

I FOUND THE ANCIENT WAY

By

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CHAPTER FOUR

CONFESSION

EVER SINCE MY ADOLESCENT DAYS I had gone to confession, but seldom did I feel satisfied with having confessed. Always there stayed with me the uneasiness of wondering if my confession had met all the requirements the sacrament demands to be valid.

During the spiritual exercises that preceded Minor Orders, as a preparation for them, I recall that I made several general confessions because every time, in spite of the fact that I had them with me in writing so as to be sure I wouldn't forget any sin, I was always in doubt whether my declaration had been sufficiently clear, or on the contrary defective, whether the confessor had understood what I meant, or understood something different.

When my eyes began to open to the truth, I saw that instead of confession being a divine or apostolic precept, it is a very useful and effective means that the Catholic Church has to get hold of the keys of sciences and meddle in the private life of the truthful; that the great interest shown in having it carried out has a material and not a spiritual aim.

One of the first conclusions I reached after I had carefully read the Gospels was that pardoning sins is exclusively GOD's right, and that it wasn't sufficiently clear that it was ever granted to men.

It is significant that JESUS himself, to show that He had power to grant absolution, when the Jews thought He was blaspheming because He said, "**Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee**" (Matthew 9:2), hastened to show that He was GOD become man, by doing a miracle. He didn't tell them that pardoning sins was a right of any man serving as GOD's representative; but recognizing it to be GOD's exclusive right, He showed that He was GOD by healing the paralytic.

Still the Catholics argue that JESUS said, "**Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained**" (John 20:23).

For several years this statement of JESUS was my support when doubts came upon me about the effectiveness of this Catholic sacrament. But one day, after a careful reading, I saw that these words were not spoken to the twelve Apostles only, as I had thought and as a certain pamphlet states. (The author seems to be ashamed to give his name, signing with a pseudonym which certainly doesn't fit him very well: "One who has read the Bible." If he says he has read it we'll have to believe him, but he certainly did it very poorly).

In verses 19 and 20 of John 20 it tells the place where the *disciples* were, not the *Apostles*, and says, "**Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.**"

Were the disciples the Twelve only? We can state without any question that they were more, for we read in Luke 19:81: "**And when he was come nigh, even now at the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God.**"

Multitude means a crowd, and no one would say that twelve people is a crowd or a multitude.

Did JESUS give this privilege to men only? There is no basis for saying so, since we know that His mother Mary and other women who followed Him were with the Apostles and other disciples like those of Emmaus in those tragic, fearful days. We are not to presume that John in such circumstances had abandoned the Lord's mother, who was entrusted to him from the cross.

Besides, in Acts 1:14 we read: "**These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.**"

So we can state that there were other disciples in the upper room, besides the Apostles, and therefore the words of JESUS were not addressed to the latter alone, and much less to Peter; but whatever its meaning, the charge was given to all who were met there and we can't exclude the women.

Some will ask in amazement, "Then according to doctrine we have the power to forgive one another's sins?"

Let's see how the disciples themselves to whom it was granted understood it.

Do we have in the Scripture any case of a sinner who went to the Apostles? If so, by seeing what the Apostles did we can deduce from their actions the real meaning of JESUS' words.

This struck me forcefully the first time it was called to my attention.

I noticed in Acts 2:37 and 38:

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Peter doesn't tell them, "Confess your sins to us," but "**Repent.**" Neither does he tell them, "I forgive you in the name of JESUS."

When I saw these contradictions that the Catholic Church includes with the Gospel, I tried to find something on which to base the doctrine that I was then professing and preaching from altar and pulpit. Every time I saw an innovation in the doctrine of CHRIST it was a veritable martyrdom for my soul, and in this passage I was able to find what at the time seemed to me like a way out.

"Since that multitude wasn't yet baptized, they were not yet able to receive the sacrament of penance."

But if it took me days sometimes to find something to justify Catholic doctrine, almost immediately there would spring up in my mind an argument that would upset it. Was there at that time any canon law to establish an order for the receiving of the sacraments? To this question, which arose in such an inopportune way just at the time when I was expecting to pacify my conscience, I had to answer decidedly, "No."

And so if the Apostles had power to forgive, and those souls, crushed under the weight of sin they realized they had committed, asked them what to do, their charitable and logical answer should have been, "We forgive you because we have the power to do it." Not "**Repent,**" as if they were Protestants, for the text tells us "**they were pricked in their heart,**" which is simply repentance.

Continuing the reading of the Acts, I found another case of a man who was already a believer and baptized, who repented of his sin and who also was not pardoned by the Apostles. In this case there wasn't the slightest question as to whether it might be because he wasn't baptized, as in the previous one, but I could read the following:

"But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Then Simon himself believed also and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done . . . And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost."

“But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me” (Acts 8:9-13, 18-24).

To my heart's great sorrow, I had to admit the nonexistence of the power of the Apostles to absolve from sin; and therefore my own power that, as a Catholic priest, I believed I had received from them: Simon had believed and was baptized, so he was a Christian.

This man wanted to have the power of transmitting the Holy Spirit and, perhaps through ignorance, perhaps also because he let himself be dragged along by temptation, he offered money for a gift of GOD. But Peter severely scolded him and told him to repent and beg pardon of GOD.

Why didn't he tell him to make confession?

Wasn't it cruel on Peter's part to leave that man in sin when he could have given him pardon? Wasn't Peter stating a Protestant doctrine when he advised him to ask GOD to pardon his sin?

We can presume that Simon was a truly converted Christian and that he sinned, for when he was reprov'd for his sin he didn't get puffed up but humbly replied that they should pray GOD for him, the most Christian answer he could have given. And yet neither did the Apostles here exercise the right to pardon sins.

I ceased to believe in the efficacy of priestly absolution, and my soul was tortured with the thought that I might be giving a twisted interpretation to the Holy Scripture.

But other sacred texts came to confirm me in my new belief that GOD alone is the One who pardons sins, and with this peace was born again? - in my spirit. I was following the Word of GOD and could not be walking along the road of condemnation.

It seemed that my chest swelled and my heart threatened to burst when I read, **"I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins"** (Isaiah 43:25); and **"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon"** (Isaiah 55:7).

The peace and JOY I felt when I saw clearly that GOD for His own sake - or for the sake of CHRIST who is also GOD - pardoned my sins and no longer remembered them, because He is wholly merciful and abundantly pardons, is only comparable to that of a person shipwrecked in an angry ocean seeing before him the rescue ship.

I thought I was lost in a sea of doubts, and each time I read these passages from Isaiah I saw more clearly that my salvation was in GOD and that I should go to Him to beg for pardon for my countless sins. When I did this I no longer had any doubts about the pardon of my sins, because then I had not made my confession to a man but to GOD who saw the hidden parts of my heart.

No longer could I question whether my Confessor had understood aright what I meant to tell Him; and if perchance I forgot any sin, my Confessor had been present every time I offended and He was not only listening to my words but He knew my thoughts. So then at last I could feel the great peace of knowing that I was cleansed. He had mercy on me and has shown me that He abundantly pardons.

These passages removed every doubt that assailed me when I first became aware of the nonexistence of priestly absolution as a means for pardoning sins.

But someone else accustomed to Catholic practice may ask the question that I also asked myself: "If GOD is the one who pardons sins, how can I know whether He has pardoned mine or not?"

In the Holy Scripture I found the answer. How wonderful it is!

Only GOD could write this Book in which we always find a solution for any spiritual problem, however small or great it seems. And so I read in John 3:18: "**He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God**"; and in John 5:24: "**Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.**"

By these two passages we can see that the one who believes is no longer condemned; so if I believe I no longer have a reason to go to any man so he can judge me.

And the Scripture also says that the one who believes has passed from death unto life, which could only be said of one who doesn't have sin, since passing from death to life is a passage from sin to grace; and, according to the beloved disciple, this comes to pass through believing and not through making confession.

So I can have the assurance that my sins have been forgiven because I trust in the word of the one who, because He is GOD, cannot fail to keep it.

There is a Spanish proverb that says: *Par mucho trigo nunca es mal ana* ("For much wheat never is there a bad year").

Applying it to what we are talking about, we can say that no matter how many quotations we cite concerning confession, they will never be too many.

Peter says in the message he gives in Acts 10:43: "**To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.**"

We can see how clear it is in this quotation that by believing in JESUS, and through His name, I shall receive pardon, not by going to any confessional.

The Catholic Church brings one quotation to prove confession from I John 1:9: "**If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**" But here the Apostle does not say that his confession should be made to a man but to the One who is faithful and just to forgive us. There can't be found, because it does not exist, a single passage in all the Scripture that orders confession of sins committed in private against GOD to be made to a man.

Paul says in his epistle to the Ephesians 5: 10-12: "**Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret.**"

Later I noticed also that the earliest Church Fathers also repudiated confession:

Augustine says: "What then have I to do with men, that they should hear my confessions, as if they were going to cure all my diseases?"

"They answer and say, 'If men do not forgive sins, then that is false which CHRIST saith, **'Whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven also'** ". But thou dost not know why this is said, and in what sense this is If' said. The Lord was about to give to men the Holy Spirit, and He wished it to be understood that sins are forgiven to His faithful by His Holy Spirit, and not by men's deserts. For what art thou, O man, but an invalid who hast need of healing. Wouldest thou make thyself my physician? Together. with me, seek the Physician. For that the Lord might show this more plainly, that sins are forgiven by the Holy Spirit, which He hath given to HIS faithful ones, and not by it, men's deserts, after He had risen from the dead, He saith in a certain place, **'Receive ye the Holy Ghost;**' and when He had said, **'Receive ye the Holy Ghost'** He subjoined immediately, **'Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them;'** that is, the Spirit remits them, not ye. Now the Spirit is GOD. GOD therefore remits, not ye."

John Chrysostom: "Confession of sins is the cancellation of transgressions. If Lamech did not refuse to confess his sins to his wives, how can we be worthy of pardon if we do not wish to confess ours to the One who knows our hidden faults?" (*Hom. xx in Gen*).

He does not tell us that as Lamech confessed his to his wives, we should do it to men, even though they are called priests, but to the One who sees our most hidden faults, that is GOD. It is this same Father who condemns confession in a more restricted way when he says: "It is not necessary that there be any witness of our confessions; acknowledge your iniquities and let GOD alone hear your confession without anyone's knowing it (*Hom. Arrep.*).

And in another of his works: "I urge and entreat you to confess your sins to GOD. I say not that you reveal them to man; only GOD sees your heart" (*De Incomp. Dei Naturta, Hom. 5*).

One of the things that bothered me about confession was that it was too variable to be of GOD.

This is easy to prove.

While for certain sins one priest will refuse absolution to a penitent, a few steps away, and in the knowledge that it had not been granted in the neighboring confessional, another gives it.

This happened to me in the year 1940. In the Church of St. Genes in Madrid, a confessor whose name I shall not mention refused me absolution, and a half hour later another granted it to me in El Carmen. Because of reservations in the matter of sins, the confessor in one little town cannot absolve from certain sins that the bishop has reserved for himself alone to pardon; but if it is another diocese, he can pardon them! Ninety-nine per cent of the Catholics don't know about these anomalies, since they don't. even know what is a reserved sin and who can reserve them."

GOD cannot leave the forgiveness of sins to the whim of a man, who may fail to act Justly, influenced perhaps by his passions and sympathies.

I can say from my own experience that a great many times, and especially after three or four hours in the confessional, the priest acts in a mechanical way and isn't even aware of what the penitents are telling him. Other times he is distracted, thinking of other things than what he is doing. And in all these cases they say that the church makes up for the lack of attention and the intent of the minister. What need for such a minister there?

Confession is a great danger.

One who has heard many confessions affirms this. In it a woman tells a man the secrets of her intimate life. This man becomes acquainted with the weaknesses and the frailties of that woman, with the quarrels she may have with her husband, with her temptations. I am not saying that all priests make an evil use of confession. But who can assure me that this or that particular one is not one of them? Appearances of saintliness are often deceptive. This isn't a malicious supposition of mine, for the very Book of Canon Law, in Canon 2368 says: "The one who commits the crime of solicitation . . ." So the Catholic Church itself admits that the priest may use the confessional to solicit to do lewd things. It is true that the one who does it has his punishment; but for that the bishop has to know about it and seldom does it come to be known.

Confession is also a danger for adolescent boys and girls because of the indiscreet questions put by the confessor, sometimes with the best of intentions.

This chapter may seem quite strong, but only the one who has lived many hours in the confessional can have any idea of the dangers and evils that can come, and often have come, from this wrong interpretation of the words of the Lord. And that this interpretation of the Catholic Church is erroneous as well as dangerous is proved by the attitude of the Apostles who heard the words of the Lord and by the opinion of the early Christians we have quoted and could quote.

The reader will ask, "How do these quotations agree with those other very abundant ones in patristic literature that recommend penance and ascribe to the bishops absolution and remission of sins?"

Any reader will notice that in such quotations there is no allusion to auricular confession as it is practiced today, for all kinds of sins, but to absolution for re-admission of the penitent into the church, when he had been separated from it for some reason.

It is evident that auricular confession was not practiced by the Apostles or by Christians in general until it was started in certain communities in the seventh century and made obligatory for all the faithful centuries later in the fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215.

On the other hand, it is quite certain that the early churches had an extraordinarily strict discipline compared with that of the churches in our day, especially with the Catholic Church in respect to its laity. At present the Catholic Church scarcely ever uses excommunication, and when it does so it is usually against those who are no longer interested in returning to its fold. It was not so in the early church, where the faithful were often punished with separation from communion for very different kinds of sins. This very fact proves the nonexistence of auricular confession after the fashion of our day with absolution given by a disciple at the moment of the confession.

Those who were excommunicated were always excommunicated for public sins; that is, they had been a scandal to the Christian community to which they belonged. And then they had to perform certain public penances that gave testimony to their repentance, like kneeling in church during certain periods of worship, going out at the time of the communion, and so on.

If the Catholic reader wants to inform himself on this theme through a writer of his own creed, he can consult the *History of the Church* by Fleury.

To the faithful who were excommunicated, the bishop or pastor (both mean the same thing; pastor is a Spanish word and bishop is the Greek word that means pastor) granted reconciliation with the church by declaring the sin pardoned, after the period of penance was passed or was shortened by the good conduct of the penitent and the performing of pious works. It is this kind of absolution to which the early documents refer.

It seems that this procedure, even though a bit extreme, was put into practice when Christianity grew and the clergy acquired more authority.

Yet it is not entirely in disagreement with New Testament doctrine, as can be seen in the case of the excommunication of the incestuous person of Corinth (I Corinthians 5).

Later excommunication was pronounced with greater frequency for many kinds of sins, as the quotations reveal which the author of *Ego te Absolvo* ("I absolve thee") presents when he tries to make confession go back to early times.

But it is evident that these quotations do not refer to absolution but to pardon granted by the church in cases of church discipline.

To present such quotations as if they dealt with auricular confession is to take advantage knowingly of the ignorance of Catholic people in general, concerning the customs of the early church.

It can clearly be seen that absolution and confession in the early church were not frequent and common exercises, as at present in the Catholic Church, but something very special and reserved for those who had been separated from communion. Otherwise one could not understand the fear that Leo the Great expresses that the penitents may die before fulfilling their penance (*Epistle 18*), a sign that these penances were somewhat more serious than the ones that are prescribed today and they were carried out before the people were absolved.

Also in present-day confession the prayers of the people are not asked for the penitent one. But in the writings of the Fathers it is the church that prays, that holds the keys, that pardons, because the sins mentioned are sins that had been committed in some way against the community.

And keep in mind that the church is simply the gathering of the faithful, as the church of Ephesus, and the church of Corinth, that is, the faithful in Ephesus and Corinth, who believed in JESUS as Saviour and had put their faith in Him. These composed the local church.

On the other hand, this same confession and reconciliation, though with a bit less ceremony, is generally practiced today in all Evangelical churches in readmitting members who have been separated from communion. And I can say that it was one of the things that made the greatest impression on me when I attended a church meeting for the first time; I saw brethren who had been out of communion for public sins they had committed asking forgiveness from the community for their bad example and asking to be readmitted to communion. And I saw how the church, after being consulted, granted forgiveness through the lips of the pastor.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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