

50 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Go, show yourselves to the priests. And . . . As they went, they were made clean”
(Lk. 17: 14)

The cleansing of the lepers, spoken of in today’s gospel, teaches us the lesson that it is the will of Christ – that grievous sins are shall be forgiven ordinarily only through the absolution of the priest. And that we must glorify God, who has given such power to men, and must make frequent and worthy use of the Sacrament of Confession.

These ten lepers who had been excluded from living in cities, came out to meet Jesus and begged his mercy. The physical condition of these lepers, their flesh rotting away and dropping from their bones – is nothing but an external significance of the spiritual state of a person in mortal sin. But beholding the wretched state of these mortals and their dispositions, Our Lord cured them, and in order to conform to the existing law, he required them to go and show themselves to the priests. Likewise, those who are afflicted with the leprosy of sin, and who desire to be cured of their spiritual malady, are required by divine law to go and present themselves to the priests who are the ministers of the Sacrament of Penance.

1 A Validly ordained priest is the minister of the Sacrament of Penance

On the day of his resurrection Our Lord bestowed the power of forgiving and retaining sins on the Apostles; and that this power was to continue in the successors of the Apostles – the bishops and the priests of the Catholic Church, is evident from the fact that Jesus Christ came to deliver the whole mankind from sins. Since there will be always sin in the world, the power to forgive sin must always remain in the Church.

The words of Our Lord: “Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained” (Jn. 20: 22, 23”) plainly signify the commission, stamped by the broad seal of heaven, by virtue of which the pastors of The Church of Christ absolve repenting sinners upon their confession.
(foot note in Douay Version)

In the Sacrament of Penance, it is God who forgives our sins through the instrumentality and agency of the priest. God is accustomed to exercise his power and authority through certain delegated human agents, as he did in the past (for

example) when he delivered the Israelites from Egypt through Moses and converted St. Paul through Ananias.

The priest must be duly authorized and must exercise the power of forgiving sins in a judicial manner – i. e., in the sacramental forum. He has to hear the penitent, and by the commission of Christ, sometimes to forgive and sometimes to retain sin. Hence the penitent must confess his sins to him and wait for his judgment upon them.

2 The minister of the Sacrament of Penance must not only be a priest Validly ordained, but he must be duly authorized.

The priest in ordination receives the power of forgiving sins, but he cannot normally exercise that power unless duly authorized by proper ecclesiastical authorities. **But in danger of death, and in times of emergency for the survival of faith**, the Church gives jurisdiction even to priests who are not approved by the bishops.

3 The minister of the Sacrament of Penance must exercise the power of forgiving sins in a judicial manner.

By the commission of Christ (Jn. 20: 23), it is evident that the priest has sometimes to forgive and sometimes to retain sins; hence he should hear sins of the penitent and be able to pass judgment of them.

The priest must be able to deal with different classes of penitents; some are well disposed and know how to make their confessions; others are ill disposed, either because they try to conceal or justify their sins or because they have no true sorrow or purpose of amendment; still others are ignorant and know not how to make their confession properly.

The duties, therefore, imposed on the confessor require that he has knowledge, virtue, prudence etc. Furthermore, to guard the sacredness of confession there is imposed upon the priest by natural and divine law the obligation of secrecy.

4 The meaning and necessity of confessing the sins to the priest

First, Confession is a declaration of personal sins to a lawfully authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining absolution. This declaration must be (a) by word or sign, according to the circumstances; (b) it must be made to a priest who is validly

ordained; and (c) it must have as its end and purpose the obtaining of sacramental absolution.

Secondly, the necessity of confession is clear that; (a) Jesus Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance when he said to his Apostles, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (Jn. 20: 22, 23). But this power of forgiving and retaining sins, which was to be exercised with discretion, could not be exercised at all without that direct and personal declaration which we call confession. (not through phone calls or any other media)

(b) Jesus Christ has instituted confession, not as an optional, but as a necessary means of obtaining pardon, otherwise the power of the keys and of binding and loosing, which was given to the Apostles and their successors (Mt. 16: 19; 18:18) would be of no avail.

(c) That confession has been practiced and considered necessary from the time of the Apostles is evident from the writings of the Fathers.

This power would otherwise be of no use in the Church. If heaven can be entered without the power of the keys, in vain would they to whom the keys were given seek to prevent entrance within its portals. This thought was familiar to the mind of **St. Augustine**. "Let no man," he says, "say within himself: 'I repent in secret to the Lord, God, who has power to pardon me, and knows the inmost sentiments of my heart.' Was there, then, no reason for saying 'whatsoever you lose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven';(Lib. 50. horn. 49) no reason why the keys were given to the Church of God?"(Matt. xviii. 18)

The same doctrine is taught by **St. Ambrose** in his treatise on Penance, when refuting the heresy of the Novatians who asserted that the power of forgiving sins belonged solely to God. He says: "Who, yields greater reverence to God, he who obeys or he who resists His commands? God commands us to obey his ministers; and by obeying them, we honor God alone." (Lib. i. de poenit. 2)

4 The advantages of confession

1. Confession is a powerful means of promoting holiness and piety, as is proved by the testimony of all who have any knowledge of its use.
2. It is the least difficult means of obtaining forgiveness, because even imperfect contrition with confession is enough for pardon.
3. Through confession the sinner is able to obtain wise counsel and direction in a manner at once most secret and most competent.
4. The thought of confession is a powerful deterrent against secret sins.
5. Confession

promotes the good of domestic and civil society by securing peace and charity, by causing reparation to be made for scandals, injustices, and the like.

5 When and how confession is to be made.

1. **Regarding the time** of making confession the following points are to be noted: (a) confession becomes obligatory when a person reaches the age of reason; (b) all who are in grave sin after Baptism are obliged to go to confession at least once a year; (c) everyone in danger of death or about to receive one of the Sacraments of the living is obliged to go to confession, unless he is already in the state of grace.
2. **Confession should have the following qualities:** it should be humble, entire, sincere, prudent, and brief. (a) Confession should be humble, i.e., not made in a boastful, but in a contrite spirit. (b) It should be entire, i.e., it should embrace: (i) all mortal sins remembered since the last worthy confession; (ii) the circumstances which change the malice of a sin or multiply it. (c) Confession must be sincere, i.e., the sins should be declared just as they appear to the conscience without exaggeration or diminution (The cord attached to the cow). (d) It should be prudent, i.e., the penitent should confess his sins in careful words, and should guard against revealing the sins of others unnecessarily. (e) Confession should be brief, i.e., the penitent should avoid irrelevant facts and details.
3. **Consequences** (a) people should know how to make their confessions properly; (b) a bad confession should be repeated; (c) mortal sins forgotten should be declared in confession when remembered; (d) those who have no certain sins to confess should mention some sin of their past life; (e) general confessions are to be permitted according to the prudence and discretion of the confessor.

EXHORTATION, 1. We should have the highest reverence for this divinely instituted, necessary, and gracious means of obtaining pardon for our sins. 2. We should go to confession not only when it is necessary, but frequently in order to obtain grace and strength from the use of this Sacrament. 3. In order that confession may be properly made it should be preceded by a careful preparation consisting of an examination of conscience and acts of faith, hope, love and act of contrition. 4. After confession we, like the Samaritan leper in today's Gospel, should return thanks to our Divine Physician.

Act of Hope: O my God, relying on Thy infinite goodness and promises, I hope to obtain pardon of my sins, the help of Thy grace and life everlasting, through the merits of Jesus Christ my Lord and Redeemer. Amen