to assist us. He takes his normal place in our lives in a natural way. So with the spiritual life.

7. Lastly, I make my confession because it is the way of perseverance in sorrow for sin. The way to God is through ever-deepening contrition and the reception of grace to deal with the stubborn sin and the willful self which would keep me from Him.

II. WHY YOU SHOULD MAKE YOUR CONFESSION

I HAVE gone into some detail to explain why I make my confession, but confession is good not only for my soul, good not only for the soul of the spiritually ill, but good for every soul, - good for your soul. Let us, then, consider why you should go to confession.

Here again, there is only one really important reason. It is because confession is the divinely appointed way to "get right with God." God's will is all that matters. You ought to have this blessed experience, first of all for God's sake. God created you because He loves you and desires you to be wholly His. Humble confession is the way to God. Secondly, you should make your confession for the sake of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church of God. As we have thought before, "no man liveth to himself." Just as a hurt in one part of a body causes discomfort to the whole person, so one sinful soul causes great suffering to the Body of Christ. For His Body's sake, the Church, you should come into full union with God. And thirdly, you should make your confession for your own sake. It is the way of escape from sin and self; the way of finding spiritual guidance in perplexing problems; the way of growing in holiness; the way of happiness; the way by which we learn to help others. Let us examine these points in detail.

1. In the first place, you must "get right with God." You know there are things which keep you awake at night. The first step in the spiritual life, after we have seen the vision of love in the face of Jesus Christ, is to find release from the things which dog out waking hours. We cannot put away "self" by "self." To try to do so will only result in an increase of selfishness and self-centeredness. But we must get rid of our baser selves. Certainly the psychologists tell us that we must find release from the things which worry us and frighten us. The way of release is not by alcohol, or sin, or self-culture, or the mad rush of modern life, or by suicide, but by confession of sin and reception of Absolution.

Do not wait until it is too late. There may come a time when a soul becomes so enmeshed in selfishness that it loses the vision of God which is the compelling motive to contrition. And there may come an hour when our physical senses are so dulled, as we lie upon our bed for death, that it is well nigh impossible to make an act of contrition. Do not postpone your act of contrition until it is too late.

2. Secondly, you should make your confession because, after you have made your initial act of contrition and all your sins are washed away, there will still remain the "old man" with his many temptations and problems and imperfections. If you need expert medical advice, you go to a physician who will both assist you and observe the seal of secrecy of his profession. If you lack legal information, you go to a learned lawyer who will enlighten you and will respect your confidence. If you need spiritual advice, (and all souls need some guidance until the hour of death) you will find it awaiting you, under the seal of the confessional. Every soul is beset by special temptations, fears, "complexes." The spiritual life is not a trackless wilderness, it has a map all its own. While every soul differs in its particular battles, there is a

science of the spiritual life which is yours for the asking. Furthermore, - and this is so very important, that we here repeat this truth previously mentioned, - there is a special power in God's forgiveness thus received, which will enable the penitent soul to meet its own particular temptations. Even if both you and the confessor be ignorant of the real nature of your temptations, God will know. In Absolution He will supply grace to meet your real problems. The devoted soul welcomes this means of receiving spiritual power in this very perplexing life.

3. Then there is the problem of growth in holiness. What the Church needs above all else is a great host of souls thirsting for holiness, - all on fire with the love of God. The confessional is one of the principle aids to the development of sanctity. It is not easy to make one's confession, and it is right and necessary that it should cost the soul much in the way of faith and humiliation. It must be so. It was not easy for our Lord to redeem us and it must cost us dear to enter into the work of redemption.

4. And, after we have learned the way of contrition and the path of illumination through the use of the Sacrament of Absolution, then, having humbled ourselves, we are in a position to try humbly to help others. For the end of the spiritual life is not only the salvation of our own souls. Salvation is the entering into a social experience. It is true that it begins in the individual soul and souls are saved, not by nations, or by armies, but one by one. But each soul, after it has found the way of redemption, realizes that its vocation is to know and love and serve God, and to work along with Him. Find your own salvation, face your own problems, grow in holiness, and when sin and self are met, turn away from yourself, forget yourself in working for your fellows. If this is what you want, your first step is to get right with God.

Why I make my Confession and you should too!

An introduction to the
theology of 'private'
confession in the Episcopal
Church – not required, but a
great aid to holiness!

by

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