

LETTER TO A LAPSED CATHOLIC

By Very Rev. F. J. Ripley, C. M. S.

MY DEAR FRIEND,—I am a Catholic priest. For ten years I have been preaching missions all over England and Wales. Before that I was a curate in Liverpool for eight years and a Chaplain in the Royal Air Force for three.

My travels have brought me into contact with many people who were baptised in the Catholic Church but have ceased to practise. We call them ‘lapsed’.

If you happen to be one of them this letter is addressed personally to you.

The vast majority of lapsed Catholics I have met have told me that they still believed in the Church. They would never contemplate dying without the Last Sacraments; they intended to return ‘sometime’ but not just yet.

If you are sincere you will agree that these people are taking a grave risk. Our Lord has warned us that death will come like a thief in the night and that we know neither the day nor the hour of its coming.

Most priests will tell you of those to whom they have been called suddenly. I could tell of many. My own dear mother was found dead in bed one Tuesday morning in 1916 at the early age of 34. Thank God she was well prepared.

Why have you ceased to practise? Perhaps your parents never set you a good example. When you left school you gave up church as well. Or, maybe, you gradually fell into the ranks of the lapsed, missing Mass occasionally at first, then more and more frequently, then missing Confession and Easter Duties, and then—well, you found yourself lapsed almost without realising it.

Shall we put it down to ignorance? Are you really convinced that the Catholic Church is different from all other churches? That the Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ, who was God Himself, whereas all the others were set up by men? That the Catholic Church teaches you, pardons you, guides you, makes you holy and leads you to heaven by the authority of Christ Himself, who is God?

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Yes, God became Man because He loved us. He was hidden within His Mother’s womb. He lay in the manger’s straw, He lived in St Joseph’s cottage, He preached and did miracles, He suffered terribly and died cruelly because He loves us, you and me and all men. He said: “Greater love than this no man hath than that a man lay down his life for his friends.” He calls you and me His friends.

Is not that quite wonderful—that God Himself should want us to be His friends? That is why He died for us. Look at the picture of Christ on the Cross in this booklet. See His hands and feet pierced by nails, see His side wounded and open, see His head dug with sharp thorns, see His body covered with the scourges’ stripes, see His face bowed and His eyes closed in death. Is it not a picture that speaks to us of infinite love?

When I was about to be ordained my family gave me a chalice with which to say Mass. The silversmith who made it asked me to choose a text to be engraved around the cup. I did. I see it now every morning when I raise my chalice before my eyes during Mass. It is this: “He loved me and delivered Himself for me.”

The love of Jesus is just as personal as that. Think of what else He has done for us. He made us, you and me, in preference to countless others whom He has not made and never will make. He made us because He wants us to be His companions in infinite happiness for ever and ever.

God does not want to have to damn you. He died to save you from damnation. If you do go to hell—which God forbid—it will be through your own deliberate fault, through rejecting the graces He offers you, possibly through refusing the appeal of this letter.

I say God does not want you to go to hell. He died to save you from that. He gave Himself to the very last drop of His precious Blood. How are you repaying that infinite generosity?

He has done much more. He has hidden Himself under the appearances of bread and wine because He wants to be the

food of your soul. He has given His priests power to forgive your sins because He wants you to come back to Him. He put His Church here among us and preserved it from error to guide you safely to heaven. He shows you His own Sacred Heart, burning with love but wounded, bleeding, crowned with thorns and surmounted by His Cross, saying : “Look at my Heart which loves you so much. If only you will love Me in return I will regard all I have done for you as nothing.”

As sincerely and as kindly as I know how, I ask you to think now about these things. Thought and prayer today may make all the difference between heaven and hell hereafter.

Ours is a religion of love, not of fear. Being a good Catholic is not just a matter of regular attendance at Sunday Mass and the Sacraments. It should be an effort to love our dear Lord in return for His unbelievable love of us.

He loves us so much that He has made His own mother our mother, too. She loves us with all the love of the most perfect and tenderest of mothers. As you read these lines she is praying her Son that you will return to the regular reception of the Sacraments. She knows that you are one of her lapsed children. She understands you through and through. She feels your every need. She cannot see you separated from her Son and not pray that you will return.

If you honestly believe that you have forgotten much of what you ought to know about the Faith you can easily make up for lost time. The best plan would be to call on a priest and ask him to go over things again with you. Or you could easily obtain a book of instructions or read the pamphlets of the Catholic Truth Society. Whatever else you do, please start going to Mass every Sunday. Do not put it off any longer. Every Sunday Mass missed means another mortal sin. Once you begin to go again you will be surprised how soon everything comes back and you begin to understand.

THEY DIED FOR THE FAITH

Do you ever think about those who died rather than deny the Faith you have ceased to practise? They have lived in every century since Christ’s own day. As you read this letter Catholics are imprisoned in their thousands behind the iron and bamboo curtains because they refuse to deny their Faith.

Think for a moment of a young housewife of York. She was a convert with a non-Catholic husband and three children. She had been condemned to death for sheltering priests in her home. Now, on March 25th 1585, the awful sentence was to be carried out. In the Toll Booth on the Ousebridge all was ready. “Mrs. Clitherow,” said the Sheriff, “you must remember and confess that you die for treason.” “No, no, Mr. Sheriff,” she replied “I die for the love of my Lord Jesu.” She lay on her back; they stretched out her arms in the shape of a cross and tied her hands to stakes in the floor; they put a sharp stone under her spine and put a heavy door on top of her. Four hired beggars then began to lay -weights on the door. As she felt them the bystanders heard her praying: “Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! have mercy on me!” For about fifteen minutes she suffered the agony; the watchers saw a pool of blood slowly forming on the floor. If you go to York you can see her hand, preserved at the Bar Convent. The closely clasped fingers will speak to you of what she suffered. Why? Because she loved the Faith that you are not practising. She was only one of many who loved it more than life itself.

THE MORAL LAW

Perhaps ignorance is not your trouble. You may be quite convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church but still not practising.

Are you one of those who find it hard to live up to the Church’s moral teaching? Our Lord said “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” We all know how true it is.

Yet, the Church’s moral teaching, based on God’s commandments, is, like her doctrine, God’s truth. We cannot pick and choose. We must accept everything. “He that heareth you, heareth me,” said Our Lord, and “Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven.”

God tells us to keep the Sabbath holy. It is the Church which tells us on His authority that the Sabbath is Sunday and we must keep it holy by hearing Mass and not doing servile work.

God cannot make laws which are impossible or too hard or not good for us. If you buy something new—a car, a television set, a pressure-cooker—you must follow the maker’s instructions if you wish to get the most out of it. So it is

with us. God made us. We must follow His instructions. That means keeping His law. If we do so we shall get the best out of ourselves, life and the world.

God does not make laws without helping us to keep them. He is not a slave-driver, threatening us all the time with punishment. He is a Father, infinitely wise, kind, good and loving. He wants us to save our souls infinitely more than we do ourselves. He wants you to resolve now to come back to your Church.

Think of what He says to us through His Prophet in the Bible: "You shall be carried at the breasts, and upon the knees they shall caress you. As one whom the mother caresseth, so will I comfort you." Have you ever thought of it that way before—of yourself as a little child being carried through life like a tiny baby being loved in its mother's lap or upon her knee?

"God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able," St. Paul tells us, "but will make also with temptation issue that you may be able to bear it." Is it not rather wonderful that God has told us these things—for example that we know for certain that however weak we feel, we are, with His help, stronger than the strongest temptation and always able to overcome it? We should ask for that help. He is waiting to be asked. He wants us to trust Him just as the tiniest child trusts its father and mother.

It is so very easy to fall into bad habits. Sometimes young people find that they have them almost before they realise it. They are afraid of going to confession. A long time goes by; then confession is harder than ever. Worse still, perhaps a bad confession has been made. We priests understand these things. We long to be allowed to help such people back to the straight and narrow path by pronouncing over them the words of absolution in the confessional. We do everything the Church allows us to do to make the way back home as short and easy as possible. Of course, sorrow for sin is essential.

SMOKE-SCREENS

During the war ships being pursued by the enemy used to hide themselves in a smoke-screen. We priests come across a lot of excuses which are just about as solid as the smoke-screens. Here are some examples: "I never go to Mass, Father, but I am as good as those who go." We know well enough that the person who says that does not really believe it; nobody in his senses would be so foolish. It is just self-deceit, a bold front, a mechanism of escape from a guilty conscience. The person who goes to Mass is at least doing his first duty to God.

"I don't go to Mass because I have no time; the family comes first." When he hears this one the priest thinks of the dozens of excellent large Catholic families he knows in which neither parent would ever dream of missing Mass. Their children are not neglected: quite the opposite. Devotion to the Church unites the family and brings God's blessing on all the members.

"I want a rest on Sunday morning; I work hard all week." Nowadays there are so many evening Masses that this excuse is usually no more weighty than the air required to make it. Even if there is no evening Mass it is surely not a hardship to be in church by eleven or twelve o'clock. When we remember that the Mass is the sacrifice of Calvary we see how unworthy such an excuse really is.

"IF YOU HAD BEEN TREATED LIKE THAT"

"If you had been treated by the Church like I have, you would not go to Mass yourself." It has been said only too often. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it is one more example of the smoke-screen. On investigation it turns out to be a worthless excuse. The alleged slights and injuries were merely imaginary or there was some sort of misunderstanding.

Many priests have had the experience—I certainly have—of being accused of directing their remarks from the pulpit at certain individuals, when, in fact, the thought of these people never so much as entered the priest's head.

It is so easy to make mountains out of molehills. It is amazing how really trifling matters are allowed to come between people and priest and so between souls and God.

But you insist that your grievance is genuine. The priest really did scold you when you went to confession; he really did refuse to baptise your sister's baby; he really did forbid the organ to be played at your daughter's wedding. I know of

a man who gave up the practice of his Faith as a boy over 50 years ago out of a sense of loyalty to his father who felt that his family had been insulted from the pulpit.

First of all, do remember that in some of these things the priest has no option. He has to do the hard thing because it is the Church's law or the bishop's ruling. These regulations are made for the good of the whole Church or the well-being of the flock in a certain district. The priest is not allowed to make exceptions in order to remain or become popular. In fact, he might easily commit a grievous sin by failing to obey.

But, you still insist, in your case the priest was certainly wrong. Well, suppose he was. God did not choose angels to be His ministers. We priests are flesh and blood like yourself. We have our failings as you have yours. We go to confession frequently to acknowledge our sins before God. That priest about whom you complain has given up life in the world, left his parents, refused marriage, sacrificed himself in many ways to bring you the blessings of the Faith.

No man is perfect. I am not; you are not. But you ought to try to think of every priest trying hard to love, serve and help his people. Your parish priest often prays for you. He says Masses for you. He knows he will have to give an account to God of how he has looked after you. He is anxious and worried when he knows you are not going to church. How do you return all this? Do you pray for him? Do you co-operate with him? Do you try to help him in his work?

In the particular matter about which you complain, have you heard his side of the story? Have you talked it over with him? If you are sure you are not blaming him excessively you ought to try to forgive and forget.

That priest is not the Catholic Church. By staying away from your duties because of something, real or imaginary, said or done by a priest you are punishing yourself and meriting God's condemnation. You will be the first to agree that to do harm to yourself because of something that has offended you is really very foolish. You probably still say your prayers: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." Do you expect God to forgive you when you persist in holding this thing against one of his priests?

MISSED GRACES

Think of all the graces you are missing. Our Blessed Lord, who is your greatest Lover and your best Friend, who will one day be your final Judge, begs you to allow Him to enter your soul often in Holy Communion. You reply, in effect if not in words, "No, Lord; my soul is closed to you."

In the Mass He has made present every day in your parish church the sacrifice of Calvary, the greatest act of all time, the climax of all history, when God gave His life because He loved His creatures so much. But you say: "Christ, keep your Calvary; I am not interested in being present beneath your Cross."

On the day He rose from the dead Our Lord appeared to His Apostles and gave them power to forgive our sins, saying: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." Week after week the priest sits in the confessional forgiving in Christ's name, removing the one thing which stands between souls and eternal life. He is waiting for you. But you are saying by your actions: "Lord, keep your forgiveness; I don't want it. I shall not ask for it."

Am I being a little too strong? I would love to think so. You intend to ask Christ's forgiveness someday, do you not? Then why not now? Why do you go on offending our dear Lord? Why go on crucifying Him again?

"CRUCIFYING CHRIST"

"Crucifying Him?" Yes, indeed. Mortal sin, like missing Mass or your Easter duties, is just that—crucifying Christ. The Holy Spirit tells us so through St Paul, writing to the Hebrews: grave sinners, those who "are fallen away" are "crucifying again to themselves the Son of God, and making him a mockery". That means, in everyday language, that when you deliberately and without an adequate excuse miss Mass on Sunday, instead of watching at the foot of the Cross with Our Lady and St John, you join the Roman soldiers or the Jewish priests, help to drive the nails into Christ's flesh and add to their mockery of Him.

I have never yet met any person whom I could believe would consciously wish to crucify Christ again. I cannot believe

that a person of that sort would read this letter of mine. I do honestly believe that most lapsed Catholics are being unworthy to themselves for just as long as they refuse to come back home. The consequences to themselves of every week's delay are so incalculable that, did they but realise it, they would never afflict themselves so.

BIRTH PREVENTION

During the last twenty years I have come across a number of people who have ceased to receive the Sacraments or even to go to church because of the Catholic teaching on birth prevention. You may be in the same category. At least half of those with whom I have discussed the problem had wrong ideas on the subject. Most of the others would have found a chat with an understanding priest most helpful.

If you are worried on this point one or two suggestions may help you. This is not a booklet on birth control and it is beyond my scope to deal with the subject fully.

Please do not think we priests do not understand your difficulty. Indeed we do understand. We are advising people about it—even our own close relatives—every day of our lives. Nobody comes into such close contact with these human problems as the Catholic priest.

Remember that the Church exists to bring God's life and truth to men. She is bound to teach and interpret God's law to us. She knows that what she teaches about birth prevention is the law God has implanted in nature and that all men everywhere, Christian and non-Christian, are bound by it. It is not for you and me to pick and choose in God's laws, obeying those we like and disobeying those we dislike or find difficult.

It is not strictly true to say that the Church forbids birth "control". Husband and wife are bound to govern their intimate relationship, like everything else, by the cardinal virtue of prudence. No human activity is exempt from that virtue. It implies self-control. It requires that every important circumstance and condition be taken into account. God's grace, given to married people as a right through the Sacrament of Matrimony, is always available to enable them to practise prudence.

Here we arrive at the fundamental answer to the problem. Christian marriage is a Sacrament. When you knelt before the altar on your wedding day you staked your claim with Almighty God to all the helps He will give you to keep His laws in marriage. You have a strict right to those helps, which we call sacramental graces. There is no possible difficulty for which they are not available for you.

If your difficulty is this popular one about birth prevention be fair to yourself. Talk it over with a priest in or out of the confessional. I believe that you want to get back to the Sacraments and that if you have deliberately offended God you are really sorry.

There are circumstances in which the prevention of conception may not be the responsibility of one of the partners. The other, possibly in inculpable ignorance especially if he or she is a non-Catholic, may insist on it. The Catholic's position is difficult, but it should never be a reason for staying away from church or joining the legions of the lapsed.

If you are sure you really understand the Church's teaching on the use of marriage, if you have read booklets about it (like the Pope's encyclical letter on 'Christian Marriage' or Bishop Dwyer's pamphlet called 'Birth Control', both published by the Catholic Truth Society) and have talked it over fully with a priest and still refuse to try to live up to it, I simply beg of you to be fair. Do not consider the teaching apart from the Sacrament nor the difficulties apart from God's grace. Remember that God cannot command the impossible; He is always the same good, wise, loving and just Father; we must trust Him as docile, affectionate, little children. "Unless you be converted and become as little children," Our Lord warns us, "you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

I am sure of this—if you really understand what the Catholic Church teaches us on this subject you must admit that it is most reasonable and the best for all concerned. God made marriage. The surest way to happiness in marriage is to find out the laws of its Maker and, with His grace, given through the Sacrament, keep them.

MARRIED OUT OF THE CHURCH

Perhaps you were married out of the Church. I have met many people who have done what you have done. Very, very

few of them were not, deep down in their hearts, worried and anxious to come back home. Probably your marriage can be put right; do please see a priest about it as soon as you can. You will be the first to agree with me that it is foolish to go on living in sin. Sin never pays. Why delay? Why deny yourself all the graces you might so easily be receiving through Confession and Holy Communion?

You may, of course, be one of those whose marriage cannot be put right. Perhaps your first partner is still alive or you are married to a divorcee, whose partner is living. You have made a grievous mistake, but that does not prevent your finding out how you stand. In rare cases it is possible to rectify unions such as yours appears to be owing to the invalidity of a previous marriage. In any case, you ought to attend Mass, say your prayers and, especially, try to make frequent and fervent acts of sorrow for your sin.

Our Blessed Lord does not change. He lives in the Church still, always the same, merciful Saviour, always anxious to forgive sinners, always offering them the grace of repentance.

THE MERCY OF CHRIST

Think of the unforgettable story of the Prodigal Son: the young man who took his money, left his father's home and went off to see life in the world. When famine came, his friends deserted him. He found himself looking after pigs, forced to share their swill to keep body and soul together. (Incidentally, what a description of sin that is! Our Lord must have chosen the pig for the story deliberately because the Jews regarded it as unclean. The young man, He says, "filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat". Think about that. Those who refuse the Bread of Angels in their Father's House may be doing that very same thing.) Then he realised what a young fool he was, that even his father's servants were living better than he was. He returned home—and what a welcome his father gave him! The same welcome from your heavenly Father is waiting for you now in the Church. Do not delay your home-coming.

Are you afraid to take the step? Think of Our Lord again. He is in the forecourt of the Temple being questioned by some of the Jews. Another group comes along pushing towards Him a poor woman. They say "Master, this woman was even now taken in adultery. Now Moses in the law commanded us to stone such a one. But what sayest thou?" "Our Lord said nothing but bent down and wrote with His finger in the dust on the ground. They went on demanding a decision. Standing upright He looked right at them and said "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." Again He bent down and wrote in the dust. One by one her accusers slunk away. Jesus and the woman were soon alone. "Then Jesus lifting up Himself, said to her: Woman, where are they that accuse thee? Hath no man condemned thee? Who said: No man, Lord. And Jesus said: Neither will I condemn thee. Go, and now sin no more." Jesus is still the same.

Think of Mary Magdalen throwing herself at His feet. Listen to His merciful words : "Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much." Recall His moving story of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep in the pen to go and look for that which had strayed. "Rejoice with me," He said, "because I have found my sheep that was lost. I say to you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven upon one sinner that doeth penance, more than upon ninety-nine just who need not penance." And: "They that are whole need not the physician but they that are sick. I came not to call the just, but sinners to penance."

SCANDAL

Somebody has said, with a lot of wisdom, that saints never go to heaven or sinners to hell alone. They always take others with them.

You, who have not been going to church, may be a parent. God has given you children as keepsakes for heaven. He has entrusted them to you to have their feet set firmly on the straight and narrow path. It is your privilege to prepare them for eternal life.

You may tell them to go to church but your words will be useless unless your example shows them that you mean what you say. An ounce of good example is worth a ton of words. You cannot forget the severe words of our gentle Saviour used of those who scandalise His little ones: "It were better for him that a millstone should be hanged about his neck, and

that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Do you deserve that condemnation of Christ?

It is never too late to come back home. Our Lord is waiting now to welcome and forgive. He loves you with an infinite love. He wants you to go to heaven infinitely more than you want it yourself.

In the confessional the priest waits. He is most strictly bound to treat you as kindly, as mercifully, as compassionately, as lovingly, as understandingly as the father in the parable received home his erring but repentant son. He is bound to be to sinners, as far as he can, like His Master was to the adulterous woman or to Mary Magdalen.

Do not be afraid. Even a lifetime of great sin is removed by the priest in a few moments. He will not upbraid or blame or rebuke. He will, like the prodigal’s father, rejoice “because this my son was dead, and is come to life again: was lost, and is found.” He will thank God for allowing him to be the channel of forgiveness.

CONFESSION

Many years ago an old monk told me a story. I tell it to you now in the hope that it will help you. A woman who had been away from the Sacraments for a long time had been persuaded by a very saintly old priest to go to confession. The reason why she had not been was one very grave and sordid sin she had committed as a young woman. She was so ashamed and so embarrassed that she could not bring herself to tell it in confession. However, on this occasion she knelt there, fully determined to tell all. The priest blessed her. She told her sins but, unfortunately and unwisely, left the cause of all her trouble to the end. Only that had to be told when she paused. It just would not come out. All the old fear, shame and embarrassment surged up within her. “Is that all?” asked the priest quietly and gently after a few moments of silence. She was just about to answer “Yes”, when she raised her eyes. Instead of seeing through the flimsy, purple curtain the dim shape of the priest’s head, she saw quite clearly the thorn-crowned head of Christ.

That story may help you. It certainly illustrates what confession is. We, you and I, tell our sins to the priest, not for his own sake, but because he represents Christ our Lord. “If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as snow,” the Holy Ghost tells us through the Prophet, “and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool.”

Do not delay any longer. Make that humble, sincere confession as soon as you can. Receive Christ, with all His blessings, in Holy Communion. Your return to the Church will be one of the most wonderful things in your life.

I shall remember every day in my Mass all the lapsed Catholics who have read these lines. If they have helped you, I beg you to say a little prayer now for

Yours sincerely and devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Francis J. Kelly". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name. There is a horizontal line under the signature.