

Confession

By Father Homer F. Rogers

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles we read: "They came confessing their sins and were baptized."

In the last lecture we talked of baptism as the transition from one community to another, from one self-understanding to another. It involves the abandonment of one set of ideals and values and goals and the adoption of a different set. It involves, fundamentally, the severing of one set of relationships – and remember that a person is a subsistent relationship – and being inserted into a new set of already existing relationships which involve attachment both to God and to our fellow Christians.

Recent converts are the best missionaries; they still have ties and friendships in the old "world;" after a few years it is common that the devout Christian has very few close personal friends outside the Christian community.

Conversion, or the change from a life based on one set of ideals to a life based on an entirely different set of presuppositions, normally involves the conviction that the previous set of values were false and inadequate. The subjective effect of this may vary from a sense of having been stupid or foolish, to a profound contrition and a cry to God, "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

One of the graces of baptism not mentioned in the previous lecture is the forgiveness of sin. It is also the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The power of the keys, to forgive sins, to bind and loose on earth, is first exercised in the sacrament of baptism. If an unbaptized person makes his confession he does not receive absolution; he receives baptism. But since the Christian life is a life of growth, a life of repeated and ever deepening conversions, as more and more we discover in ourselves things that we have with-held from God and are moved by the Holy Spirit to surrender to God at a deeper level, there is need for a repeated sacrament of forgiveness.

However, the forgiveness of sin is the same, whether received in baptism or in the sacrament of reconciliation.

I mentioned Alcoholics Anonymous in the previous lecture; let us take their approach as a paradigm. Leaving aside the question a defective liver and all other complicating considerations, one reason the alcoholic drinks is that he does not like himself; he cannot stand the reality of himself, so he escapes into an alcoholic haze. When he sobers up he often cannot remember what fool things he has done and so has additional reasons for despising himself and needing to escape. His essential problem is that he cannot forgive himself.

What he discovers in A.A. is a group of people all of whom have been where he is. The standard topic of the talks in an A.A. meeting is a kind of testimonial by someone who has been there himself. What the alcoholic finds in A.A. is a nonjudgmental community, people who do not look down on him because they know they are no better than he is. In such a community no one is despising him, no one is shaming him, no one is accusing him. When he finds acceptance from others, he is on the road to being able to accept himself.

But, as the A.A. people say, he has to be ready, he has to have hit his bottom. As the church puts it, he has to have renounced the flesh, the world, and the devil; he has to have discovered how shallow and empty and foolish have been the things he has built his life on. He has to have hit his own bottom; he has to have converted.

The alcoholic has a great advantage over the ordinary sinner; he has one outstanding vice he can blame it on. I know and admire the A.A. program; it works. They start with the drinking problem. They focus on alcoholism – at first. But in no time at all they are teaching

the new convert to sobriety about pride and envy and resentment and jealousy and avarice and self will and all things Christians are supposed to talk about – and seldom do.

But there are two things that make the A.A. program work; one is the twelve step program, which is just elementary Christianity, and the other is the absolute importance of being in the community. We ask our converts to come to Mass every Sunday, and some do. A.A. asks their new converts to come to meetings seven nights a week, and they come, and they stop drinking.

Step one is the discovery that one's life is in a mess and that one is powerless over alcohol. It could be any one of a score of other vices. The important thing is the discovery that I cannot manage myself.

Step two is the germ of a faith in "a power greater than myself," and the belief that that power – God – can lead me to sanity.

Step three is a willingness to turn my life over to God (as I understand him) and seek only to do his will.

There you have in skeletal outline the ingredients of the conversion experience. But steps four through ten – the next seven steps – have to do with making one's confession. They do not call it that. They call it making a fearless moral inventory. They call it admitting to God, myself, and one other person the exact nature of my wrongs. Exact! No vague statement of sinfulness as in our liturgical confession. The exact nature of my wrongdoings. Spelled out in specifics.

And all the while they find strength to do this because they have already experienced forgiveness in the acceptance they receive from the community.

The Christian Church is a group of sinners anonymous. Every speaker in an A.A. meeting introduces himself by saying, "My name is so and so, and I am an alcoholic." In every Christian liturgy there is a corporate confession of sin. We are sinners. Just as the alcoholic speaking may have been dry for twenty years, so the Christian may be close to sanctity; but once an alcoholic always an alcoholic; and once a sinner always a sinner.

Our job is to receive in love the repentant sinner before he has grown in virtue. Just as in A.A. all that is required is the desire to become sober; so in the church all that is required is the desire to become holy.

A person coming into the church from the world... What has he known in that "world?" He has known a society in which a man is judged by how much he possesses, by the amount of clout he has, by what he has achieved and accomplished, by how many degrees he holds, by what records he has broken. He is judged by his physical prowess; if a woman, she is judged by her physical appearance. One is judged by whether he speaks correct English, by the kind of car he drives, by his job or profession.

In such a world a person dare not admit weakness. If he is not a financial success he must act as if he were. All his silly secret vices must be hidden lest he find himself scorned and despised. So he develops a "public self" which he "puts on" like a mask when he is out among others in that world.

Sin is in essence alienation or separation from others; from God and one's fellowman. It is that spiritual condition of being encrusted, locked inside oneself so that no one has access to one's inner self. The fundamental root sin of all sins is pride, that condition of the soul in which all reality is that which is inside our own consciousness, and everything outside ourselves is impersonal and an adjunct to our selves. Sin is isolation, separation, estrangement, blocked relationships. Hell is loneliness, loveless-ness. Pride makes us think of ourselves as different, special, unique. It produces fear and resentment of others who in any respect may be better than we, a critical attitude toward those who do not dance to our tune or march to our drumbeat, a judgment and condemnation of others for faults which we have but rationalize and excuse in ourselves but scorn in others. It produces

a curious kind of blindness. In extreme forms it reduces all reality to my own fantasy life, and I become the creator of a private world which I can control – the characters in that world are my puppets and move at my command. I hate the outside world because it does not respond when I pull the strings. The souls in hell are gods in charge of tiny, private universe of their own creation.

All of us are like that to some degree. Real reality we cannot control at all; hence we must surrender our claim to the control of our own destinies and surrender, come to terms with, God and His world, the real world.

God has planted in each of us the compelling desire to be God-like, to be a hero, somebody great and important and splendid. What tempted Eve was the offer of a short-cut to sanctity, a kind of do-it-yourself sanctification. “Eat this, and be like god.” All sin, from that day to this, has been the effort to be our own God, to achieve our own perfection and happiness, instead of that which God freely offers us.

As small children we do not know what to make of ourselves. “How’m I doing?” we ask ourselves often. We learn early to evaluate our worth in terms of what others seem to think of us. If we are liked and admired it helps us to like ourselves. So we begin to develop different personalities to “put on,” depending on the crowd we’re with. You see this often in people who are cruel and callous at home but polite and considerate with outsiders. Or we have one personality when we are out with the boys, another with the boss, and another in church. All this is, of course, as phony as a three dollar bill, but it earns us acceptance and eases the pain of self doubt.

We so earnestly desire to be worthy and acceptable that we rationalize and excuse our faults and present a mask to the world. We settle for seeming to be rather than being. Would you rather be wise and have everyone believe you to be stupid, or stupid and have everyone believe you to be wise? Would you rather be virtuous and have others believe you wicked, or wicked and have others believe you virtuous? It’s a hard choice for the unconverted. We lie and strut and post and posture to impress others, we drop names, we pretend to virtues, and sometimes to vices, which we do not possess just in order to gain acceptance from the crowd we’re with. We criticize others to elevate our own esteem, we engage in power struggles, put others down, fawn and flatter those over us, and create a spurious, pseudo-personality to hide the unflattering things about ourselves. And we do this until we come to believe that mask we wear is our real face. We come at last to know no other. All our sins are in defense of this false self, in the effort to maintain its credibility and conceal our true self, even from ourselves. Every man, until he is converted, is a self-made man, and the self-made man is always an ass.

The grotesque mask we wear will never be acceptable. But in the world we play a game; I’ll take you at face value if you’ll accept my mask. We interpret the kindness of others as tributes to our merit, and the horrible part of it is that we believe our own lies, are taken in by our own deception. Any social contact which threatens to penetrate the mask is an occasion for conflict, for defensive maneuvers, and often for bitter and angry recriminations.

Now the spiritual life begins with getting honest with ourselves, with God, and with our fellow man.

It is said that Jesus “took our sins upon.” How are we to understand that? It certainly means many things, but at the very least it means this: Sometimes when two people have a falling out and are not communicating, each is convinced that he is right and the other wrong; the other ought to make the apology. Each may grieve over the broken relationship and yearn to patch things up, but each is convinced that it is the other’s fault. If the broken relationship is to be healed, one of them, has to accept the blame and make overtures of reconciliation.

But what if one of them really is blameless and the other totally at fault, yet the guilty one has beguiled himself – how easy this is! – and does not know his guilt? This is the situation between God and man. God and man are estranged. It is our entire fault; God is totally blameless and has never ceased loving us and desiring our friendship. The sinner, in his pride and blindness, feels that he is the victim of circumstances, that life has mistreated him, or even that God “has it in for him.” He stoutly maintains his innocence, even his righteousness. Into this situation Jesus comes and says, in effect, “Look, fellows, I’m sorry. I’ll take the blame.” In our fury we crucified him, and he never once complained of the injustice. We said, in effect, “You’re damn right you’re to blame. It’s all your fault. Take that, and that, and that!” And he was God.

But that leaves the situation still unresolved. It is our fault. Jesus has shown us that God, far from being vengeful and cruel and punishing, allows us to punish him and does not strike back. He followed his own advice: “Resist not evil, but overcome evil with good.” He turned the other cheek, went the second mile. When we crucified him he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Our sin is precisely in that we do not know. Yet we might know. We are blind, but ours is a willful blindness. We do not see because we will not see.

Compare the alcoholic who steadfastly insists that he is not an alcoholic, when all his friends know that he is. It is just as true of all our petty vanities, our subtle self-indulgences, our ego defenses, our rationalizations.

But when we had vented our spite on him, spit on him, scorned and taunted him – and remember, he said, “inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren” – when we had exhausted our spleen and he still did not sin back, we are finally forced to say with the centurion, “Surely this was a just man.” And the corollary is unavoidable: surely I am not.

We ought to respond to God’s generosity by saying, “No, no! I will not have it. It is not your fault; it is all my fault.” Until we do that we are still locked in our silly pride and our blind ego defenses and remain at odds with God – and with reality.

John the Baptist said, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus went further. “The Kingdom of God is within you.” What can this mean but that the Kingdom of God, God’s Sabbath rest, the peace that passeth understanding, is only a breath away? It waits only on our simple “I’m sorry.”

There is no humiliation greater than having done some stupid or ugly thing in the blithe assumption that it was right, then to discover that we ought to have known all along it was wrong. Every time I put someone down to boost my own esteem or reputation or image, every time I impose on another for my own comfort or convenience, every time I insist on having my way to the annoyance or inconvenience of others, I crucify Christ. “Inasmuch...”

But how can I admit that the mask I wear, which is the only self I know, is wicked and evil? It would certainly destroy me. It would be the death of me. I could never face the world again, or hold up my head in public. People would despise me.

That’s right. It would kill me. It would kill the phony self, the self I think myself to be. This is St. Paul’s “death unto sin.”

The church is, by Christ’s intent, a community of people who are committed to loving and accepting sinners before they are worthy, just as A.A. accepts the alcoholic before he is dried out. All that Jesus requires is that we be honest and admit that we are not worthy, and abandon our pretense of righteousness.

A person coming into that community honestly, admitting his guilt, discovers that he is not despised and rejected, but loved and accepted. Once the mask is dropped we discover that underneath, unsuspected even by ourselves, there is another self, a real self, one that God has been making all along, and that self is beautiful. Immature and incomplete, but not

distorted and perfected – and beautiful. This is the death and resurrection experience on its subjective side. The church has been talking about this since the days of the apostles, because she has experienced it again and again for nearly two thousand years. It is a real death, for it is the extinction of the only self I know, the only identity I have, and I must lay it down voluntarily. No one can take it from me, and God will not.

The new identity is literally bestowed on me by the church, by Christ through His Body, and in this we experience what it is to be forgiven. The outward and visible experience of being loved and forgiven by Christians makes credible the incredible fact of divine forgiveness. If you love me in God's name I can begin to believe that God can love a sinner like me.

God's attitude toward us is a relentless forgiving that needs only to be accepted, but we do not know that, cannot believe that. Baptism, our admission into the loving and accepting community, is the efficacious sign (the sacrament) by which God's forgiveness becomes credible, is experienced in flesh and blood, in the here and now of human relationships. This is another reason why the sacrament of baptism should never be administered outside the context of the full assembly of the faithful, ready to love and forgive the penitent sinner. If the church is being the church, if it is truly reflecting God's attitude of love for the sinner, and if the repentance is genuine, the baptized person feels himself enveloped in a love which is overwhelming. All that is required is the "broken and contrite heart," (Ps. 51:17) and the willingness to love and forgive back, and to pass on that love and forgiveness to others.

There are those who would fault the church because it is always insisting that we humble ourselves. Too much stress on penitence, not enough on joy. Maybe so, but the experience of two thousand years teaches that real joy is known only after penitence; any other joy is shallow and brittle and phony, the painted face on the mask.

The church neither requires moral rectitude as a condition of being loved, nor is she indifferent to morality. But she knows – God has taught her by her own experience – that we must be loved first before we can become lovable.

If after we have known and enjoyed the love and forgiveness we sin against it, reject it by a willful violation of that love, we have put ourselves outside the community of love. We have abandoned the comradeship of love and hence of God himself. "For he who dwelleth in love dwelleth in God." (St. John.)

If that should happen and we want back in, we must return to the original condition of penitence and admission of guilt. You do not just come back and rejoin the party as if nothing had happened. This would be forcing everyone else to participate in the pretense, the hypocrisy. Sacramental confession is designed to cover this situation.

We can put ourselves outside the community of love by a single act of spiteful rejection of our neighbor or a deliberate act which hurts another. Inasmuch as we have done it to our neighbor we have done it to God, who loves our neighbor and is one with him. Or we can drift away by a series of little acts, by not caring, by neglecting to love, by growing cold and indifferent and sinking back into ourselves. In either case, when we wake up and find ourselves out in the cold, the way back is through confession and absolution.

The condition of being outside the community of love, of having lost the love of God and our neighbor from our hearts, is called mortal sin. To do and live eternally in this condition of lovelessness is hell. The soul in mortal sin is once again in that crusted-over condition of self-justification which chokes the life of God in us and leaves us barren and dry and "on our own." For such souls, confession is morally obligatory. We may attempt to spare our pride and take refuge in the idea that we can repent and confess to God privately, but that is cheating. There is also our neighbor; there is the community of love which we have betrayed and abandoned. We cannot expect others to share our delusion and participate in

our hypocrisy. Confession and apology to our Christian brothers, at least in the person of our spiritual father, the priest, is required not by rubric or canon law, but by common honesty.

There are also venial faults which do not cut us off from the life of God. These are the unintentional things that we do or leave undone that bring inconvenience or hurt upon others. They are not so much deliberate denials of love as the result of flaws in our character, weaknesses, imperfections, forgetfulness, unintentional failure of consideration and helpfulness.

A confession is morally obligatory in the case of mortal sin. By it one may also confess and receive the comfort of absolution for venial sins. If I have hurt you, even unintentionally, and I am a gentleman, I will apologize. Not to do so were an additional fault.

The church gives us the sacrament of confession as an efficacious sign of our being received back into the love of God after we have abandoned it, and also of being forgiven for even our venial faults. If we have the decency to apologize to the family of Christ, we have the right to expect some acknowledgement of our apology. It is a delicate and sensitive thing, tuned to the relationship of people in love with one another. But it only works if we repent. But if we repent we open the door to the entrance of God's Spirit and flood the soul with the joy of companionship with the holy and the Communion of the Saints.

How often have you heard the reproach, "But no man can forgive sins; only God can forgive sins." Strangely enough, this is exactly what the Pharisees said when Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic let down through the tiles of the roof. They had brought the man to be healed of a physical disease; Jesus gave him forgiveness.

Let it be noted that the worst thing that can happen to a man, far worse than disease or poverty or the frustration of ambition, is to fall into serious sin. Until we have achieved this point of view we are not thinking like Jesus, our values are not Christian.

Now Jesus specifically gave to his church the authority and power to forgive sins. "Whose sins ye forgive they are forgiven; whose sins ye retain they are retained." This (and other similar passages) is the scriptural basis both for the teaching that baptism removes both original and actual sin, and also for the sacrament of confession. We must not make Jesus a liar; if he said it, it must be so.

We have already noted that being received and accepted into the loving and forgiving community is to experience forgiveness, is what makes forgiveness credible. But there is more to it than that. Surely it must be, given the unceasing love of God and his compassion for lost sheep, that the same inner disposition that separates us from God separates us from our neighbor. Pride excludes from our heart both God and our neighbor. And the change of heart that opens us to love makes it possible for us to receive both God's love and our brother's.

Forgiveness is not having a judicial sentence of punishment remitted. (If that were the case it were better that man not meddle in God's affairs.) Rather it is being restored to comradeship. The sentence, the punishment, is self imposed, as in the case of the prodigal son. He was lonely and hungry and longed for his home and family, but he was the one who had gone away. All he had to do was to return. When we abandon our pride we are open to receive not only God's friendship but also that of our brothers. How can it be otherwise than that whosoever receives, accepts, the forgiveness of the church also automatically receives God's forgiveness? And whoever rejects the friendship of the church is rejecting the friendship of God.

We may pick our friends because of some quality in them, because of something they do for us, because they agree with us, because they are what we would like to be, or just because we enjoy them. This is not friendship; this is exploitation. You cannot be God's friend on that basis. When we open ourselves to one another and offer ourselves to them to

be their friend we become vulnerable; we lose control of our destinies. You never know what demands they will make. The prodigal son was ready to become his father's hired servant. This kind of friendship works both upward and outward, toward God and toward my neighbor.

God can safely entrust the task of forgiving to the church because neither God nor the church can forgive who will not be forgiven. If the church forgives (i.e., receives into the mutual relationship of love and trust and selfless service) God automatically forgives. But if the church cannot forgive (because someone does not admit the need to be forgiven) then neither can God. The same disposition which opens the sinner to the love of the church opens him to receive the love of God. Man can forgive sins, thank God.

How about this one? I do not have to confess to a priest; I can confess to God alone. It would be all right to confess to God alone if it were possible to sin against God alone. If I have grievously harmed you, caused you the loss of reputation by gossip, perhaps stolen from you, or assaulted you and caused grave bodily harm, and afterward I'm sorry, it does not make everything all right if I confess to God alone. I must confess to you also, and make reparation if at all possible for the harm done you.

If we carefully analyze sin we discover that every sin is against not only God, but also against my brother. And every sin against my brother is a sin against God, against our common Father who loves us both. And if we accept the proposition that those we have sinned against deserve an apology, then surely we must confess not only to God but also to our neighbor. Every sin by a Christian is a sin against the community, against the church. At the very least it is a sin of ingratitude. But it also smirches the good name of Christian. Haven't you heard a thousand times, "I don't see why I have to go to church; I'm as good as those who do." We are so bound together in the interaction of a common spirituality that my weakness weakens others, and my strength strengthens others. You are the best Christian that somebody knows. When we have sinned we must offer apology both to God and to the church – as well as to people yet unborn who will grow up in a moral climate we have helped to create. And we betrayed the saints who have suffered to bring us the gospel.

The priest has been authorized by God, through the Church, to hear our apology on behalf of God and on behalf of our fellowman, and to assure us of both God's and the church's forgiveness. In the primitive church confession was made openly in the congregation, with absolution by the bishop. Be grateful for the development that allows us to confess only to the priest in private.

But doesn't confession make forgiveness too cheap? Isn't it an encouragement to sin again?

It is usually expressed something like this: "Those Catholics think they can commit any sin they like and all they have to do is tell the priest and be forgiven."

But it might be turned around: "Those Protestants think they can commit any sin they like and all they have to do is confess to God and be forgiven."

But neither Catholic or Protestant has ever said that we can be forgiven without repentance, and genuine repentance includes the desire not to sin again.

As a matter of fact, God went to a great deal of trouble – like the crucifixion – to make it easy to be forgiven. He wants to forgive. The Catholic knows that he can be forgiven without going to confession – any act of perfect contrition immediately affects the divine forgiveness – but he goes to confession for another reason.

We have previously mentioned the corporate nature of both sin and forgiveness. But there is a further reason for the sacrament of confession. Far from it being something that makes forgiveness and sin easy, the practice is a positive deterrent to sin and an aid to virtue. In the first place, if I am tempted to sin, will I be likely to say, "Oh, goodie, I can do this, and all I have to do is tell father about it"? Or will I say, "oh, oh, if I do this, I'll have to

tell father about it”? Nobody really enjoys going to confession (except those far advanced in holiness), no matter how wonderful it feels afterward. And the knowledge that I must include any sin I commit in my next confession sometimes stops me from doing it. Not only that, but the regular practice of confession attaches a bit of unpleasantness to each sin and diminishes its appeal – like mustard on ice cream. It is not a cheap forgiveness for it involves the wholesome humiliation of the self, a little bit of dying to pride and self will.

But more, it is a positive aid to virtue. Besides the divine grace in the sacrament – and that of course is its real purpose – at the purely human level, if I have told a thousand lies, the addition of one more does not appreciably increase the burden of guilt. The difference between one thousand, and one thousand and one, is minuscule. But the difference between none and one is infinite.

And when I go to confession I start numbering my sins over again with one. Confession is the sacrament of starting all over again with a clean slate. Confession gives me an event in time and space, a concrete sensible event – a sacrament – from which I can reckon my cleansing, and it renews my incentive to keep the soul unspoiled for a little longer.

The real, perhaps, unconscious objection that most people have to this sacrament, is this: “But I don’t want my priest to know what a stinker I am.” But such a person is not really penitent. That is pride speaking, and pride involves the effort to pretend to be nice when I’m not. However, in point of fact, the priest already knows you are a stinker, for we all are. He is too. And your sins are not all that different from others in your age group and station in life. If the priest knows his craft he can spend an afternoon with you and write your self examination for you and be 90% accurate. We do not do that good a job of concealing our sins. What the priest does not know is whether you are sorry. What you add to his knowledge in confession is your penitence, and his reaction will be one of admiration and joy and respect.

One should mention the seal of the confessional. The priest is bound by the most solemn obligation of his profession never to reveal, by word or action, anything that he learns in the confessional. He cannot even discuss your confession with you unless you come to him again outside the confessional and bring up the subject once more.

But what if I know I’ll sin again? You probably will. But the God who told Peter to forgive until seventy times seven is no less forgiving. What counts is that you grow in virtue, that your sins become less frequent and less grave. If you tell fifty lies a week this year, and only thirty next year, you’re making real progress. In five years you may be down to one a week, and a dozen years from now you do not lie at all. You will still have sins to confess, however. The closer we come to God the more clearly we see our own imperfections, and ten years from now you will be confessing sins that now you are already committing but hardly noticing, or don’t regard as sins at all.

God does not desire that we should carry about a load of guilt. Do not dwell on your sins or become morbidly introspective. Sins have a merely negative importance; they keep us from enjoying God. It’s sort of like forgetting the time of your favorite TV program and spending that hour idly thumbing through last week’s newspaper. Put your sins behind you and go forward into the love of God. That is what confession is for.