

PROBLEMS CONCERNING CONFESSION<sup>1</sup>

If people want to hear something about ‘problems concerning confession’, it is obviously presupposed that there are such problems. I take this presupposition of the organizers of this Congress seriously. A problem is not a didactic question whose answer one knows already from *Denzinger* and any textbook of moral theology. A problem is . . . a problem, i.e. a question for which one has no clear solution, no liberating and exhaustive answer. It is a question which even annoys certain listeners when merely put and expressed honestly, because they tacitly presuppose that basically everything is quite clear already and that anyone who has a *Denzinger* no longer walks *in umbris et imaginibus*, or that at least the theory is always perfectly clear even though the practical carrying out of clear principles sometimes comes up against the malice and stupidity of men. We certainly do not mean to align ourselves with those who prefer to fish around in the murky waters of questions and problems rather than in the clarity of answers, to those who are too lazy to listen to a clear answer and make it their own, or who think *a priori* that a hard answer is no answer at all. Yet it must not be maintained that one should pose a question only if the answers can be given immediately afterwards. For even a question not answered, if it is a genuine and honest question, is better than the dull stupidity of someone for whom everything is always quite clear.

So, we want to concern ourselves with problems. We presuppose in this that the clear answers of dogmatic, moral and pastoral theology – which exist and are more important than all our problems – are known and applied, including even those moral principles whose permanent [191] existence and validity must be defended especially today in the confessional. Anyone who wants to find out about these, should open any textbook or any of the many writings which rightly state, defend and give the pastoral applications of the traditional confessional moral theology, especially on sexual questions.<sup>2</sup>

## I. CHANGES IN THE INSTITUTION OF CONFESSION

Presupposing, affirming and naturally accepting all this, we now want to turn to a series of problems. The best way to do this is to start from the fact that the institution of Confession, with all its substantial stability, has undergone many changes which have been so far-reaching that, if it were not a fact, most dogmatic theologians would *a priori* declare these changes to be impossible because they seem to go counter to the substance of the sacrament. But St Joseph did not build the first confessional. There were many centuries when there was no confession of devotion. A St Augustine never went to confession. There were centuries when the saintly bishops of Gaul preached that one should *do* penance but go to confession only on one’s death-bed. There were Councils which warned against administering this sacrament to a young person in danger of death, since he might recover and might then find the life-long penitential obligations far too difficult. There were centuries during which

<sup>1</sup> The following essay was a lecture given at a small congress of pastoral theology. It has no ambitions to give the reader anything new on the scientific level. It intends to say things, however, which should be talked about repeatedly if they are to be taken notice of in everyday practice.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. among about the most recent work, Joseph Miller, S. J., *De usu et abusu matrimonii*, published in manuscript form by the Austrian Episcopal Conference (Innsbruck, Rauch).

ecclesiastical reconciliation could be received only *once*. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and right into the thirteenth century, all theologians taught that this sacrament does not remit guilt before God but has other more secondary effects. Even St Thomas still took it for granted and even regarded it as a duty of the penitent that he should come to this sacrament already justified by contrition, just as St Albert the Great and St Bonaventure thought it to be imperfect if someone tried to gain indulgences instead of doing penance. It was not until the thirteenth century that there appeared the indicative formula of absolution and that a beautiful penitential liturgy was permitted to shrink to bare absolution. The existential religious accent of the whole of penance shifted in century-long stages from the practice of doing hard penances to interior contrition, to the ashamed confession, to the priestly absolution. During twelve or rather thirteen centuries the Church managed [192] without the explicit distinction (which seems of such capital importance to us) between perfect and imperfect contrition. Before the time of St Thomas, theologians declared the duty of annual confession (laid down by the 4th Lateran Council) to be obligatory even for someone who has no mortal sins to confess. St Thomas and later theologians, looking more deeply into the theology of all this, maintained the opposite; the normal practice keeps quiet about this declaration, so that even those of the faithful who are in the state of grace go to confession during the Easter period, often not so much out of insight into the inner meaningfulness of their action but more out of habit, compulsion and fear.<sup>3</sup> Whereas during the Patristic period, the sacrament of Penance could be received only once during the whole of one's life (and even then only in case of necessity), there were yet Provincial Synods during the Carolingian period which obliged everyone to go to confession three times a year. For St Bonaventure, the *Misereatur* was still the real formula of the absolution from guilt, and the *Ego te absolvo* referred simply to the remission of the punishment due to sin; with St Thomas, the *Ego te absolvo* is the sole, decisive formula for the remission of guilt. Right up to the high Middle Ages it was the predominant view that in case of necessity one must confess even to a layman (St Ignatius of Loyola still held this view).

All these facts are simply meant to prove one thing: this sacrament is alive. What is alive undergoes its changes even though its innermost essential form remains the same. It would be silly to try to conclude *eo ipso* from these changes that we might or should bring back an earlier outward form and arrangement in theory and in practice. The historically-minded person more and not less than anyone else knows the *falsehood* of the statement that just because something existed at one time, it can also exist again. But if the Church's institution of Penance is alive, it will also change again in the future, without losing its proper nature. These futures changes may take place more silently and be less noticeable in the external, institutional aspect of Penance than previous changes. But if they did not happen, then Christ's institution would have become fossilized and dead.

[193] Is it possible to guess in what direction such a development will take place? Are there reasons for such a prognosis, reasons arising both from what *should* be and from the observable tendencies of the past? Such questions are not merely a matter of idle curiosity, which fancies it can see through a brick wall. We certainly have neither the power nor the right to change any existing thing, either in theory or in practice, regarding the institution of Confession. For this we lack *de iure* the authorization and *de facto* we are too few for consciously, as it were *via facti*, advancing any development. *But*, on the other hand, there is

---

<sup>3</sup> This is not meant to dispute the fact (quite the contrary) that this custom is a good one in the pastoral sense, and it is to be hoped that it will always be kept. One needs only to imagine what would happen if it no longer existed: we would in practice return to the conditions of public ecclesiastical penance as practised in Christian antiquity and this would bring with it all the pastoral disadvantages which were tied up with this form of the sacrament of Penance. Cf. K. Rahner, 'Die Busslehre des hl. Cyprian von Karthago', *ZKT* LXXIV (1952), pp. 425 *sqq.*

still a relatively great deal of scope for a very different way of handling this sacrament *within* the framework of the present-day teaching and practice regarding the sacrament of Penance and, on the other hand, it can be a good thing in the pastoral sense to make use of the thus offered possibilities within this framework in *that* direction in which the development is tending. For the history of this sacrament shows precisely that one can retard a necessary development to the detriment of souls, by traditionalistic slowness, by following in the mere routine of what has always been, as happened in the fifth and sixth centuries until at last the Irish-Anglo-Saxon simplicity in the new handling of repeatable private confession forced a change whose blessing we still feel today. At the present time, too, there seem to be such developmental tendencies, tendencies which are not quite conscious of themselves as yet or which, in some cases, threaten to go beyond the right mark. Where these tendencies are not clarified, they become dangerous. Where they remain unnoticed or are even denied or suppressed, they may paralyse or poison the desire for this sacrament. The question about the direction in which one may possibly conceive of a future development of this sacrament and suppose it to happen, provides us with the opportunity of describing the present-day problems of confession and, even if not to give an answer to them, at least to indicate the direction in which a solution maybe found. These problems of confession, it must be explicitly emphasized, are always simultaneously also problems of the right *education* for the proper reception of this sacrament, as well as problems about its administration and reception itself.

We would like to state the following thesis: the theory and practice of this sacrament will in future tend towards a *theologically fuller* and also *more personal* accomplishment of this sacrament. What this means and what consequences may be surmised from it, is what we must now show.

[194]

## II. LEGALISTIC AND MAGICAL TENDENCIES IN THE PRACTICE OF CONFESSION

The ordinary man and hence the piety of the people (which can have good or bad effects even on the highest levels of theology) think and act (to a greater or lesser extent) legalistically, magically and according to taboos. These things are interrelated: they are all based on the fact that simple and childlike thinking does not make a clear enough distinction between the basic personal, *moral* exercise and its external objectification, while at the same time it regards God as one particular being among others, from whom one can save and shelter oneself. We do not mean to make an exact analysis here of the nature of such attitudes. Simply to give some practical idea or approximation of what is meant, we will mention a few examples at random, examples which are related sometimes more to the one, sometimes more to the other of the attitudes mentioned. We give these examples without comment.

According to a well-known moral theology textbook, it is necessary, with regard to the commandment of keeping the Sabbath Day holy, to distinguish as to whether one is writing notes or simply drawing lines for notes. According to this same textbook, one derives more benefit from three Masses attended simultaneously than from one Mass. There have been Saints who filled the chalice they were going to consecrate as full as possible, since they thought this would give more grace. The fear about interrupting the unbroken series of Gregorian Masses is not to be viewed very much differently from the fear of breaking the chain of chain-letters. Even today, casuistry gets so easily tied up in knots with regard to the Eucharistic fast (e.g. about when food is still a liquid), so that it becomes rather difficult to see the wood for the trees. For hundreds of years, nocturnal pollution was regarded *eo ipso* as an 'impure action'. Everyone is familiar with the kind of casuistry connected with this in itself purely physiological process, beginning with the Fathers and right up to the *Missale Romanum* of today. How many taboo-like undercurrents are not present in the medieval

casuistry regarding the lawfulness or unlawfulness (even to the point of mortal sin) of receiving the sacraments after having had marital intercourse the night before. In 1277, Bishop Stephen of Paris condemned the proposition: *Quod delectatio in actibus venereis non impediatur actum seu usum intellectus*. St Bernardine of Siena (1443) says in one of his sermons that it is a piggish irreverence and a mortal sin if husband [195] and wife do not abstain from marital intercourse for several days before receiving Holy Communion. Even the *Catechismus Romanus* still properly prescribes a three-day abstinence. During the Middle Ages, a woman who had died in childbirth was often buried in a special corner of the cemetery and without the usual honours. John Belet permitted such a woman's burial in consecrated ground only if the child had first been cut out of the womb.

Even today there are still legalistic and magical attitudes and taboos which have arisen from such views and precepts, but they are getting fewer. Man has become more rationalistic even towards himself he is becoming more technological and profane; he is learning to differentiate more sharply between personal freedom and psycho-physiological mechanisms, between the genuine thing and what is simply 'put on' by training. Whenever such a person meets one of these attitudes we have spoken of, he protests; they appear laughable to him and as something unbecoming when it is a question of the real dignity of religious matters, or – even worse – he confuses the religious with such things and then rejects both.

Now, there is no doubt about the fact that even today such things still play a part in the popular practice of *Confession*. They still continue to have an effect; they are inculcated during youth and later on meet with protests and refusals, and so endanger the institution of confession in general. Who has not innumerable times experienced confessions which are simply rattled off which go simply through the catalogue of sins mechanically? Every priest has experienced confessions where underneath a personally perhaps quite innocent but terribly legalistic and magical attitude, the only thing that seems to matter is the sacramental event as such; confessions in which, if necessary, sins are invented so that there may be something to confess; confessions in which objective sins are treated in exactly the same way as subjective sins; confessions where the person believes that one should confess, for instance, having missed Mass even though one had been ill in bed and could not go to Mass; confessions where the person believes he is making a good confession, even though he is out to pull the wool over the confessor's eyes or to confess when there is as much noise in the church as possible. Everyone has experienced children's confessions and confessions during Missions which go with such speed that one really has to speak of a confession-factory and where – in the words of a Protestant, very well disposed towards the Catholic practice of confession – it really looks like a nail-punching machine with [196] nails flying out of it left and right at regular intervals. Have we confessors not often had the feeling already that one should, if possible, reduce the liturgy of confession even further to the absolutely necessary minimum, so that it might go even faster? Have we ourselves not too often confessed sins for which one can only manage to say one is sorry by some formalistic pettifoggery, 'sins' for which one cannot possibly be sorry because they are not sins, since in their case there cannot seriously be any question of a personal, free decision? Who has not at some time instructed penitents about the fact that something is not a sin at all, and then has nevertheless been given the impression that this does not make the penitent feel relieved but that he would rather confess the same thing again? How often do not people confess something 'just in case', so that God will not have anything 'on us', and as if one had to or could insure oneself against him, as though God could debit one with something when we ourselves did not recognize any clear duty?

If one analyses these and similar cases of legalistic, magical instincts in confession, one will find the following:

1. Confession is *reduced* to the absolution from sins given by the priest, together with the

necessary presuppositions to the extent in which these are an absolute *conditio sine qua non* for the happening of the sought-after effect.

2. Confession is treated far too much as an objectively mechanical process (often by appealing to the fact that it is an *opus operatum*), the main thing in it being that there is the actual absolution.

The basic legalistic, magical instincts of man take effect in both these factors.

### III. NEW TENDENCIES IN THE CURRENT PRACTICE OF CONFESSION

If our pastoral care is not to bring the institution of confession gradually into disrepute with the man of tomorrow – as being a legalistic, magical tool – then we must, as far as lies in our power, counteract these not infrequent misunderstandings, and take up the right attitude in our practice. We must see to it that this sacrament will be affirmed and accomplished in a theologically fuller and more personal way.<sup>4</sup>

[197] In practice, such a theologically fuller and more personal understanding of confession means the following:

1. The sacrament is an *opus operatum*. This precisely does *not* mean, however, that it achieves its effect by magic or automatically. The efficacy (*in actu secundo*) of the sacrament is measured and limited by the dispositions of the penitent. This, however, includes also the fact that – where this disposition for the sacrament and through the sacrament, regarded quite soberly and honestly, does not *grow* – a more frequent reception of the sacrament has, practically speaking, only an insignificant effect, even when (from the point of view of a moral minimalism) the sacrament is not received sacrilegiously. Obviously, no useful purpose is served by, nor is there any sense in, reducing the frequency of confession. If we did nothing more than reduce this frequency, we would not gain anything by it and would simply be causing harm. We do not want to sanction spiritual sloth. For in reality, we do not take our daily examination of conscience nearly serious enough and do not try hard enough to overcome our weaknesses and sinful inclinations. But conversely it is also true that a mechanical (even though not sacrilegious) frequency, which is not combined with a personal growth of the inner man, is of no use either. The recommended frequency of the reception of the sacrament, must, therefore, be determined by the concrete possibilities at the disposal of the person who is seriously trying to achieve the sacrament in a really genuine personal manner. It is no attack on the *opus operatum* to say: even from the sacramental point of view, *one* good confession is better than three routine confessions. For the *opus operatum* is no patent, easy way of getting grace. It may quite well happen that a person requires a certain, even though relatively little bit of new life, new practical knowledge and experience to provide his personal efforts with material for existential realization. Let us not forget that, especially in the case of confessions of devotion, no sin is forgiven in the concrete by such a confession unless it is already blotted out *ex opere operantis*. Sins for which we are not really sorry are not remitted by the sacrament. This is a platitude which we priests and penitents forget only too easily in practice.

[198] We should rid ourselves of the tacit prejudice that the sacraments have been instituted by God so that we might make it easier for ourselves personally and subjectively and have less to pay. This is a prejudice which arises from the fact that modern theology (in

---

<sup>4</sup> Since we cannot here enter further and more deeply into the theological foundations of what is meant by this, we may be permitted to refer the reader to three of my own works: ‘Sackramentale und personale Frömmigkeit’, *GuL* XXV (1952), pp. 412-429; ‘Vergessene Wahrheiten über das Buszsakrament’, *GuL* XXVI (1953), pp. 339-364; *Die vielen Messen und das eine Opfer* (Freiburg 1951). The first two essays appear also in: *Theological Investigations* II (London & Baltimore 1963), pp. 109-174.

contrast to the great theology of the Middle Ages) has *onesidedly* emphasized the doctrine that attrition, i.e. imperfect contrition, is sufficient for justification *in* confession but not *outside* of it. We do not dispute this thesis. Yet it is no justification for the above prejudice. Anyone who manages to have *attritio* will have no difficulty about having *contritio* (that is perfect contrition); the only difficulty about *contritio* is *attritio*, i.e. the real turning away from sin. In other words, the fact of receiving the sacrament in no way dispenses us from true repentance, especially since it does not dispense us from love – i.e. from the ultimate form which converts *attritio* into *contritio*. The sacrament has, of course, its own power. But, either we bring to it that contrition necessary for the remission of sins, or the sacrament can prove its power of remitting sins only by the fact that it offers us ourselves the *capacity* (freely to be accepted or rejected) of truly turning to God by repentance.

It would perhaps be a good thing if the word ‘repentance’ were to be avoided for the next fifty years; for today, repentance has come to be understood only too easily as a regret, a cheap desire that it might have been otherwise, just as one regretfully wishes things to be different which one cannot change in any way. If only, instead of saying: you must repent, one were to say: you must change your life, you must work hard and honestly on yourself and deny yourself so as to change your outlook, your attitudes and impulses; do not regret your actions but strongly and actively – if you honestly have the courage for this – disavow that outlook and those attitudes of yours which give rise to these actions of which you ostensibly repent; let us see actions which show that the hidden root-reason of your actions has changed. How can you actually deceive yourself into thinking that you have repented of that unkindness, if you simply . . . ‘repent’, say a Hail Mary as a penance and otherwise leave everything as it was, instead of doing something really good to the one you have offended? Do you really distinguish annoyance about the formal discrepancy between your actions and your official maxims (which is simply hurt pride), and the loving turning-towards genuine, understanding preference of what is better even though it hurts your egoism? Or why do you act as if you repented, when you do not really want to change [199] yourself and perhaps cannot even do so, at least not now and not in *that* point for which you supposedly are sorry?

Thus, we again and again investigate in our practice, from the point of view of the inner unity of our sacramental and personal action, as to what is the really appropriate frequency of receiving the sacrament. If young people are simply trained mechanically to make as frequent confessions as possible, and if they then make their confession in the manner normally or at least very often done, then they will stop going to confession when they grow up. And really they are quite right: done in this way, *such* confessions are basically simply pious legalism or magic. One might go on from there to ask what improvements could be made even technically with regard to school and similar mass confessions by having more confessors, possibly by having such confessions less frequently, spread over several days, etc. One might ask whether a communal preparation for confession or something similar might not help the genuine, personal accomplishment of this sacrament. As long as many of our young people go to confession under arrangements where it takes the least amount of time, this is a sign that there is still too much legalism and sacramental magic even today.

2. The sacrament should be experienced in a theologically fuller fashion. It is not just absolution in God’s name. It is one of Christ’s mysteries; in it takes place the judgement on us which on the Cross was passed on the sins of the world; in it takes place by anticipation the judgement of the future; it is a dialogue between God and man; it is liturgy; it is a profession of guilt committed against the holy community of the redeemed; the Church too, therefore, gives her freedom and reconciliation; she prays for me and solemnly gives me by this sacrament that renewed right to *her* grace and *her* intercession which she – the Church of sinners who are sanctified – offers daily to God in the sacrifice and in the prayers of all her saints. There ought to be in the healthy Christian a feeling for the fact that he is excluded

from the sacred mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ and that he is admitted again, by the Church's lifting of the ban, into this her inner circle of salvation, that he is reconciled again with the altar, as one used to say. The sinner ought to sense that he professes to the holy Church, the Prow-sacrament of Christ – and not to a psychiatrist or an examining magistrate, an ecclesiastical police magistrate – because by this one orders one's relationship to the original source of grace; he ought to have a sense of responsibility towards this Church, of which [200] he is a representative: compromisingly by sinning, celebrating *her* liturgy himself as the liturgy of the Church of sinners, by confessing; one ought to feel something of the fact that only a baptized person can celebrate this sacrament. The sinner ought to have a feeling for the fact that he, as a baptized person whose sins have been forgiven after baptism, lives by this forgiveness off the whole Body of Christ, and by the prayers and penance of all the saints, and that our prayer after absolution, *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi, merita beatae Mariae Virginis et omnium Sanctorum*,<sup>5</sup> simply expresses what has happened in the absolution, viz. that our repentance lives by the love of the whole Church.<sup>6</sup>

If repentance, as a part of the 'matter' of the sacrament of Penance, bears an inner orientation towards the absolution seen as an act of the Church done in the name of Christ, then we must not recommend and encourage prayers of repentance which even a Deist could say. Repentance must address itself to Christ, it must be the prayer of the baptized, of a member of the Church, of someone who experiences in himself the saving judgement of the Cross and who knows that salvation can only come from there. The content of the prayer of repentance ought to make it clear to the one who prays that his sins are remitted, not by his repentance as such but by God's grace, that the repentant sinner does not *have* to be forgiven (just because *he* has become better) but that *God* changes the heart and fills it with his Spirit. If this consciousness were absolutely alive, then it would also be much more obvious to the sinner that he, as a baptized person, must accept this deed, which God does in him, by the word of the Church. It is a great pity that, from an external point of view, the whole liturgy of the sacrament of Penance has shrunk to a few hastily whispered words. One need not be a liturgical romantic to regret this. For it is extremely important that man should personally accomplish out of the depth of his being what takes place sacramentally. For this, however, a genuine exercise of the liturgical elements of this sacrament is most helpful. Let us at least do the little which remains of this liturgy genuinely. Let us teach people that the sacrament is more than the juridical act of absolution. Where modern man does not see the specifically Christian and ecclesiological [201] nature of this sacrament, he will sooner or later get the idea that he can settle the question of his sins with God alone, if this is the sole meaning of the sacrament.

3. *The confession of sin*,<sup>7</sup> as a part of the sacramental sign, is orientated towards the words of absolution pronounced by the priest. It is necessary and essential, because in the really normal human case, the words of absolution must not fall into emptiness and into the indetermined, but ought to be knowing words, words in which the priest as a freely acting human person (which he is even when he acts at the behest of his Master) must know what he is doing, to whom and for what reason he speaks the word of free forgiveness. In this lies the real and decisive meaning and necessity of a confession of sins. It follows from this, however, that the priest is not an examining magistrate who has to discover a guilt of which the penitent is not aware or which he is suspected to be keeping quiet. Furthermore,

---

<sup>5</sup> 'May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the merits of the blessed Virgin Mary, and of all the Saints, whatever good you have done and whatever evil you have suffered, gain for you a remission of your sins, an increase of grace, and the reward of eternal life.'

<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. Charles, 'Doctrines et pastorales du sacrement de pénitence', *NRT* LXXXV (1953), pp. 449-470; for the above, esp. pp. 455 *sqq.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Charles, *loc. cit.*, pp. 460-466. We give here a condensed summary of P. Charles' exposition.

confession is not in itself, i.e. *of its nature*, a self-humiliation or an exercise of putting oneself to shame; it is not really a part of the penance. We must, therefore, take careful note of what P. Charles rightly tries to bring home to us: today (with the exception perhaps of school children, boarders and certain ‘Easter confession merchants’) only those still come to this sacrament who freely decide to do so. The penitent in certain cases may not know exactly how he is to express himself, the authority and greater knowledge of the confessor make him feel tongue-tied. Hence, if the confessor treats him like a suspected criminal, if he asks him questions whose justification the penitent does not understand, if he makes the penitent repeat what he has just said, then the priest does not act like the one he after all is, viz. the judge whose highest duty is to pardon, but instead he acts like a subordinate examining magistrate and thus falsifies the nature of this court of mercy. It may not be said against this that the priest must ask as precise questions as possible in order to be able to evaluate the guilt of the penitent. For it must not be forgotten that the confession of the penitent is not an object for examination. It is the matter and hence an intrinsically constitutive element of the sacramental sign and must be treated as such. We must never forget what Catholic tradition, to the great annoyance of the Jansenists, has always stressed: *malitia non apprehensa non contrahitur* (a non-apprehended evil is not attributable to us). Personal guilt, to the extent in which it must be confessed because it goes [202] beyond the general (original) sinfulness of every man, can only be committed *knowingly*. When a penitent has said what he regards as his guilt, he has sufficiently confessed *his* guilt. Further instruction – if it has hope of success – can be advisable or even obligatory only in the case where the confession reveals a grave error which could endanger the salvation of the penitent. How often (but, thank God, this does not happen too often) have not penitents stayed away from the confessional for a long time or even for a whole life-time, because they have been frightened away at one time by a lack of tact, by curious questioning, by an attitude of suspicious distrust or by a kind of spying attitude. That they should as a result, have stayed away is false; but false, too, was the behaviour of the inquisitorial confessor.

4. There is still one further question which belongs to this theological deepening and to the destruction of the magical outlook of our practice of confession. Seen superficially, this concerns the question of the imposition of a penance.<sup>8</sup> But in reality it goes much deeper than that. We have become accustomed to distinguish between the *reatus culpae* (the burden of guilt) and the *reatus poenae* (the burden of punishment). This is a correct but also dangerous distinction. For we then regard the burden of punishment as a purely juridical matter, after the manner of civil jurisprudence; we are then inclined to regard it as a punishment imposed merely externally by God, and one which can be remitted just as externally by absolution, for example. In this conception, the punishment is [203] settled up either now, by absolution, or later on in Purgatory. At any rate, in such a view one has really nothing to do here and now

---

<sup>8</sup> On this point, we find a not insignificant difference between the view exposed here and the view given by P. Charles in the aforementioned essay (pp. 466-469). Charles pleads for the correctness of the usual practice of the imposition of penance. We gladly admit that the practical conclusion following from his reflections is perfectly justified for the confession of devotion and in general for frequent confessions. The same cannot be said, however, for the imposition of a penance in Confession in itself and in general. His theoretical reflections, moreover, seem to be extremely questionable. It surely cannot be said that, because the imposition of a penance in the sacrament has an inner orientation towards absolution, it is merely an act of docility, subjection and adaptation to the Church and hence can just as well be achieved through a little prayer as through a real doing of penance. If the statement that God forgives us our sins and there is no business transaction with God in the sacrament were to prove anything against imposing heavy penances, then it would also make *every* imposition of penance, as understood by the Church, seem ridiculous. His appeal to the practice of the Church, finally, proves perhaps the concession we made above, a concession which arises Out of the nature of things. But it by no means proves that such a practice is always and in every respect correct. For in that case, what does the earlier, different practice of the ‘Church’ prove?

with this burden of punishment. And the burden of guilt is taken away by absolution.

The average Catholic of today does not deny Purgatory; God forbid that he should. But to maintain that the average Catholic of our great cities still believes in it existentially would be just naïve optimism. It would be very interesting to know how many of us have ever honestly feared Purgatory. You will protest vehemently. But I do not believe such protests of most of our younger people today. How would it be, however, if we were to conceive the burden of punishment from a less external, juridical point of view? If we were to say: this *reatus poenae* is myself in reality, myself with my egoism, with my hardheartedness, my blasé attitude, my pharisaical outlook, my cowardice, with everything which is so very much identical with myself that I do not even notice how little I manage to get away from it and that everyone else but myself notices it. What torment, what unforeseeable spiritual development I will have to pass through before this is, or may be, changed, what deadly pains of spiritual development will have to be undergone before we reach something approximating to that perfection, that total integration of our whole being – with all its dimensions, urges and layers – into the one love of God, and that achievement of possession of the innermost centre of our being through free love of God, just as we conceive all this in the case of a mystic. What experiences would have to be made, what mystical journeys of the soul, compared to which the imagination of a Dante looks like a childish game. These are the facts. We, however, think that if someone lives a decent and Christian life, then he is juridically on the right side. He may indeed still get a few years in Purgatory. But even this is not all that awful in the last analysis, even if absolution does not preserve him immediately from it. At any rate, nothing much can happen. And then I, just as I am, will be in heaven.

The reality is different. This ego, with which I identify myself with such self-satisfaction, will never get to heaven. It is flesh and blood and these do not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Between the two, there is a dying and a transformation which is both God's deed in us and also our own deed for ourselves, the transformation and new creation of a man who is flesh and a sinner but must become *pneuma* and justice. And this God cannot and will not give us for nothing, this is not given us 'free' by [204] absolution. This also cannot be granted by absolution except *in such a way* that, through the official intercession of the Church, I am offered the grace by God to achieve this purifying and maturing process of the soul more quickly and in a more beatifying way (for, alas, how much is still left in me even after all the dross has been burnt away). But even then I am not spared the process. It must be achieved, together with its birth pangs and the deadly tormenting pains, either here or on the (so-called) other side which we call Purgatory, although without there being any longer any possible increase in my basic existential, supernatural attitude and depth, so that all there can be then is a maturing of what had already grown here below.

Seen in this light, the *reatus culpae* and *poenae* are brought much closer together. The forgiveness of sin is only the beginning (even though the-most decisive one) of this transforming process of man and leads finally to his complete deliverance from sin. And even this beginning takes place in *that* conversion whose continuation and completion cannot be spared to man – not even by absolution – and which we – from a juridical point of view – call the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin. We calmly put off this conversion, which we must exercise ever anew in God's grace, until the time of Purgatory. We do this as if there will be time enough then for such 'extras'. In reality, however, this conversion is the only thing by whose seriousness and progress we can hope to gauge whether the beginning of this conversion – namely repentance – was even present, while we think all the time that repentance is very easy, presupposing merely that the urge to do the same again has been removed from us by such extrinsic factors as age or other circumstances of life, which suppression of urges or occasions we then call 'good resolutions'.

It is only when we look at things in this way that we can come to see the real meaning of a

re-evaluation of the practice of imposing a penance.<sup>9</sup> Where a genuine conversion (a change of outlook or attitude) is needed, it is not merely a question of getting rid of some state of affairs which (in our present-day practice of penances) gives a slightly infantile impression and merely gives rise to the feeling that confession is an institution which lets one off extremely lightly. The reason for this practice is an externalized [205] conception of the burden of punishment. If only one understood what is really objectively involved in it, one would not leave remission to Purgatory or only to absolution; one would have doubts about repentance when the will to do penance is absent. We are all aware, of course, that this cannot be changed quite so easily from one day to the next. Yet one ought at least to recognize this state of affairs and to realize that anyone who sees no problem in all this, has a formalistic juridical conception of sin or thinks of the sacrament as something magical and mechanical. Such ideas, inculcated in the men and especially the youth of today (not by any explicit theory but by the far more dangerous implications of common practice), will later on have a destructive effect on belief in this sacrament.

5. If we carry out Confession with all our strength and in a more personal, more serious, and more interior fashion, then we need not be afraid of the present-day competition of psychotherapy. If we act merely as machines for giving absolution, if we do not take man seriously and do not allow him to have his say, if we do not force him to take himself and God seriously or help him to find himself and to identify himself in a personal way, then these people will find that they are taken more seriously by the psychotherapist and they will go to him. We do not want to be psychotherapists in the confessional. This is not our job and would merely be silly charlatanism. We must simply be priests, but that wholly. We lend historical tangibility to God's effectively forgiving word in a personal happening; we are not applying magical machinery. We should even know when to regard a penitent as a patient for a psychotherapist and send him to one. But we possess one word which no psychotherapist can say: the word of God, which forgives sin. The psychotherapist says a word which is meant to cure illness; we say a word which forgives sin in God's sight. Even if we cannot remove the illness – heavy burden though it is in many cases – we can, however, take away the death in illness, the despair in it and the guilt. Yet, even though this is a deed of God, it nevertheless passes through the free faith of the patient sinner, through *his* penance. Only if we do not forget this and do not deny it in practice, does the psychotherapist not become our personal rival; only then does he remain the one who from time to time can give us welcome assistance, but for the rest has his own proper field.

6. The fight to remove the idea from people's minds that confession is the necessary preparation for the Eucharist and that the Eucharist is the reward for confession is not yet finally and everywhere won. The only [206] truth in this association is that the Eucharist is barred to someone who is conscious of a really subjectively grave guilt and who has not yet had it remitted even in the sight of the Church. This coupling, which unfortunately is always created anew by the conditions for indulgences, is serious because it either lessens the frequency of Communion or gives rise to a frequency of confession which can no longer be managed in a personal way and which leads to mechanical confessions. If the word 'rare' is understood correctly, i.e. relatively to the frequency of Communion, then it could be said absolutely that there should be rare but real confession and frequent Communion. In spiritual matters it is absolutely true that the cult of numbers is false and less can be more.

We suspect that many among you have been waiting patiently for us to come to the confessional problem which seems to you to be the real problem today: the treatment of those

---

<sup>9</sup> We are not speaking here of the weekly confession, for in this case the frequency proves in general precisely that the penitent concerned has the desire to work energetically – as far as in him lies – on his progressive sanctification. Hence in these cases one can be satisfied with the usual practice.

sinners who not only are conscious of their guilt in the sphere of sexual morality and in the face of the objective norms of the gospel and of the Church, but who also hold that they themselves are fundamentally incapable of living according to these norms and hence do not think they can work up the necessary purpose of amendment required for absolution. But these questions would require a whole exposition to themselves, which we are unable to offer here. Perhaps it is good to be silent about these things for once. For otherwise the impression will gradually be given that these are the only confessional problems today. This, however, would be a false view.