

LET US CONFESS OUR SINS TO ALMIGHTY GOD

It is certainly appropriate that in our journey through the Divine Liturgy we should arrive at the General Confession of Sin on the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday. Regarding the need and appropriateness of the confession of sin there is little disagreement among us. I wonder, however, just what goes through our minds of a Sunday morning as we arrive at this point, when following the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church the priest turns again to the congregation and says, "Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to live a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, devoutly kneeling."

The words are part invitation, part instruction, part prohibition and part reminder. The words are part *invitation* for they invite all whose consciences are heavy, all whose souls are grieved, all who have a disquiet within, all who know their need of God's grace and who would approach with proper attitude of heart and mind to come. "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden," says our Lord, "And I will give you rest." It is a ringing invitation to the banquet of the Lord, to all from near and far, from highways and byways, all, that is, who would rightly prepare their hearts and thus be appropriately attired with humility and clothed in righteousness, all who would properly fit themselves for his presence.

The words also *instruct* us as to what we ought to do: draw near with faith, receive the comfort of the Holy Sacrament, and make our humble confession to Almighty God, whilst kneeling devoutly before him. The invitation to draw near was originally to be understood quite literally as only the relatively few who were to receive the Holy Communion any a particular service would leave their seats and come to the chancel near the holy altar. There one of them or the priest would say the words of the general confession on the behalf of those alone who were kneeling there. The words "in faith" ("draw near *in faith*") were later added when communion was more generally received

and the people remained in their pews until the point of receiving communion. I can only imagine that the effect was quite profound when in response to the invitation of the priest the few who would come would rise from their seats to come forward and in the view of all present make their confession and receive first the absolution and then the blessed sacrament. Though we do not now draw near in sure a physical way at this point in the service, let us no less deliberately draw near in faith when our Lord through his priest invites us so to do.

The words are invitation and instruction. They are also *prohibition* reminding us that no one who is not in love and charity with his neighbor ought to accept this invitation. These words recall the summary of the Law read at the beginning of the service wherein we are reminded that our business with God is not a thing apart from our business with our neighbor. Our Lord told us that if upon coming to the altar we remember that we are at odds with our neighbor, or even that our neighbor is at odds with us, we ought to first go and be reconciled to the neighbor and then bring our gift to the altar. I sometimes wonder whether, if we took these words to heart, if we should always be so ready to come on every occasion. It is interesting that the oft quoted warning of St. Paul against unworthily receiving the Supper of our Lord were written in the specific context where certain members of the church, those who were better off, disregarded the needs of the poorer among them (I Cor. 11:17ff.). The love of God and love of neighbor are always intertwined

Invitation, instruction, prohibition and *reminder*. The direct words remind us that we cannot come without repentance, and that repentance has two inseparable sides: that which looks back and expresses a sorrow and turning away from those many ways in which we have fallen short of true love of God and neighbor, and the flip side of repentance which is here expressed as intending to lead a new life following the commandments of God. Thus in these words of the priest we see that what is required of us ere we venture to the Lord's table is threefold: first, a looking backward with regret and repentance; second, a living in the present in love and respect and justice toward our neighbors, all of them throughout the world; and, third, a looking forward in hope and with new resolve for a life of commitment to God and the work of Christ through his Church and of service to God and neighbor in the world.

Of the lengthy confession of sin itself I do not intend to say much. We understand well enough what it means. It may sometimes be felt that, as Massey Shepherd put it, the language is “somewhat overwrought.” We do not tend naturally to use such language as “grievously committed” and “provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation.” (I am reminded of the group of young singers a few years back who echoing the words of the confession of sin that is found in the daily office, called their group “The Miserable Offenders.” I never heard them sing, but they may have been right!) We smile, but we must remind ourselves that the language found in this prayer echoes wording found often enough in Holy Scripture, language that seeks to understand how our sin must truly appear before God. We think of Moses and Isaiah as exemplary men of God, but in the presence of the thrice holy the one was told to put off his shoes from his feet and the other exclaimed, “Woe is me. I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips.” If the language in this prayer does seem a trifle overwrought, it must surely be held to balance somewhat the exceedingly timid words of confession found in most liturgies in our day. Karl Menninger asked in the title of a book written several decades ago, “Whatever Became of Sin?” The question remains for the most part unanswered. It is a beneficial thing for us to turn to hear again the words of the divines and poets and composers of England in the 16th and 17th centuries in particular. Take time to dip now and again into the poems of John Donne, Richard Crashaw and George Herbert and to listen again to such sacred music as that of Thomas Tallis, Richard Farrant and Henry Purcell as may be heard in our coming Evensong for Lent.

Jesus began his ministry by taking up and expanding the message of John the Baptist, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Repentance is the first note of the gospel and thus a key to the kingdom. It is a saying ‘no’ to self and ‘yes’ to God, a turning from our poverty to his riches, and it must be a continual thing. Martin Luther said in the very first of his 95 Theses that when Jesus told us to repent, he meant that the whole life of the Christian was to be one of repentance. St. John told us, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Through the auricular confession to a priest of particular sins when we have grievously offended and through the general confession of the sin which is our constant companion,

God transforms and renews us more and more until; we are conformed into the likeness of his Son. The opportunity of confession and forgiveness is God's gift for the ongoing renewal of his people. It is not a frightful, but a blessed thing. Charles Wheatley in his classic commentary upon *The Book of Common Prayer* noted regarding the General Confession, "[What] the congregation here does in words so apposite and pathetic [that is, full of pathos] [is such] that if their repentance be answerable to the form [that is, if they mean the words they say], it is impossible that it should ever be more hearty and sincere." Suffice it to say that if we utter these words in genuine humility and sincerity, they will surely reach the ear of God, and there be heard and answered.

Following the confession of sin the priest pronounces upon all who have come with hearty repentance and true faith, the forgiveness which God in his great mercy provides. The authority to absolve from sin is a gift which our Lord promised to his apostles repeatedly during the course of his ministry and gave them explicitly in the days following his resurrection. This authority to absolve from sins properly confessed was passed on from the apostles to bishops and then to the priests whom they ordained. Thus the words of the priest, "[God] have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all yours sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life" must be heard as though spoken by Christ, for that they are indeed through the ministry of the priest.

The words of absolution are followed for the sake of any whose faith is weak, by the comfortable, that is, the strengthening, words of our Lord and his apostles. Charles Wheatley again in his most wonderful book says of these sentences of Scripture,

It is so necessary for every one that would receive comfort and benefit by this blessed sacrament, to have a lively faith, and a mind freed from unreasonable fears; that the Church, lest any should doubt of the validity of the foregoing Absolution, hath subjoined these Sentences; which are the very promises on which it is grounded, and so overflowing with sweet and powerful comforts, that if duly considered they will satisfy the most fearful souls, heal the most broken hearts, and utterly banish the blackest clouds of sorrow and despair.

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