

The Meaning and Purpose of Frequent Confession

A person may receive the sacrament of Penance frequently for the reason that over and over again he falls into mortal sins and wants to obtain forgiveness for them from God. We are not speaking here of frequent Confession in this sense. What we have in mind is the frequent and regular Confession of a person who in general does not commit mortal sin but rather lives a life of union with God and is bound to him by love. Such a person may, nevertheless, be guilty of many disloyalties and failings. He may have various weaknesses and bad habits and perverse inclinations, and he may have to struggle hard with his inordinate desires and his self-love. It is not a matter of indifference to him that here and there he has acted against his conscience, even though it be in nonessential matters. He is anxious to purify his soul from every stain of sin and from every fault and to keep it pure and to keep his will steadfastly directed toward God. For this reason he goes frequently to Confession, possibly every week. He seeks inner purification and strength of will, new strength to strive after perfect union with God and with Christ.

He knows well that he is in no way bound in conscience to confess the venial sins that he has committed. He knows—for it is the explicit teaching of the Church—that venial sins need not be told in Confession: and this because there are many other means by which they can be forgiven. Such means are all acts of true supernatural contrition, all petitions for the

forgiveness of sin, all works undertaken and sufferings borne in a spirit of penance and atonement, all acts of perfect love of God, all works of Christian charity toward neighbor that spring from a supernatural motive—in a word, every work that is done and every sacrifice that is made out of supernatural love. Other means still are the right use of what we call sacramentals, for example, holy water and various liturgical prayers, such as the *Confiteor*. There is, especially, assistance at Holy Mass and the reception of Holy Communion: for, as the Council of Trent says, through Holy Communion we are “purified from our daily faults” (Session XIII, ch. 2). For the soul that is honestly striving, God’s mercy has indeed made it very easy to atone for past faults and failings.

If there are so many ways in which the soul can be cleansed from venial sin without recourse to the sacrament of Penance, what meaning or what value has the confession of venial sins? Wherein exactly lies the “profit” of such confession, of which the Council of Trent speaks? For the Council says: “Venial sins, which do not separate man from God and into which we frequently fall, are rightly and with profit accused in Confession, as is the practice of pious Christians” (Session XVII, ch. 5).

(a) *The Advantages of Frequent Confession*

The “profit” of the confession of venial sins comes above all else from the fact that when we go to Confession we receive a sacrament. The forgiveness of sin takes place by the power of the sacrament, that is, by the power of Christ himself. In the sacrament of Penance, says the Council of Trent, “the merits of the death of Christ are applied to those who have sinned after

Baptism” (Session XIV, ch. 1). It should be noted too that it is not upon the sins committed themselves that the action of the sacrament falls but rather upon our interior aversion of heart from sin; it is this that the power of the sacrament takes hold of, as it were, and elevates in order to unite us to God through grace.

Since it is exclusively venial sin that is in question here, the grace bestowed by Confession is not, as in the case where mortal sin is confessed, a new life of grace, the “state of grace”; rather, it is the strengthening and deepening of the supernatural life already existing in the soul and an increase of the love of God. In these circumstances the sacrament is primarily positive in its effects: it strengthens the supernatural life of the soul, increases sanctifying grace, and, along with this, gives actual grace, which stimulates our will to acts of love of God and of contrition for our sins. Such sentiments of love tend to uproot venial sins and cast them out of the soul, just as light dispels and does away with darkness.

The value of the confession of venial sins lies furthermore in this: that the power of the sacrament not merely blots out these sins but also undoes their evil consequences in the soul more fully than is the case when venial sins are forgiven outside Confession. Thus, for instance, when venial sins are forgiven in Confession a greater part of the temporal punishment due to them is forgiven than would be outside the sacrament with the same sentiments of contrition. But especially the sacrament of Penance cures the soul from the weakness that follows venial sin and from the weariness and coldness toward the things of God and the inclination toward worldliness that venial sin brings; it delivers the soul from its reawakened inordinate inclinations and instincts and from the domination of concupiscence: and all this by its sacramental power, in other words, by

the power of Christ himself. Moreover, the confession of venial sins gives the soul an interior freshness, a new aspiration and impetus toward self-surrender to God and toward the cultivation of the supernatural life: results that are not usually produced at all when venial sin is forgiven outside Confession.

A very important advantage of the confession of venial sins is that as a rule our examination of conscience and especially our acts of contrition, of purpose, of amendment, and of resolution to atone and do penance are much more carefully made when we go to Confession than is the case of the extra-sacramental forgiveness of venial sin, for example, by means of an ejaculation or by the pious use of holy water. We know quite well what an effort it takes to formulate properly the accusation of our sins for the priest and how intent we must be to elicit a good act of contrition and purpose of amendment and to form the intention to do our penance and atone for our sins. We must consciously and of set purpose apply ourselves to making these acts well.

Indeed, it is only right that we should take this trouble. For these acts of interior aversion from our faults are required not merely as a psychological predisposition for the reception of the sacrament of Penance; they are essential constituent parts of the sacrament. They are necessary for the very existence of the sacrament, and the measure of the effects of the sacrament—of the increase of divine life and of the remission of sin—is determined by them.

Apart from the sacrament of Matrimony, Penance is the most personal of the sacraments. The personal dispositions of the penitent—his personal expression of sorrow, of accusation of sin, and of the desire to atone for it—are absolutely necessary for this sacrament. Its

efficacy depends essentially on our personal attitude to the sins we have committed and on our personal turning back to Christ and to God. In the sacrament of Penance these personal acts of penance of ours are elevated; they no longer remain purely personal but are linked with the sufferings and death of Christ, from which the power of the sacrament comes. Here, indeed, we see clearly the great value and advantage of the sacrament of Penance.

What we call the sacramental grace of the sacrament of Penance—the grace that belongs to this sacrament and that is not given and cannot be given by any other sacrament—is sanctifying grace with the special power and function of remedying the debility of soul and the lack of vigor and courage and energy, caused by venial sin, and of strengthening the soul and removing the obstacles that the working of grace encounters in it.

Another important value and advantage of frequent Confession is that in it our venial sins are confessed to the priest as the representative of the Church and thus, in a sense, to the Church itself, to the Christian community. It is true that the person who has committed venial sin remains a living member of the Church. But by his venial sin he has offended not only against God and Christ and against the good of his own soul; he has also acted against the interests of the Christian community, the Church. His sin is a spot and wrinkle (Eph 5: 27) on the garment of the Bride of Christ, an obstacle preventing the charity poured forth in the Church by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5: 5) from flowing freely in all the members. Venial sin does a wrong to the community of Christians and is a failure in charity toward the Church, in which alone are the sources of life and salvation for the Christian. Therefore it can be atoned for in no better way than by being confessed to the representative of

the Church, absolved by him, and expiated by the penance he imposes.

(b) *Positive Aim of Frequent Confession*

The usefulness of frequent Confession is not confined to the fact that in this sacrament the faults of which we have been guilty are forgiven and the interior weakness of our soul is cured. Frequent Confession looks not only backward to what was, to our past failings; it looks forward also to the future. Precisely by its frequency it aims at an eminently positive goal: at strengthening and invigorating our will in the struggle to acquire true Christian virtue, to become perfectly pure and pleasing in God's sight, to put the supernatural man in full control, to make the spirit reign over the impulses and passions and weaknesses of the old man.

Frequent Confession helps us to foster ever more within ourselves a Christlike disposition and especially a Christian hatred of everything in us that displeases God. It helps us to develop a spirit of Christian penance and atonement and the desire to make satisfaction for our own sins and for those of others. And from a genuine disposition to do penance there grows a readiness for all the sacrifices and sufferings and difficulties and trials that the Lord may allow to come upon us. These are some of the precious things that the devout and frequent reception of the holy sacrament of Penance will bring us.

(c) *Frequent Confession and Spiritual Direction*

1. As a further advantage of frequent Confession many lay stress on the spiritual direction given by one's confessor. It is a fact that for those who are striving to attain