

A saint can become a saint, under grace, *because* of innate tendencies, reinforced by natural environment. But equally well a saint may become a saint *despite* innate and acquired characteristics. Is not this the explanation of St Thérèse of Lisieux, about whom there has been so much controversy of late? The circumstances of her early upbringing were such that she may well have been born with a tendency to, and at an early age she clearly acquired, an inordinate craving for human affection, which uncurbed might well have proved an insuperable obstacle not to sanctity only but to the love and service of God in any degree whatever. The one thing that is clear beyond doubt to both sides in this controversy is that she *was* a saint. It seems however that without knowing anything of psychology or having to consult psychiatrists, the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and in particular the gift of Fortitude, through the discipline of her Carmelite life, taught her the 'little way', and so enabled her to transmute this inordinate craving for human affection into an all-embracing love of God.



## THE SACRAMENTS: III—PENANCE

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WE have seen in earlier articles how the Church takes natural, human things, such as water and oil, and supernaturalizes them by the power of God. In the technical language of sacramental theology the natural sign is called the matter, the words which raise it up and determine it to bring about that which it signifies, the form. But it would be quite wrong to imagine an implied contrast between material and immaterial in the normal sense of the words. In the sacrament of penance the natural element is human sorrow for sin, a turning from evil to good: it is transformed into that supernatural love of God which is charity, through words of absolution spoken by a priest who has been given the necessary faculties by the bishop. The matter here is not a visible element, like oil and water, bread and wine, but in the same way it is something itself significant of what the sacramental words actually make it do.

In the first place there must be a real change of heart in the

individual sinner. The gospel begins with a demand for conversion, *metanoia*: 'Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' says the Baptist (Matt. 3, 2) and our Lord himself echoes the words (Matt. 4, 17); do penance, return to God, says St Peter to the infant Church (Acts 2, 38). They are only repeating what the prophets had constantly said to Israel, to nation and to individual alike: return to God and he will save you. 'When the wicked turneth himself away from his wickedness which he hath wrought, and doeth judgment and justice, he shall save his soul alive' (Ezekiel 18, 27). Yet at the same time it is quite clear, even in the Old Testament, that this change of heart, through the free action of the individual sinner, is not something which it is in his own power to bring about apart from God. The heart must be recreated, and this God alone can do. God tells his people through the prophet, 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you: and I will cause you to walk in my commandments and to keep my judgments and do them' (Ezekiel 36, 26). Israel would have strayed hopelessly away had God not been their shepherd: 'So will I visit my sheep and will deliver them out of all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day' (Ezekiel 34, 12). The scriptures are the story of that search, and of its ending on the cross. So while the gospel is a promise of new life for all men, they are left in no doubt that this is none of their deserving, but is the gift of God. The first Christians were acutely aware that they were the despised remnant, chosen simply because such was God's will: 'This is the Lord's doing; and it is wonderful in our eyes' (Psalm 117, 23), quoted over and over again in the New Testament, must have been constantly on their lips. The same truth occurs in more technical theological terms throughout the epistles of St Paul: 'by grace you are saved through faith: and that not of yourselves, for it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2, 8). Change of heart, penance, say the Scriptures, is wholly man's doing and wholly God's: yet intense controversy both inside and outside the Church has been roused down the centuries by attempts to find an easy resolution of that mysterious tension.

Now God has willed that this change of heart is not a private matter between him and an individual sinner, but is normally to be brought about through the sacraments of the church. This is how Catholics interpret those commissions of our Lord, first to

St Peter, 'whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall be bound also in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose upon earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven' (Matt. 16, 19), and then to all the apostles: 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained' (John 20, 23). It is God's will that what is done in heaven should happen because of what is done on earth by the Church. Protestants have of course denied that these passages refer to post-baptismal sin, and it must be admitted that there is little evidence before the third century to show how the Church worked out the full implication of our Lord's words. But my articles have no apologetic purpose, and I shall be content to explain the Catholic interpretation of those words.

First, then, forgiveness comes through the Church. For all sin, however private it may be, is sin against the Church. Indeed it was only comparatively late in the history of the old Israel that individual responsibility for sin came to be realized. The sin of Achan, to take a single example, was the direct cause of the defeat at Hai (Josue 7), so close were the bonds that tied together person and nation. Only in the later prophets do we find emphasis on personal responsibility: 'The soul that sinneth, the same shall die: the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, and the father shall not bear the iniquity of the son' (Ezekiel 18, 20). But the tension between the personal and the collective remains. It is difficult to decide whether the penitential psalms, for instance, are the prayer of a single man or of the nation: do the messianic prophecies refer to the people or their leader? Both, we must say finally, with their fulfilment in Christ. It is the same in the New Testament; 'By the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners' (Rom. 5, 19), is typical Hebraic thought. What was true of 'Israel after the flesh' remained true of the new people of God bound together in Christ by the ties of love. If we are indeed members of his body, how can our sin fail to affect every other member? St Paul gives that as the reason for moral teaching: 'Speak ye the truth, every man with his neighbour. For we are members one of another' (Eph. 4, 25). Here, as always, a correct theology will have an effect on the sacramental life of ordinary Christians. We must live as members one of another, first in our own family, then at work, at our clubs, in the numberless other groupings that for us represent the body of Christ, the communion of all the faithful.

Our neighbours, who include our enemies, have been given us as the means of loving Christ himself. So in seeking pardon for the sins we have committed, we are to discover them not merely by comparison with the prohibitions of the law, as so many vainly try to do, but by seeing how we have fallen short of the love required by Christ. In what ways have we caused the whole body to suffer by loosening the ties that bind us to it? At once we shall realize our selfishness, our envy, our divisions and discords, our wish to avoid difficulties at all costs; and our confessions will begin to advance beyond the standard omissions of night and morning prayers. One of the great themes of St John's gospel (worked out especially in chapters 7-10) is that Christ brings judgment to the world simply by his presence in it, the standard by which all else is measured: 'This is the judgment: because the light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than the light' (John 3, 19). It is through him, present in his Church, that we know we are sinners, and through him that we are restored to grace.

All forgiveness for sin comes then through the Church. The member torn from the body cannot live, the branch cut from the vine cannot bear fruit. It is for this reason that when we go to confession the priest gives two absolutions, the first one removing any penalty of excommunication which may have been incurred. Our sin cannot be absolved so long as we are cut off from the Church by disciplinary measures. It is absolved by the divine activity, but God has willed that it should be done through the instrumentality of our Lord's human nature and through his body the Church. And now there is a second point to be made. God has also willed that it should be brought about by means of the further instrumentality of a sacrament. This, as I have said, is not immediately clear from the words of scripture, yet surely it is in keeping with all we learn there of God's dealings with men. He could have justified us in many ways, but he chose to do so by taking human flesh and a human death, and from this first sacrament all the rest derive. They are the means by which our Lord comes to every man who believes in his name. Our Christian life begins with baptism, and is daily renewed in the eucharist. In these two, without question, scripture shows us a sacramental life, by which once and for all, and yet daily, we are brought the cross of Christ, and with it his new and risen life in the spirit: 'You are dead, and

your life is hid with Christ in God' (Col. 3, 3). There is hardly a chapter of St John or St Paul which does not have its sacramental reference. For this is an interim life we are leading, between the first coming and the return, with the Spirit still only a pledge of future glory (Eph. 1, 13), and a time will come when Christ is no longer mediated to us through signs: but until then he is ours really indeed, yet in figure only.

In this way we live in the Spirit with Christ, and should we destroy that life by sin, it is fittingly through sacramental means that God restores it. By the words of absolution spoken over a penitent he is turned away from sin. Yet even Catholics sometimes seem anxious to escape the implications of this statement. One reads, for example, in popular explanations of the sacrament, that perfect contrition, which is sorrow for sin informed by charity, justifies the sinner without the need for any sacrament, so that the obligation to confess becomes a rather pointless ecclesiastical regulation. The suggestion is that the sacrament is only essential for those rather second-rate people who cannot manage more than natural sorrow for sin ('attrition'). But this is certainly not the teaching of the Church at Trent.<sup>1</sup> Contrition, says the council, is a pure gift of God, given through sacramental means. Sometimes indeed it is given to the penitent before he actually goes to the sacrament, as soon as he forms the intention of going, sometimes not until the moment of absolution: but that is a very different distinction from the one given in the popular books. The point of time at which contrition occurs depends on whether obstacles are put to the action of the Holy Spirit, but contrition itself, according to true theology, is always a sacramental grace, not a psychological condition which the penitent must strive to achieve—and then go smugly to confession in order to fulfil the law. The other interpretation not only makes the theology of the sacrament unintelligible, it leads to practical difficulties, especially in those inclined to be scrupulous. How often people worry themselves unnecessarily because they do not seem to feel truly contrite. They forget that because contrition involves the virtue of charity it is not a thing within their power to achieve: it is a pure gift of God, which they can refuse, but not demand. 'This is

<sup>1</sup> Denzinger No. 898. In the following discussion I assume that the bond with the Church has been broken by mortal sin. Venial sin, where the virtue of charity has not been lost, can be healed by other means.

charity', says St John, 'not as though we had loved God, but because he hath first loved us' (1 John 4, 10). Nor can we expect to *feel* guilt and sorrow, discovering it by some process of introspection before we are in a fit state to repent our sins. What is essential is a rational judgment that we have sinned, and the desire of that sacrament in which God gives the grace to return to him in love. In this desire lies the basis of sorrow. Emotional sorrow may be present in consequence (sometimes there is too much), but it is not demanded of us. Nor does a penitent need to engage in that equally fruitless struggle to 'purify his intentions' from all trace of self-interest: let him do what he can and trust in the means that the Church provides him. There is a streak of Pelagianism running through much popular instruction, at least in this country; we are unwilling to admit that there are things we must allow God to do for us because they are not within our power.

I can best summarize what I have been saying about the relation of contrition to confession by quoting the words of St Thomas in one of his questions *de quolibet*<sup>2</sup>. He first points out that sacraments operate in a quite different way from natural causes, since they act on us from the moment we promise to receive them (have them *in voto*). After a comparison with baptism of desire, he continues 'A person receives the full effect of the sacrament when he is actually absolved, but its power acts to remit his sins as soon as he makes the promise to go to confession'. It is assumed of course that the intention to confess is a genuine one, though circumstances (as in the case of the dying) might prevent its ever being fulfilled. But whether we have been given the grace of contrition before going to the sacrament or not, it is always the sacrament which produces contrition, and causes the remission of sin.<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that grace is limited to the sacramental (or, as it is often called, the 'visible') Church. We do not doubt that those who through no fault of their own are deprived of the sacraments nevertheless receive grace from God, but he has not revealed the manner in which this happens. Yet even in this abnormal case it seems likely that grace comes through the visible Church of Christ, so that for example the justification of the good pagan, given without baptism, would still be a baptismal grace.

<sup>2</sup> Quod. 4, 10. The *Summa Theologica* breaks off before reaching this question.

<sup>3</sup> In the terminology introduced in the previous article, interior repentance is the *res et sacramentum* produced by the external actions, *sacramentum tantum*; together they cause the *res tantum*, remission of sin. S.T. 3, 84. 1 ad. 3.

They are right then who insist that the most important element in the remission of sins is, from the human point of view, true penitence or contrition. But I have tried to show that contrition cannot be separated from sacramental absolution, because grace is given through the visible body of Christ. The argument depends on that characteristic property of a sacrament of being both within and yet outside time. Sacraments have their effect on the Christian here and now, yet look back to the cross and forward to the second coming. More particularly, penance looks back to the moment when we are sorry for our sin: but it also looks forward to the moment when new temptations will be felt. That is the sacramental meaning of the 'firm purpose of amendment' which is required of us. Once again this is no mere psychological need; it belongs to the grace of the sacrament, which does not merely give remission of those sins we confess, but if we are prone to commit them, gives us the strength to resist temptation during the time to come. The sacrament of penance must never be thought of as an isolated activity, confined to a few minutes on Saturday night: like the other sacraments, it is a part of that life in Christ which is the pledge of our future inheritance. Understood in this way, Catholics may possibly begin to find it a lighter burden, and an easier yoke.



## COUNSEL IN CONFESSION

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**T**HERE is always a danger that emphasis on the primary effect or purpose of any one of the seven Sacraments may obscure our vision of secondary effects and purposes. It is only natural that we should think of a Sacrament in relation to its principal effect, but we must never lose sight of the complete picture. It is as though we thought only of the head in a human body and forgot the unobtrusive little finger or toe. Yet should we lose a little toe we suddenly become aware of being thrown out of balance. If a more important limb—none the less secondary—suffers grave damage we notice it still more. In spite of the fact that we adjust ourselves strangely quickly, we do remain crippled