

THE SACRAMENTS – 2

When I talked to you about sin, I mentioned that there are certain effects of sin that remain within us even after we have repented of our sins. One important effect is that our willpower to resist sin is weakened so much so that once we become old enough to make moral choices, we soon find out that we are tempted to make choices that are sinful. We discover that we are all sinners to some extent or other and that if we are honest with ourselves we will find that we have to live our entire lives in dependence on God's inexhaustible love and forgiveness. That is why Christ went out of his way to make clear that the church has his authority to forgive sins. He not only sent the apostles out to preach God's never ending forgiveness but commissioned them to actually forgive sins in his name. That forgiveness is practised in the sacrament of penance or, as we call it today, reconciliation.

Penance therefore is the sacrament that symbolises and makes real to sinful but repentant members of the church that they share in the forgiving love of Christ that binds all members to him and to each other.

Catholics distinguish between two types of sin: venial sin and mortal sin. Venial sins are more in the line of imperfections. While they are serious threats to our ability to love as we should love, committing a venial sin is not radically incompatible with love. Mortal sin however is different. This is the deliberate fully conscious performance of a thought, action or omission that is incompatible with love. You may be a bit too selfish to let your sister have the bigger slice of cake but you still love her. However, you can hardly be said to love her if you murder her to grab her share of your inheritance. Venial sins do not break our sharing in the church's love life, though they do weaken it. Mortal sin from its very name indicates that it kills our sharing in the church's love life. People who are conscious therefore of being in the state of mortal sin have to refrain from going to holy Communion because the action would be a hypocritical one – they would be expressing a unity with Christ that no longer exists in their souls. They have ex-communicated themselves from the God – humankind community. Therefore, repenting of a mortal sin does not automatically readmit one to full, living membership of the church. One has to be readmitted by a member of the church who has the authority to do that, namely priests and bishops. This readmission takes place in the sacrament of reconciliation. People have often asked the question: why do I have to confess my sins to a man. Surely God forgives me when in sincerity I tell him I'm sorry for the sin I have committed. It is indeed true that a person can be reconciled with God before going to confession. However, just as one had to be admitted to membership of the church through baptism in the first place so too one has to be readmitted to the church through the sacrament of reconciliation.

The sacrament was primarily designed for mortal sinners and for them it is a necessity if they want to be reintegrated into the life of the church. There is no obligation for people who are aware of only venial sins in

their lives to go to confession. But if you want to progress in your spiritual life, regular confession, especially to a priest who gets to know you well, is a powerful help in identifying and rooting out those pet sins that we don't really want to get rid of.

The way in which the sacrament is celebrated has changed greatly down the ages. In the earliest period the sacrament was administered only once in a person's lifetime. The reason for this was that if after reconciliation you went around committing mortal sins again this, they believed, showed that your repentance was not genuine. The sacrament was also celebrated openly before the gathered congregation. The priest or bishop would sit in the sanctuary and the penitent would go up and confess quietly to him his mortal sins. He would then be given a penance and a really strict penance too – for example fasting for two years. Only when he had finished his penance would he be absolved and receive holy Communion once more.

The more private celebration of the sacrament that we practice today was brought by the Irish monks to Europe when they re-evangelised it. They allowed you to receive the sacrament more than once. But they retained the practice of delaying absolution until you had finished the penance that was imposed upon you. This more private form of confession and absolution spread throughout the church in the West and at some point absolution began to be given to a penitent before he had completed his penance. Which is the practice we have today.

The purpose of the penance was initially to ensure that the penitent was strengthened spiritually by it. Hence their length and severity. Then the penance came to be seen as a straightforward punishment for sin: a “temporal punishment” to distinguish it from “eternal punishment”. Eternal punishment was hell fire. Both were seen as being laid down by God. Both could be worked off in this life if one repented for one's sins. But nobody knew, apart from eternal punishment, how much and how long your penance needed to be in order to pay the full punishment laid down by God. Worse than that, people who had had a rather interesting life would find themselves approaching death without them being able to complete the penance. For such people the horrors of Purgatory awaited them – unless the penance was lessened.

And so the practice arose of the bishop permitting a long penance to be lessened and the local community was asked to pray that the lesser penance was acceptable to God for eradicating all the temporal punishment that an interesting life could accumulate. This reduction of the original penance was called an ‘indulgence’. So if your original penance was 10 years of fasting and it was reduced to 5 years of fasting you were said to have received an indulgence of five years. An indulgence therefore referred to a lessening of the original penance imposed. It did not mean you were given five years off Purgatory. Eventually, the granting of an

indulgence was separated from the sacrament of confession. It began to be sought after as a lessening of whatever debt you would have to pay should you end up in Purgatory. Since the church did not have a clue as to what amount of punishment God was going to exact for your sins, the only way it could quantify the indulgence given you was in terms of the amount of penance that used to be imposed in the past. This whole theology of indulgences led to the unhealthy practice amongst some people of keeping a sort of bank balance of how many days indulgences you had collected because all sorts of pious acts began to have an indulgence of 30 days hundred days et cetera attached to them. The biggie was a plenary indulgence. If all the conditions were observed, especially that of repenting fully and deeply of all one's sins, then you were freed of all punishments of Purgatory you deserved *up to that point*.

There is a deep truth buried in the theology and practice of indulgences and it is the fact that through our prayers and sufferings we can assist each other in purifying the love that is the whole reason for our existence. But unfortunately this truth got buried under scandalous mercenary practices such as the granting of indulgences to those who gave money for the restoration of St Peters and were told that their loved ones in Purgatory were freed as soon as the money fell into the bowl – out of Purgatory popped the soul. It was the abuse of indulgences that triggered off the Protestant Reformation. In modern times the practice has been purified of those abuses, indulgences are no longer distinguished by the length of days attributed to each one since we now have only two kinds of indulgences: plenary and partial.

Let me turn now quickly to the sacrament of the sick.

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick symbolises and makes real for a sick person that he or she shares in a spiritual life that will one day conquer even sickness and death. The sacrament is primarily concerned with the spiritual life of the sick person. Its primary purpose is to comfort that person by reminding them that they are under the protection of the spirit of love that binds us together. Moreover, if it is God's will, the sick person will be restored to health. Its primary purpose therefore is not to be a catholic version of the many healing churches that promise healing if the sick person's faith is strong enough. Such promises are dangerous since they can destroy the faith of the person seeking healing but in vain. Nor is the primary purpose of the sacrament to prepare one for death. It came to be seen as such way back in the old days when the sacrament of confession could be received only once in life. The practice therefore developed of avoiding confession and keeping it in reserve for the time when death seemed imminent. Since the sacrament of the sick requires from a mortal sinner the confession of his or her sins, in practice the sacrament was delayed until the very end of a person's life. And it came to be called 'the last anointing', that is to say 'extreme unction'. Nowadays the sacrament is given to anyone who is ill enough to be reminded of his or her mortality.