

Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner

Chapter IX The Confessional



This is the continuation of the previous chapter, [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter VIII The Mass](#).

1 The Nature of the Confessional

The Baltimore Catechism defines confession as follows: "Confession is the telling of our sins to an authorized priest for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness."

It adds:

"An authorized priest is one who has not only the power to forgive sins by reason of his ordination to the priesthood, but also the power of jurisdiction over the persons who come to him. He has this jurisdiction ordinarily from his bishop, or by reason of his office" (p. 315).

The important words here are "authorized priest." And to be genuine a confession must be heard, judged, and followed by obedience to the authorized priest as he assigns a penance, such as good works, prayers, fastings, abstinence from certain pleasures, etc. A penance may be defined as a punishment undergone in token of repentance for sin, as assigned by the priest—usually a very light penalty.

The New York Catechism says:

"I must tell my sins to the priest so that he will give me absolution. I shall go to confession often... to fulfill a condition for gaining certain indulgences. ... A person who knowingly keeps back a mortal sin in confession commits a dreadful sacrilege, and he must repeat his Confession. ... The sacrament of penance remits the mortal sins and their eternal punishment; it revives the merits annulled by the mortal sins, and gives a special grace to avoid sin in the future."

The French Catechism goes so far as to say:

"One must receive absolution in feelings of total humility, considering the confessor as Jesus Christ Himself whose place he takes."

The priests can scarcely make a greater demand than that! Canon Law 888 says: "The priest has to remember that in hearing confession he is a judge." Canon

Law 870 says:

“In the confessional the minister has the power to forgive all crimes committed after baptism.”

And a book, *Instructions for Non-Catholics*, primarily for use by those who are joining the Roman Catholic Church, says:

“The priest does not have to ask God to forgive your sins. The priest himself has the power to do so in Christ’s name. Your sins are forgiven by the priest the same as if you knelt before Jesus Christ and told them to Christ Himself” (p. 93).

Thus Roman Catholics are required to confess all their mortal sins to a priest who sits as a judge and who claims to have the power to forgive sins in the name of God. The priest forgives the guilt of mortal sins, which saves the penitent from going to hell, but he cannot remit the penalty due for those sins and so the penitent must atone for them by the performance of good works which he prescribes. Priests, too, including the bishops, cardinals, and even the pope, receive forgiveness in this same manner, confessing their sins to other priests.

In the language of Romanism a “penitent” is one who confesses to a priest, not necessarily one who is repenting of sin, although that is implied; and the “confessor” is the priest, not the one who confesses.

The confessional “box” found in all Roman Catholic churches, is divided into two compartments. The priest enters one, and the penitent the other. In the wooden partition between them is a metal gauze about two feet square. The penitent kneels, and through the gauze whispers or speaks in a low voice his or her sins. The confession is secret, and is called “auricular,” because spoken into the ear of the priest. It supposedly is a detailed confession of all the mortal sins committed since the last confession.

The penitent may be, and usually is, interrogated by the priest, so that he or she may make a full and proper confession. That, of course, gives the priest the opportunity to find out practically anything and everything that he may want to know about the person or about community affairs. Stress is placed on the fact that any sin not confessed is not forgiven, and that the omission of even one sin may invalidate the whole confession.

The form of confession is quite interesting. After kneeling before the priest and asking and receiving his blessing, the penitent must repeat the first part of the Confiteor:

“I confess to the Almighty God, to the blessed Virgin Mary, to blessed Michael the Archangel, to blessed John the Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul, to all the saints, and to you, father, that I have sinned exceedingly, in thought, word, and deed, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” (latter, repeated three times).

The penitent must then confess all his mortal sins, concealing nothing. Venial sins, in most instances, may be omitted, since they are comparatively

mild and may be expiated by other means.

We notice concerning this form of confession that (1) it places Mary, Michael, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, the Roman saints, and the officiating priest on a level with God Almighty; (2) it addresses the confession of sin to all of them, as if the sin was committed equally against all of them, and as if they were holy beings with power to forgive; and (3) it makes no mention whatever of Christ, through whom alone pardon is to be had, or of the Holy Spirit, by whom alone the soul can be cleansed. And there sits the priest, usurping the place of God and forgiving sins! Notice how the penitent is constantly put in a subordinate role and at the mercy of the priest.

Every loyal Roman Catholic is required under pain of mortal sin to go to confession at least once a year. The Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, decreed that every adult, man or woman, should confess all his or her sins to a priest at least once a year. This decree was ratified by the Council of Trent, 1546, and remains in force today. More frequent confession is advised, particularly if public or heinous sins have been committed. This decree has been elaborated and extended by various church laws so that considerable pressure rests on the average church member to go to confession more often, the preferable time period frequently being set at once a month.

Confession is facilitated through "societies," or "confraternities," which under the guidance of the priest urge their members to confess at least once a month. Young women may belong to an organization known as "Children of Mary." Boys and young men have similar organizations, most of which have a provision for confession at least once a month. Membership in such organizations supposedly is voluntary, but the social pressures may be such that one who fails to join is made to feel practically ostracized. Hence "voluntary" confessions are fairly frequent and fairly easy to secure. Ordinarily a child is required to begin going to confession at the age of seven, as though he comes to accountability at that age.

Historical development. We search in vain in the Bible for any word supporting the doctrine of auricular confession. It is equally impossible to find any authorization or general practice of it during the first one thousand years of the Christian era. Not a word is found in the writings of the early church fathers about confessing sins to a priest or to anyone except God alone. Auricular confession is not mentioned in the writings of Augustine, Origen, Nestorius, Tertullian, Jerome, Chrysostom, or Athanasius—all of these and many others apparently lived and died without ever thinking of going to confession. Those writers give many rules concerning the practice and duties of Christian living, but they never say a word about going to confession. Never were penitents forced to kneel to a priest and reveal to him the secret history of all their evil thoughts, desires, and human frailties. No one other than God was thought to be worthy to hear confessions and to grant forgiveness. There were, to be sure, public confessions before local church groups, in order that offenders might be restored to fellowship. Such practice is found even in some Protestant groups of our own day. But such confessions were open, general, and voluntary, and were as different from auricular confession as light is from darkness.

But gradually as the church gained power the practice of seeking spiritual counsel and advice from the priest was turned into the confessional. Confession was first introduced into the church on a voluntary basis in the fifth century, by the authority of Leo the Great. But it was not until the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, under Pope Innocent III, that private auricular confession was made compulsory and all Roman Catholic people were required to confess and to seek absolution from a priest at least once a year. At that council the twin doctrines of auricular confession and transubstantiation were decreed. It will be recalled that that was the period of the greatest extension of priestly and papal power over the people. It was, therefore, during the darkest days of the state and of the church that this masterpiece of deception was brought forth.

2 Mortal and Venial Sins

The Roman Church divides all sin into two classes, making an important and elaborate distinction between so-called "mortal" and "venial" sins. Mortal sin is described as "any great offense against the law of God," and is so called because it is deadly, killing the soul and subjecting it to eternal punishment. Even after a penitent has received pardon, a large but unknown amount of punishment remains to be expiated in purgatory.

Venial sins, on the other hand, are "small and pardonable offenses against God, or our neighbor." Technically, venial sins need not be confessed since they are comparatively light and can be expiated by good works, prayers, extreme unction, purgatory, etc. But the priests are not to be outdone by this technicality. The terms are quite elastic, and permit considerable leeway on the part of those who want to probe more deeply into the affairs of the penitent. It is generally advised that it is safer to confess supposed venial sins also, since the priest alone is able to judge accurately which are mortal and which are venial. The Baltimore Catechism (written, of course, by priests) says: "When we have committed no mortal sins since our last confession, we should confess our venial sins or some sin told in a previous confession for which we are again sorry, in order that the priest may give us absolution" (p. 329). What chance has a poor sinner against such a system as that?

There is no agreement among the priests as to which sins are mortal and which are venial. But they all proceed on the assumption that such a distinction does exist. What is venial according to one may be mortal according to another. If the pope were infallible in matters of faith and practice, as claimed by the Roman Church, he should be able to settle this important matter by accurately cataloging those sins which are mortal as distinguished from those which are venial. But such a list no pope has ever been able to produce. Instead what they have is an elaborate system of compromise which is designed to promote the authority of the church and to give a considerable amount of leeway to the priest as to what seems expedient in individual cases.

Among mortal sins, however, are those committed in breaking the ten commandments, together with the so-called "seven deadly sins": pride, covetousness, lechery (lust, lewdness), anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

Included are practically all sexual offenses, whether in word, thought, or deed, and a long list of transgressions down to attending a Protestant church, reading a Protestant Bible, eating meat on Friday, or "missing mass on Sunday morning" without a good excuse (which means that considerably more than half of the claimed Roman Catholic membership throughout the world is constantly in mortal sin). Sometimes violations of the rules of the church are treated as mortal sins, while transgressions of the commandments of God are treated as venial sins. All mortal sins must be confessed to the priest in detail or they cannot be forgiven. The theory is that the priest must have all the facts in order to know how to deal with the case and what penance to assign the real reason, of course, is to place the penitent more fully in the hands of the priest.

But the Bible makes no such distinction between mortal and venial sins. There is in fact no such thing as venial sin. All sin is mortal. It is true that some sins are worse than others. But it is also true that all sins, if not forgiven, bring death to the soul, with greater or lesser punishment as they may deserve. The Bible simply says: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)—and there Paul was not speaking of any particular kind of sin, but of all sin. Ezekiel says: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (18:4). When James said, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is become guilty of all" (2:10), he meant, not that the person who commits one sin is guilty of all other kinds of sin, but that even one sin unrepented of shuts a person out of heaven and subjects him to punishment, just as surely as one puncture of the eyeball subjects a person to blindness, or as one misstep by the mountain climber plunges him to destruction in the canyon below. In the light of these statements, the distinction between mortal and venial sins is shown to be arbitrary and absurd.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Presbyterian), in answer to the question, "What is sin?" says: "Sin is any lack of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (Question 14). And we are reminded that in the Garden of Eden eating the forbidden fruit appeared to be but a very trifling offense; yet the consequences were fatal, not only for Adam and Eve but for the entire human race.

Romanism presents a purely arbitrary classification of sins. The effect of that classification is in itself immoral. We know how quick corrupt human nature is to grasp at any excuse for sin, and how readily this distinction gives license for its commission. Furthermore, we may point out that a Roman Catholic who commits mortal sin shortly before his death, but who cannot find a priest to whom he can confess, by definition of his church, runs the risk of dying in mortal sin. It is so easy to commit mortal sin. As just stated, even failure to attend Sunday mass without a good excuse is a mortal sin.

Through the use of the confessional the priest has been able to pry into the conscience of each individual, so that no heretic might escape, and in the case of the faithful to gain entrance into the privacy of the domestic family circle. There is literally and in truth no area of life that is exempt from the scrutiny and supervision of the priest. "Knowledge is power," and that power can be wielded in many ways, to direct people along lines that will promote the church program, or for the personal benefit of the priest

himself. It is perfectly evident that the priest to whom a person has confessed his thoughts, desires, and every sinful action just as it occurred, has placed that person largely under his control.

For some that means little less than slavery. This is particularly true of women and girls who have even destroyed their self-respect in so surrendering themselves to the priest. The result is a sense of shame, worry, and of being at the mercy of the priest. Through the confessional Rome has been able to exercise an effective control not only over the family, but over political officials of every grade, teachers, doctors, lawyers, employers and employees, and indeed over all who submit to that discipline.

3 The Priests Cannot Forgive Sins

The Scriptures teach that only God can forgive sins: "Who can forgive sins but one, even God?" (Mark 2:7); "...The Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matthew 9:6). It is because God is our Creator and Owner and Judge, and because it is His law that we have broken, that He can forgive sins. The Lord Jesus Christ has this power because He is God.

But the Church of Rome teaches that her priests also can forgive sins, and that "They pardon sins, not only as ambassadors of Jesus Christ, but as judges, and by way of jurisdiction" (Council of Trent, Sess. 14,9; Bellarmine, *De Poenit*, 3,2). The Council of Trent declares further: "Whosoever shall affirm that the priest's sacramental absolution is not a judicial act, but only a ministry to pronounce and declare that the sins of the party confessing are forgiven, let him be anathema." And the priest, after hearing the confession says to the penitent: "I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Thus the priest in the confessional claims not merely a declarative power through which the penitent's sins are pronounced forgiven, but a judicial power through which he assigns penances. Unlike the priests of the Old Testament who merely declared the leper cleansed from his leprosy, the Roman priest actually claims power as a minister of God to forgive sin. Though a mere human being, he exalts himself to a position as a necessary mediator between God and man, and insists that in his office as confessor he be considered as Christ Himself. Auricular confession therefore becomes a public act of idolatry in that the penitent bows down before a man, who is dependent on him for his living, and asks from him that which God alone can give. And on the part of the Roman Church it is the height of sinful pride and folly thus to put in the place of God a priest who himself is only a man and guilty of sin.

Even a priest who is in mortal sin still can forgive sin in the confessional. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, after saying that "The Church asks that a priest who absolves a penitent be in the state of grace, a participant, himself, of the Divine Life," adds "This does not mean, however, that a priest in the state of mortal sin would not possess the power to forgive sins or that when exercised it would not be effective for the penitent" (*Peace of Soul*, p. 136; 1949; McGraw Hill Book Co., New York).

Dr. Zacchello tells of his experience in the confessional before conversion to Protestantism in these words:

“Where my doubts were really troubling me was inside the confessional box. People were coming to me, kneeling down in front of me, confessing their sins to me. And I, with a sign of the cross, was promising that I had the power to forgive their sins. I, a sinner, a man, was taking God’s Place, God’s right, and that terrible voice was penetrating me saying, ‘You are depriving God of His glory. If sinners want to obtain forgiveness of their sins they must go to God and not to you. It is God’s law that they have broken, not yours. To God, therefore, they must make confession; and to God alone they must pray for forgiveness. No man can forgive sins, but Jesus can and does forgive sins.’”

In the United States the Roman hierarchy is much more reserved in its claims than it is in Roman Catholic countries, and the priests often say to uninformed people that they do not presume to forgive sins. But that is a deliberate falsehood, as is shown by the official decree of the Council of Trent, and by the formula of absolution which is, “I absolve thee. Go in peace.” The Roman position is that, through the power given to Peter, and received from him by apostolic succession, they have the power to forgive or to refuse to forgive sins. That was a power claimed by the priests of pagan Rome, and it was taken over by the priests of papal Rome. Many American Roman Catholics have been enlightened by their contacts with Protestantism to the extent that they refuse to believe such claims. But where Rome is unopposed the claims are asserted boldly.

In the Roman system the priest constantly comes between the sinner and God. In Father McGuire’s edition of the New Catechism No. 1, with imprimatur by Cardinal Spellman, of New York, we read: “You must tell your sins to the priest to have them forgiven.” And again, “Confession is telling your sins to the priest to obtain forgiveness.” As the penitent confesses to the priest and does the penance assigned, there is no direct contact with God, but only with the priest. A Roman Catholic does not pray to God spontaneously as to one who is a Friend, Comforter, Forgiver. To him God is exalted beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, and his contact is on a lower level, with the priest, who presents himself as God’s representative. The result is that Roman Catholics never really settle the sin problem. The only solution they have is in their contact with the church; original sin is removed by baptism, and mortal and venial sins are confessed to the priest who absolves them in his own right. They may be punctual in prayer to God, but only to venerate and adore Him. The priest represents God in personal problems. Consequently, they have religion, but not the religion of the Bible. Martin Luther says that after becoming a priest, which he did primarily as a means of gaining assurance concerning his own salvation, he realized, as most priests eventually do, that forgiveness of sins in the Catholic confessional had no effect on him and that he was just the same after confession as before.

In this connection Dr. Paul Woolley, Professor of Church History in Westminster Theological Seminary, says:

“People today love authority. In a disordered and uncertain world that may

blow up in their faces, they have a deep desire to listen to the man who knows or the church which knows. The Roman Catholic Church says that it knows. But the substitution of the authority of the Roman Church for the authority of God is exceedingly dangerous. It results in such phenomena as the denial of the freedom of Protestant preaching in Spain and in Colombia, in the physical persecution of Protestants in various areas where Rome is dominant. This is not the exercise of the authority of God; it is the tyrannous perversion of God's authority by sinful men. It is a denial of the New Testament teaching that the Gospel is to be preached by spiritual means, that violence cannot bring in the kingdom of God, that 'faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God,' not by imposition from above.

"Catholicism is a refuge for the lazy thinker. The man who wants to be told the answers to everything, to be treated like a child, can find what he wants in the Roman Church. But God gave His Word to man to read, to study, to ponder, to apply. Only under the freedoms of modern Protestantism can this be done with a good conscience. These freedoms must be protected as of the vital core of our liberties. Rome claims the right not only to suppress free preaching but to deny civil liberties in general. Let us not barter away these freedoms" (*The Presbyterian Guardian*, December 15, 1958).

The somber attitude of the confessional cannot be denied. The priest sits as judge of the eternal destiny of all who come before him. He may, at his own discretion, forgive or withhold forgiveness for every kind and number of sins. There are no witnesses to what is said. No record of the proceedings is kept. The penitent is merely given a promise that secrecy will be observed. For the devout, sincere Roman Catholic salvation depends upon his ability to call to mind while in the confessional all of his sins and to confess them. It is impressed upon him that only that which is confessed can be forgiven. The priest cannot forgive that which he does not know about. What spiritual agony that means for many a soul who fears he may have omitted some things that should have been told, and that he will have to make amends for them in purgatory! And even though he does his best, he may, from one confession to another, fall into mortal sin and be lost.

On the other hand, no matter how serious the crime, whether murder, robbery, adultery, fraud, etc., no public jail sentence or fine is imposed, but instead only a few minutes of prayer, the saying of the rosary or of "Hail Mary's," and a verbal promise of reform is imposed. This secret process of forgiveness and of hiding of crimes may be accomplished again and again as long as the sinner conforms to the church regulations. A consequence of easy absolution is that many take the moral law more lightly and sin more freely just because they know absolution is easy to obtain.

The Roman Church denies that anyone can have assurance of eternal life—such assurance, of course, would undermine the confessional itself, for the penitent must be made to feel his constant dependence upon the priest and the church. But how contrary is such teaching to the word of Christ: "Verily, verily I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). Here Christ clearly teaches that (1) the believer now has eternal life, (2) he does not come into judgment, and (3) he

has passed from death into life. All three of these blessings are given solely on the basis that one has heard and believed the promise of Christ. Not a single word is said about confession to a priest or about doing penance. And nowhere in the New Testament is there any record of forgiveness having been obtained from a priest.

We may well ask: If Roman priests have the apostolic power of binding and loosing, of granting or refusing absolution from sin, why do they not also possess the 'power' to perform miracles which Christ conferred upon the apostles? Christ said that it was just as easy to say, "Arise, and walk," as to say, "Thy sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:5). Why cannot Roman priests do the same? The fact is that all men are sinners, all have serious defects and faults, and none can exercise the powers of God. Those who play God are only acting foolishly.

4 Scripture Teaching Regarding Confession

The Bible teaches that it is the privilege of every penitent sinner to confess his sins directly to God: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). What did the Lord Jesus say when He spoke of the Pharisee and the publican? The publican had no priest, and he did not go to a confessional. All he did was to cry with bowed head, "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner." He went directly to God. And Jesus said that he went down to his house justified (Luke 18:9-14). Indeed, why should anyone confess his sins to a priest when the Scriptures declare so plainly: "There is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). And yet the priest presumes to say, "I absolve you," "I forgive your sins."

Confession of sins is commanded all through the Bible, but always it is confession to God, never to man. It is a striking fact that although Paul, Peter, and John dealt frequently with men and women in sin, both in their teaching and in their practice, they never permitted a sinner or a saint to confess to them. Paul wrote thirteen of the New Testament epistles, and in them he often speaks of the duties and practices of Christians. But never once does he mention auricular confession. Peter, John, and Jude wrote six epistles in which they have much to say about the matter of salvation. But not one of them ever mentions auricular confession. And certainly Christ never told anyone to go to a priest for forgiveness. Nowhere do the Scriptures tell us that God appointed a special class of men to hear confessions and to forgive sins.

If such an important tribunal as the confessional had been established, undoubtedly the apostles would have commented on it repeatedly. Had the power of forgiving sins been committed to the apostles, it would have been one of the most important parts of their office and one of the leading doctrines of Christianity. We cannot imagine that they would have been so remiss as never to have exercised that most important function, and nowhere even to have alluded to it. John, for instance, says: "If any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). He does not say that we have a priestly tribunal to which we can go and having confessed our

sins receive forgiveness. Everywhere throughout the Bible the remission of sins and the gaining of salvation is connected with faith in Christ. "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life: but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). "Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," says Paul (Romans 5:1). Everywhere the exhortation is, "Believe and be saved." Nowhere are we told to seek the absolution of a priest.

The statement of James, "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (5:16), and that in Acts 19:18, "Many also of them that had believed came, confessing, and declaring their deeds," alleged by Roman Catholics to support their position, do not teach private confession to a priest, but are rather proof against it since they imply the duty of the priest to confess to the layman as well as for the layman to confess to the priest. These statements properly mean, "Confess your faults, your shortcomings, to your fellow Christians who have been injured by you." They mean that when one has wronged his neighbor he should acknowledge his fault and make restitution. Paul used the word "sin" in this sense when he said: "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar, have I sinned at all" (Acts 25:8).

Public confession was practiced in the early church on occasions, as it now is in some Protestant churches when members wish to give a testimony of their lives. But secret auricular confession to a priest, with the priest privileged to draw out the individual and probe for details, to pronounce a judgment upon him and assign a penance, is an entirely different thing. The Bible does not require us to parade our sins before a priest or before the congregation, but only to confess to God. In any event, for one sinner to confess his sins to another sinner to obtain forgiveness is degrading and demoralizing, and, more than that, it is dishonoring to God.

5 Alleged Roman Catholic Scripture Proof

In defense of the confessional the priests depend primarily on the two following Scripture references:

"I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19).

"He therefore said to them, 'Peace be to you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you.' When he had said this, he breathed upon them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained'" (John 20:21-23, Confraternity Version).

In the chapter on Peter, and the section dealing with the "Keys," we have discussed the meaning of Matthew 16:19, and have pointed out that the power given to the apostles was symbolical and declarative, and that it related to the authority given to them to preach the Gospel, which contains God's conditions for repentance and forgiveness. "Repentance and remission of sins" was to be "preached in his name unto all the nations" (Luke 24:47). "To him

(Christ) bear all the prophets witness, that through his name every one that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). And again, "Be it known unto you therefore, brethren, that through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins: and by him every one that believeth is justified from all things" (Acts 13:38-39).

Christ often used figurative language, as when He said, "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe: but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not" (Matthew 23:2-3); and, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter" (Matthew 23:13).

The scribes and Pharisees were in possession of the law. In that sense they sat on Moses' seat. As the law was faithfully given to the people, or withheld from them, the way to heaven was opened before them, or closed to them. In the failure of the scribes and Pharisees to give the law to the people they were shutting the kingdom of heaven against men, not literally, but figuratively.

"The keys of the kingdom" was a symbolic expression for the Old Testament Scriptures which set forth the way of salvation. The Old Testament, of course, was the only Scripture they had at that time. It was the responsibility of the scribes and Pharisees, who were the custodians of the Scriptures, to acquaint the people with that knowledge by making the Scripture truth available to them. But instead, they not only neglected that duty but actually veiled the Scriptures and perverted their meaning so that the people who wanted that knowledge were deprived of it. Similarly, in the Christian dispensation, the apostles were given "the keys of the kingdom," not a set of metallic keys, of course, and not that they could by a mere word admit certain individuals into the kingdom while excluding others, but that, in the words of Paul, they were "intrusted with the Gospel" (1 Thessalonians 2:4), and so opened or closed the kingdom as they proclaimed the Word of Life or withheld it. In that sense every minister today, and indeed every Christian, who teaches the Word also possesses the "keys" and admits to, or excludes from, the kingdom. The key to the kingdom is the *Gospel of Christ*. Peter was given that key, and he used it to unlock the kingdom to those to whom he preached. We have that same key, and we must use it in the same way, by making known the message of salvation and so opening up to others the way into the kingdom of heaven.

The powers of binding or loosing, and of forgiving or retaining sins, were given to the apostles as proclaimers of the Word of God, not as priests. As we have shown elsewhere, there are no Christian "priests" in the New Testament dispensation. The apostles never claimed the power of forgiving sins by absolution as Roman priests do. Rather they preached the Gospel of salvation through Christ—which was a declarative power, by which they announced the gracious terms on which salvation was granted to sinful men.

As Dr. Woods has said:

"These expressions indicate a *declarative* power only: the right to proclaim in Christ's name and with His authority, that all who truly repent of sin and trust in Him for pardon and salvation, shall surely be forgiven and saved. But it is Christ alone, and not the minister, who forgives. According to Scripture, the minister is only a herald to announce what the King will do, on condition of repentance and faith on the part of the sinner.

"This was the teaching of the apostles, and of the early church before the papal party corrupted it; for Tertullian in the third century declared that all Christians have, like Peter, the power of the keys, to proclaim forgiveness and salvation through Christ. And this has always been the doctrine of the Reformed Church of all branches" (*Our Priceless Heritage*, p. 118).

That this is the true meaning of Matthew 16:19 and John 20:21-23 is clear from the practice and preaching of the apostles. They always directed sinners to Christ. Never once did any apostle say, "I absolve you," or, "Your sins are forgiven." Instead, we read that when Peter entered the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and this man "fell down at his feet, and worshipped him," Peter "raised him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man" (Acts 10:25-28). And when the people of Lystra attempted to confer divine honors upon Paul and Barnabas, these two Christian missionaries promptly stopped such procedure, saying, "We also are men of like passions with you" (Acts 14:15).

Language similar to that spoken to the Apostles was addressed to the prophet Jeremiah. We read: "And Jehovah said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth: see I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down and to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:9-10). But Jeremiah never literally plucked up, or broke down or destroyed, or planted nations and kingdoms. His mission was to declare to the nations the terms on which God would build up or destroy, or reward or punish nations. His was declarative, not executive, power. Similarly, Peter and the other apostles were given authority to declare the terms on which God would save His people and forgive their sins.

It is perfectly obvious that the teaching of these verses regarding the forgiving or retaining of sins, and the binding or loosing, are not intended to contradict the clear teaching of the rest of the Bible on this subject, which states explicitly that only God has the power to forgive sin. If we read carefully Matthew's account, for instance, we find that the context deals with disciplinary problems in a local church. The immediately preceding verses, 15-17, read: "And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the word of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican." Then follows the statement: "Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Here we have a case in which a difference develops between two believers. This passage tells us how such a difference is to be settled. If our Christian brother has sinned, it is our duty first to go to him and tell him about it. If he hears us and mends his ways, well and good. But if he does not hear us, then we are to go back to him, taking one or two Christian brothers with us. If that is unsuccessful, then we are to bring the matter before the local congregation. If he refuses to heed the admonitions of the church, i.e., the whole assembly of believers, then we are to treat him as a Gentile and a publican, as no longer a member of the congregation. In this manner disciplinary action is to be exercised, not secretly by a priest, but openly by the collective decision of the local church, the elders of course leading as they do in all other functions of the local church. If their efforts prove futile, then the "sin" of this member is to be "bound," that is, the offender is to be officially charged with it, pronounced guilty, and expelled from the membership. But if he is found innocent, he is to be "loosed" from the sin, that is, acquitted of the charge of which he was accused. In this sense, and in this sense only, not a priest, nor an elder, but the local congregation is to exercise discipline. And Christ has promised to honor such action in His church, so long as it is done in a Christian manner under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—what they bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what they loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

6 Abuses of the Confessional

If the confessional has no sanction in Scripture, how did it come to be established in the church? Let Dr. Woods answer:

"Because its establishment was greatly to the interest of the hierarchy. The confessional enormously increased the power of the pope and the clergy. The priests came to know the secrets of men from the emperor down to the humblest peasant, and all classes of society were thus placed in the power of their religious leaders, whom they did not dare to disobey or offend. Not only were the sins and scandals of each individual's life and that of families laid bare, but all the intrigues of State, the political schemes of the rulers of Europe, were in the possession of the confessor, who could use his knowledge for the advancement of the church, or to help a political party in which he was interested. What greater intellectual and moral bondage for human beings could be imagined, or what more dangerous power could be possessed, than that of the Roman confessional? History furnishes many impressive warnings; see Charles IX and the massacre of St. Bartholomew; or of Louis XIV and the cruel revocation of the Edict of Nantes, 1685" (*Our Priceless Heritage*, p. 129).

Listen again to the testimony of Lucien Vinet, who for years operated the confessional and who knows the Roman system well:

"A Roman Catholic, says his church, must, in order to obtain peace with God, declare all his sinful actions, omissions and his most secret thoughts and desires, specifying minutely the kinds of sins committed, the number of times and all the circumstances that might alter the gravity of a sin. A murderer is obliged to declare his crimes, a young girl her most intimate thoughts and desires. We have seen men tremble, women faint and children cry when the time to confess their sins to us had come. A priest cannot hear confessions for

many months before he realizes that this ordeal cannot be requested by the kind and merciful Lord. On the other hand we have seen priests laugh and joke in referring to their embarrassed penitents. Confession is a usurpation of authority by priests who investigate the minds and souls of human beings. When an organization such as the Roman system can control not only the education, the family and policies of the civil government of its members, but even their very thoughts and desires, we do not wonder that it can prosper and succeed. Roman Catholics, whether they feel that they ought to admit it or not, are forced into submission to Romanism through the process of torturing auricular confession."

Vinet then gives the following specific examples of the abuse of the confessional:

(a) "*Confession of a Child*. The child may be only seven years of age. He has been told that he must tell all his sins to the priest. If he does not, he will commit a sacrilege and should he die, he cannot go to heaven. He is naturally very confused as to what really constitutes sin. He is naturally shy and reluctant to tell what he has done or thought. The result is that he omits to declare certain things that are really not sinful but he thinks they are. His conscience will reproach him for having hidden a sin in confession and he cannot make peace with his God. Confession has ruined the soul of many a child. (Webmaster's note: This was certainly true of me!) How different is all this from the words of Christ who said, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'!

(b) "*Confession of a Young Girl*. We now have a shy Roman Catholic young girl, passing through the state of childhood to puberty, who is about to enter the confessional. She is naturally embarrassed and her state of mind is just what a sordid confessor wishes to explore. The priest will now hear from a young woman the most secret thoughts and desires of her soul. Her mind and soul are sacrificed on the altar of Romanism. Many embarrassing questions are asked according to the sins accused. ... These shameful details of a confession are mentioned here to illustrate what is meant by the torture of confession. Roman Catholics know very well that what we disclose is the crude truth.

(c) "*Confession of a Married Woman*. A married woman enters the confessional. She will tell a strange man secrets which she probably would not dare to reveal to her husband. She is even bound to reveal certain secrets of her husband. In the Roman Church birth control of all varieties is a sin and must be confessed with all its circumstances. The husband might be of Protestant faith and his Roman Catholic wife will have to disclose to the priest the most intimate relations of their marital life. The priest will know more about the wife than the husband. There are no family secrets because Rome has required that hearts and souls shall be fully explored by priests. In this manner Romanism controls the whole intimate lives of married couples.

"A married woman, who has any amount of natural discretion and honesty, will enter the confessional with apprehension and often despair. She fears that terrible infallible questionnaire. It is impossible to describe the mental inconvenience she now experiences by the spectre of compulsory confession. ...

"Poor Roman Catholic women! We know well that your kind souls are tortured to death by this terrible Roman obligation of telling, not only your sins, but also the most intimate secrets of your married life. As an ex-priest we can tell you that these mental tortures imposed upon your souls are not a prescription of the Saviour of mankind to obtain forgiveness of your sins, but are pure inventions of men to keep your minds and hearts under the control of a system, the torturous Roman religious organization. We must admit that as a priest we had no power to forgive your sins. No priest has such powers" (*I Was a Priest*, pp. 62-67).

Father Charles Chiniquy, after spending twenty-five years as a Roman Catholic priest in Canada and the United States, renounced the Roman Church and the priesthood and in the following paragraphs expressed his sense of humiliation and shame at having ever engaged in the processes of the confessional.

"With a blush on my face, and regret in my heart, I confess before God and man, that I have been through the confessional plunged for twenty-five years in that bottomless sea of iniquity, in which the blind priests of Rome have to swim day and night.

"I had to learn by heart the infamous questions which the Church of Rome forces every priest to learn. I had to put these impure, immoral questions to women and girls who were confessing their sins to me. Those questions, and the answers they elicit, are so debasing that only a man who has lost every sense of shame can put them to any woman.

"Yes, I was bound in conscience, to put into the ears, the mind, the imagination the memory, the heart and soul of women and girls, questions of such a nature, the direct and immediate tendency of which is to fill the minds and hearts of both priests and penitents with thoughts and temptations of such a degrading nature, that I do not know any words adequate to express them. Pagan antiquity has never seen any institution more polluting than the confessional. I have lived twenty-five years in the atmosphere of the confessional. I was degraded and polluted by the confessional just as all the priests of Rome are. It has required the whole blood of the great Victim, who died on Calvary for sinners, to purify me" (*The Priest, the Woman, and the Confessional*, pp. 67-68).

This book by Charles Chiniquy is, we believe, the best available dealing with all phases of the confessional, and should be read by everyone who would have a clear understanding of the evils involved in that institution. It describes conditions which existed in Montreal and in other parts of Canada in the middle 19th century, and shows the depths to which the confessional tends if unrestrained by evangelical forces.

Such testimonies as we have cited make it clear that the confessional is contaminating alike to the penitent and to the priest. The great ornament of the woman is modesty and purity. But when a woman is taught that modesty and restraint in the confessional are in themselves sins, womanly virtue is bound to suffer. Most of the priests are educated, trained, clever men, who know how and to what extent they can safely ply their penitents. Appropriate here are the words:

Vice is a monster of such hideous mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
But seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We soon approve, admire, and then embrace.

Husbands and fathers are not ordinarily asked such questions as are put to girls and women in the confessional, and it is not an unusual thing when they become enlightened as to what conversations are carried on between the priests and their wives and daughters that they absolutely forbid them to go to confession. The unfortunate thing, however, is that even after they become enlightened concerning this phase of Romanism, they usually remain in that church and continue to try to fulfill all of the other requirements, despite the fact that failure to comply with the regulations concerning the confessional is in itself a mortal sin.

Another who grew up in the Roman Catholic Church describes the confessional and its effect on the people in these words:

“The confessional is a system of espionage—a system of slavery. The priest is the spy in every home. Many Catholics are shocked by the character of the questions put to them. A Catholic woman said to a Protestant friend, ‘I would rather take a whipping any day than go to confession.’ One can readily understand why most Catholics are timid and afraid of the priest and are obedient to the letter of his wishes because they know that through the confessional the priest has secured a knowledge of their habits and life that no one else knows anything about. The average priest can stride along with that lofty air. When he meets his parishioners he often tosses his head as though he were a demigod. Why is it? Because he holds the secrets of the personal lives of all his flock—of all who trust him” (John Carrara, *Romanism Under the Searchlight*, p. 70).

Under the rules of the Roman Church the priest is forbidden to reveal anything told him in the confessional. This is known as the “seal of the confessional.” Otherwise the practice of confession could not be maintained. But under certain circumstances he can pass on information gained: (1) with the consent of the penitent, which for the priest often times is not hard to obtain; (2) anything revealed apart from the confession itself, that is, in further conversation, can be passed on; (3) among themselves priests often discuss information gained in the confessional without mentioning names, and so stay within the limits of Canon Law; and (4) if a dispute arises as to whether or not permission was granted, the word of the priest is to be accepted in preference to that of the penitent. And, as the clergy are not permitted to tell what transpires in the confessional, so neither are those who confess permitted to repeat anything, since they too are a part of the church system. This, then, gives the priests an ideal situation for the secret direction of the personal affairs of their parishioners, including their family life, community affairs, voting, or the management of any political machines directed by them or political offices held by them.

The assertion of the priests that the confessional brings peace to the soul is cruel sarcasm. In most cases the result is exactly the opposite, and the penitents remain a certain period of time, sometimes longer, sometimes

shorter, in a distressed state of mind. For the honest, conscientious person, young or old, the fear of not making "a good confession," of omitting or inaccurately reporting the various experiences, and so making the entire confession null and void, is in itself a tormenting worry. Believing that their salvation depends, as the priest tells them that it does, on a full and truthful recounting of all their sinful actions, those honest souls fear that they have not been sufficiently contrite, or that they have withheld some necessary details. Women in particular dislike the confessional, and usually restrict themselves to what they must say.

The Roman Catholic people pay dearly for this invention as they submit themselves to its discipline. Much depends, of course, upon the individual priest. Some are truly considerate of the sensitivities of their people and refrain from unreasonable probing, while others abuse the privilege. In any event, every priest knows that he proffers what is flagrantly false every time he dismisses his penitent with the benediction: "Go in peace, thy sins are forgiven thee." For Protestants the confessional is undoubtedly the most revolting feature of the Roman system. Fortunately, in the United States, where Protestantism is the predominant religion, the abuses of the confessional do not reach such depths as in the Roman Catholic countries. Why is it, for instance, that the Roman Catholics of Southern Ireland are so inferior to their Protestant neighbors in Northern Ireland? Why so much poverty, ignorance, superstition, and immorality? Nearly a century ago Charles Chiniquy wrote concerning the Roman Catholic nations of his day:

"The principal cause of the degradation of Ireland is the enslavement of the Irish women by means of the confessional. After the Irish woman has been enslaved and degraded, she, in turn, has enslaved and degraded her husband and sons. Ireland will be an object of pity; she will be poor, miserable, degraded, as long as she rejects Christ and is ruled by the father confessor."

He added:

"The downfall of woman in France, and her degradation through the confessional, is now an accomplished fact, which nobody can deny; the highest intellectuals have seen and confessed it. Why is it that Spain is so miserable, so weak, so poor, so foolishly and cruelly reddening her fair valleys with the blood of her children? The principal, if not the only cause of the downfall of that great nation is the confessional. There, also the confessor has defiled, degraded, enslaved women, and women in turn have defiled and degraded their husbands and sons" (The Priest, the Woman, and the Confessional, p. 64- 66).

As regards the comparative status of Roman Catholic and Protestant nations, it is a fact that every Roman Catholic nation in the world today is bankrupt, and that every Roman Catholic nation in the world today is looking to Protestant United States for financial and economic aid in one form or another. The Protestant nations of Europe—England, Scotland, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and northern Germany—have been far more enlightened and progressive than have their Roman Catholic neighbors. This is not mere chance, but a consistent pattern that has been in evidence since the days of

the Reformation. Surely the facts speak for themselves. Someone has said: "Every Protestant nation is superior to every Roman Catholic nation." We believe that is true.

According to a decree of the Council of Trent it is not necessary, in order to obtain pardon in the confessional, that the sinner be sorry because his sin was an offense against God, but only that he be sorry for fear that unless he confesses before a priest and receives forgiveness he will go to hell forever. The decree reads:

"It is sufficient if he is sorry for fear of otherwise burning in hell for all eternity" (Sess. 14, C. H.).

Commenting on this phase of the confessional Dr. Zacchello says:

"Anyone can understand that this practice of the Catholic confession is no deterrent to crime, and can easily, in fact, be made an excuse for continuing in it. Big-time criminals and racketeers generally can find ways to circumvent the civil law and its penalties. If they are Roman Catholics and believe in confession, they have assurance of an easy way of also escaping punishment in the next life.

"Examples are plentiful of such big-time Catholic criminals and racketeers continuing in crime without any qualms of conscience. 'Big Tom' Pendergast of Kansas City who died after release from federal penitentiary was one of them. Under his rule Kansas City was a menace to the morals of young and old. Brothels flourished openly and criminal gangs enforced his edicts. Gambling houses were commonplace, and he himself was the biggest gambler of his age. Political corruption abounded and Pendergast, as the boss of it all, grew fabulously rich from the wealth that flowed into his pockets from this underworld traffic in crime. Yet, when he died on January 26, 1945, Monsignor Thomas B. McDonald who preached his funeral sermon after solemn high mass, publicly proclaimed him 'a man with a noble heart and a true friend,' because 'he went to mass every morning at 7:30 for 30 years.'

"Tom Pendergast did not fear the penalties of the civil law, because he could escape them by bribing and corrupting judges and officers of the law whom he himself had appointed. He was assured by his church's teaching that he could also escape God's punishment as long as he went to confession regularly, told his crimes to the priest and said he was sorry merely because he was afraid of going to hell. He was assured that he could continue his life of crime with impunity as long as he made sure of having a priest to absolve him before he died and to say masses afterward for his soul in purgatory. ... We former priests now know what true forgiveness of sins means in Christian teaching; that God alone forgives sin and with forgiveness comes a complete change of life. The Catholic practice of confession is merely a recital to a man of sins committed, with no guarantee of pardon from God, and nothing to prevent the repetition of the same sins over and over again" (*Secrets of Romanism*, pp. 123-125).

What a fraudulent, dishonest, futile, and unscriptural practice the operation of the confessional really is!

(Continued in the next chapter, [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter X Purgatory.](#))

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