

THE CURRENT DEBATE ABOUT THE “THIRD RITE”

Some “conservative” Roman Catholics have been writing letters to the editor in the paper these days about the “third rite.” It is about the requirement that individual confession should be made to a priest. People are told that unless all sins are confessed orally, the absolution spoken in the private confessional box is null and void. One of the problems is the embarrassment that comes with having to confess all sins one’s to a priest. There must be considerable anxiety that the priest will recognise the person’s voice through the curtain-covered grille.

So what is wrong with general absolution? The absolution in the so-called sacrament of penance has been beset with legalism from the early centuries of the church, particularly in the Western church. People who had committed a serious sin after baptism were excluded from the Lord’s Supper for long periods, and only restored after a public service of confession. One problem was the idea that only clergy could forgive sins. Another was that “bind” and “loose” included the authority to impose and relax satisfactions.

Changes were made in the penitential system in the West in the Middle Ages. One of the most significant was that the Lateran Council (AD 1215) required private confession to a priest at least once each year, at Easter. The tying of penance to indulgences and the notion that that pilgrimages and veneration of relics could serve as satisfactions (technically, only for temporal punishment), and that military service in a crusade could substitute for all penance helped to reinforce the legalism that enveloped the whole system. There was a heavy emphasis on sorrow in the heart, confession by mouth, and satisfactions.

Vatican Council II changed the situation slightly. It said, “Particular occasional circumstances may render it lawful and even necessary to give general absolution to a number of penitents without their previous individual confession” (Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, no. 1670. However, Vatican II said that general absolution was not lawful when confessors were available. General absolution was permissible only when there was a very large number of people to be heard within a given time. Apparently some Roman Catholic clergy are taking the easy way out to avoid the many long hours sitting in the confessional box! There was no “third rite” before Vatican II. That is what the “conservatives” are objecting to. They want absolution to continue to be restricted to the private confessional and hence want the legalism associated with the private confessional to continue.

It is an interesting thing that the word “satisfaction” had its chief use in the early church in connection with the church’s penitential system. It was only at the time of Anselm, who wrote the important work, “Why God became Man” (about AD 1097) that “satisfaction began to be applied to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It is significant that the *Augsburg Confession* later also used the word “satisfaction” in its crucial article IV about justification through faith. “Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by His death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight.”

One may well ask how the legalistic penitential system is supposed to relate to Christ’s complete atonement for sin, and His giving of the authority to forgive and retain sin to all Christians, not only to the clergy. God is very rich in the ways in which He imparts the forgiveness that Jesus Christ has won, in the reading and proclamation of the Gospel, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, absolution (both private and general), and in the mutual consolation of fellow-Christians.

Certainly, we ought to confess all our sins to God, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer. However, no one can know all his sins and consequently cannot confess them all. The requirements that surround the confessional place all the emphasis on works instead of in faith in Christ. Besides, when people know all the sins you have committed, you are likely to be afraid of them. People understandably regard their clergy with fear and unease.

The legalistic penitential disciplinary procedures in the West were not continued in the East after an incident at Constantinople. Sometimes good things can come out of scandal. In about 390 AD, when Nectarius was the bishop of Constantinople, it was thought necessary to abolish the office of those presbyters in the churches who had responsibility of restoring penitents to the church: After the Decian persecution and the withdrawal of the Novatianists from the church, a presbyter had been appointed to receive the confession of any people who had sinned after baptism. (The Novatianists entirely disallowed any restoration after serious post-baptismal sin.) A woman of noble family came to a penitentiary presbyter in one of the churches in Constantinople. She made a comprehensive confession of sins she had committed after baptism, and the presbyter imposed fasting and continual prayer as ‘satisfactions. Some time later this same lady again presented herself, and confessed that she had been guilty of another crime. A deacon of that church had slept with her.

After the fact had been established, the deacon was expelled from the church. However, the people were very indignant. They were annoyed for two reasons, that it had happened at all, and that the exposure of the incident had brought scandal on the church. As a result, the clergy were publicly blamed and taunted. Then Eudaemon, a presbyter at Constantinople, persuaded the bishop Nectarius to abolish the office of penitentiary presbyter. It was left to everyone's own conscience whether he was repentant when he went to the Lord's Supper.

Absolution is pure Gospel, and promise, not Law. People should hear it as God's own word from heaven. It is just as valid when spoken to a group, as in our general absolution at the beginning of a church service, as to an individual. The absolution that follows confession is the chief part. The assurance in absolution does not rest on sorrow for sin, but on Christ's promise of reconciliation. It proclaims, conveys, and seals that reconciliation that Jesus Christ has won, and gives the conscience peace. Christ's mandate is not to investigate sins, but to declare His forgiveness. It should be valued highly.

One layman can absolve another. Private absolution is not commanded, but is available as an aid when it is spoken to an individual who is troubled in conscience about a particular sin. However, the emphasis on sorrow in the heart, oral confession, and satisfactions within Roman Catholicism has loaded penance down with legalism, so that very little is said about Christ's reconciling work and faith in it. Still today there is uncertainty connected with it, and Vatican II specifically denied that penance removed all the temporal punishments of sin. The same uncertainty continues in other directions. Who can ever know that enough has been done to release a person from purgatory through masses? Who, after he has gone through spiritual exercises that are supposed to earn remission of time in purgatory, can know that enough has been done? The torture of conscience that such confession produced at the time of the Reformation is still going on.

Luther commented on the situation in his day in the *Smalcald Articles*: "At the same time his attention was directed to his own works and he was told that the more completely he confessed, the more he was ashamed, and the more he abased himself before the priest, the sooner and the better he would make satisfaction for his sins, for such humiliation would surely earn grace before God. Here again, there was neither faith nor Christ. A person did not become aware of the power of absolution, for his consolation was made to rest on his enumeration of sins and on his self-abasement"