



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"I am asking for renewed pastoral courage in presenting, persuasively and effectively, the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Every effort must be made to face the crisis of the 'sense of sin' apparent in today's culture. Even more important is the rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance." Pope John-Paul II: *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001.

"If we say we have no sin in us, we are deceiving ourselves, and refusing to admit the truth" (1 Jn 1:8)

Monastic Voices

"The fifth step of humility is that a monk does not conceal from his Abbot any sinful thoughts entering his heart, or any wrongs committed in secret, but rather confesses them humbly. Concerning this, Scripture exhorts us: Make known your way to the Lord and hope in him (Ps 36[37]:5). And again, Confess to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy is forever (Ps 105[106]:1; Ps 117[118]:1). So too the Prophet: To you I have acknowledged my offence; my faults I have not concealed. I have said: Against myself I will report my faults to the Lord, and you have forgiven the wickedness of my heart (Ps 31[32]:5) Holy Rule 7:44-48

"St. Mary Magdalene, you came with springing tears to the spring of mercy, Christ; from him your burning thirst was abundantly refreshed; through him your sins were forgiven; by him your bitter sorrow was consoled. My dearest lady, well you know by your own life how a sinful soul can be reconciled with its Creator, what counsel a soul in misery needs, what medicine will restore the sick to health. We know this of you, dear friend of God, since you were the one to whom were 'many sins forgiven, because she loved much' (cf. Lk 7:36-47). Most blessed lady, I who am the most evil and sinful of men do not recall your sins as a reproach, but call upon the boundless mercy by which they were blotted out. This is my reassurance, so that I do not despair; this is my longing, so that I shall not perish. I say this of myself miserably cast down into the depths of vice, bowed down with the weight of crimes, thrust down by my own hand into a dark prison of sins, wrapped round with the shadows of darkness. Therefore, since you are now with the chosen because you are beloved, and are beloved because you are chosen of God, I, in my misery, pray to you, in bliss; in my darkness I ask for light; in my sins, redemption; impure, I ask for purity. Recall in loving kindness what you used to be, how much you needed mercy, and seek for me that same forgiving love that you received when you were wanting it. Ask urgently that I may have the love that pierces the heart; tears that are humble; desire for the homeland of heaven; impatience with this earthly exile; searing repentance; and a dread of torments in eternity. Draw me to Him where I may wash away my sins; bring me to Him who can slake my thirst; pour over me those waters that will make my dry places fresh. You will not find it hard to gain all you desire from so loving and so kind a Lord, who is alive and reigns and is your friend...

My Lord, my most dear Jesus, I want your love to burn in me as you command, and as it did in your faithful servant and disciple. May I desire you alone and sacrifice to you a troubled spirit, a broken and contrite heart (Ps 50[51]:17). Give me, O Lord, in this exile, the bread of tears and sorrow for which I hunger more than for any

choice delights. Hear me, for your love, and for the dear merits of your beloved Mary, and your blessed Mother, the greater Mary. Redeemer, my good Jesus, do not despise the prayers of one who has sinned against you, but strengthen the efforts of a weakling that loves you. Shake my heart out of its indolence, Lord, and in the ardour of your love bring me to the everlasting sight of your glory, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, God, for ever. Amen. St. Anselm of Aosta (1033-1109), monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Bec in Normandy; became Abbot in 1078; succeeded Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1089.

Dear oblates and friends,

When people are first introduced to the Rule of St. Benedict, they are often struck by the all-pervading sense of sin they find there. This is perhaps one of the features that most of all mark it out as a document of the 6th, and not the 21st, century. St. Benedict certainly loved his monks, but equally certainly had no illusions about them. We find him assuming throughout that monks can well be negligent, stubborn, resentful, secretly acquisitive, presumptuous, and disobedient. Again and again he feels it necessary to warn against the vices he hates most: pride, laziness and grumbling. The seriousness with which he regards the reality of sin is reflected in his "penal code" (chapters 23-30; 43-46) which establishes graded punishments for monks who offend. In the very chapters dealing with monks considered worthy to be ordained priest (ch. 62) or made Prior (ch. 65), he considers what should happen if they succumb to pride, and makes provision even for their expulsion from the monastery.

St. Benedict's ideal monks, on the other hand, will typically pray "with tears of compunction" (4:57; 20:3; 49:4; 52:4). Progress in the spiritual life (Prol 49; 62:4) will mean for them advance in humility. This path leads not so much up, as down. The sense of sin is at the beginning and end of St. Benedict's ladder of humility (7:11-30; 62-66). Precisely on the 12th rung, where the monk reaches "the perfect love of God which casts out fear" and is truly "cleansed from his vices and sins", he "judges himself always guilty on account of his sins, saying constantly in his heart with the publican: Lord, I am not worthy, I a sinner, to raise my eyes to heaven" (cf. Lk 18:13; HR 7:64-5).

Is life according to such a Rule oppressive? The experience of the centuries shows that it is not. Countless people who have willingly accepted its discipline have found it a sure guide towards happiness and fulfilment. This is because St. Benedict's negative view of human nature is rooted not in a world-weary pessimism, but in Christian faith and hope. It is simply the reverse side of his belief in our capacity for real holiness (4:62). We find the same attitude, for example, in St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul's harsh words about human wickedness and folly at the beginning (Rm 1:18-3:26) only serve to highlight his astonished realisation of the meaning of our justification in Christ Jesus, through the unmerited love and mercy of God. So Jesus teaches in St. John's Gospel that it is the Holy Spirit, the One who will lead us to complete truth (16:13), who convinces us of sin (16:8).

I think our modern "crisis of the sense of sin" is a visible aspect of a deeper crisis: that of faith itself. We need to be clear, with St. Anselm, that sorrow for sin is a great grace: something that is creative and healthy; something we should desire and pray for. And I'm sure that the Pope is right in suggesting frequent reception of the sacrament of penance as the best way to foster it.

Although the 5th step of humility is not explicitly about this sacrament, the practice of confession is obviously very much in accordance with the spirit of St. Benedict's Rule. The Pluscarden custom of weekly confession is one I greatly value. As our Constitutions put it: "The brethren are to approach the sacrament of penance frequently because of their eagerness for conversion to God." So I want to offer here a few reflections on confession, which I hope you might find helpful and encouraging.

The sacrament of reconciliation is always a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. We come to him in faith, as if asking with the leper in the Gospels Lord, if you want to, you can cure me (cf. Mk 1:40). Through the ministry of the priest, He then reaches out and touches us, personally, individually. "I do want to", He says, "be cured". His words have divine power. By them our wounds are healed; our sins taken away. By them also we receive new grace and strength, through the Holy Spirit, to resist sin in future, and to grow in holiness. If we fall, He is waiting to help us up again. His love will always be stronger than our sin. His blood has infinite power to cleanse. Nothing we ever do could justify despair of His mercy (HR 4:74).

Unfortunately, some people today have the mistaken impression that sacramental confession is only needed in cases of murder or adultery. They feel they lead a good, religious life, and so stand in no real need of forgiveness. And it is true that, according to the law of the Church, confession is only of "obligation" in case of serious sins, and then only once a year. So we don't "have" to go to confession, any more than we "have" to go to communion, more than once a year. But it is a strange sort of faith that is content with meeting Jesus Christ as seldom as possible. There is a real danger here of our falling all unwittingly into the attitude of the Pharisee, who congratulated himself that his life bore very favourable comparison with that of some of his neighbours. This was not the mind of the Saints. They had a horror of all sin, since they understood it as an offence against the infinite goodness of God. They realised therefore that no sin can truly be regarded as trivial. Their gaze was fixed not on their own virtues, or other people's faults, but on God's greatness and love, and the sufferings Christ endured because of sin. They understood that every Christian has a vocation to practise charity according to the measure of the charity of Christ. The slightest thought or action against the love of God therefore filled them with dismay. And the closer they drew to God, the more they thought of themselves as sinners.

Perhaps many people today are all too aware of their sinfulness, but have great difficulty with the idea of telling their sins to a priest. They are embarrassed, and wonder what he will think of them.

The first thing to say about this is that the priest himself is a sinner, who needs to go to confession. Also, he is probably quite unshockable. There only are 7 sins in the book, and he has heard them all before. From my own few years' experience on the receiving end, I can testify that a truly humble confession is always a source of joy and edification for the priest. One is conscious of the enormous privilege of being a channel of divine mercy. So often one meets people earnestly striving for closer union with God, whose humility shows that they are already far advanced on that journey. Sometimes also one encounters a penitent who starts "Father, it's been 25 years since my last confession..." Even if a frightful list of crimes follows, it is impossible for the priest to think badly of this person. He has dared to show his wounds and ask for healing. The whole point of the sacrament is that he emerges forgiven, restored to the radiant grace of his baptism, the sins he has confessed taken away, blotted out, gone forever. All that is left is the joy of the angels in heaven, and enormous love for this child of God who has returned to his Heavenly Father; who had been lost and is now found (Lk 15:10,32).

Some people experience discouragement when they feel they are always having to repeat the same, dreary list. Our Dom Bruno used to say: Of course you have the same sins to confess: you're the same person! Living always in the same circumstances, one is very likely to confront the same temptations, and to suffer from the same weaknesses. The best advice in this case is to keep struggling on, and not give up. Nevertheless, there should be gradual progress. If there is really none, perhaps it is because the person is not opening himself to the grace of the sacrament. Even if we cannot expect every confession to be an emotional experience, genuine sorrow for sin is always an essential part of its celebration. That requires an effort in preparation, and assumes a realistic determination to amend for the future. Without these we will be left with a merely mechanical recitation, which can achieve very little.

It is very important to distinguish between temptations and sins. Jesus Himself was tempted, but He never sinned. The first motions of our natural passions are not within our control. So a feeling of anger or lust need not involve any sin at all. Indeed it can be the occasion for a heroic act of love for God and our neighbour. Sin only comes in when we willingly consent to these impulses, take pleasure in them, follow them through. To be hurt when somebody hurts us is not sinful. To indulge in resentment, bitterness and hatred against the person who hurt us is.

Many people worry that their confession has not been perfect. Well: it doesn't need to be! Apart from mortal sins, there is no requirement to go into much detail. You don't have to say everything. You certainly don't have to present the priest with a perfect self psycho-analysis. It is much better to be very simple about the whole thing. Just mention perhaps the one or two things that are on your mind, and then renew your sorrow for all the sins of your life, including the ones you are not aware of. This might take very few minutes, or even seconds. Perhaps you want to talk at greater length, and mention some of your troubles or concerns to the priest, for his advice and prayer. There is certainly a place for this, and it can be very helpful. Strictly speaking though, it is not part of the sacrament.

Sometimes the moment for confession comes - and you can't think of a single thing to say. If that happens to you, simply tell the priest that, and ask him to help you. He will be happy to do so. Usually, however, this won't be a problem if we have done our "examination of conscience" beforehand. Some people find handbooks with lists of possible sins, or detailed considerations of the commandments or the virtues helpful for this. Others

don't. Often a regular habit of prayer and spiritual reading will provide all the stimulus needed to prompt the conscience. We are struck by some virtue we lack, or we notice as if anew some failing in ourselves that we could correct. If that is not enough, try reading over, for example, St. Paul's hymn to charity in 1 Corinthians 13, or Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Luke 6:27-38, or chapter 4 of the Holy Rule. Then: if you can, go to confession. Sometimes nowadays it may not be easy to find an available priest. But how often ought I to try to go? In this matter, we are free. One or two confessions a year, however, would seem to indicate carelessness in the battle against sin in our lives. We have a vocation to holiness. Confession is an excellent means given us for attaining that.

Lord Jesus, you chose to be called the friend of sinners. By your saving death and resurrection free me from my sins. May your peace take root in my heart and bring forth a harvest of love, holiness and truth.