

# The Bondage Of Doing



This article is from a PDF file on LutheranLibrary.org. It was published by The Converted Catholic Magazine. The author, Leo Herbert Lehmann, is a former Roman Catholic priest.

ROMAN CATHOLIC TEACHING rests upon the principle that eternal salvation depends upon the works performed by the hands of its priests. This principle is expressed by the phrase, *ex opere operato* (literally, "because of the work that is worked"), coined by the theologians in Rome to convey the belief that the grace of salvation can be made to flow into the souls of men only through the works performed upon them by validly ordained priests of the Roman Catholic Church.

They have another phrase to complement this: *ex opere operantis* ("because of the work of the worker"), which means that the individual must also earn his salvation by works of penance and mortification as commanded by the Church. But these works of the individual are of no avail without the works that are worked upon him by the priest. Both of these kinds of works, however, are contradictory of the new and living way of salvation as clearly set forth in the New Testament:

*"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." (Titus 3:5).*

Of prime importance, therefore, to the young priest setting out from the seminary to begin his ministry are his anointed and consecrated hands. Many hundreds of newly-ordained priests, with the oil of ordination scarcely dry on their hands, enter each year on the active work of the Roman Catholic priesthood in the United States. Pious men and devout women and young girls love to kiss these freshly-anointed hands. For they believe that these hands will carry the body of Jesus Christ to countless thousands of the faithful, and that they will be the actual instruments for the signing away, by absolution in confession, the crimes of men against God and the many mortal sins committed against the laws of the Roman Catholic Church. In Latin countries of Europe and South America, the customary mode of saluting a priest is by kissing the palms of his hands.

With these hands is poured the water of baptism over the heads of infants, without which there is no possibility of salvation at all. These hands are likewise the instruments which will apply the oil of last anointing to the sin-stained senses of dying bodies, an action which is believed to take effect on the soul even after consciousness has fled. The motions of these

hands raised in blessing over material objects, chase out the power of evil which is held to be inherent in all matter, after which such objects become sacred and holy things. To employ such objects – medals, scapulars, rosary beads etc. – thereafter for other than spiritual uses is considered desecration. It is by these hands that the devil is exorcised from infants after they are born.

But Roman Catholic priests no longer claim to possess in their hands the power of healing sickness and disease, although it was definitely said by Christ: "They shall lay their hands on the sick and they shall be healed." Relics of saints from Italy are now applied instead to the bodies of the believing faithful in the hope that they will be cured of their infirmities.

The intricacies of theology, philosophy and the art of preaching count much less in the work of a priest than his anointed hands. A young man may receive ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood who is intellectually deficient, but not so one who is lacking one joint of either thumb or two joints of an index finger. Personal sanctity is of lesser importance than the left eye, called "the canonical eye," the lack of which constitutes an impediment to ordination, since it would render difficult the reading of the prayers from the mass book which is placed at his left side on the altar. As regards the productive efficiency of the works he performs with his hands, the personal beliefs or morals of a priest do not matter at all, as long as he performs the operations correctly and has the intention of doing what the Church has instructed him to do. It is a necessary fundamental rule of Roman Catholic soteriology that the efficacy of the manipulations of a priest's hands is no way impaired by unbelief or immoral conduct of the priest in his own private life.

Unless he has specially qualified for a teaching position, the young priest beginning his ministry has a very hazy knowledge of what the theology that was taught him in the seminary is all about. A small book called a ritual detailed instructions of the manner in which he must perform the various actions deemed essential for the valid administration of the sacraments and other ceremonial acts. The "Church" is his covering and final argument in every doctrinal difficulty presented to him. "The Church," he will answer, "has so decreed it, so you must obey or be damned." The law of the Church and his tabloid ritual book constitute his entire equipment. His usefulness as a priest is limited to what his hands are endowed to accomplish.

A priest's help to the dying (which many Protestant ministers in America seem to envy) is not due to any personal contact from himself, but to the psychological comfort induced in the dying person by the contact of the act of oil applied by the priest to his lips, nose, hands, feet and other parts of his body. His preaching is mostly about brick and mortar for buildings, and the necessary dollars to cover payment of mortgages, along with frequent appeals to increase attendance at devotions and novenas to the Little Flower, Saint Anthony or Saint Anne.

But the priest cannot be altogether blamed for this. His economic support, his dignity, and his position as mediator between the people and God have been made dependent upon the belief of the people in the magic of external

objects – shrines, blest candles, medals, beads, relics and such like. Were he to exert himself to prepare inspiring sermons to raise the people's minds to grasp the true teachings of Jesus Christ, of what use then would it be for him to exhort the people to drop their dimes and dollars into church boxes to light little colored lamps before magical shrines of the Sacred Heart and the Little Flower? Were he to take the trouble to explain the real meaning and message of Calvary, how then could he demand a price for the favor of celebrating the sacrifice of the mass for those who can afford to pay more than others for it? If he were to preach the self-development of supernatural power and spiritual insight, how could he then command unquestioned submission to a pope in Rome as the sole medium of all things spiritual?

If Roman Catholic priests were to extol the virtues of true education and intellectual progress, how could they honestly clamor Sunday after Sunday for the dollars of their poor parishioners to build bigger and better parochial schools? For in these Catholic schools education must be in strict accord with the Church's dogmatic teaching, which consists in stuffing the child's mind with mere one-sided knowledge – the doctored metaphysics that are essential to protect the authoritarian system of the Catholic Church. The first duty of a Roman Catholic priest is to keep his people in 'simplicity of faith.' In order to do so he is obliged to leave them in ignorance of facts.

Often the priest himself is confused about many things that he is obliged to preach to the people. One of these is the power he is supposed to have to forgive sins in confession. Does or does not the act of absolution which he pronounces over sinners in the confession box take away their sins? No priest can give a clear, definite answer to this question. He was taught that he has the power of forgiving sins, which was transmitted to him by the authority of the Church in Rome. But he has no clear understanding of the extent and limitations of this supposed power. The people who come to him for forgiveness, on the other hand, have no doubt about their belief that pardon for their sins depends entirely on the will and judgment of the absolving priest. But this is not strictly true. For, in theory at least, Roman Catholic theologians admit that sins can, in some cases, be forgiven without absolution of a priest.

The whole difficulty, of course, centers around the absurdity that sins can be forgiven week after week in the same way as you pay off your debts to your grocer, after which you can begin again to contract further debts. The Jesuit theologians have made it more difficult still by distinguishing between different kinds of contrition or sorrow for sin. One kind they call 'perfect' contrition, the other 'imperfect' contrition, for which they have coined a special word attrition. A person who has only this attrition for his sins is said to be sorry for them, not because his sins have offended God, but because he is afraid he will go to hell unless he obtains forgiveness of them from the priest.

It can easily be seen that this is fear, not sorrow or true repentance. For it means that if there were no hell, such a person would not be sorry at all for having sinned, and would keep on sinning all the time with impunity. But according to Roman Catholic teaching, if a person with this feeling of mere

attrition for his sins confesses them to a priest, then his sins are washed away as soon as the priest makes the sign of the cross over the sinner's head and pronounces the prescribed formula of absolution. But not all together. Immediate danger of going to hell only is removed, but there remains an unknown amount of guilt which must be expiated for, either in this life by penances, or in the next life by burning in purgatory.

It is taught that, in rare instances, sins can be forgiven without the absolution of a priest. There are two conditions attached to this supposition: if the person is dying and a priest is not available, and if the sinner can work up 'perfect' contrition. Furthermore, if such a person recovers he is obliged to go and confess his sins, already pardoned, to a priest as soon as he can find one. If not, then in some mysterious way that no one can explain, his sins come back. In fact, if he fails to do so, another sin is added, namely, one of grave disobedience to the law of the Church.

It is entirely unscriptural that 'attrition' is sufficient to obtain forgiveness of sins. In the Christian dispensation, "the blood of Jesus Christ alone cleanses from all sin." This is obtained by true repentance, metanoia, a change of heart, and is a complete and perfect pardon. Confessing to a priest to obtain his forgiveness is the pagan, pre-Christian way. But it serves to enhance the power of the priest to whom the people trust for pardon of their sins before they die.

This teaching explains the anxiety of Roman Catholics to make sure they will have the priest when they come to die, and it is for this reason that we see pictures in newspapers of priests rushing dramatically into burning buildings, or to the scene of automobile smash-ups, to reach the burned and mangled bodies of the victims before they expire. The people firmly believe that the priest alone has the power to give them a ticket to heaven, even though it leads through the flames of an excruciating purgatory. To know that "he had the priest" at the end, relieves the anxiety of many a Catholic mother's heart about the salvation of a wayward son, even if he dies in the electric chair.

Parents and friends of those killed in automobile wrecks and airplane crashes are consoled to hear that a priest was in the locality, even some distance away. I once knew a Catholic mother whose son was killed in a plane crash, and who was broken-hearted at first because there was no priest present to absolve him. But her sorrow disappeared afterward when a priest wrote to tell her that he had seen the accident from a passing train and had made the sign of absolution in the air to forgive the sins of those in the plane.

In practice, however, it is made the rule that only by the absolution of a priest can a sinner be pardoned from his sins and saved from eternal punishment in hell. Priests make it known that generally speaking it is almost impossible to work up 'perfect' contrition for sin, for perfect sorrow is equal to perfect love of God, something that only heroic saints can have. In this way, the obligation to come to confession is stressed. To clinch the argument, they will quote verse 22 of the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John (Catholic version): "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven them, and

whose sins you shall retain they are retained.”

This verse of Scripture, they tell their people, makes it plain that only priests of the Roman Catholic Church have the power to forgive and to refuse to forgive sins. They do not explain that Jesus Christ said this to both apostles and disciples, among whom were some women. Neither do they explain the context, in which Christ mentioned two distinct ‘missions,’ one, His mission from the Father – which was to die upon the cross to forgive the sins of the world, and which only He could do – and the other, the commission to his apostles and disciples to go forth and preach the Gospel message that sins have been remitted by His finished work on Calvary. Protestant ministers carry out this commission to remit sins, but in the correct sense that they declare that sins are forgiven, and that sinners are saved, “to the uttermost,” by this redeeming work of Jesus Christ. For who can forgive sins but God alone?

This matter of the forgiveness of sins has been made so confusing in Catholic Church teaching that the bewildered young priest soon ceases to argue how it is done. He takes it for granted that all he has to do is to make the sign of the cross and pronounce the prescribed formula over the heads of the thousands of sinners who kneel down before him in the confession box. Some priests become very careless about it and ask no questions of their penitents. Others require that every detail of sins confessed must be explained to them, and that it depends upon the judgment of the priest whether or not the sinner can be pardoned. They are especially severe on women who try to conceal the details of their marital relations with their husbands in the matter of birth control.

The word ‘confession’ and ‘going to confession’ are ill-advised and no substitute for true repentance for sin. The former implies merely the telling of sins and the number of times committed to a priest in order words of absolution. The whole process is in no way spiritually directive and has little psychological value.

An action of the priest’s hands of even greater importance is the pouring of the water of baptism over the heads of infants. If this action is not properly performed the infant will be cast out of the sight of God for all eternity – even if he grows up and professes full faith in Jesus Christ. No other sacrament of the Catholic Church is of any avail to a person who was not properly baptized in the beginning. The three essential words which the priest must be sure to say while pouring the water are: Ego te baptizo. Woe to the child if the priest, by inadvertence or a slip of the tongue, should say the formula for confession, Ego te absolvo, which is so much alike and which he repeats many thousands of times. Should this mistake occur, the entire act of baptism would be invalidated, and the child would be a Christian in name only. The unconscious antics of the baby, the sudden contact of cold water on its head, the embarrassing, but perfectly natural accidents that happen to newborn babies at unexpected moments, may conspire to unsteady the hand of the priest while pouring the water or divert his mind from the correct word formula. This pouring of the water of baptism is made so essential for the attainment of heaven, that exact instructions and suitable instruments are provided to perform this action upon a fetus still

in its mother's womb, if it appears likely that it may die before issue.

An infant, because born of natural intercourse, is regarded by the Roman Catholic theologians as possessed by the devil after it comes from its mother's womb. The priest's first task, therefore, is to cast out this unclean spirit from the child before baptism. To this end he uses the most powerful exorcisms accompanied by the sprinkling of holy water and repeated signs of the cross. He puts salt (previously exorcised) into the infant's mouth, wets the infant's lips, ears and nostrils with spittle from his own mouth, rubs oil on its chest and back. Directly addressing the devil which is believed to be in the child, the priest commands him as follows: "Depart, thou accursed devil (maledicte diabole) from this servant of God."

Rosary beads, scapulars, medals, chalices and mass vestments must likewise be cleansed from the evil which is supposed to be inherent in them as natural and material objects. After being thus exorcised they are looked upon as holy objects to be handled with reverence and used exclusively for acts of worship. It is a sin for a layman to touch the chalice used by the priest at mass. It thus comes about that Catholics believe that such objects, after being blessed by a priest, possess a magical charm and are able to ward off the power of the devil and to protect from accidents their person and property. Blest medals of Saint Christopher are pinned to automobiles (even by some Protestants) in the belief that by so doing cars and their occupants will be protected from wrecks. But insurance companies allow no rebate on insurance premiums for cars that carry one of these blest medals of Saint Christopher.

Priests personally have little faith in relics of the saints, medals, beads, scapulars and statues, even though it is part of their work to exorcise the evil from them and to recommend their use to the pious faithful. Priests who have been to Rome for any length of time lose reverence for such things because of the shameless traffic carried on there in bits of bones and all kinds of pious objects. Rome is a vast graveyard of skulls and bones of supposed saints. In some churches the lamps and ornamentations around the walls are fashioned from bones of departed holy people. In Rome are two heads of Saint Paul, a slipper of Saint Joseph, the girdle of the Virgin Mary, and what is said to be milk from her breasts.

All this ritualistic maneuvering has been invented by the Roman theologians to fit in with their basic teaching that salvation can only be gained by "the works that are worked" by a priest. The grace of salvation is taught as something that can be 'poured' into people's souls through the specially devised channels of the seven sacraments. These in turn are supposed to act as conduits from the great reservoir of grace over which the pope in Rome has sole monopoly. This engineering of external unrealities, to act with magical force to produce a spiritual effect, runs through the entire system of Roman Catholic theology. The works of a priest's hands must be accepted both as a matter of belief as well as of organization and practice.

But of such is not the power of the kingdom of heaven.