

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH claims that “confession is not a human institution of Pope or Council, but a divine institution observed in the church from the beginning” (*Question Box*, p. 282). The Council of Trent is quoted as authority:

If anyone denies either that Sacramental Confession was instituted or is necessary to salvation, by divine right, or says that the manner of confessing secretly to a priest alone, which the Church has observed from the beginning, and doth observe, is alien from the institution and command of Christ, and is a human invention, let him be anathema.

Rome cites a few Scriptures in support of her thesis, but none of them makes any reference to confession to a priest, with a view to absolution, and no allusions to confession are found in the writings of the early church until the third century, and most are later than this.

Confession as used in the Roman Church today appears to have sprung from the practice of requiring certain penitents to make public confession of their sins before being readmitted to Holy Communion. In the nature of things this often proved other than edifying, and so in specific cases the leaders first heard the confession in private, so that the penitent might be instructed in the way his public confession to the whole assembly should be made. Gradually this procedure became customary for all offenses.

In 450, however, Pope Leo the Great forbade public confession, and private confession to the priest took its place. Private confession must be made after the commission of any serious sin, before taking Holy Communion, and at the approach of death.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 decreed that at least one confession must be made each year. Baptism took away original sin and all actual sin prior to baptism, but for sins after baptism there must be confession and absolution, if the soul were not to be eternally lost. Without it none could be saved.

Rome asserts, though without any scriptural authority, that the priest has been appointed by God to judge the sins of men, with power to acquit or condemn. In the exercise of this awesome function he must know all the facts of the case before he can give a true judgment, hence the need for a “good confession” in which nothing has been held back.

Auricular confession is nowhere expressly mentioned in the Bible, but Christ Himself divinely commanded it by giving His apostles the power to remit or retain sins (John 20:23).

The Sacrament of Penance is a judgment, requiring on the part of the priest-judge an accurate knowledge of the nature, number, and circumstances of the sins committed. This can be known only through the penitent himself, who is at once defendant, prosecutor, and witness in this divine, secret tribunal (Council of Trent, XII, Canon 6, 7). In a word, the sinner must lay bare his soul to the priest, so that he may be able to know the state of his conscience, and, convinced of his sorrow, give him a fitting and adequate penance. (The Question Box, p. 287).

Here we have John 20:23 cited as proving that auricular confession was instituted by Christ Himself. Let us examine the verse and its setting.

Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained (John 20:23).

To whom were these words spoken? The context shows that they were addressed to the disciples, or apostles, as they are elsewhere called. But that is not the whole answer. There is a parallel passage in Luke 24, which also records the events of that first Easter Day.

In Luke 24:9 we read of the women who came from the tomb, that they returned and **“told all these things unto the eleven, and,”** please note, **“to all the rest.”** So others were there besides the apostles!

Again look at verse 33 concerning the two who met the Lord on the road to Emmaus, **“And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and,”** again note, **“them that were with them,”** the earlier company plus the women!

And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread. And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you (Luke 24:35, 36).

Luke records more fully than John who were in the company. John records some things said by the Lord which Luke does not mention. The two accounts are not contradictory but complementary, and to get the complete account we must read both.

Not only the eleven apostles were there when our Lord spoke the words concerning remitting and retaining sin—others were there also, and they shared in the benediction and all that followed. Whatever the words of the commission meant! For the apostles, they meant the same for others too.

Now as to the words our Lord uttered. What is their true meaning? There are two interpretations. Let us take first that held by Rome, expressed quite definitely by the Council of Trent:

Whosoever shall affirm that the words of the Lord and Saviour, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven, whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained, are not to be understood of the power of forgiving and retaining sins in a sacrament of penance, as the Catholic Church has always from the very beginning understood them, but shall restrict them to the authority of preaching the Gospel, in opposition to the institution of this sacrament, let him be anathema.

The other is stated with equal clearness in the English Prayer Book:

He hath given power and commandment to His ministers, to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins; He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel.

The first says that the apostles, and by inference their supposed successors, the priests of the Church of Rome today, were given the actual authority to forgive sin. The second says that the authority is vested in Christ! alone, His ministers being empowered to declare His forgiveness to the penitent.

Which is right? Our Lord Himself gives us His answer:

Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:46-48).

The apostles, and those who were with them, were to preach repentance in His name.

Now let us see from the New Testament what the apostles actually did. Did they absolve, or did they preach repentance? The answer is plain. Never once do we read of any one of the apostles hearing someone's confession and granting absolution. What we do find again and again is that they witnessed to their Lord and preached remission of sins to those who repented, and believed in Him.

When the crowd in the temple court on the Day of Pentecost, pricked to the heart, cried out, "**Men and brethren, what shall we do?**" the Apostle Peter answered,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38).

Peter proclaimed the Gospel, and promised forgiveness to those who repented and trusted Christ—that was all. Indeed, that was all that was possible in the few short hours of that day. It was already nine o'clock when Peter began his sermon, and three thousand turned to the Lord and were added to the church. How could three thousand have been confessed in the time available? That was the "beginning" of the Christian Church of which Rome speaks.

On this, the first occasion of preaching the Gospel after the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed the way of salvation in its simplest possible terms: "**Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved**" (Acts 2:21). This simple message was not for that one occasion only, but for all times and all places, for he went on to say,

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call (Acts 2:39).

Making their defense before the High Priest and the Council, Peter and the other apostles said,

We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things (Acts 5:29-32).

When the sin of Simon the sorcerer was revealed, Peter does not call him to make confession to him, but says,

Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee (Acts 8:22).

Preaching at Antioch, Paul says,

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things (Acts 13:38, 39).

In reply to the cry of the Philippian jailer, “**What must I do to be saved?**” Paul does not say, “Come and confess your sins to me,” but, “**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house**” (Acts 16:31).

The claim of Rome that the words of our Lord recorded in John 20:23 constituted an actual bestowal of authority for the apostles themselves to forgive sins is therefore palpably false, and still less can that authority be claimed by the priesthood of Rome as their so-called successors.

The claim also that the priest is appointed to judge men’s sins is equally false. God is the Judge of all (see Hebrews 12:23).

The Father . . . hath committed all judgment unto the Son [not unto the priest] that all men should honor the Son, even as they honor the Father . . . and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man (John 5:22, 23, 27).

Peter says:

And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead (Acts 10:42).

Paul preaching at Athens declared:

He [God] hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

The priest is dependent upon the confessional for “*an accurate knowledge of the nature, number, and circumstances of the sins committed.*” Not so the Lord!

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; . . . and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth (Isaiah 11:2-4).

David said of God:

O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising; thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me (Psalm 139:1-5).

Auricular confession is blasphemous, for it puts a sinful erring man in the place that belongs to God alone. It is morally wrong and shameful, for it forces not men only, but women and girls also to whisper even their hidden thoughts into the ears of an unmarried man. It is soul destroying, for it provides a man-made absolution, which cannot really absolve from sin, and which will not avail in the day of judgment.

There is a true confessional, but it is at the feet of the risen Saviour, “**who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification**” (Romans 4:25).

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9).

If our sins have injured others, there is a place for confession even to men. It is not to the priest, however, but to the one we have injured, and then not only confession to him is required, but so far as is possible reparation also.

Our Lord Jesus said to the Jews of His day,

If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matthew 5:23, 24).

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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