

LESSON SEVENTEENTH.

ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE.

WHEN Our Blessed Lord redeemed us He applied the benefits of the Redemption in the sacrament of baptism. By this baptism He freed us from sin and the slavery of the devil; He restored us to God's grace; He reopened for us heaven; made us once more children of God: in a word, He placed us in the condition in which we were before our fall through the sin of our first parents. This was certainly a great kindness bestowed upon us, and one would think we would never forget it, and never more lose God's friendship by any fault of ours; especially when we had seen the great miseries brought upon the world by sin, and had learned something of hell where we would have been, and of heaven which we would have lost, if Our Lord had not redeemed us. Our Blessed Lord saw, however, that we would forget His benefits, and again, even after baptism, go freely into the slavery of the devil. How, then, could we be saved? We could not be baptized again, because baptism can be given only once. Our good Lord in His kindness instituted another sacrament, by which we could once more be freed from sin if we had the misfortune to fall into it after baptism—it is the Sacrament of Penance. It is called the plank in a shipwreck. When sailors are shipwrecked and thrown helplessly into the ocean, their only hope is some floating plank that may bear them to the shore. So when we fall after baptism we are thrown into the great ocean of sin, where we must perish if we do not rest upon the Sacrament of Penance, which will bring us once more in safety to the friendship of God. How very thankful the poor shipwrecked sailors would be to any one who would offer them a plank while they were in danger! Do you think

they would refuse to use it? In like manner how thankful we should be for the Sacrament of Penance, and how anxious we should be to use it when we are in danger of losing our souls!

The Sacrament of Penance shows the very great kindness of Our Lord. He might have said: I saved them once, and I will not trouble Myself more about them; if they want to sin again, let them perish. But no, He forgives us and saves us as often as we sincerely call on Him for help, being truly sorry for our sins. He left this power also to His apostles, saying to them: As often as any poor sinner shall come to you and show that he is truly sorry for his sins, and has the determination not to commit them again, and confesses them to you, I give you the power to pardon his sins in the Sacrament of Penance. The forgiveness of your sins is the chief though not the only blessing you receive in the reception of this sacrament, through which you derive so many and great advantages from the exhortation, instruction, or advice of your confessor.

Is it not a great benefit to have a friend to whom you can go with the trials of your mind and soul, your troubles, temptations, sins, and secrets? You have that friend—the priest in the confessional. He is willing to help you, for he consecrated his life to God to help men to save their souls. He is able to help you, for he understands your difficulties, sins, and temptations, and the means of overcoming them. He has made these things the study of his life, and derives still greater knowledge of them from hearing the sad complaints of so many relating their secret sorrows or afflictions, and begging his advice.

Then you are sure that whatever you tell him in the confessional will never be made known to others, even if the priest has to die to conceal it. You might tell your secrets to a friend, and if you afterwards offended him he would probably reveal all you told him. The priest asks no reward for the service he gives you in the confessional, but loves to help you, because he has pledged himself to God to do so, and would sin.

if he did not. Some enemies of our holy religion have tried to make people believe that Catholics have to pay the priest in confession for forgiving their sins; but every Catholic, even the youngest child who has been to confession, knows this to be untrue, and a base calumny against our holy religion; even those who assert it do not believe it themselves. The good done in the confessional will never be known in this world. How many persons have been saved from sin, suicide, death, and other evils by the advice and encouragement received in confession! How many persons who have fallen into the lowest depths of sin have by the Sacrament of Penance been raised up and made to lead good, respectable lives—a blessing to themselves, their families, and society!

187 Q. What is the Sacrament of Penance?

A. Penance is a sacrament in which the sins committed after baptism are forgiven.

One who has never been baptized could not go to confession and receive absolution, nor indeed any of the sacraments.

*** 188 Q.** How does the Sacrament of Penance remit sin, and restore the soul to the friendship of God?

A. The Sacrament of Penance remits sin and restores the friendship of God to the soul by means of the absolution of the priest.

“**Absolution**” means the words the priest says at the time he forgives the sins. *Absolve* means to loose or free. When ministers or ambassadors are sent by our government to represent the United States in England, France, Germany, or other countries, whatever they do there officially is done by the United States. If they make an agreement with the governments to which they are sent, the United States sanctions it, and the very moment they sign the agreement it is signed and sanctioned by the authority of our government whose representatives they are, and their official action becomes the action of the United States itself. But when their term of office expires, though they remain in the foreign

countries, they have no longer any power to sign agreements in the name and with the authority of the United States.

You see, therefore, that it is the power that is given them, and not their own, that they exercise. In like manner Our Lord commissioned His priests and gave them the power to forgive sins, and whatever they do in the Sacrament of Penance He Himself does. At the very moment the priest pronounces the words of absolution on earth his sentence is ratified in heaven and the sins of the penitent are blotted out.

It may increase your veneration for the sacrament to know the precise manner in which absolution is given. After the confession and giving of the penance, the priest first prays for the sinner, saying: "May Almighty God have mercy on you, and, your sins being forgiven, bring you to life everlasting. Amen." Then, raising his right hand over the penitent, he says: "May the Almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon, absolution, and remission of your sins. Amen." Then he continues: "May Our Lord Jesus Christ absolve you, and I, by His authority, absolve you from every bond of excommunication and interdict, as far as I have power and you stand in need. Then I absolve you from your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." At these last words he makes the sign of the cross over the penitent. In conclusion he directs to God a prayer in behalf of the penitent in the following words: "May the passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints, and whatsoever good you may have done or evil you may have suffered, be to you unto the remission of your sins, the increase of grace, and the recompense of everlasting life. Amen." Then the priest says, "God bless you," "Go in peace," or some other expression showing his delight at your reconciliation with God.

*** 189 Q.** How do you know that the priest has the power of absolving from the sins committed after baptism?

A. I know that the priest has the power of absolving

from sins committed after baptism, because Jesus Christ granted that power to the priests of His Church when He said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

Every Christian knows Our Lord Himself had power to forgive sins—(1) because He was God, and (2) because He often did forgive them while on earth, and proved that He did by performing some miracle; as, for example (Mark ii.; John v.), when He cured the poor men who had been sick and suffering for many years, He said to them, "Thy sins are forgiven thee; arise, take up thy bed, and walk," and the men did so. Since Our Lord had the power Himself, He could give it to His apostles if He wished, and He did give it to them and their successors. For if He did not, how could we and all others who, after baptism, have fallen into sin be cleansed from it? This Sacrament of Penance was for all time, and so He left the power with His Church, which is to last as long as there is a living human being upon the earth. Our Lord promised to His apostles before His death this power to forgive sins (Matt. xviii. 18), and He gave it to them after His resurrection (John xx. 23), when He appeared to them and breathed on them, and said: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

*** 190 Q.** How do the priests of the Church exercise the power of forgiving sins?

A. The priests of the Church exercise the power of forgiving sins by hearing the confession of sins, and granting pardon for them as ministers of God and in His name.

The power to forgive sins implies the obligation of going to confession; because, as most sins are secret, how could the apostles know what sins to forgive and what sins to retain—that is; not to forgive—unless they were told by the sinner what sins he had committed? They could not see into his

heart as God can, and know his sins; and so if the sinner wished his sins forgiven, he had to confess them to the apostles or their successors. Therefore, since we have the Sacrament of Penance, we must also have confession.

191 Q. What must we do to receive the Sacrament of Penance worthily?

A. To receive the Sacrament of Penance worthily we must do five things:

- (1) We must examine our conscience.
- (2) We must have sorrow for our sins.
- (3) We must make a firm resolution never more to offend God.
- (4) We must confess our sins to the priest.
- (5) We must accept the penance which the priest gives us.

When we are about to go to confession the first thing we should do is to pray to the Holy Ghost to give us light to know and remember all our sins; to fully understand how displeasing they are to God, and to have a great sorrow for them, which includes the resolution of never committing them again. The next thing we should do is—

(1) “**Examine our conscience;**” and first of all we find out how long a time it is since our last confession, and whether we made a good confession then and received Holy Communion and performed our penance. The best method of examining is to take the Commandments and go over each one in our mind, seeing if we have broken it, and in what way; for example: *First.* “I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt not have strange gods before Me.” Have I honored God? Have I said my prayers morning and night; have I said them with attention and devotion? Have I thanked God for all His blessings? Have I been more anxious to please others than to please God, or offended Him for the sake of others? *Second.* “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” Have I cursed? Have I taken God’s name in vain or spoken without reverence of holy things? *Third.* “Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath-day.” Have I neglected

to hear Mass through my own fault on Sundays and holy-days of obligation? Have I kept others from Mass? Have I been late, and at what part of the Mass did I come in? Have I been wilfully distracted at Mass or have I distracted others? Have I done servile work without necessity? *Fourth.* "Honor thy father and thy mother." Have I been disobedient to parents or others who have authority over me—to spiritual or temporal superiors, teachers, etc.? Have I slighted or been ashamed of parents because they were poor or uneducated? Have I neglected to give them what help I could when they were in need of it? Have I spoken of them with disrespect or called them names that were not proper? *Fifth.* "Thou shalt not kill." Have I done anything that might lead to killing? Have I been angry or have I tried to take revenge? Have I borne hatred or tried to injure others? Have I given scandal? *Sixth.* "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Have I indulged in any bad thoughts, looked at any bad pictures or objects, listened to any bad conversation, told or listened to bad or immodest jokes or stories, or, in general, spoken of bad things? Have I done any bad actions or desired to do any while alone or with others? *Seventh.* "Thou shalt not steal." Have I stolen anything myself or helped or advised others to steal? Have I received anything or part of anything that I knew to be stolen? Do I owe money and not pay it when I can? Have I bought anything with the intention of never paying for it or at least knowing I never could pay for it? Have I made restitution when told to do so by my confessor; or have I put it off from time to time? Have I failed to give back what belonged to another? Have I found anything and not tried to discover its owner, or have I kept it in my possession after I knew to whom it belonged? Have I cheated in business or at games? *Eighth.* "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Have I told lies or injured any one by my talk? Have I told the faults of others without any necessity? It is not allowed to tell the faults of others—even when you tell the truth about them—unless some good comes of the telling. *Ninth.* "Thou shalt not covet

thy neighbor's wife." This can come into our examination on the Sixth Commandment. *Tenth.* "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods." This can come into our examination on the Seventh Commandment.

After examining yourself on the Commandments of God, examine yourself on the Commandments of the Church.

First. "To hear Mass on Sundays and holy-days of obligation." This has been considered in the examination on the Third Commandment. *Second.* "To fast and abstain on the days appointed." Have I eaten meat on Fridays or fast-days remembering that it was Friday or a fast-day, and when I had no permission from my confessor to do so on account of poor health or other reason? *Third.* "To confess at least once a year." Is it over a year, and how much over it, since I have been to confession? *Fourth.* "To receive Holy Eucharist during the Easter time." Did I go to Holy Communion between the first Sunday of Lent and Trinity Sunday? If not, I have committed a mortal sin. *Fifth.* "To contribute to the support of our pastors." Have I helped the church and reasonably paid my share of its expenses—given to charity and the like, or have I made others pay for the light, heat, and other things that cost money in the church, and shared in their benefits without giving according to my means? Have I kept what was given me for the church or other charity, or stolen from the church and not stated that circumstance when I confessed that I stole?

Sixth. "Not to marry persons who are not Catholics, or who are related to us within the fourth degree of kindred, or privately without witnesses, nor to solemnize marriage at forbidden times." Have I anything to tell on this commandment?

After examining yourself on the commandments of God and of His Church, examine yourself on the capital sins, especially on "**Pride.**" Have I been impudent and stubborn, vain about my dress, and the like? Have I despised others simply on account of poverty or something they could not help? "**Gluttony.**" Have I ever taken intoxicating drink

to excess or broken a promise not to take it? Have I knowingly caused others to be intoxicated? "**Sloth.**" Have I wasted my time wilfully and neglected to do my duty at school or elsewhere? After examining yourself on the commandments and capital sins, examine yourself on the duties of your state of life. If you are at school, how have you studied? You should study not alone to please your parents or teachers, but for the sake of learning. If you are at work, have you been faithful to your employer, and done your work well and honestly?

The above method is generally recommended as the best in the examination of conscience. But you need not follow these exact questions; you can ask yourself any questions you please: the above questions are given only as examples of what you might ask, and to show you how to question yourself. It is useless to take any list of sins in a prayer-book and examine yourself by it, confessing the sins just as they are given. If you do take such a list and find in it some questions or sins that you do not understand, do not trouble yourself about them. In asking yourself the questions, if you find you have sinned against a commandment, stop and consider how many times. There are few persons who sin against all the commandments. Some sin against one and some against another. Find out the worst sin you have and the one you have most frequently committed, and be sure of telling it.

(2) "**Have sorrow for our sins.**" After examining your conscience and finding out the sins you have committed, the next thing is to be sorry for them. The sorrow is the most essential part in the whole Sacrament of Penance. In this sacrament there are, as you know, three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction—and contrition is the most important part. When, therefore, we are preparing for confession, we should spend just as much time, and even more, in exciting ourselves to sorrow for our sins as in the examination of our conscience. Some persons forget this and spend all their time examining their conscience. We should pray for sorrow

if we think we have none. Remember the act of contrition made at confession is not the sorrow, but only an outward sign by which we make known to the priest that we have the sorrow in our heart, and therefore we must have the sorrow before making the confession—or at least, before receiving the absolution. Now what kind of sorrow must we have? Some one might say, I am not truly sorry because I cannot cry. If some of my friends died, I would be more sorry for that than for my sins. Do not make any such mistake. The true and necessary kind of sorrow for sin is to know that by sin you have offended God, and now feel that it was very wrong, and that you have from this moment the firm determination never to offend Him more. If God adds to this a feeling that brings tears to your eyes, it is good, but not necessary.

(3) Remember real sorrow for sin supposes and contains “a firm resolution” never to sin again. How can you say to God, “O my God, I am heartily sorry,” etc., if you are waiting only for the next opportunity to sin? How can we be sorry for the past if we are going to do the same in the future? Do you think the thief would be sorry for his past thefts if he had his mind made up to steal again as soon as he had the chance? Ah, but you will say, nearly all persons sin again after confession. I know that; but when they were making their confession they thought they never would, and really meant never to sin again; but when temptation came, they forgot the good resolution, did not use God’s help, and fell into sin again. I mean, therefore, that at the time you make the act of contrition you must really mean what you say and promise never to sin, and take every means you can to keep that promise. If you do fall afterwards, renew your promise as quickly as possible and make a greater effort than before. Be on your guard against those things that make you break your promise, and then your act of contrition will be a good one. A person may be afraid that he will fall again, but being afraid does not make his contrition worthless as long as he wishes, hopes, and intends never to sin

again. We should always be afraid of falling into sin, and we will fall into it if we depend upon ourselves alone, and not on the help which God gives us in His grace.

(4) **"Confess our sins."** Having made the necessary preparation, you will next go into the confessional; and while you are waiting for the priest to hear you, you should say the confiteor. When the priest turns to you, bless yourself and say: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It is a month or a week (or whatever time it may be) since my last confession, and I have since committed these sins." Then tell your sins as you found them in examining yourself. In confession you must tell only such things as are sins. You must not tell all the details and a long story with every sin. For example, if a boy should confess that he went to see a friend, and after that met another friend, and when he came home he was asked what had kept him, and he told a lie. Now, the going to see the friend and the meeting of the other friend, and all the rest, was not a sin: the sin was telling the lie, and that was all that should have been confessed. Therefore, tell only the sins. Then tell only your own sins, and be very careful not to mention any one's name—even your own—in confession. Be brief, and do not say, I broke the first commandment or the second by doing so and so: tell the sin simply as it is, and the priest himself will know what commandment you violated. Again, when you have committed a sin several times a day do not multiply that by the number of days since your last confession and say to the priest, I have told lies, for example, four hundred and forty-two times. Such things only confuse you and make you forget your sins. Simply say, I am in the habit of telling lies, about so many, three or four—or whatever number it may be—times a day. Never say "sometimes" or "often" when you are telling the number of your sins. Sometimes might mean ten or it might mean twenty times. How then can the priest know the number by that expression? Give the number as nearly as you can, and if you do not know

the whole number give the number of times a day, etc. Never say "maybe" I did so and so; because maybe you did not, and the priest cannot judge. Tell what you consider your worst sin first, then if there be any sin you are ashamed to tell or do not know how to tell, say to the priest: "Father, I have a sin I am ashamed to tell, or a sin I do not know how to tell;" and then the priest will ask you some questions and help you to tell it. But never think of going away from the confessional with some sin that you did not tell. The devil sometimes tempts people to do this, because he does not like to see them in a state of grace and friends of God. When you are committing the sin, he makes you believe it is not a great sin, and that you can tell it in confession; but after you have committed it he makes you believe that it is a most terrible sin, and that if you tell it, the priest will scold you severely. So it is concealed and the person leaves the confessional with a new sin upon his soul—that of sacrilege. When Judas was tempted to betray Our Lord, he thought thirty pieces of silver a great deal of money; and then, after he had committed the sin, he cared nothing for the money, but went and threw it away, and thought his sin so dreadful that he hanged himself, dying in despair.

It is not necessary to tell the priest the exact words you said in cursing or in bad conversation, unless he asks you; but simply say, Father, I cursed so many times. Do not speak too loud in the confessional, but loud enough for the priest to hear you. If you are deaf, do not go into the confessional while others are near, but wait till all have been heard and go in last, or ask the priest to hear you some place else.

(5) Listen attentively to hear what "**penance**" the priest gives you, and say the act of contrition when he tells you to say it; and above all, never leave the confessional till the priest closes the little door or tells you to go. If the priest does not say at what particular time you are to say your penance, say it as soon as you can. When he tells you to say **anything** more than once, he generally means that you are

to say it once a day for so many days. If, for example, he tells you to say the Litany of the Blessed Virgin three times, he intends you are to say it once a day for three days.

When you have told all your sins, you will say: "For these and all the sins of my whole life, especially any I have forgotten, I am heartily sorry, and ask pardon and penance." Listen to the priest's advice, and answer simply any question he may ask you. If you should forget a sin in confession and remember it the same day or evening, or while you are still in the church, it will not be necessary to wait and go to confession again. It is forgiven already, because it was included in your forgotten sins; but you must tell it the next time you go to confession, saying before your regular confession: In my last confession I forgot this sin. Of course if you tried to forget your sins your confession would be invalid. It is only when you examine your conscience with all reasonable care, and then after all forget some sins, that such forgotten sins are forgiven.

Never talk or quarrel for places while waiting for confession, and never cheat another out of his turn in going to confession. It is unjust, it makes the person angry, and lessens his good dispositions for confession. It creates confusion, and annoys the priest who hears the noise. If you are in a hurry, ask the others to allow you to go first; and if they will not be contented and wait, and if you cannot wait, go some other time. Spend your time while waiting in praying for pardon and for sorrow. Never keep the priest waiting for you in the confessional; pass in as soon as he is prepared to hear you.

192 Q. What is the examination of conscience?

A. The examination of conscience is an earnest effort to recall to mind all the sins we have committed since our last worthy confession.

"Worthy confession," because if we made bad confessions we must tell how often we made them, and whether we re-

received Holy Communion after them or not, and also all the sins we told in the bad confessions, and all others committed since the good confession. If, for example, a boy made a good confession in January, and in confession in February concealed a mortal sin and went to confession after that every month to December, he would have to go back to his last good confession, and repeat all the sins committed since January, and also say that he had gone to confession once a month and made bad confessions all these times.

* 193 Q. How can we make a good examination of conscience?

A. We can make a good examination of conscience by calling to memory the commandments of God, the precepts of the Church, the seven capital sins, and the particular duties of our state in life, to find out the sins we have committed.

* 194 Q. What should we do before beginning the examination of conscience?

A. Before beginning the examination of conscience we should pray to God to give us light to know our sins and grace to detest them.