

THE JOY OF CONFESSION

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CHAPTER ONE

Red Jim was rather a blood-curdling character. I think he got the name one day he was seen at the races sitting astride an enormous enemy and bashing his face with a lump of iron. Anyhow he would not go into the church. So on the bank of the canal I met him, standing in the wet grass in sun and shadow beneath aspen poplars that shivered in the wind beside the shining water that reflected sky and tree, and there he made his confession, and with the priest's help stumbled through the words of sorrow, made his promises, and got his absolution. When it was finished, he turned and walked off along the bank of the canal. Presently he began to run, and he ran off out of sight. I met him next day. I said: "Jim, you went away in a great hurry from confession yesterday." "Father," said he, "I felt that light, I thought I was walking on the wind." I want to make confession as easy and happy as that for you, and I think I can if you do as I say.

First, ask for the grace to make a good confession.

"O my God, help me to make a good confession."

"Mother of God, pray for me that I may make a good confession."

Now it will be all right. You will make a good confession.

Second, examine your conscience. There is no need to make too big a job of that.

I met a seafaring man by the roadside. He had long ceased to travel the seas and was travelling the roads of Ireland. Indeed. I think he had ceased even from that and had anchored his caravan. He said it was forty years since he had been to confession, so he sat on a grassy bank by the side of the road and made his confession, and got his forgiveness. When it was finished, I looked up and saw in the doorway of the caravan his wife, a much younger person, standing; so I said: "Perhaps it would be just as well for you to go to confession, too. Is it long since you've been?"

"Ten years, father," said she.

"Come over to the chapel, then," said I, "and go to confession."

"O father," said she, "I couldn't do that. It would take me six months to examine my conscience."

"In that case," said I, "you will never go to confession till you are dead. Come with me and I'll do it for you in a minute."

We went to the little chapel. The priest went through the commandments for her; mostly all she had to do was to answer yes or no. He said the words of sorrow for her, and gave her absolution, by the power of God washing the sins off her soul with the holy words. In two or three minutes all was finished and she rose to her feet a happy woman. A month later I got a letter from her from England, one of the loveliest letters I ever got in my life, she was so happy to be at peace with God.

So there is no need to make a terrible job of the examination of conscience, and if a person is a very long time away, or is scrupulous, they can leave most of it to the priest.

However, may I help you to examine your conscience?

'Have you any big sin?

Missing Mass through your fault?

Trying to injure another seriously by word or action?

Theft, fraud, dishonesty to a serious extent?

Drunkenness, or selling or treating to drink with this result?

Impurity in talk or act?

Any other big sin?

At time of retreat or mission it is well to look back over the past twelve months for the following reason: If a person has committed serious sins a number of times in the past year, he will do exactly the same in the coming year, when the retreat or mission is over, unless he finds some new way of preventing these sins happening. Of course, he intends never to sin again, and feels sure he never will, but in a month or two he will probably be as bad as ever, unless he has found a new remedy. Therefore he should examine himself and think carefully till he finds this remedy,

and, if he cannot find it, let him ask the priest.

If by God's grace you have no big sin, you should examine yourself to see if you have any small sin that is doing you serious harm. For instance, a lie is a small sin; but a habit of lies does a person serious harm by making him mean, weak and cowardly, and so completely spoils his character and ruins his life.

So also Temper is usually a small sin; but if you cannot control it, it will certainly prevent you ever enjoying a happy home.

Laziness is also small sin, but it may result in a girl losing every job she gets, or a man being permanently unemployed.

Carelessness at Mass is also venial; but may lead to fatal results. Have you any other small sin that is doing you serious harm?

It is not necessary to tell all venial sins; so if you find one that is doing serious harm, tell it, make a plan to stop it, and you may leave out the rest.

If you cannot find any such small sin, you would do well at time of mission or retreat to examine yourself on three matters: namely, you and your Home, you and your Work, you and your God. Your Home: Are you doing anything to cause real unhappiness in your home, any serious selfishness, unkindness, negligence, or any still graver fault? Or, on the other hand, is there anything more you could do to make your home happy, to make it more like Nazareth. You might take five minutes one day to look into this, either walking home along the road, or sitting by your fire, or before the tabernacle, or kneeling by your bed at night.

Secondly, your Work: For most of us sanctity consists in doing our work well, according to the old definition: a saint is a person who to please God does his ordinary duty extraordinarily well. So is there anything wrong with your work, like dishonesty, negligence, cursing, grouching? Or on the other hand, can you do anything to make your work more like that of the Carpenter's Son and the Carpenter's Mother, in efficiency and cheerfulness?

Thirdly, you and your God. As the years pass you should be growing better friends with God, more loyal to Him, more at home in prayer, more reliable. Therefore you may spend five minutes considering whether there is anything separating you from God, any obstacle grown up between you and Him, anything making a wall between you. Or, on the other hand, is there anything you could do that would bring you nearer to God, anything more in the way of prayer or Communion that would be likely to bring you results worth the trouble it would entail.

This threefold examination is not made with a view to telling things to the priest, but to enable you to make a plan by which you can make yourself happier and better. Therefore, if you get any good idea during it, make a definite plan and stick to it.

After the examination of conscience comes sorrow for our sins, which we shall speak about later on.

Then comes the part of confession which some people find difficult, telling our sins to the priest. There should be no difficulty about this. The priest is the spiritual physician of the soul, and, just as we have to tell the doctor any ailments we may have in order that he may prescribe a remedy for them, so we must tell the priest our spiritual ailments in order that he may cure them. We should therefore tell all mortal sins and also the number of times we have committed these sins since our last confession. We should also tell any circumstances that would change the nature of the sins and make them sins of quite a different kind. But there is no need to tell details. For instance, if a person wished to tell that he did something against the Sixth Commandment (which would be something about purity, modesty, company keeping) he could say: "Father, I have committed a sin against the Sixth Commandment." He must add if it was done alone or with someone else, and if there was anything special about the someone else, for instance, if that person were married, that must be mentioned also. But nothing more need be said about it. There is no need to tell details.

This point is very important, and you yourself might sometimes be able to get a man to confession who had not been for years if you told him about it. Once upon a time I asked: "Is there anyone in these parts who does not go to the sacraments?" And I was told: "There is the old lady at X. But there is no use going to her. She has turned down every priest that went to her." However, I went to see her. In the room below her, three grown-up children met me, full of anxiety. "It must be fifty years since she has been to confession," they said. Their faces were white between hope and fear. The daughter showed me upstairs, where the old lady lay in bed by a window looking out over the river.

After a little conversation the daughter slipped away, and I told the old lady what I have been telling you. You should have seen the hope break over her face, as she sat up in bed and made her confession. When all was over, she said: "Oh, Father, am I really forgiven? It seems too good to be true. If I had known that about the details, I'd have gone to confession fifty years ago."

Another thing that worries people is the thought of a bad confession. It is not an easy thing to make a bad confession. Often people worry the life out of themselves about their past sins, whereas God has buried them all long ago "in the depths of the sea," as He says Himself. Such people should stop worrying about the past, for such fears are due to selfishness and cowardice, and they should not give in to selfishness and cowardice, and should rather try to make up for their sins by doing as much good as they can in the future. However, it would be a bad confession if a person had a serious sin (perhaps he did not quite know it was a mortal sin, but he knew it was serious, quite different from telling a lie, or having a distraction in prayer) and did not tell it in confession, not because he forgot- it, for if he forgot, he would make a good confession, but because he was ashamed or afraid. That would be a bad confession.

Or a person might make a bad confession, if he had been committing a mortal sin frequently, and now in confession had no intention of keeping out of the danger of that sin, although to keep out of the danger was not impossible for him, This might show that he had no real sorrow for sin, and so his confession would be bad.

A bad confession is a sacrilege; and the terrible thing about it is that it may be followed by a bad Communion, when a man in sin, whose soul therefore is much more foul than any dirty thing to be found in a ditch or yard, kneels at the altar rail, and the priest all unsuspecting places Jesus, the joy of angels, Jesus for whom our fathers died, on the tongue of this man, who draws Him down into the sin-soaked soul, a crime crying to heaven for vengeance. Yet terrible as is a bad confession, it is very easily put right. A person says: "Father, I made a bad confession last week (or ten years ago)." The priest asks: "Well, my child, what was it you did not tell?"

The sinner tells, and, with the help of the priest, makes his confession without any difficulty. He is absolved, and he may walk off safe, forgiven and free. Only it is a pity he did not tell long before.

So when we have a sin that we are ashamed to tell, and sometimes a person can be terribly ashamed of a very small sin (though I remind you that we are not bound to tell small sins), we can encourage ourselves by thinking that the priest also goes to confession, and generally he has to go to someone he knows -quite well and perhaps meets every day, whereas you can go to a stranger at mission time, or if you like, you can take a bus and go to the next town, where the priest won't know you. So, as the priest has to go to confession himself, he will sympathise with you.

It will help you also to think of Our Lord before Caiphas. After the arrest of Our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, He was taken to the house of Caiphas for trial. Now we may suppose that, while the trial was preparing, Our Lord was kept between two guards outside the door of judgment hail. Behind this closed door Our Lord could hear His enemies assembling. He listened to the stir and murmur of a growing crowd, the rising sound of their voices. He heard the footsteps of the judges cross the hall and ascend the steps of the dais, and sit down. He who knew all things could foresee that in a moment the door would open, a voice would call: "Bring the prisoner in," and He would have to enter the hall. There He would be condemned to death. Caiphas would come down the steps of the dais and stand before Our Lord and look into His face and say: "You called me a whited sepulchre, didn't you?" and, raising his hand, would strike Our Lord on the cheek, and go off home to bed, satisfied, leaving the red mark of his palm on Our Lord's cheek. After him another would descend the dais, stand before Our Lord, say: "You called me a hypocrite," and would spit on Our Lord's face and go home content. This Our Lord foresaw as He stood a prisoner outside the door of the hall, and most certainly that human weakness in Him that had cried: "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass away from me," must have tugged at Him, urging Him to break the ropes that had no power to hold their Creator. while horrified angels surely whispered: "Come away, Lord, Come away." But Our Lord for love of us did not go away, but thinking of us, stood His ground and waited till at length the door did open and the voice said: "Bring the prisoner in," and Our Lord most bravely walked forward through the doorway into the hall to take the shame that was coming to Him. So we, when we have a difficult confession to make, can walk bravely over to the confessional, muttering: "You did that for me, Lord, and I do this for Thee."

There is a certain heroism about such a confession, and in this is another thought that may help us. We are all at our best when we go to confession. We think indeed that we are revealing the worst that is in us, and so we are

ashamed of our lives, but in reality at the moment of confession all that is best in us comes to the surface. We are doing perhaps something really heroic in overcoming our shame and telling our sin. We are showing real love for God by doing something that costs us a great deal. Sometimes the sinner is breaking off and giving up some pleasure that has been the biggest pleasure in his life; and making a sacrifice that costs him more than death itself. No doubt this is one reason why Our Divine Lord spoke so kindly to sinners, and why most and almost all of His sweetest and tenderest words recorded in the Scriptures were spoken to sinners who were turning from their sins, for He was touched by all this good He saw in them. Now the priest has enough of likeness to his Master to be able to see this good and be touched by it, and many a time the sorrow of a sinner puts the priest to shame.

I would like to encourage you also by telling you about the happiness that comes after confession to those who have had a bad story to tell. The Catholic Church teaches through the Council of Trent that one of the effects of the Sacrament of Penance is Joy, and daily experience bears this out. Many a time I have been surprised when, after a confession in which I have said all the hard things I could think of in order to make the penitent give up sin, and when I have felt that perhaps I had gone too far and been too hard, the penitent has said: "I'm happy, now, father," and so departed, leaving me amazed.

So it is with many who dragged themselves reluctantly to confession, and, being forgiven, walked out of the door of the church, head in air and with a light step, walking on the wind.

I remember one old gentleman whom I caught on a Sunday morning in his shirt sleeves by the fire, who went on his knees by the kitchen table, and when he stood up, his sins forgiven, slapped his trousers pocket and said:

"Father, if I had fifty pounds in my pocket this minute, I wouldn't be as happy as I am now, after what you have done for me."

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them," said the Creator of men, thinking, no doubt, of all the happiness His sweetly-invented Sacrament would bring to anxious men.

What to do After Confession:

1. Thank God. My God, I believe that all my sins are forgiven. I believe that if I die now I will go to heaven.

I thank you with all my heart.

My soul doth magnify the Lord,

And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour,

For He that is mighty hath done great things for me,

And holy is His name.

2. Think. Did you make any promise to the priest, or is there any resolution you ought to make?

If so, think it over, make your promise, look ahead and plan how you are going to keep your promise to-day and to-morrow and during the week.

3. Say your penance.

CHAPTER TWO

This makes you sorry for your sins

I suppose you would like to feel very sorry for your sins, and would be glad if I could say something now that would make you feel very sorry and ashamed. Well, I think I can. But, first, you will have to ask God for this grace, because it is a very great grace, and God will give it to you, as He does to all sorts of people. I was crossing the bridge over the canal, beside Mullingar, when I was hailed by a fellow fishing in the canal. It proved to be, shall I say, Mick. He brought me down the canal to where his family was camped. They were travelling people, and their caravan was drawn up on the green, forming, with a couple of carts, a little quadrangle up against the hedge. The dusk was falling, and as I entered the enclosure a donkey stuck its head out from under a cart and brayed, some fowl joined in the chorus, and a couple of babies began to howl. Mick's old mother was sitting on an upturned bucket, peeling potatoes, so I sat down on another bucket and began to tell her all the stories I could think of from the words of Christ about Dives, and Judgment, and Torturers and Hell in general. She was a wicked-looking old lady, her beauty not improved by a great scar all across her face. — Madame Pavlovskaja, Society Palmist, New York, was written in red and blue

over the van. She knew nothing of religion, for she came from a foreign land, never had a chance, but of all the exciting stories she used to read from the palms of others at a fee of five shillings, I should say her own story was the most interesting. As I talked, darkness closed in, the donkey ceased his clamour, the fowl and babies were hushed, and in the quiet of the night, lit by the flickering flames of the gypsy fire, I told her the parables of the Mercy of God, about a prodigal son, and a shepherd, and a sinful woman from Magdala. When I had finished, she lifted her old head and said: "Father, when I see all the people going up to Mass on a Sunday, and think that I know nothing about God or religion. *I sweat with shame.*" I was astonished by the glimpse of the heart's emotions, concealed behind the wicked old face, and I remembered the True Light of which it is Written: "that enlightens *every* man that comes in this world." So pray that this True Light may give you a similar grace of sorrow, and say:

"O Divine Light, shine like the sun on the sin-soaked soil of my soul, and draw up from it such a mist of sorrow as may break in tears. O God, powerful and most kind, who didst draw water for Thy thirsting people from a rock, draw from my hard heart a stream of tears, that I may weep for my sins, and through Thy pity may get forgiveness for them."

We have good reason for being ashamed and sorry for our sins when we consider that sin drives three nails into us before driving them through the hands and feet of Our Saviour.

The first nail is that sin degrades us. The Catholic Faith teaches us that mortal sin kills the soul, by destroying sanctifying grace, which is the life of the soul. For, as when the soul leaves the body, the body dies, and has to be buried; so, when grace leaves the soul; the soul dies, not altogether, but with such a death that it has to be buried in hell. Moreover, when the body dies, it slowly blackens and falls to pieces in wet rotteness, giving forth the terrible stench of death. When the soul dies, its decay, being a spiritual thing, is instantaneous, and as horrible as that of the body—nay, worse, for lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds, and it has to be buried not in clay, but -in hell. Besides, while the soul was in the grace of God, the Spirit of God dwelt in the man, truly ennobling and dignifying him, but, when he committed mortal sin, the Spirit of God went forth from the dead and rotted soul; and there is reason to fear that the spirit of Evil, Satan, whom the Scripture calls the Impure Spirit, who surely was not far from the man in his temptation, may now enter in through the walls of the man's body, finding nothing to keep him out, and take up his dwelling there, filling the man's mind, and perhaps his flesh, with desires of sin. He did so in the case of Mary Magdalen. No doubt as she walked down the street of the town, neatly dressed, with fresh innocent face, you would have said: "Looks like a good girl," but you would have been wrong. She was in mortal sin, and the Scripture says that seven devils lived in her.

Will you pardon me if I give you a rather lurid account of the condition of a person in mortal sin, and if you were ever in that condition yourself, do not think that I am exaggerating, but, on the contrary, only dimly hinting at the reality of your dreadful state. One summer's day I went with some friends for a swim in the Silver River. We said: "Before we dive in we'll see if the water is clean." So we walked a bit up the river bank till we came to a spot where a willow tree had fallen across the stream, and in its branches was caught the drowned body of some animal. We said: "We'll get this out before we have our swim." So we got long sticks and ran them under the carcass, and lifted it out of the water, and then we saw that it was long drowned—a calf with stretched and swollen skin that burst open, so that legs and entrails dropped out, while there came to us such a frightful stench that I saw the face of the man beside me go perfectly white as we dropped the thing back into the water. That carcass is the image of the soul in sin—dead, rotted, destined to float eternally on dark waters, and there is no power in earth or heaven that can bring that carcass to life save God alone. There you have the first nail of shame that sin drives into us before piercing the hands of Christ. So we may pray: "O God, who didst say, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' and who didst raise Lazarus, four days dead, from the tomb, bring my dead soul to life, and come and dwell once more within my body."

Or again:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy, and according to the multitude of thy mercies blot out my iniquity. Wash me yet more from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my iniquity and my sin is always before me. To thee only have I sinned, and I have done evil before thee."

The second nail that sin drives into man and Christ is that sin may entail the ruin of another person. A little girl came walking down the bank of a Pyrenean stream gathering sticks, and presently put down her bundle of sticks in the

grass, and, kneeling, began to say her beads. After a while she looked up at the great grey face of the cliff above her, on which some shrubs—growing from crevices made patches of green, and a white rose trailed its flowering branches. There on a frail branch of the rose she saw a lovely lady standing, clothed in white, with a blue sash at her waist, and on her bare feet a few blossoms of the rose. So wondrous and sweet was the vision's beauty and her radiant smile, that at length the child stammered: "Who are you?" and the vision answered:

"I am the Immaculate Conception." All humanity may kneel in the tear-wet grass of the earth, and raise its eyes, and glimpse between earth and heaven, white and stainless, Mary Immaculate, a woman grown out of the mud of our race, but sinless as angels and their Queen, and may cry:

*"O woman above all women glorified,
Our tainted nature's solitary boast,
Purer than foam on central ocean tossed,
Fairer than eastern skies at daybreak strewn with fancied roses,
Than the unblemished moon before her wane begins on heaven's blue coast."*

Even so the Catholic church holds up before the eyes of the world the Catholic man or girl, who after Holy Communion, rising from the altar rails, comes down the aisle of the church and seems to stand against the background of the altar, like Mary Immaculate, and Mother Church cries:

"Look, peoples of the world. This man from childhood is fed on the flesh of God, and washed in His Blood. There is not a stain on him: whiter than snow is his soul."

You would have reason for sorrow if you were a cause of sin to such a soul. If you, through softness, or perhaps cowardice, or maybe passion, or perhaps vice, were to be a temptation to such a soul, with result that this soul committed mortal sin, either in talk, or act, or consent, then at the moment all that white beauty was blasted, and on the minute the lovely graceful soul was dead, rotted, the Spirit of God driven out, the foul Spirit entered in, the stench of rottenness replacing the sweet fragrance of innocence, the lovely soul immaculate changed to the likeness of the drowned carcass. Did you do that? And for the sake of what pleasure? And how long did that pleasure last, and how long the ruin?

But what became of him or her in the end? Is there any fear that she may be in hell for ever as a result of it? I wonder if she ever told the sin, or was she afraid to tell the priest and made a bad confession, and has not yet dared to put it right, and perhaps on her deathbed will have some priest she knows so well and respects so much that she will not tell, and so die and lose her soul for ever.

Or will she meet a sudden death before she has time to repent? Or will that first sin waken such passions as will lead to other sins, and so to a life of vice, ending perhaps across the water in loss of Faith and death without priest or sacraments? What Irish boy taught that Mary to sin, who crossed to C— city, and two months after her arrival there was found by the police dead in her bed, in a house of sin, at the age of 23. They arrested her partner, but not the Irish boy who started her on the road to shame.

We want to be sorry for our sins. Certainly, if God gave us a vision of someone in hell through our fault, the sweat of sorrow would break out on our foreheads. The Scriptures tells us how King Saul went to see the witch of Endor in her cave in the night, and entering out of the dark of the night came into the darker cavern, where above the witch's fire rose heavy smoke, lit with lurid red, commanded her to bring up the spirits of the dead, so that in the smoke rose up the grey and hooded figure of Samuel, who prophesied death to the King; and if the room where you sit were to grow dark as that cave, and the world were to dissolve around you as one day it will, and that smoke of which St. John writes that "the smoke of their torment rises before the throne of God," were to roll up its heavy and sickening clouds around you, clouds reddened perhaps by the glow of the "everlasting flames" of which Christ spoke, and in that cloud out of hell were to appear before you the once lovely girl, truly immaculate, fresh from the altar rail, mind full of heavenly thoughts, body pure and fit for heaven, daughter of Mary Immaculate, now damned, like the rotted carcass raised from the river, face discoloured, worse no doubt than a mere corpse long drowned, body swollen with decay, from the once laughing lips the scream of pain, an arm uplifted perhaps to point at you, and eyes, so pitifully full of hate and pain and vice, to look at you, you who sent her to hell. God grant it is only a nightmare, and not true.

"My God, I offer You all the sufferings of my life, in union with those of Jesus Christ, for the salvation of any one

I have caused to sin.

“I promise to go to the Sacraments frequently. Have mercy on those I have caused to sin.

“I promise to deny myself dangerous pleasures. Have mercy on those I have caused to sin.

“I offer Thee the death I must one day die, for the salvation of those I have caused to sin.

(If there is any other promise you would like to make, insert it here).

“My God, I beg and implore You not to allow anyone to go to hell through my fault.

“I am not worthy to see the sun because of the multitude of my sins.

“O grant that I may die before I ever lead a soul into sin.

“Lord, have mercy on me, Thou who hast said: ‘I will not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live.’ Have mercy on me.”

There is a third nail. It is concerned with the word Traitor—an ugly word. There have been traitors in Irish history: he who led the Williamite army through the bog at Aughrim, he who betrayed Blessed Oliver Plunkett in his hiding place; others in more recent times. It is an ugly word—Traitor. A man can never recover from that shame. It clings to his family for generations.

Through certain woods at night a traitor crept. The moonlight glistened on small shiny leaves that in multitudinous millions roofed the dark garden. On the grass beneath the trees white pools of light accentuated the surrounding blackness.

The traitor muttered to the mob around him: “Whoever I kiss, that is He. Lay hold on Him.” That is enough, Judas. No! He adds: “Lead Him away carefully.” Who? His Friend Divine, who stood in an open glade in the moonlight surrounded by faithful friends. Towards Him the traitor crept, leaving the mob behind, hoping he might have it both ways, get the money of the betrayal, and yet not be found out, came nearer, close, put arms around the quivering body of Jesus, raised his lips, lips surely bloodless with fear, pressed them to the cold moist cheek that still was wet with sweat of blood, blood shed for His friends. The signal was given. Through the woods came a rush of soldiers, crash of their leaping footsteps, roar of fierce excitement. “Friend, to what are you come. . . Judas . . . do you betray the Son of Man . . . with a kiss.” The traitor had leaped back. The mob, with blows and ropes and violence, held Christ fast. Judas watched from the shadow of a tree. Better for him if he had never been born. The world henceforward will never know a darker name of shame than Judas. Tomorrow, despairing, he will hang from the branch of a tree, swinging in the wind, ghastly figure of death, burst open in the middle, eternally in hell.

Every mortal sin is this betrayal. Jesus, to whom the future is present, saw in the moonlight and shadows, Judas, and by his side the man who despises Sunday Mass, the man guilty of serious theft, fraud, dishonesty, the drunkard or those responsible for drunkenness, the person who does serious injury to another by word or act, the impure.

What should Judas have done when he saw his Friend taken? Ah, he should have run forward, knelt by Our Lord’s side, have taken His hand and kissed it, and said:-

“You are my God. I have betrayed You. I am lost. Save me. I will do penance. I will live for You. I will obey You. I will die for You. Save me.” If he had done it, Jesus would have forgiven him, and blessed him, and gone to His death with a happy and triumphant heart, knowing it was not in vain since Judas was saved from hell. What Judas did not do, let us do in spirit, for as we kneel by the confessional, we are as present to Jesus in Gethsemane as are the soldiers and the sombre woods, and amid their yells, He hears as dearly our voices saying:

“I have sinned before heaven and against Thee.

“I have betrayed my loving Saviour.

“Who will give to my eyes a spring of tears?

“My God and my Saviour, I confess that my sins, like that of Judas, have sent You to your death. I am ashamed and sorry and will never sin again.

“I, too, in childhood was your friend, and I have betrayed You, as Judas did. I am ashamed, and sorry, and will never sin again.

“I kiss Your hand, nailed to the cross for me.

“I wish that I could show my sorrow by tears.

“I will try to make up for my sins in the future.

“I will try to love You more than those who have not sinned.

“I will be hard on myself.

“I will keep out of temptation.

“So I will show You that I am ashamed and sorry.

“Perhaps some day I may wipe out my sins by dying for the Faith.

O God, Who dost reject no one, but no matter how much we sin, dost forgive in Thy kind pity when we repent, look in mercy on our shame and our prayer, and put such holy thoughts into our minds, that henceforth we may be able to keep Thy Commandments.”

CHAPTER THREE

Now you will love God for His great Sacrament of Mercy.

The confessional is a place of mystery. Strange and mysterious it would have been for you if you had been present when God was making the world, when over the dark of nothingness the Spirit of God moved, for “the earth was void and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved over the waters and God said: ‘Be light made.’ At Whose word ‘the light shone flashing forth, and stars and sun swam into existence, and this little earth began to swing around the sun: a moment of tremendous importance for the human race and for you; Certainly you would have trembled if you had seen the mysterious light flash and shimmer, and flame in so many starry shapes, and with it a torrent of growth and life pour out of the Creator’s hand on earth and sea and bog and mountain in wave on wave of leaf and flower, insect and bird and beast and men. “Be light made,” He had said.

Now, in the dark of the confessional a like mystery takes place every Saturday. For some man in sin walks into the confession box, his soul as dark as that primeval darkness, for, supposing that he is in mortal sin, there is in his soul not a spark of the light of sanctifying grace, and so his is a darkness much greater than that before the world was made—a dreadful darkness which, unless God intervenes, will be eternal dark, lit by the fearful flames of hell. Better, indeed, for this man if the primeval dark had never been shattered. A bad day, indeed, for him was the day when the light first shone forth, since it was for him a beginning of eternal doom. Now he kneels in the confessional, tells his sins; makes his act of sorrow; and now hear the Creator speak again by the lips of the priest a word to this man much more important than the first: “Be light made,” and say: “*Ego te absolvo . . .*” and at the words see over the dark soul the Spirit of God spread His wings and the light of Grace dawn and spread and diffuse itself and chase the darkness and drive it wholly forth and produce such a brilliance as dims the shining of the sun, for the sun itself is mud, and like all material things, shall wear out and be dark, but the supernatural light of grace now lit in the man’s soul, please God, will shine eternally in heaven. Is it not true that to the poor sinner the confessional is a place of far happier mystery than that first void and darkness where it was said: “Be light made?” And we who perhaps were once darkness and are now through confession light in the Lord - ought, I think, to love God because He gave us Confession.

The confessional is also a place of mystery, because in it Life is given. Sanctifying grace is the life of the soul. Now, it would have been a moment for you strange and marvellous if you had once followed a little crowd down a path between cypress trees to the base of a cliff in which a rock tomb was hewed, and heard One say:

“Roll back that stone from the mouth of the tomb,” and heard the muttered answer: “No, for he is four days dead,” and gazed on the glorious face of Christ, who, with uplifted hand, ‘cried out “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Did I not say that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God. Roll back the stone.” So they rolled it back, and the crowd pressed forward to peer over one another’s shoulders into the black depths of the tomb. The Creator called: “Lazarus, come forth,” and the crowd shrank back with a scream of terror to see a white form stir in the dark depths, and a corpse in white come moving through the air, for its feet were tied and a white cloth was over its face, and the dead Thing stand erect in the mouth of the tomb, while the trembling sisters untied its feet and pulled the cloth from the face and revealed grey cheeks to which the flush of blood was returning, and dead eyes slowly opening and gazing all dazzled on the light of day and the Face of God, and the frozen lips clumsily separating to utter the cry of one risen from the dead as the poor man staggered into the arms of Him who was able to rescue him even out, of the grave. This scene is renewed in the confessional—and perhaps it is your own story. For perhaps someone who loves you, and as

Mary loved her brother Lazarus, has brought, not Jesus to your grave, but you to Jesus in the confessional. I mean that a person in mortal sin is dead—that is, his soul is dead —Not dead in every respect, but dead with such a death that he cannot live in heaven and must be buried in hell. Now, this man enters the confessional like a walking coffin, his body containing a dead soul, and before this confined soul Christ stands, and, while the man makes his act of contrition, Christ raises His hand and cries: “*Ego te absolvo...*” and the dead soul stirs in its coffin and wakes to life, and sanctifying grace runs like a fiery flood of life through the soul’s veins, and the dead soul stands up alive, while spirits, heavenly and infernal, shrink back in horror at a marvel much greater than the raising of Lazarus; for Lazarus comes to life only for a time, and one day must go back to the grave, but the sinner, forgiven, will surely die no more, but live for ever. Do you not agree with me that we ought to love God greatly for giving us the Sacrament of Confession?

Of course if a person has only venial sins, confession does not work so great a change in him, for there is Light in his soul and Life. But the Sacrament increases this Light and Life of Grace and the least increase of this light is more wonderful than the creation of the sun, because the sun is matter—that is to say, about the same as the mud under our feet—whereas grace is supernatural, heavenly; and the sun is transient and will pass, while this grace, please God, will never pass, but last for ages after the sun is extinct; and in the same way the least increase of Grace, the Life of the soul, is more wonderful than being raised from the dead, for the life of the body can only last a few years, whereas that of the soul is eternal unless destroyed by mortal sin.

The confessional is also a place of mystery, because in it the Blood of God is applied to our souls. If you had knelt on the hill of Calvary in the darkness, you would have been overwhelmed with horror to see the blood and torture, and with indignation and anger at His jeering murderers, and with sorrow at your own sins, and with gratitude to this brave Man who died for you, even if you had not fully sensed the awful mystery of the moment, the Creator of the Earth dying upon it, a Fight going on upon which depended the eternity of us all, whether it should be in heaven or in hell, Blood on stones washing sins from souls. Our Divine Lord, to whose eyes all things are naked and open, looked down from the Cross and, with dimming eyes in the darkness, could just perceive the dreadful pool of Blood spreading over the gravel and stones and not less dearly could see all the confessionals of the world clustered beneath His Cross and all the thousands of our sinful race entering sin-stained, kneeling, telling, while mingled voices rose amid the spatter of His Blood and the yells of Jews, voices saying: “O my God, I am heartily sorry ...” and “*Ego te absolvo . . .*” and shame and sorrow rise hot in human hearts, and a tear welling into the eye is brushed away with hasty hand, and grace descending like rain upon the soul washes all its sins away, and men and girls rise from their knees forgiven, lust and passion changed to a sweet Peace and a good desire of holy things, and a Christian multitude pours out of ten thousand churches, like a human River streaming down the slopes of Calvary hill, returning to home and work, sanctified with a holy purpose.

So when you kneel in the confessional, you may think that you are on Calvary and that above your head in the dark of the confessional the hand of Jesus is stretched out, His poor fingers closing in on the nail as though weakly striving to pull it out, while from beneath the broad black head of the nail His blood oozes slowly through the torn flesh, tight swollen round the iron, and trickles down the palm of His hand to gather in a great drop that hangs beneath His hand, and slowly detaches itself to fall, dark and heavy, on your sinful soul and wash all its sin away. And therefore we thank Him who gave us the confessional at so great a cost.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brief Proof that Priests have Power to Forgive Sins

I believe whatever the Catholic Church teaches.

Why?

Because Christ founded her to teach the world, and Christ is God.

My fathers died for this Faith, and I trust that if need be, in the face of persecution, I, too, will be found ready to die for it. Now, the Catholic Church teaches that “priests have power to forgive sins,” because Christ promised that power to St. Peter, saying:

“Whatever thou shalt bind on earth, it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it

shall be loosed in heaven,” and to the other Apostles, saying on a latter occasion: “Whatsoever you shall bind on earth, it shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose on earth, it shall be loosed in heaven.” And after His Resurrection gave this power to the Apostles, saying: “Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them: and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.” And because the church has always used this power: In the first century A.D. witness the Didache: “On the Lord’s day come together and break bread . . . having confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure.”

About A.D. 218 Pope Callistus wrote: “I forgive sins to those who have done penance.”

St Athanasius (died A.D. 373): “He who in penance confesses his sins, receives through the priest forgiveness.”

St. Augustine (died A.D. 430): “The Church of God has power to forgive all sins.

And hundreds of like witnesses.
