

ADVICE TO CONFESSORS

BY

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

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To the Reverend Pastors and Confessors of the Diocese of Geneva, peace and love in Our Lord:

My Dearest Brothers,

The office which you exercise is of great excellence, since You have been installed in it by God with such great authority to judge souls that the sentences which you pronounce correctly on earth are ratified in heaven. Your lips are channels through which flows peace from Heaven to earth on men of good will; your voices are the trumpets of the great Jesus, which overthrow the walls of iniquity - the mystical Jericho.

It is the epitome of honor for men to be elevated to this dignity to which even the angels are not called. For to which of the angelic orders was it ever said, "Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven."? But these words were spoken to the Apostles, and through the Apostles to all those who were to receive the same authority by legitimate succession. Since you hold this admirable office, you must bring to it, day and night, all your care, and I, on my part, a great deal of my attention.

Some time ago I drew up a series of observations on this matter, and these I believe proper to aid you in the exercise of this office. From these observations I have drawn this brief Memo which I send on to you. I believe that it will be most useful to you.

DISPOSITIONS OF THE CONFESSORS

You must have a great cleanliness and purity of conscience since you propose to cleanse and purify the consciences of others, lest the ancient proverb be your reproach: "Physician, cure yourself." or the saying of the Apostle, "In judging others, you condemn yourself." If then, you are called upon to hear confessions and find yourself (God forbid) in mortal sin, you must first confess and receive absolution; or, if you are unable to obtain this great benefit through lack of a confessor, you must stir up in yourself a most holy contrition.

Have an ardent desire for the salvation of souls, and especially for those of your penitents, praying God that it please him to further their spiritual advancement.

Remember that at the beginning of their confessions the poor penitents call you Father, and that you must indeed have a fatherly heart towards them, receiving them with a great charity, bearing patiently their uncouthness, ignorance, weakness, slowness and other imperfections. Never leave off aiding them and assisting them as long as there is hope of their amendment. According to St. Bernard, the burden of pastors is not made up of strong souls, but of the weak and feeble. The strong can help themselves but the weak must be carried. Thus, even though the prodigal son returned from among the swine stripped, dirty and stinking, his good father nevertheless embraced him and kissed him lovingly, wept over him because he was his father, and fathers' hearts are tender towards their children.

Have the prudence of a physician, since sins are spiritual maladies and wounds, and consider well the dispositions of your penitent and treat him accordingly. If, for example, you see him burdened by shame and embarrassment, instill in him assurance and confidence, showing him that you are not an angel, no more than he is. Tell him that you do not find it strange that men should sin. Assure him that confession and penance render a man infinitely more honorable than sin renders him blamable. Assure him that first God, then confessors, do not evaluate a man on what he has been, but on what he is at the present moment. Assure him that in confession sins are buried before God and the confessor in such a way that they will never be remembered.

If you notice him to be without shame or apprehension, make him understand that he has come to cast himself before God, and that in this action it is a question of his eternal salvation. Remind him that at the hour of death we will have to give a more careful accounting of bad confessions than of any other transgression. Call to his attention that in absolution we call upon the ransom and the merits of the Passion and the Death of our Lord.

If you notice him fearful and crushed by some lack of hope of obtaining pardon for his sins, encourage him, showing him the great pleasure God takes in the penance of great sinners. Point out that the greater our misery, the more is the mercy of God glorified. Remind him that our Lord prayed to his Father for those who crucified him, to let us know that even if we were to crucify him with our own hands, he would willingly pardon us. Tell him that God has such an esteem for penance that the smallest penance in the world, provided it be true penance, would make him forget all sorts of sins to such a degree that, if the damned and demons were able to perform it, all their sins would be forgiven. Remind him that many of the great saints were also great sinners: Saint Peter, Saint Matthew, Saint Mary

Magdalen, David, etc.; and finally that we can do no greater wrong to the goodness of God and to the Passion and Death of our Lord than to have a lack of confidence of obtaining pardon for our iniquities. Further, we are obliged to believe, as an article of Faith, in the remission of sins. This article exists lest we should doubt of receiving absolution when we have recourse to the Sacrament of Penance, which was instituted for this very purpose.

If you see them perplexed because they do not know how to express their sins, or because they do not know how to examine their conscience, offer them your assistance, and assure them that, with the help of God, you will not permit this in any way to interfere with their making a good confession.

Above all, be charitable and discrete with all penitents, especially with women, in order to help them confess shameful sins.

1. If they accuse themselves using indelicate or improper words, don't play the part of the delicate soul. Don't let them think that you find them strange. Let them finish, and then calmly and charitably instruct them in the proper manner of expressing themselves.

2. If in confessing shameful sins they mix in all sorts of excuses, pretenses and stories, be patient with them, and don't trouble them until they have finished. Then you may question them so that they might make a distinct and perfect declaration of their sins. Then, but kindly, point out to them and let them see the superfluities, impertinent matter and imperfections of which they were guilty in excusing themselves and disguising and softening their guilt. This, however, must be done without lecturing or scolding them.

3. If you notice that they have difficulty in accusing themselves of shameful sins, you will begin by questioning them on the lightest degree, as taking pleasure in improper talk, entertaining improper thoughts. Thus, little by little, you will go through the various degrees, that is, from listening, to thoughts, to desires, consent, and finally actions, depending on what is uncovered. Encourage them ever to more completeness, using such or similar words: "You are indeed fortunate to make a good confession. God indeed has given you great graces. I know that the Holy Spirit has touched your heart to help you make a good confession. Take courage, my child, and recount your sins openly, and do not be troubled. Having made a good confession will be your greatest happiness, and you will desire nothing in the world more than this gift of complete freedom of conscience. The greatest consolation at the hour of your death will be that you made a good and humble

confession. May God bless your heart which is so well disposed to accuse itself entirely." And ill this way you will urge their souls, beautifully and gently, to make a perfect confession.

4. When you encounter persons who are extremely crushed and burdened in conscience because of enormous sins, as sorcery, calling upon the devil, bestiality, murder and like abominations, you must, by all means, raise and console them. Assure them of the great mercy of God which is infinitely greater in pardoning them than are all the sins of the world to damn them. Promise them that you will help them in all matters in which they require your assistance in order to lead them to salvation.

QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED

When the penitent arrives, before all else he must be asked his state and condition; married or single, cleric or layman, religious or secular, lawyer or judge, artisan or laborer. One must proceed differently according to each vocation.

After that, one must determine if the penitent has the intention of confessing completely, without concealing anything known to him. Also, whether he has the intention of leaving sin and detesting it completely, and whether he will perform the penance imposed and follow the advice given for the salvation of his soul. If he is not so disposed, one must stop there and enkindle in him these dispositions if this be possible. If this cannot be done, one must send him away, making him realize the dangerous and miserable state in which he finds himself.

MATTER FOR CONFESSION

It is an intolerable abuse that sinners should not accuse themselves of any sins unless they are questioned. One must teach them, then, to confess of themselves as far as they are able, and then help them with questions.

It is not sufficient that the penitent accuse himself merely of the genus of his sins, as for example, homicide, lust, theft; the species of the sin must also be named. If he murdered his mother or father, it is different from simple homicide, and is given the name of parricide. If he murdered in church it is a sacrilege. If he murdered an ecclesiastic, it is spiritual parricide, and he is thereby excommunicated. The same can be said of the sins of lust. If he were with an unmarried woman, it is fornication. If he knew a married woman, it is adultery, and so on with the other sins.

Not only must the type of sin be mentioned, but also the number of times it was committed. The penitent must accuse himself of the number of times he has committed the sin, or at least the approximate number of times as far as he can remember. If he is particularly given to this sin, he must tell how long he has persisted in it. Certainly there is a great difference in the cases of one who has blasphemed once, one who has blasphemed a hundred times, and one who has the habit of blasphemy.

One must further examine the penitent on the various degrees of sin. For example, there is a great difference in simply becoming angry and in striking someone, striking with a fist, club or sword.

These are all various degrees of the sin of anger. Similarly, there is a difference in the case of carnal glances, of touches and of consummated sins. It is true that one who has confessed an evil deed need not confess the others which are necessarily required to commit it. Thus, one who accuses himself of violating a maiden once need not mention the kisses and touches that took place on this occasion. All that is sufficiently understood without his mentioning it, and all these are included in the confession of the sin.

I say the same of sins whose malice may multiply itself in one action. For example, who steals one dollar has sinned. Who steals two dollars also commits but one sin and of the same type, but the malice of the second is double. Likewise it is possible to scandalize one person by a certain action, and on another occasion by the same action to scandalize thirty or forty, and there is no proportion between the two actions. Thus, one must state, as closely as possible, the quantity stolen, or the number of people scandalized by one action. The same holds for other sins whose malice is increased or decreased according to the quantity of the object or matter.

One must penetrate still further, examining the penitent on desires and consents which are purely internal. One must determine if the penitent has desired or consented to take vengeance, or other improprieties, for these evil affections are sins.

One must further examine bad thoughts, whether they were followed by desires or consent. For example, one who took pleasure in thinking of the death, ruin or disaster of his enemy, even though he did not desire these; nevertheless, if he voluntarily and knowingly took delight and pleasure in these imaginations and

thoughts, has sinned against charity, and must accuse himself rigorously of these. It is the same with him who voluntarily and with pleasure carries and takes delight in thoughts and imaginations of a carnal nature. He sins interiorly against chastity and must confess this sin. Even though he had no desire of applying his body to the sin, he has nevertheless applied his heart and soul. Sin consists more in the application of the heart than of the body. It is in no way permissible to take pleasure and delight knowingly in sin, neither by actions of the body nor of the heart. I say knowingly because it may happen that these thoughts come upon us against our wishes, or when we have not fully averted to their character. In this case it is not sinful, or at least not mortally so.

Further, the penitent must accuse himself of the sins of others as did David. If by bad example or other means he has caused others to sin, he is guilty, and the sin is properly called scandal. Nevertheless, the penitent must be prevented from naming his accomplice in sin, or making him known in any way whatsoever.

HOW RESTITUTION IS IMPOSED

Once the confessor has well recognized the state of conscience of the penitent, he must dispose and order what he sees to be necessary to render the penitent capable of the grace of God. This concerns the restitution of the goods of another, the amendment of his life and avoiding the occasions of sin.

As to restitution and reparation to the wronged, means must be found, if at all possible, to do this secretly in order that the penitent may not be defamed. For example, in the case of theft, the matter or its equivalent must be returned, but by a discrete person who will neither name nor reveal the restitutor in any way whatsoever. In dealing with false accusations or deception, it must be tactfully arranged that the penitent gives the contrary impression before those concerned, without seeming to do so, saying the contrary of what he said, again without any display of contradiction.

As for usury, false suits, and other entanglements of conscience, it is with great prudence that reparation must be ordered. If the confessor is not equipped to make a judgment on the matter, he must gently ask the penitent leave to think on the subject for some time. The confessor will then consult those more learned. But above all, those who are consulted must not be able to determine the identity of the penitent, unless by direct or explicit consent of the penitent. Even with the permission of the penitent this must never be done except in cases of extreme

necessity, and if the penitent asks this of the confessor outside of and after confession.

HOW PENANCES TO BE IMPOSED

The confessor must impose the penance with gentle and consoling words, especially if he notices the penitent to be very repentant. He must always ask the penitent if he is willing to perform the penance, for in the case that the penitent seems at difficulty to perform it, it is better to give a lighter one. Ordinarily it is better to treat the penitent with love and mildness, without, however, flattering him in his sins, than to treat him sharply. Nevertheless, one must not forget to point out to the penitent that, according to the gravity of their sins, they deserve a heavier penance, so that the penitent will do what is enjoined more humbly and with greater devotion.

The penance must not be confusing and mixed with all sorts of prayers, nor must a variety of actions be imposed. Two inconveniences arise from this accumulation of prayers and exercises: one, the penitent can easily forget and may become scrupulous; two, if he thinks more of what he has to do or say than what he is actually doing or saying, or if he goes searching his memory as to what he is to do, devotion will be chilled.

It is much better, then, to give prayers that are all of the same kind, as for example all Paters, or psalms which follow one another, and need not be sought after. Further, the following may also be given: to read a certain book which is judged profitable for the penitent, to join a confraternity, and similar actions which will serve not only as a penance for past sins, but will be a preservative against future sins.

COUNSELS TO BE GIVEN

As for the counsels which should be given the penitent, in general those that are most useful to all types of persons are the following: to confess and communicate frequently, to choose a good regular confessor, to assist at sermons and instructions, to keep and read good books of devotion, to shun bad company and to seek the good, to meditate on death, judgment, heaven and hell.

BEFORE ABSOLUTION

This being done, before giving absolution, you will ask the penitent if he does not ask humbly for the remission of his sins, if he does not hope for this grace by the merits of the Passion and Death of our Lord, if he is not determined from that moment on to live in obedience and fear of God.

After that you will let him know that the sentence of absolution which you pronounce on earth will be acknowledged and ratified in heaven; that the angels and saints of paradise rejoice to see him restored to the grace of God; and that from then on he should live in such a manner that, at the hour of death, he may be able to enjoy the fruits of this confession, and since he washed his conscience in the blood of the Immaculate Lamb he should take care not to sully it again.

CLOSING

You have, my dear brothers, these articles which I have judged worthy of being proposed to you. Distracted by other occupations, I have been unable to write them more ornately, nor to write the rest. Always recommend my soul to the mercy of God. I, on my part, desire for you his holy blessing.

FURTHER ADVICE TO CONFESSORS

Beware of speaking too harshly to your penitents. It sometimes happens that we are so austere in our corrections that we are more blamable than our penitents are culpable. God does not want this. He complains that our too severe moods have caused his altars to be deserted and his sacrifices without victims. Because you commanded with such absolute power, says our Lord speaking to his priest, my poor sheep have fled in terror.

Jesus Christ our Master never would have destined men to be confessors if there were to be no sinners. Confessors being sinners themselves are obliged to be humble, meek, and to lower themselves with the penitents by a gentle condescension. This is, nevertheless, something that the greater part of spiritual fathers do not know how to do. This amazes me, for the touchstone of the perfect confessor is that he be merciful with the vices of others, but implacable with his own. True piety, says St. Jerome, is always compassionate, and false piety has nothing but cruelty.

In the Law of Grace there must be nothing but sweetness. The anger of our Lord is like summer rains, which but touch the earth. The Son of God is a vessel of mercy, and he became man to unite himself to a merciful disposition. For that reason, his divine soul was united with his body to suffer with his creatures and to make himself like unto his brothers. I do not mean to imply the type of compassion which presents vice with a pillow and a window to place sin at ease. No, I mean only that we accommodate ourselves to the reach of all. We give nothing to malice, but only to infirmity. Souls do not wish to be pushed rudely, but gathered gently. This is the nature of man. A saintly tact is needed for this conduct. Our conscience should be our guide in these encounters.