

*The priest must remind himself that he is called  
to be a confessor; a sign of contradiction  
and herald of hope, in the midst of the world.*

## The priest as confessor

*By Jeff Kirby*

■ This past year, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops printed a new booklet on how to do what Catholics should be well adjusted and accustomed to doing, that of confessing their sins. Msgr. James Moroney, who leads the Bishops' Liturgy Office and announced the printing of the guide, voiced concern over the growing negligence of the sacrament of Penance. According to recent studies, of the 65 million Catholics in the United States, 26 million never go to Confession and only 35 percent go once a year. The increasing decline in confessions has become a serious pastoral issue and the question is asked as to how this has occurred. Among the many reasons, two in particular can be cited, that of both a loss of the sense of sin among the faithful and, more detrimentally, an apathy towards the sacrament among many in the clergy.

While the loss of the sense of sin can be comprehended as a consequence of the secularism of the modern era, the more pressing question is how a priest, as a minister of the sacrament, can become indifferent to its celebration? Perhaps a review of the simple, yet

noble, title of "confessor," which the Church gives to the priest, with its history and symbolism, can renew appreciation and zeal for the exercise and propagation of the sacrament.

In the early Church those believers who remained faithful to the Gospel and were persecuted—many being physically scarred or maimed—but not martyred, were given the noted title of "confessor" because they had confessed their faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ, willing to endure all things out of love for him. They stood as marked witnesses to God's love for humanity and the love humanity should always be willing to give to him. Among the various penitential acts of the apostates seeking reconciliation with the Church, one act in particular was the seeking after one of these confessors, the admission of infidelity and the request for the confessor to "offer up" his own sufferings, with those of Christ, for their betrayal of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Why would the Church, in her perennial wisdom, give to the priest in the confessional, who maybe has not experienced the historical prerequisite of physical torture, the

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same title as these early Christians? The understanding is that the priest administering Penance is seen as a spiritual confessor, who gives testimony to the Good News of God's enduring concern and providence for humanity. Even if historically different, the confessor is called to the same level of abnegation ordered to love of God. He sits as judge and healer, concerned with both the divine honor and the salvation of souls.<sup>2</sup> In his ministry, he must be willing to suffer inconveniences, annoyances and interruptions, as well as the possibility of physical affliction, for the sake of the Kingdom of God and the redemption of humanity.

Knowing the activity within the Blessed Trinity and the specific ministry of the Son to humanity, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the confessor *in persona Christi* exercises the very office of Jesus Christ, administering both divine justice and mercy. The confessor is the very image of Christ to the penitent, offering Christ's own absolution, saying, "I absolve you," as well as giving Christ's correction and compassion, to the reformed sinner.

Does the priest, however, only preside in the Person of Christ? Having the title confessor also seems to imply an ecclesial office and, indeed, the priest as confessor also sits *in persona Ecclesiae*, representing the whole Church and doing what she intends.<sup>3</sup> The confessor does not merely represent the Church, as if only an empty delegate, but he truly embodies the Church. He personifies not only the local parish or specific community he serves, but also the Church in her full expression; that Church which has "astonishing propagation," "outstanding holiness," "inexhaustible fertility in every kind of goodness," "catholic unity," and "unconquerable stability."<sup>4</sup> The confessor dialogues with the sanctified in heavenly triumph, intercedes for those in purgatorial fires and he dispenses the mysteries of God and the means of salvation and perseverance to the members of the Church on earth, who

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still fight the good fight, seeking holiness and eternal beatitude. The priest holds within himself and is exercising the glorious heritage of the Body of Christ, the inheritance of all the saints.<sup>5</sup>

How does this unique office of *in persona Ecclesiae* express itself? The priest as confessor does not sit alone but is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1), which are his and the penitent's older brothers and sisters in heaven who have stories to tell and advice to give. The confessor, while relying on the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon him at ordination, also has at his disposal the generational network and vast source of counsel, admonition and instruction of the members of the Church through history's multiple and various encounters with fallen humanity, the struggles of man and the tension of the social order. He bears within his sacramental identity the bounty of the martyr's blood and the science of agony's sweat. He possesses a vicarious victimhood with spiritual scars and sufferings of love, and actively exercises the whispered wealth of wisdom and the earned treasures of tears and torture. This communal sense is clearly verbalized in the optional prayer of the confessor after absolution, "May the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints, whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life."

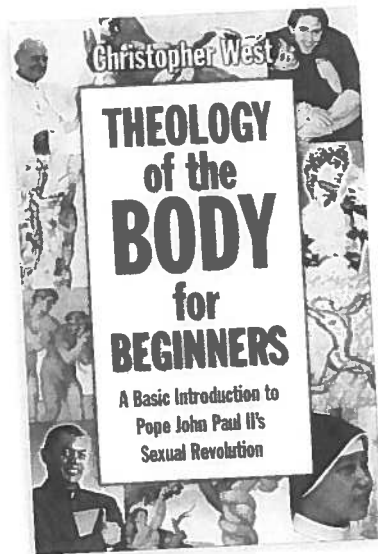


In the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, such as in the confessional, the priest himself becomes the locus, the point of intersection, between Christ and the Church, bear-

ing the personhood of both, and he serves as a breathing reflection of the nuptial union of Christ with the Church. What pastoral benefits and practical implications does this relationship within the priest call for and provide?

On account of this reality and assistance, the priest is able to have a universal charity, being a brother to all and a father for all. He will never meet a stranger or foreigner in the confessional and is able to surpass differences of "Jew and Greek," "free and slave," "male and female," (Gal. 3:28) and to truly be all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:22). The confessor, furthermore, is able to be timeless, not drifting with time and its trends, or to be caught up in fashions and prejudices. He is grounded by the Cross, the martyrs' blood, the confessors' example and the doctors' teachings, and is able to give sober and clear counsel and direction.

The priest *in persona Christi* and *in persona Ecclesiae* is called to discipline himself



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in the teachings of Christ and his Church, so that in his ministry he may be a well-trained disciple knowing what to retrieve and bring forth from this available store-house of the old and of the new (Matt. 13:52). To the degree that his own fallen humanity is ordered and open to the Holy Spirit, tongue of the prophets and father of the poor, the confessor will be able to allow his ontological identity and established office to function more fruitfully and to be more efficacious for the People of God.

In these ways and realities, the priest is a confessor in word, deed and sacrifice. At times he must remind himself that he is called to be a confessor, a sign of contradiction and herald of hope, in the midst of the world. The priest's ministry of Penance should not come to be seen as a burdensome chore but rather as a welcomed duty and privilege, in which the priest desires to hear the confessions of the People of God and to radically confess himself, proclaiming to penitents and to the whole creation, the saving and readily available Good News of redemption.

By the clergy coming to a renewed sense of its lofty service as confessors, can priests overcome their own possible stagnation with the sacrament and begin to address the diffi-

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culties of the faithful, providing opportunities and inviting them to regularly avail themselves of the sacrament and its abundant graces. ■

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church of the Apostles and Martyrs*, Trans. A. Butler (London: L.M. Dent and Sonds, 1960), pg. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Code of Canon Law, Trans. Canon Law Society of America, Canon 978.

<sup>3</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, October, 1976, #32.

<sup>4</sup> First Vatican Council, *De Fide*, Trans. N. Tanner, Chapter 3, pg. 807.

<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, Trans N. Tanner, #7, pp. 852-53



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