

The Confessional

Its Effect On Society

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(We take pleasure in reproducing this significant lecture by Father Thomas Nicholas Burke, the great Irish Dominican preacher, as we believe that modern audiences will find much fruit in reflecting on its contents.)

DEARLY BELOVED BRETHREN: Amongst the things that were prophesied concerning our Lord and Saviour, there was this said of Him: That He would be an object of wonder to men: "Vocabitur admirabilis."

"He shall be called," says the prophet, "the Wonderful." He came; and, in signs, and miracles, and many glorious deeds, He excited the wonder of mankind; but never so much as when they heard from His lips such words as these: "Your sins are forgiven you," spoken to the sinner. They were astonished at His wisdom; they were astonished at His miracles; but it was only when He said to the paralytic man: "Your sins are forgiven you," and to the Magdalene, "Arise, go in peace; all is forgiven you," it was only then that the Pharisees absolutely refused to believe. Their wonder carried them even into incredulity; and they said among themselves, and to each other "How can this be?"

As it was with our Divine Lord, so it is with the action of His Holy Church with regard to sinners. The world beholds her as Christ, our Lord, established her in all her spiritual loveliness and beauty, in majesty, in unity, in truthfulness, and in power. Men are obliged to acknowledge all the beautiful things that dwell in the Church. Some reluctantly, others with apparent joy, bear witness to the fair order of mercy and charity in her. And when they see her best and her holiest sitting down in the hospitals and in orphanages, attending the poor, or following the soldier to the battlefield, they fill the world with praise of this wonderful mercy which is so organized in the Catholic Church. When they see eight hundred of her bishops, meeting in council, and all hearing the word of one man, and before that one bowing down as before the voice of God — they bear willing testimony to the wonderful unity of faith, which is in the Church. When they contemplate her priesthood, consecrated to God, and devoted to the people, they give loud and cheerful testimony to the devotedness, which exists in the Catholic Church.

But there is one thing — just like the Pharisees with our Lord — there is one thing that they will not admit; and they are, perpetually, in regard to that one thing, repeating the old word of the Pharisees: "Who is this that says he can remit sin?" and "How can this be?" "Who is this man that even forgives, or pretends to forgive, sin?"

And so, over and over again, we meet those who say: “We admire the strength of your faith; we admire the piety of your worship; we admire the wonderful energy of your organization; we admire your ancient traditions; but don’t speak to us of confession!” Whenever the confessional is abused, they listen to the abuse of it with greedy ears. No man is more popular than the man who pretends to “unmask confession!” He is “honest!” he is “sincere!” he is “acting up to his convictions!” There must be something fearful, something terrible, in that assumption of power by which the Church pretends to deal with sinners, and to cleanse them from their sin. Yet, my friends, reflect; certain it is, that the mission for which the Eternal Son of God came down from heaven to earth was to take away sin; “that where sin abounded, grace might abound still more.” Certain it is, that it was for sinners He came, and for their sins that He died. Now, the action of Christ upon sinners and upon sin, was either to the total and entire destruction of sin, or only to the remedying of sin. Which of these was it?

Did His sufferings and His death totally and entirely destroy sin? He might have done it. Did He put an end to sin? Alas, no! It was not the design of His wisdom. With sorrowing voice, He, Himself, declared that, when He had died and gone to the place of His glory, sin would still remain. “It is necessary,” He said, “that scandal should be.” If, then, this death and suffering of our Lord, and the mission of Christ, our Lord, was not to the total destruction of sin, and the mechanical and entire expulsion of all evil from this world, nothing remains but to say that He came to remedy sin; to deal with sin wherever he found it; to deal with it in each successive generation. And this is the truth; for Christ, our Lord, knowing and foreknowing that sin should be, provided a lasting remedy for the lasting evil. And, therefore, calling to Him His Apostles, He said: “I am come, that where sin abounded, grace might abound still more.” Therefore did Christ suffer that the body of sin might be broken and destroyed in each successive generation. “The Father sent Me,” He says, “that where sin abounded, grace might abound still more.” “Again, I say unto you, that even as the Father sent Me, so do I send you.” Then, breathing upon His Apostles, He said: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose sins ye shall forgive they are forgiven them: and whose sins ye shall retain they are retained.” That moment — at the breathing of the Son of God — the power that was in Him was communicated to His Apostles, that, in His power, and in His strength, and in His grace, and in His action, they might absolve from sin, and cleanse the soul of sin.

Behold, then, how Christ, our Lord, clearly and emphatically embodied His action in the Church, and gave to the Church to do unto the end of time what He came to do upon the earth, namely, to deal with sin and with sinners; and to say to every weeping and contrite one, no matter how great the burden of his sin, “Arise; depart in peace; your sin is forgiven you!” Even those who deny to the Church the power of forgiving sin, admit that the Apostles did it. They cannot deny that the Apostles had it, without denying the very words of Christ: “Whose sins ye shall forgive they are forgiven.” And yet, while they admit that the Apostles had it, strange to say, they imagine that the mysterious power died with the Apostles. Now, let us take up this theory.

Let us reflect for a moment upon this foolish imagination that the power to forgive sin died with the Apostles. The action of Christ, I repeat again — the mission of Christ — was to deal with sin and with sinners. He gave that power, undoubtedly, to his Apostles; and I assert that if that power died with John, the last of the twelve, the action and the mission of Christ came to an end. It was absolutely necessary to acknowledge either that the power was transmitted from the Apostles to their successors in the priesthood, as they themselves had received it from Christ, or to confess that the action of the Son of God, our Redeemer, not being utterly destructive of sin, but only remedial

— that that action must have ceased entirely when the last of the Apostles died, and that there was an end of all hope of pardon for sinners. Can you imagine this? Did He come only to redeem the generation that had crucified Him?

Did He come only to redeem and to provide a remedy for the few generations that lasted as long as one of the Apostles was upon the earth? Oh, no! But He declared that as the ‘Redeemer’ from everlasting was His name at the beginning, so, until the end, He should be with His Church, in the fullness of His power — in the greatness of the outpouring of His grace. “I am with you,” He says, “all days, even to the consummation of the world.” And therefore, He is Jesus Christ, the anointed Saviour! — The same Saviour today as eighteen hundred years ago, through his Church; — yesterday, to-day, and the same for ever. That the Apostles had the power of transmitting all that they received from Christ to their successors, is evident from one simple fact that is not sufficiently meditated upon by those who deny it. Christ, our Lord, spoke to the original twelve. Judas was amongst them when He called them to be Apostles. Judas prevaricated; betrayed his Master; fell from his place of glory, even as Lucifer fell from his high throne in Heaven; and then there were only eleven left.

What did they do? They chose one man from out the seventy- two disciples — His name was Matthias — good and holy; — and they took this man — having laid their hands upon him — into the number of the Twelve Apostles, and he became even as they were. Everything that they could do he received the power to do. From whom? From Christ?

Christ was already ascended into Heaven. From whom, then? From the Apostles themselves. Think you, my brethren, that, if they had not the power of transmitting all that they had received from Christ, they would have chosen a man and made him an Apostle? But we have this upon the authority of Scripture. What, therefore, they were able to do for Matthias, they were able to do for all their successors in the priesthood and in the episcopate. And so the glorious tradition was handed down the stream; for all that began with Jesus Christ — that flowed from Him through Peter, James, John, and the others — flows to-day in the sacred channels of the priesthood. And that stream is a two-fold stream, namely, pure undiluted doctrine, as true as the very Word of God, because it is the Word of God — never to be polluted by the least error; and, side by side with that stream of doctrine, the waters of Divine grace; the sacramental power to heal by the touch of sanctity; by the application of the grace of Jesus Christ in the sacraments. These remained principally, as far as regards sinners, in the sacrament of Baptism and in the sacrament of Penance.

It is clear, then, dearly beloved, that this was necessary in order that the mission and action of the Son of God, as Redeemer of the world — falling upon sinners, touching them, and cleansing them — should continue in the Church. This was prophesied clearly by him who said: “On that day there shall be a fountain open unto the House of David and unto the dwellers in Jerusalem; unto the cleansing the sinner and the unclean.” (Zechariah 13:1) That sacramental fountain springs forth from the Church in the sacrament of Penance.

Now, before we pass to consider the action of this sacrament upon society, consider it, first, viewed by the Almighty God, and in the wonderful manifestation of the heart and the hand of Jesus Christ. When the Son of God came down from heaven to redeem the world, He came with three glorious attributes, which He was bound to preserve, even in the action of His redemption, because He was God. These were mercy, power, and justice.

The justice of the Eternal Father demanded that His own divine Son, who, alone, could pay man's debt, should come down from heaven and pay that debt in His blood. The justice of the Son of God, in relation to His heavenly Father, made Him come down from heaven and pay, in the shedding of that blood, the all-sufficient price for all the souls of mankind. The justice of the Eternal Father demanded that, as He had been outraged in every attribute of His power and dignity by the man, Adam, so, by a man — a true man — that honor, and glory, and dignity should be restored to Him; and the justice of the Eternal Word brought that untreated God from heaven, that, becoming true man — the Son of Man — He might be able to pay, in that sacred humanity, and by the shedding of that blood, for the souls of mankind. Thus, we see how the justice of God came forth for the world's redemption.

Secondly, the mercy of God is seen; for, O dearly beloved brethren, when we had abandoned the Almighty God, ungrateful for all that He had conferred upon us, He might have left us a fallen and a God-forsaken race; He might have turned away from the first sinner upon earth as He turned away from the first sinner in heaven, so as never to look with mercy upon his face again. But no; God looked upon the fallen race with eyes of pity, with eyes of infinite compassion and of mercy; and, on the first day of His anger, He remembered this pity and this mercy; for, after having cursed Adam for his sin, and having laid His curse upon the earth in the work of Adam, then did He unfold the plan of his redemption; and to the serpent He said: Therefore, the woman, and the woman's seed shall crush your head.

In this, we behold the power of God. For, says Saint Augustine, the power of God is measured in our regard by the greatest of His works. Now, the greatest work of God is the redemption of mankind; and the greatest work it ever entered into the mind of God to conceive, or into the hand of God to execute, was, God made man in our Saviour, Christ. This was the greatest of all God's works. Compared with this creature — the Son of Mary; for in His humanity He was a creature — a man; compared with Him in the ineffable union of God and man, of two natures in one person; everything else that God made, every other power that He ever showed or exercised, vanishes as if it was nothing; and Christ, our Lord, God and man, looms forth, filling heaven and earth, as the greatest of all God's works.

So, in like manner, in the dealings of Christ our Lord with sinners, He was careful to preserve the same three attributes of His divinity. His power He showed forth in the remission of their sins; His mercy He showed forth in turning to them and spurning them not from Him; His justice He showed forth, for never did He absolve a sinner from his sin without cautioning that sinner, lest he might return to that sin again, and something far more terrible should fall upon him.

And now, when we pass from the action of Christ to His Church, what do we find? We find, dearly beloved brethren, in all the works of God in His Church, in all her sacraments, a union of the same attributes. But nowhere, in no sacrament, in no action of God, do we find power and mercy so magnificently shown forth, and so wonderfully blended into one act, as in the act by which the sinner is saved, and absolved from his sin.

First of all, consider the power of God. Almighty God showed His omnipotence, first of all, in the creation. He spoke over the darkness and the void of space, and He said, "Let there be light;" and light was made in an instant. The sun shone forth in the heavens, and the moon caught up her reflected glory from him. The stars sprang forth like clustering gems in the firmament newly created, and the whole world was flooded with the blessed light, which sprang into existence at the

word of God. Then followed the same imperative, omnipotent command — the same fiat; and at the sound of the expression of God's will, life came out of death, as light out of darkness; beauty out of chaos; order out of disorder; and all the series of worlds took up their position in their respective places in creation, and began that hymn of harmony and praise which has resounded before Him for 'six thousand years' and more. How great, how wonderful is the word that God spoke, and by which He could effect such great things! Yet Saint Augustine tells us that the words by which the priest says to the sinner, "I absolve you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," and which, at their sound, cleanse that sinner's soul from all his sins; bring him forth from out the grave; bring him forth from out the darkness of his sin, into the light of God's grace; from defilement into purity; from death into life; that that word is simply, infinitely more powerful than the word — the fiat — by which Almighty God created the world.

Infinitely more powerful; and why? Because, when God, in the beginning of creation, stood, as it were, upon the threshold of heaven, and from heaven's brightness sent forth the word, there was nothing in that void that lay before God, nothing in that chaotic space over which His word was sped, that could resist the action of His word. There was nothing there. He made all things out of nothing; but the original nothingness, therefore, could not resist the action of God. Nor is there in heaven, nor upon the earth, nor in hell, anything that can resist the action of God, except one thing; and that one thing is the obstinate will, and the perverse heart of the sinner. The will of man alone can say to the Almighty God; "Omnipotence, I defy You." And why? It is not that God could not, if He so willed it, annihilate that will; but He does not will it. It is because the Almighty God, by an eternal law, respects that freedom of man's will, so that if that will resist Him freely, Omnipotence itself is powerless before that will. Such being the decree of the law of the wisdom of God, the heart of man alone, the will of man alone, can offer such an obstacle to the Almighty God's action, to Almighty God's will and wit. Even in His omnipotent power, God must yield, because He cannot gain a victory without destroying that freedom which He has sworn, by an eternal law, to respect.

Now, when a man commits sin, falls from one sin into another, when he becomes a drunkard, or an impure man, or a blasphemer, or, in any other way, hands over his soul to the devil, then his will is opposed to God — his heart turned against God. And how can the Almighty God convert that man whose will is opposed to Him, and the freedom of whose will He is bound to respect? Here comes in the wonderful action of God's wisdom united to His omnipotence. He will not say to that sinner, "You must be converted;" He will not say it, because, if He said it, that conversion would not be free, would not be worthy of man, nor could it be deserving of the favor and acceptance of Almighty God. The freedom that is in God essentially He has reflected on man, and he that is saved must be saved by a free co-operation with God's grace; and he that is damned, goes down to hell of his own free-will. Therefore, the Lord says, "Your perdition is from yourself, O Israel!" Here is the difficulty, then, that the mind of God alone, the wisdom of God alone, united to His omnipotence, can solve. Here is a man whose will is opposed to God. As long as that will is opposed to God, Almighty God can never have mercy on that man. And yet God cannot, in virtue of His own eternal laws, force that will to relinquish its opposition to Him.

Therefore, by His graces, by His wonderful attractive powers, He awakens in that sinner's soul the first feelings of love. He puts before the sinner's eyes, first, the hideous, yet true, lineaments of sin. He excites in the sinner's heart the first feelings of remorse and of loneliness at being separated from God. He puts into the sinner's cup of pleasure the little drop that embitters it somewhat to his own spiritual taste; and He reminds him how sweet it was to have loved the Lord his God. He

thunders in that sinner's ears the announcement of His judgments; He shakes that sinner's soul with the first tremblings of that holy fear which is the beginning of wisdom. With a merciful hand, He opens the vision of hell, and shows to that sinner's startled glance the lowest abode of the everlasting dwelling-place of the enemies of God. And thus, by a thousand powerful graces, sweetly, yet strongly, does He bring that sinner's will around, until, at length, the impediment is removed, and the man comes freely, not forced, but drawn and attracted — not coerced at all, yet coming in spite of himself — in spite of himself, yet freely; and (mystery of the omnipotence of divine grace, and of the wonderful respect of God's omnipotence for the freedom of man), he comes and surrenders himself to God. Then, and only then, can the Almighty God absolve him from his sin.

Consider how great is the obstacle that has to be removed from that sinner's soul before the omnipotent God can free him from his sin! There is there a will opposed to God. If all the angels in heaven, if all the powers in heaven and upon earth strained themselves to change that will, their action would be simply impotence before it; so tremendous is the law that preserves the perfect freedom of man's will for good or for evil.

We can again reflect upon the power of God, as shown in His punishment of sin; for this is the second great feature of His omnipotence, when it comes out in all the rigors of His justice. Oh, how terrible is this consideration, that, whilst we are here, peacefully assembled around this holy altar, there is, somewhere or other in the creation of God, the vast, the terrible, prison of hell, with its millions on millions of unhappy inmates, and its flames, roaring, sweeping, devouring, and yet not consuming; that, somewhere or other, the air is filled with the cry — the spiritual cry — of the imprisoned souls and reprobate angels of God, dashing in all their wild and impotent rage against those bars that shall never permit, them to go forth; that there is enkindled, by the breath of an angry God, a fire that shall never be extinguished; and there, for all eternity, the hand of God, in all its omnipotence, will fall with all the weight of its unsatisfied vengeance of fire! Terrible, terrible it is to think upon the despair that, looking forward to an endless eternity, sees no ray of hope, no moment of mitigation of the terrible punishments of the soul and of the body there!

Yet, if you reflect upon it, what is more natural than that the sinner, dying in his sins, should go down to hell? Where can he go? He cannot go to heaven with all his sins upon him. He died the enemy of God. He died with his free will turned away from God. He died with the hatred of God in his heart, because of the presence of sin. Is this the man you would introduce into the Divine presence? Is it on those lips, accustomed to blasphemy, that you would place the ringing canticle of praise? He has no idea of the joys of heaven, for they are spiritual; and this man's only idea or notion of delight was in gross, carnal sensuality. He has no idea of the Lord of heaven; for, all his lifetime, he spoke the language of hell cursing and blaspheming. He has no idea of the God of heaven; for, all his lifetime, he served the demon of his own passions and his own evil inclinations. There is nothing in him attuned with heaven. It would be violence offered to him to send him to heaven, and to make him enter into the joys of God. No; it is natural that he should go down into the cesspool of hell; either his sin must leave him, or else that sin, abiding upon his soul, must leave him under the brand of God's vengeance for ever.

What is more natural, my friends, than the idea of the water flowing from the little fountain on the mountain's summit — flowing onward in its little bed, falling now over one rock and then over another, receiving its various tributaries as it flows along, and growing in size until, at length, it becomes a great river in the lower plains? Falling from one cascade into another, it finds the deep

valley in the open country, and there sweeps into the mighty river, spanned by great bridges, passing through great towns, supporting upon its bosom mighty ships of war; until at length, turbulent, and with a thousand impurities, it falls rapidly into the deep, wild ocean. This is all natural. That a man should stand upon that river's side and say:

"Flow on, you shining river!"

is natural. But that a man should be able to stand in the mid-tide of that mighty stream, and with his hands to push it back against its course; to make it flow up through the upper lands, and up to the higher levels; to make it flow upwards against the cataract; to bring it up, purifying it as he goes, until, at length, from the turbulent, impure, and muddy stream, he brings it back again over the rocks, until, pure as crystal, it arrives at its source, and empties into that source — this would be a wonderful achievement! This would be power!

And what this would be is precisely what the omnipotence of God does here in the confessional, as compared with His action in permitting the damned to go down into hell. That God should permit the sinner to go down into hell, and that He should visit him there with His everlasting punishment, is natural and necessary, and shows the power God possesses, and need excite no astonishment. But that the Almighty God should stop the sinner in his mad career of sin; that He should make him stand whilst he was hurrying on through every channel of impurity, and pride, and avarice, and dishonesty, gathering every element of corruption and defilement as he went along; swelling forth in the tide of his iniquity as he was nearing the great ocean of hell that God should stop him, send him back again into the halls of memory, and there, through the upward stream of his life, cleanse him from his impurity and sin as he went along, until, at length, he brought him back to the pure, limpid fountain-head of his baptismal innocence — this is the wonder. Here shines the omnipotence of God. And this is precisely the act which He does when He takes the sinner and cleanses him from his sin in the confessional!

But how wonderfully are His love and mercy blended in this action of Christ. We know that the subject — the very subject of His omnipotence — is the sinner — a man who has violated, perhaps, the most essential and important of God's laws; a man who may have the blood of the innocent on his red-stained hand; a man from whose soul every vestige of divine remembrance and of spiritual aspiration may have departed, because of his impurity; a man who may have committed sins worse even than those that brought the deluge of fire from Heaven on the cities of Sodom and of the Pentapolis; a man who may have lived only to devote himself to every most wicked and diabolical purpose, until he has frittered into pieces and broken every one of God's holy laws and commands — that man comes and stands before this enraged and offended God — stands before this God who has a hell prepared for him — stands before this God whose goodness he has despised — whose grace he has trampled upon — whose blood he has wasted away — whose every attribute he has outraged — and he asks that God to deal with him!

He comes as a criminal, and to that God he says: "Lord! Here I am! There is not in nether hell one so bad as I. There is no record, in the annals of Your dealings with sinners, of any sinner so terrible as I have been. And now, I wish to enter with You into judgment!"

If that man had violated the laws of this world, as he has violated the laws of God; if that man had insulted human society as he has insulted the Lord Jesus Christ; if that man's iniquities were only taken cognizance of by an earthly tribunal, see how they would deal with him! He would be dragged from his house, perhaps in the noonday, by the rough officers of justice; he would be taken

publicly through the streets of the city, every eye looking at him curiously, every hand pointing at him as the great criminal — the man who committed such a murder — the man who did such and such wicked things. He would be flung into a dark dungeon, in a prison, and, after days and days of waiting and anxiety, he would be brought again into the open court, and the whole world called on to hear the testimony of his crime, and to behold his shame. Oh, no feeling of his would be spared! He would not be allowed to shrink into a corner of that court, there to hide his guilty head. No, but he must stand forth and confront the witnesses who depose against him, and quietly and calmly swear away his life's blood. He must be exposed to the heartless jeers and inquiring gaze of the world, that is so un-sympathizing. He may be, perhaps, on his transit from the court-house to the prison, exposed to the groans and the hisses of the multitude.

When he is found guilty, and his crime is brought home to him, then comes the awful moment. A judge, in solemn dignity, tells him that his life is forfeit, and that he must die a death of public infamy and ignominy to expiate his crime. Thus does the world deal with its criminals.

But if this criminal of whom I speak, appear before the Son of God, and say: "Saviour, judge; let us enter into judgment!" Christ takes him by the hand, and He warns off the crowd. Christ takes him and brings him into a secret tribunal; calls no witnesses against him; allows no finger of shame to be pointed at him; listens to what he has to say against himself; He says "Speak, my son, and speak freely!" He speaks his deeds of shame, it is true, in the ears of a man. That man is there as the representative of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose mercy he is about to administer. He hears the whispered word. It must not be heard even by the angel of mercy who is there, but only by the sinner and the priest of Jesus Christ.

That word falls upon the priest's ear; for a moment, it enters into his mind, and in a moment, it passes away. Just as a little child, on a calm summer evening, might take a pebble and fling it into the bosom of a deep, still, placid lake; for an instant there is a ripple on the face of the water; there is a little circlet of waves; presently these die away, the waters close, and the pebble is lost forever. No human eye shall ever see it again. So, for an instant, the sound of the sinner's voice makes but a ripple upon the ear of the priest, thrills for an instant on the delicate tympanum, and passes from that into the unfathomable ocean of the merciful heart of Jesus Christ. The waters of Christ's mercy close over it; and that sin is gone — gone forever. Not eye of angel, not eye of man, nor eye of God at the hour of judgment, shall ever look upon it again; for the blood of Jesus Christ has fallen upon it and washed it away.

How little it costs the priest to say, "I absolve you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," — these three words! "I absolve you." How little it costs the sinner! Scarcely a humiliation! If, indeed, a man had to proclaim his confession, and make it publicly; if a man had to make it before the assembly of the faithful; if a man had to make it on a Sunday morning, before all the people, as they were crowding in to Mass; even then, if such a confession would obtain pardon for me, o great God, would it not be a great gift to be able to purchase such a grace even at such a cost — even at the ruin of my character — even with all the ignominy and contumely that I would sustain at my public confession! It would be cheap, considering what I got in return. If the law of Almighty God said to the sinner: "I will bring you to the stake — and only at the last moment, when the last drop of life's blood is coming from that broken heart — then, and only then, will I absolve you!" — would it not be cheaply purchased — this pardon of God, this grace of God, this eternity of God's joy in heaven — even by the rendering of the last drop of our blood! But no!

Full of love, full of commiseration, Christ, our Lord, comes to us with mercy, sparing every feeling of the sinner, making every difficult thing smooth, trying to anticipate, by the sweetness of His mercy, all the humiliation, and all the pain; shrouding all under that wonderful veil of secrecy which has never for an instant been rent since the Church was first founded; and, in the end, it is the only tribunal where, when a man is found guilty, the only sentence pronounced on him is one of acquittal. In other tribunals, when a man is found guilty, he receives his punishment. In the tribunal of penitence, all a man has to say is: "Of these am I guilty before my God; oh, my God, with sorrow I confess them!" The only sentence is: "You are acquitted! Go in peace!"

No vestige of sin — no stain of your iniquity is upon you! The sin is gone, and the terrible curse that was upon your soul is changed into a blessing! The angel-guardian that accompanied the sinner to the door of the confessional awaits without, even as the Magdalene waited beside the tomb, whilst the body of our Lord lay there. For, even as the angels, when the midnight hour of the resurrection came, beheld a glorious figure rise from that tomb, and flung out their hearts and voices in adoration of the risen Saviour, from whom every wound and every deformity had disappeared; so the angel-guardian, waiting prayerfully, sorrowfully, outside the confessional, turns, for an instant, when that door opens, and rejoices when he beholds the man who went in, covered with sin, come forth as pure as that angel himself. The man who went in loaded with crimes comes forth with the blessing of the Eternal God, shining with the characters of immortal light, upon his forehead; the man who went in dead and buried in his sin, has heard, within that secret tribunal, the voice which said: "Lazarus, come forth!" and he has risen and come forth; and the angel-guardian is astonished at the change and the brightness on him.

Is it not so? Was there not a sad angel following, with reluctant and distant steps, the woman that flaunted through the streets of Jerusalem — the Magdalene, with her flowing robes, and her outstretched neck of pride — was there not an angel that knew her in the day of her innocence, and was now stricken with misery to behold so much shame? Oh, but when that angel saw her as she rose from the feet of Jesus Christ, that she had washed with her tears — oh, when that angel saw her as she rose, with the words of the Lord upon her head — "Oh, woman, go in peace: you have loved much and all is forgiven you!" — then, admiring the glory of the Magdalene's zeal, he struck the key-note of that voice that re-echoed in the heavens, until the vaults of heaven were shaken again, when the nine choirs of angels gave glory to God over the one sinner that did penance! So it is with us. We have seen the love, the mercy, the power that is exercised towards us.

And now, dearly beloved brethren, let us consider the action of this sacrament upon society.

The Catholic Church received from Christ, our Lord, a twofold mission. That mission the world is unwilling to recognize; but that mission it is the destiny of the Church of God to fulfill until the end of time. That mission has in it a two fold character. To sinners, to those who are in darkness, it brings the light; to those who are dead in the corruption of sin it brings the life of Divine grace. This two fold mission is perfectly clear from the words of Christ to his Apostles: "You are the light of the earth," He said. "Vos estis lux mundi: You are the light of the world." "And you are the salt of the earth." The light to illumine the world's darkness; the salt to heal and purify the world's corruption. The first of these missions the Church of God fulfills in her teaching; for the Psalmist said, with truth, "The declaration of Your Word, oh God, brings light and intelligence to Your little children!" And, as it is the Church's destiny to be, until the end of time, the light of the world, so the light, which is to come from her, must be the very light of God. Therefore, the word of truth, that creates that light, can never die away from the Church's lips; nor, coming from those lips, can it ever be

polluted by the slightest iota or admixture of error. She has the power given to her by our Lord, not only to illumine men in their darkness, but also to heal them in their corruption.

What is the corruption of the sinner? What is that corruption, that infirmity, that defilement to which Christ alluded when He said to His Apostles: “Ye are the salt of the earth,” ye must be put upon the sore places of the world; ye must be put upon the festering wounds of the world? What are these sore places, these festering wounds? They are the sores and wounds of sin in the soul. Sin is the sore spot of the soul. Sin is the awful ulcer of society. Sin, that abounds everywhere. For it abounds in every circle: in the commercial circles, making men untrustworthy and dishonest; in the domestic circle, making servants pilfer and steal; making masters and mistresses exacting and unjust; making children disobedient; making parents forgetful of their duties to their children; making the young man impure, and the married man unfaithful. All these things, all these evils that are teeming around us, that meet us wherever we turn that we cannot avoid seeing and hearing; be we ever so fastidious, they come under the very touch of our hand, and they disgust us with this life of ours. Then we are fain to cry out with the Psalmist, “O God, woe is me, because my pilgrimage here is prolonged!”

All these things are the corruptions of mankind; and the power that the Church received when she was called the “salt of the earth,” is to purge away all this, to remedy all these evils, heal all these wounds, and sweeten all that bitterness and all that corruption of society. All this she does through the sacrament of Penance — or through the confessional. There is she truly the savior of society, and the world cannot do without her.

How significant it is that, when Germany gave up the faith and the sacraments three hundred years ago, such was the immorality, such was the impurity that filled the community at once, that actually a German city was obliged to petition to have the confessional, or the sacrament of penance restored. All classes of society said: “The responsibility is gone — the yoke is removed from us — we need no longer betake ourselves to the task of looking up our sins and weeping over them, and wailing over them, and taking measures of avoiding them, or incurring the pain and humiliation of confessing them.” All this is gone; and then, like the Hebrews of old, they rose up, joined hands, and danced round the new-found idol — the golden calf of their own sensuality and wickedness. “You are the salt of the earth,” He said to them. Oh, if the Catholic Church was not on this earth! If she were not here with her sacraments to create purity and to preserve it; to create honesty and to enforce it; to bring home the full and entire responsibility of every man, and to him personally — to bring home to every soul — the deformity of sin, the necessity of repenting individually for each and every sin; to shake every soul in her sacrament of Penance, from the lethargy of sin — oh, I protest, my friends, I believe, if the Catholic Church were not here, operating upon her millions throughout the world, to do this, that long before this time, the chariot of society, rolling down the steep hill of human infirmity, would have precipitated the whole world into destruction and death.

How is it that Protestant employers and masters are so anxious to have Catholic servants, Catholic “help,” Catholic apprentices, Catholic people about them? How is it? Because they are shrewd enough to know that the confessional, which they despise, creates honesty — enforces it. There is no stronger way to enforce honesty than to get a man to believe that he cannot live without Jesus Christ — and that Jesus Christ is on the altar waiting for him; to tell him that between him and the Saviour stands a barrier that he must overcome, if he becomes dishonest; and that he cannot do without restoring to the last farthing whatever he has unjustly got; to tell him that if he becomes a thief — public or private — that the accumulation of his thievery will build up an impenetrable wall

between him and God; and that, until that wall is pulled to pieces by restitution, he never can approach the sacraments here nor the glory of God hereafter.

An English Protestant clergyman came to me once, when I was on the English mission, and he said to me: "Father, I come to complain of one of my man-servants." I said to him, "Well, sir, what on earth have I to do with your servants?" "Oh," he said, "all my servants, both men and women, are Catholics; and I would not think of employing anybody else." "What complaint," I said, "have you to make then of any of them?" "Well," he said, "I insist on their going to confession once a month; and this man has not been there in the last two months. So I came here to insist on his going." "Well, but you do not believe in it." "No," he said, "I know I do not believe in it; but so long as my Catholic people do go, they will not steal from me; and so long as they do not go to confession and communion, they will not receive any wages from me!"

What is the agency that touches the depravity of the world and creates purity and honesty? I answer, it is the confessional. Remember that the idea of purity as a virtue, as it lies in the mind of Christ and in the mind of His Church, is not merely an external decorum; not merely the avoiding of gross, actual sins; but that it begins in the very thoughts in the inner chambers of the soul of man; that it will not allow any impure or defiling imaginations to rest there for a single instant; that it will not allow as much even as an impure thought to be sanctioned for one second by the will; and out of that interior purity of soul, of thought, of imagination, springs the external virtue of chastity; for, without that interior purity, rendering the soul itself as candid, as white, as innocent as was the soul of Mary on the day of her assumption — without that, all external chastity would be as a dead body without its soul.

Now, the only way to create that interior purity — to create the essence of the virtue, to make the soul of the virtue, the life of the virtue — the only way is to establish firmly in the soul and in the mind of man, the idea of his responsibility to God for every thought of his mind, as well as for every action and word of his life; to bring him face to face with Christ; to make him not only know but feel that He whom he serves, also looks with a penetrating and scrutinizing gaze into the very inner chambers of the soul. How does the Church do this? By bringing that young man to confession; by putting him face to face with Jesus Christ; scrutinizing and examining his thoughts, his words, and actions; by making him search, by the light of memory, every cranny of his soul, and of his imagination; by making him feel that even although his lips may never have breathed an obscene word, even though this man may never have committed an impure action, he might still be as impure and as bad as the worst of men. This is only done by that action of the Church, which not only teaches a man to be pure, but drags him, as it were, with holy violence, and puts him into the presence of the God of purity; and says, "Come, open your heart, my son, and let the light of Jesus Christ into your soul!"

Thus it is, that from the confessional spring those virtues by which man acts upon his fellowman. The index virtue is purity; and the next virtue, in relation to our fellow-man, is honesty. The third virtue is charity. And behold how the confessional acts here. If a man speaks badly of his neighbor, if he ruins that neighbor's character or reputation, if he gets that neighbor thrown out of some lucrative employment by his whisperings, or his tales — he goes to confession; he says, I am sorry for the sin I have committed; and he finds, perhaps, to his astonishment, that the priest will say to him, "There is another difficulty;" until he makes good that man's character, there is no absolution for him; until he has swallowed the lie he has told, there is no pardon for him; until he has restored

to his neighbor the fair name and fame of which, by his whispering, and enmity, and injustice, he had robbed him, there is no pardon for him.

What greater, what stronger motive could there be to make a man guard his words, to preserve him from detraction, to make him measure well his words before he inflicts an injury on his neighbor; when he knows if he gives way to this mean jealousy or enmity, if he says these things or publishes them, even though men may forget it, God will not forget it in the interests of his neighbor. “To communion,” this man must say, “I cannot go; nor cross the threshold of the kingdom of heaven, until I have gone out and swallowed this lie that I have told.”

And so, pursue our relations to each other, to society, and to those around us, into every detail of social life, and you there will find the Church following you, guiding your footsteps by her light, preserving your souls from sin, or touching them with a healing hand if you have fallen into sin. It is, therefore, no wonder at all, my friends, that every heresy, almost, that ever sprang up in the Church, assailed the confessional first. Nearly all heresies united in this — at least many of them — offering a bribe to poor human nature. And the bribe was, “You need not go any more to confession.” When Luther started his Protestantism, the world was shocked; for as soon as the people heard, “Oh, it is all folly to go to confession! You need not go any more! There is no necessity!” — he abolished the obligation of making restitution; he abolished the form of the confessional, that has restrained so many souls and kept them within settled, salutary barriers; he abolished all that, and left men to their own devices; and he left the world, the Protestant world, as if Christ, our Lord, had never come upon earth, never touched our humanity; because he left it without the remedies by which sin could be avoided, and evaded; and he left the accumulated sins of man, from his childhood to his old age, like a mountain upon him, to bear them — and to carry them before the judgment seat of Christ.

Ah, cruel and cruel, indeed, was the heart of him who devised this infernal scheme! Oh, cruel Luther! Oh, Luther, when you did say to Jesus Christ and to His Church, “Let no more pardon and no more grace come from you! Let men live without you!” — Terrible was that denial of the greatest of earth’s comforts, as well as most substantial of heaven’s benefits! For what greater comfort can a man have — if there be any hidden sin weighing upon his spirit, breaking his heart, loading him with a burden which he cannot bear alone — what is the natural instinct of that man? To find a friend, to un-bosom himself to that friend, to lighten his own burden by sharing it with another. Even if that friend has no power to relieve him, even if he have nothing to give him but a word of sympathy or consolation — merely to tell, merely to open the heart, is such relief — such relief as can only be felt by those who, in order to gain it, might else speak their sin before the world.

But the great drawback is, “where shall we find this friend!” We must demand of him sympathy; we must demand of him patience; but, above all, what we rarely find, we must demand of him to keep whatever we tell him a secret. How rarely do you find a friend with whom you can entrust a secret? Tell a man a thing that you would not wish the world to know, and the old proverb is that you are in that man’s power for the rest of your life. Why? Because if he tells that about you, you are ruined! And he may ruin you, because you put yourself in his power. But who ever thought this of a priest in the confessional? Did it ever come across a Catholic’s mind? I verily believe it never came, even as a temptation from hell to tempt us against telling one’s sins. Well you know that that man has no power even to remember; well you know that you can meet that man an hour afterward, and you

can put your hand into his, as if you had never bent your knee to him; that he will never be so infamous a blasphemer as to remember that which the Almighty God in heaven has forgotten!

Thus it is that the voice in the confessional acts on society. If the whole world were Catholic — and I will conclude with this sentence — if the whole world were Catholic, and that all men consented to go regularly to the sacraments, and to approach worthily to the sacrament of Penance, this alone would put an end to all sin. There would be no more sin. There would be no more heart-breaking, no more tears, no more terrific records of robberies and murders, no more women hardening their hearts and making them more ferocious than the tigress when she devours and tears her young; no more of that cautious, cold, calculating dishonesty — men casting their wiles about each other like a spider's web, to entrap each other; no misery in this world; all would be happiness, if men would only open their festering souls and let in the salt of the power and of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Thus do we behold the action of the confessional on society. Oh, my friends, let us pray that God may enlighten those who, without the pale of the Catholic Church, go on from day to day, from year to year, adding sin to sin, and bearing the accumulated burden of their sins before the eternal judgment-seat of Jesus Christ.

Whilst we pray for them, oh, let us, like good men and true, enter into those privileges and graces which we enjoy, cleansing our souls from sin, preserving them in their purity by the frequent application of grace, which destroys those sins at the beginning, and, by frequenting Confession and Holy Communion, build up our souls upon the grace of graces, and strength of strengths, until we are gathered, in the fullness of the years of our manhood, into the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ.
