

## LESSON NINETEENTH.

## ON CONFESSION.

208. Q. What is confession?

A. Confession is the telling of our sins to a duly authorized priest, for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness.

“Duly authorized”—one sent by the bishop of the diocese in which you are.

“Forgiveness.” You might tell a priest all your sins while in ordinary conversation with him, but that would not be confession, because you would not be telling them to have them pardoned. If a person has lost the use of his speech, he can make his confession by writing his sins on a paper and giving it to the priest in the confessional. If the priest returns the paper the penitent must be careful to destroy it afterwards. Also, if you have a poor memory you may write down the sins you wish to confess, and read them from the paper in the confessional; then you also must be careful to destroy the paper after confession. If a person whose language the priest does not understand is dying, or is obliged to make his yearly confession, he must tell what he can by signs, show that he is sorry for his sins, and thus receive absolution. In a word, the priest would act with him as he would with one who had lost the use of his speech and power to write.

209 Q. What sins are we bound to confess?

A. We are bound to confess all our mortal sins, but it is well also to confess our venial sins.

“Bound”—obliged in such a way that our confession would be bad if we did not tell them.

**“Well,”** because we should tell all the sins we can remember; but if we did not tell a venial sin after we had told a mortal sin, our confession would not be bad. Or if we committed a little venial sin after confession, that should not keep us from Holy Communion; because the Holy Communion itself would blot out that and any other venial sin we might have upon our souls so that if the priest tells you to go to Holy Communion you should never let anything keep you away, unless you are certain you have committed a mortal sin after the confession, or have broken your fast. If you have made your first Communion, the priest means that you should go to Communion after the confession in which he gives you absolution, although he may forget to tell you to go. If he wishes you not to go to Holy Communion, he will always tell you not to go. On the other hand, if you have not made your first Communion, and the priest should, after hearing your confession, tell you by mistake to go to Communion, do not go; but if you can, say to him that you have not made your first Communion; and whether you can tell him or not, do not go to Communion after confession unless you have already made your first Communion.

**\* 210 Q.** What are the chief qualities of a good confession?

**A.** The chief qualities of a good confession are three: it must be humble, sincere, and entire.

**\* 211 Q.** When is our confession humble?

**A.** Our confession is humble when we accuse ourselves of our sins, with a deep sense of shame and sorrow for having offended God.

**\* 212 Q.** When is our confession sincere?

**A.** Our confession is sincere when we tell our sins honestly and truthfully neither exaggerating nor excusing them.

**“Exaggerating.”** You must never tell in confession a sin you did not commit, any more than conceal one you did com-



mit. You must tell just the sins committed, and no more or less; and if you are in doubt whether you have committed the sin, or whether the thing done was a sin, then you must tell your doubts to the priest: but do not say you committed such and such sins when you do not know whether you did or not, or only because you think it likely that you did.

**\* 213 Q. When is our confession entire?**

**A.** Our confession is entire when we tell the number and kinds of our sins and the circumstances which change their nature.

**"Number"**—the exact number, if you know it; as, for example, when we stay from Mass we can generally tell exactly the number of times. But when we tell lies, for instance, we may not know the exact number: then we say how often in the day, or that it is a habit with us, etc.

**"Kinds"**—whether they are cursing, or stealing, or lying, etc.

**"Circumstances which change their nature."** In the case of stealing, for example, you need not tell whether it was from a grocery, a bakery, or dry-goods store you stole, for that circumstance does not change the nature of the sin: you have simply to tell the amount you took. But if you stole from a church you would have to tell that, because that is a circumstance that gives the sin of stealing a new character, and makes it sacrilegious stealing. Or if you stole from a poor beggar all he possessed in the world, so that you left him starving, that would be a circumstance making your sin worse, and so you would have to tell it. Therefore you have to tell any circumstance that really makes your sin much worse or less than it seems; all other circumstances you need not tell: they will only confuse you, and make you forget your sins and waste the priest's time.

**214 Q. What should we do if we cannot remember the number of our sins?**

**A.** If we cannot remember the number of our sins, we

should tell the number as nearly as possible, and say how often we have sinned in a day, a week, or a month and how long the habit or practice has lasted.

\* 215 Q. Is our confession worthy if, without our fault, we forget to confess a mortal sin?

A. If without our fault we forget to confess a mortal sin, our confession is worthy, and the sin is forgiven; but it must be told in confession if it again comes to our mind.

216 Q. Is it a grievous offence wilfully to conceal a mortal sin in confession?

A. It is a grievous offence wilfully to conceal a mortal sin in confession, because we thereby tell a lie to the Holy Ghost, and make our confession worthless.

“A lie to the Holy Ghost.” God sees every sin we commit, and in His presence we present ourselves to the priest in the confessional, and declare that we are confessing all. If, then, we wilfully conceal a sin that we are bound to confess, God is a witness to our sacrilegious lie. If I see you in some place to which you were forbidden to go, and you, knowing that I saw you, positively deny that you were there, your guilt would be doubly great, for, besides the sin of disobedience committed by going to the forbidden place, you also resist the known truth, and endeavor to prove that I, when I declare I saw you, am telling what is untrue. In a similar manner, concealing a sin in confession is equivalent to denying before God that we are guilty of it. Besides, it is a great folly to conceal a sin, because it must be confessed sooner or later, and the longer we conceal it the deeper will be our sense of shame for the sacrileges committed. Again, why should one be ashamed to confess to the priest what he has not been ashamed to do before God, unless he has greater respect for the priest than he has for Almighty God—an absurdity we cannot believe. Moreover, the shame you experience in telling your sins is a kind of penance for them. Do you not suppose Our Lord knew when He instituted the Sacrament of Penance, that



people would be ashamed to confess? Certainly He did; and that act of humility is pleasing to God, and is a kind of punishment for your sins, and probably takes away some of the punishment you would have to suffer for them. Often, too, the thought of having to confess will keep you from committing the sin. There is another thought that should encourage us to gladly make a full confession of all our sins, and it is this: it is easier to tell them to the priest alone than to have them exposed, unforgiven, before the whole world on the day of judgment. Do not imagine that your confessor will think less of you on account of your sins. The confessor does not think of your sins after he leaves the confessional. How could he remember all the confessions he hears—often hundreds in a single month? And what is more—he does not even wish to recall the sinful things heard in the confessional, because he wishes to keep his own mind pure, and his soul free from every stain. The priest is always better pleased to hear the confession of a great sinner or of one who has been a long time from the sacraments, than of one who goes frequently or who has little to tell. He is not glad, of course, that the sinner has committed great sins, but he is glad that since he has had the misfortune to sin so much, he has now the grace and courage to seek forgiveness. Our Lord once said (Luke xv. 7) while preaching, that the angels and saints in heaven rejoice more at seeing one sinner doing penance than they do over ninety-nine good persons who did not need to do penance. The greater the danger to which a person has been exposed, the more thankful he and his friends are for escape or recovery from it. If your brother fell into the ocean and was rescued just as he was going down for the last time, you would feel more grateful than if he was rescued from some little pond into which he had slipped, and in which there was scarcely any danger of his being drowned. So, also, the nearer we are to losing our souls and going to hell, the more delighted the angels and saints are when we are saved. One who has escaped great danger will more carefully avoid similar accidents in the future: in like manner, the sinner, after having

escaped the danger of eternal death by the pardon of his sins, should never again risk his salvation.

217 Q. What must he do who has wilfully concealed a mortal sin in confession?

A. He who has wilfully concealed a mortal sin in confession must not only confess it, but must also repeat all the sins he has committed since his last worthy confession.

“**Wilfully.**” Remember, forgetting is not the same as concealing; but if you should wilfully neglect to examine your conscience or make any effort to know your sins before going to confession, then forgetting would be equivalent to concealing. Without any preparation your confession could hardly be a good one. When you are in doubt whether an action is sinful or not, or whether you have confessed it before, you should not leave the confessional with the doubt upon your mind.

It is a foolish practice, however, to be always disturbing your conscience by thinking of past sins, especially of those that occurred very early in your life. Sometimes it is dangerous; because if, while thinking of your past sins, you should take pleasure in them, you would commit a new sin similar to the past sins in which you take delight.

It is best, therefore, not to dwell in thought upon any particular past sin with the time, place, and circumstances of its commission; but simply to remember in general that you have in the past sinned against this or that commandment or virtue.

The past is no longer under our control, while the future is, and becomes for us, therefore, the all-important portion of our lives. Not unfrequently it may be an artifice of the devil to keep us so occupied with past deeds that we may not attend to the dangers of the future. Do not, then, after your confession spend your time in thinking of the sins you confessed, but of how you will avoid them in the future. When a wound is healed up, nobody thinks of opening it again to



see if it has healed properly; so when the wounds made in our souls by sin are healed up by the absolution, we should not open them again.

This is the rule with regard to our ordinary confessions; but we should sometimes make a general confession. What is a general confession? It is the confession of the sins of our whole life or of a portion—say one, two, or five, etc., years—of our life. A general confession may be necessary, useful, or hurtful. It is necessary, as you know, when our past confessions were bad. It is useful, though not necessary, on special occasions in our lives: for example, in the time of a retreat or mission; in the time of preparation for First Communion, Confirmation, Matrimony, etc.; or in preparing for death. It is very useful also for persons about to change their state in life; for such as are about to become priests or religious, etc. It is useful because it gives us a better knowledge of the state of our souls, as we see their condition not merely for a month or two, but for our whole lifetime. We are looking at them as God will look at them in the last judgment, considering all the good and evil we have ever done, and comparing the amount of the one with the amount of the other. We resolve to increase the good and diminish the evil in our future lives. We promise to do penance for the past and to avoid sin for the future; and thus we are benefited in general confession by this judgment of ourselves, as we may call it.

General confession is hurtful to scrupulous persons. Scrupulous persons are those who think almost everything they do a sin. They are always dissatisfied with their confessions, and fear to approach the sacraments. Their conscience is never at ease, and they are forever unhappy. It is very wrong for them to think and act in this manner, and they must use every means in their power to overcome their scruples.

Our Lord in His goodness never intended to make us unhappy by instituting the sacraments, but on the contrary to make us happy, and set our minds and consciences at ease in

the reception of His grace. Scrupulous persons must do exactly whatever their confessor advises, no matter what they themselves may think. Such persons, as you can plainly see, should not make general confessions, because their consciences would be more disturbed than pacified by them.

You prepare for general confession as you would for any other, except that you take a longer time for it, and do not pay so much attention to your more trifling sins.

218 Q. Why does the priest give us a penance after confession?

A. The priest gives us a penance after confession, that we may satisfy God for the temporal punishment due to our sins.

“**Penance.**” The little penance the priest gives may not fully satisfy God, but shows by our accepting it that we are willing to do penance. What, for example, is a penance of five “Our Fathers” compared with the guilt of one mortal sin, for which we would have to suffer in hell for all eternity? Then think of the penances performed by the Christians many centuries ago, in the early ages of the Church. There were four stages of penance. The churches were divided into four parts by railings and gates. The first railing across the church was at some distance from the altar, the second was a little below the middle of the church, and the third was near the door. Those who committed great sins had to stand clad in coarse garments near the entrance of the church, and beg the prayers of those who entered. After they had done this kind of penance for a certain time, they were allowed to come into the church as far as the second railing. They were allowed to hear the sermon, but were not permitted to be present at the Mass. After doing sufficient penance, they were allowed to remain for Mass, but could not receive Holy Communion. When they had performed all the penance imposed upon them, they were allowed to receive the sacraments and enjoy all the rights and privileges of faithful children of the Church. These penances lasted for many days



and sometimes for years, according to the gravity of the sins committed. The sins for which these severe penances were performed were generally sins that had been committed publicly, and hence the penance, amendment, and reparation had also to be public.

**“Temporal punishment.”** Every sin has two punishments attached to it, one called the eternal and the other the temporal. Let me explain by an example. If I, turning highway robber, waylay a man, beat him and steal his watch, I do him, as you see, a double injury, and deserve a double punishment for the twofold crime of beating and robbing him. He might pardon me for the injuries caused by the beating, but that would not free me from the obligation of restoring to him his watch or its value, for the fact that he forgives me for the act of stealing does not give me the right to keep what justly belongs to him. Now, when we sin against God we in the first place insult Him, and secondly rob Him of what is deservedly His due; namely, the worship, respect, obedience, love, etc., that we owe Him as our Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer.

In the Sacrament of Penance God forgives the insult offered by sinning, but requires us to make restitution for that of which the sin has deprived Him. In every sin there is an act of turning away from God and an act of turning to some creature in His stead. If a soldier pledged to defend his country deserts his army in time of war, he is guilty of a dishonorable, contemptible act; but if, besides deserting his own army, he goes over to aid the enemy, he becomes guilty of another and still greater crime—he becomes a traitor for whom the laws of nations reserve their severest penalties. By sin we, who in Baptism and Confirmation have promised to serve God and war against His enemies, desert Him and go over to them; for Our Blessed Lord has said: He that is not with Me is against Me.

We pay the temporal debt due to our sins, that is, make the restitution, by our penances upon earth, or by our sufferings in Purgatory, or by both combined.

The penances performed upon earth are very acceptable

and pleasing to God ; and hence we should be most anxious to do penance here that we may have less to suffer in Purgatory. St. Augustine, who had been a great sinner, often prayed that God might send him many tribulations while on earth, that he might have less to endure in Purgatory. Therefore, after performing the penance the priest gives you in the confessional, it is wise to impose upon yourself other light penances in keeping with your age and condition, but never undertake severe penances or make religious vows and promises without consulting your confessor. In every case be careful first of all to perform the penance imposed upon you in the reception of the sacrament. The penance given in confession has a special value, which none of the penances selected by yourself could have.

If you forget to say your penance, your confession is not on that account worthless; but as the penance is one of the parts of the sacrament, namely, the satisfaction, you should say it as soon as possible, and in the manner your confessor directs. If you cannot perform the penance imposed by your confessor, you should inform him of that fact, and ask him to give you another in its stead.

Indulgences also are a means of satisfying for this temporal punishment. Sometimes God inflicts the temporal punishment in this world by sending us misfortunes or sufferings, especially such as are brought on by the sins committed.

**\* 219 Q.** Does not the Sacrament of Penance remit all punishment due to sin?

**A.** The Sacrament of Penance remits the eternal punishment due to sin, but it does not always remit the temporal punishment which God requires as satisfaction for our sins.

Remember that baptism differs from penance in this respect, that although they both remit sin, penance does not take away all the temporal punishment, while baptism takes away all the punishment, both eternal and temporal; so that if we died immediately after baptism we would go directly to

heaven, while if we died immediately after penance we would generally go to purgatory to make satisfaction for the temporal guilt.

**\*220 Q.** Why does God require a temporal punishment as a satisfaction for sin?

**A.** God requires a temporal punishment as a satisfaction for sin to teach us the great evil of sin, and to prevent us from falling again.

**\* 221 Q.** Which are the chief means by which we satisfy God for the temporal punishment due to sin?

**A.** The chief means by which we satisfy God for the temporal punishment due to sin are: prayer, fasting, almsgiving, all spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and the patient suffering of the ills of life.

“Chief,” but not the only means. “Fasting,” especially the fasts imposed by the Church—in Lent for instance. Lent is the forty days before Easter Sunday during which we fast and pray to prepare ourselves for the resurrection of Our Lord, and also to remind us of His own fast of forty days before His Passion. “Almsgiving”—that is, money or goods given to the poor. “Spiritual” works of mercy are those good works we do for persons’ souls. “Corporal” works of mercy are those we do for their bodies. “Ills of life”—sickness or poverty or misfortune, especially when we have not brought them upon ourselves by sin.

**\* 222 Q.** Which are the chief spiritual works of mercy?

**A.** The chief spiritual works of mercy are seven: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive all injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead.

“To admonish the sinner.” If we love our neighbor we should help him in his distress, even when it is an inconvenience to us. We should help him also to correct his faults, we should point them out and warn him of them. We are obliged to do so in the following circumstances: First. When



his fault is a mortal sin. Second. When we have some authority or influence over him. Third. When there is reason to believe that our warning will make him better instead of worse. If our advice only makes him worse, then we should not say anything to him about his fault, but keep out of his company ourselves. "**Ignorant**" especially in their religion. "**Doubtful**" about something in religion which you can explain and make clear to them. "**Comfort**," saying kind words of encouragement to them. "**Wrongs**," things not deserved; for example, persons talking ill about us, accusing us falsely, etc.; but if the false accusations, etc., are going to give scandal, then we must defend ourselves against them. If, for instance, lies were told about the father of a family, and it were likely all his children would believe them and lose their respect for his authority, then he must let them know the truth. But when we patiently suffer wrongs that injure only ourselves, and that are known only to God and ourselves, God sees our sufferings and rewards us. What matters it what people think we are if God knows all our doings and is pleased with them? "**Living**"—especially for the conversion of sinners, or for those who are on their death-bed. "**The dead**"—those suffering in purgatory, especially if we have ever caused them to sin.

\* 223 Q. Which are the chief corporal works of mercy?

A. The chief corporal works of mercy are seven: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to ransom the captive, to harbor the harborless, to visit the sick, and to bury the dead.

"**Ransom the captive**"—that is, chiefly those who while teaching or defending the true religion in pagan lands are taken prisoners by the enemies of our faith. You have perhaps heard of the Crusades or read about them in your history. Now let me briefly tell you what they were and why they were commenced. About the year 570, that is, about thirteen hundred years ago, when the Christian religion was spread over nearly the whole world, a man named Mahomet was born in Arabia. He pretended to be a great prophet sent

from God, and gathered many followers about him. He told them his religion must be spread by the sword. He plundered cities and towns, and divided the spoils with his followers. He told them that all who died fighting for him would certainly go to heaven. In a short time his followers became very numerous; for his religion was an easy and profitable one, allowing them to commit sin without fear of punishment, and giving them share of his plunder. Many others not influenced by these motives joined his religion for fear of being put to death. His followers were afterwards called by the general name of Saracens. They took possession of the Holy Land, of the city of Jerusalem, of the tomb of Our Lord, and of every spot rendered dear to Christians by Our Saviour's life and labors there. They persecuted the Christians who went to visit the Holy Land, and put many of them to death. When the news of these dreadful crimes reached Europe, the Christian kings and princes, at the request of the Pope, raised large armies and set out for the East to war against the Saracens and recover the Holy Land. Eight of these expeditions, or crusades, as they are called, went out during two hundred years, that is, from 1095 to 1272. Those who took part in them are called crusaders, from the word *cross*, because every soldier wore a red cross upon his shoulder.

Some of these expeditions were successful, and some were not; but, on the whole, they prevented the Saracens from coming to Europe and taking possession of it. Many of the Christian soldiers and many of the pilgrims who visited the Holy Land were taken prisoners by the Saracens and held, threatened with death, till the Christians in Europe paid large sums of money as a ransom for their liberty. To free these captives was a great act of charity, and is one of the corporal works of mercy. *Ransom* means to pay money for another's freedom. Even now there are sometimes captives in pagan lands.

A pilgrim is one who goes on a journey to visit some holy place for the purpose of thus honoring God. He would not be a pilgrim if he went merely through curiosity. He must go with the holy intention of making his visit an act of



worship. In our time pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to Rome, and other places are quite frequent. “**To harbor**”—that is, to give one who has no home a place of rest. A harbor is an inlet of the ocean where ships can rest and be out of danger; so we can also call the home or place of rest given to the homeless a harbor. “**Sick**,” especially the sick poor and those who have no friends. “**To bury**” those who are strangers and have no friends. All Christians are bound to perform these works of mercy in one way or another. We have been relieved of doing the work ourselves by the establishment of institutions where these things are attended to by communities of holy men or women called religious. They take charge of asylums for the orphans, homes for the aged and poor, hospitals for the sick, etc., while many devote themselves to teaching in colleges, academies, and schools. But if these good religious do the work for us, we are obliged on our part to give them the means to carry it on. Therefore we should contribute, according to our means, to charitable institutions, and indeed to all institutions that promote the glory of God and the good of our religion. To explain more fully, religious are self-sacrificing men and women who, wishing to follow the evangelical counsels, dedicate their lives to the service of God. They live together in communities approved by the Church, under the rule and guidance of their superiors. Their day is divided between prayer, labor, and good works, more time being given to one or other of these according to the special end or aim of the community. The houses in which they live are called convents or monasteries, and the societies of which they are members are called religious orders, communities, or congregations. In some of these religious communities of men all the members are priests, in others some are priests and some are brothers, and in others still all are brothers. Priests belonging to the religious orders are called the regular clergy, to distinguish them from the secular clergy or priests who live and labor in the parishes to which they are assigned by their bishops. Sisters and nuns mean almost the same thing, but we generally call those nuns who live under a more severe rule and never leave the bound-



aries of their convent. In like manner friars, monks, and brothers lead almost the same kind of life, except that the monks practise greater penances and live under stricter rules. A *hermit* is a holy man who lives alone in some desert or lonely place, and spends his life in prayer and mortification. In the early ages of the Church there were many of these hermits, or fathers of the desert, but now religious live together in communities.

The members of religious orders of men or women take three vows, namely, of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These orders were founded by holy persons for some special work approved of by the Church. Thus the Dominicans were founded by St. Dominic, and their special work was to preach the Gospel and convert heretics or persons who had fallen away from the faith. The Jesuit fathers were organized by St. Ignatius Loyola, and their work is chiefly teaching in colleges, and giving retreats and missions. So also have the Redemptorists, Franciscans, Passionists, etc., their special works, chiefly the giving of missions. In a word, every community, of either men or women, must perform the particular work for which it was instituted.

But why, you will ask, are there different religious orders? In the first place, all persons are not fitted for the same kind of work: some can teach, others cannot; some can bear the fatigue of nursing the sick, and others cannot. Secondly, when Our Lord was on earth He performed every good work and practised every virtue perfectly. He fasted, prayed, helped the needy, comforted the sorrowful, healed the sick, taught the ignorant, defended the oppressed, admonished sinners, etc. It would be impossible for any one community to imitate Our Lord in all His works, so each community takes one or more particular works of Our Lord, and tries to imitate Him as perfectly as possible in these at least. Some communities devote their time to prayer; others attend the sick; others teach, etc.; and thus when all unite their different works the combined result is a more perfect imitation of Our Lord's life upon earth.