

Private Confession

A Handbook for Anglicans



The cover

The biblical story of the return of the prodigal son becomes our story as we turn toward our heavenly father in the confession of our sins to receive his loving embrace. Rembrandt's 1636 etching shown here is full of action. The father does not simply wait for the son to come to him but instead races toward the son. The son throws himself at his father's feet. The embrace is full of the passion of a restored relationship and a renewed devotion.

Private Confession

A Handbook for Anglican Laity

Introduction

This little tract is offered to the Glory of God and has been written especially for three groups of people. First, for penitents who know the joy of being unburdened by a spoken confession to God in the presence of a priest and the profound comfort of hearing the absolution of sins pronounced by the priest after a sincere repentance. Second, for those whose hearts even now are being inspired by the Holy Spirit to seek this joy and comfort for the first time. Third, for those who are unclear how it is that their Anglican sisters and brothers in Christ find such comfort and joy in making a private confession and seeking absolution of a priest.

It is important to note that there is nothing original in these pages, nothing which cannot be found in some form or other in the many devotional guides, tracts and books which have been published in the past. For the sake of brevity and ease of reading we have not identified these many sources. This tract is an offering by a simple parish priest for use by parishioners and others who may find here something helpful to their growth into the fullness of Christ.

The confession of sins and the giving of absolution is for the forgiveness of sins and the renewing of a right relationship with God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That saving relationship, which was given to us at Holy Baptism and is strengthened by the regular receiving of Holy Communion, is regularly weakened and severed by sin. Our sin causes the heart of God to yearn for us to experience his forgiveness and Love anew. God has ordained the rite of private confession as the means for many to experience this grace in a thoroughly personal and intimate manner. The private confession of sins leads to the full assurance of God's absolution pronounced lovingly and definitively by his priest.

Even if the regular making of a private confession becomes highly significant to a Christian's spiritual nourishment and growth into the divine life of the love of the Trinity, it is important to note that the confessor does not play the role of spiritual director. The counsel and advice that the confessor gives are specific to the matters contained in the confession. A confessor should not be expected to play the role of giving general spiritual direction. A formal relationship with a spiritual director or spiritual mother or father must be sought if a Christian seeks more general spiritual direction. Private confession and receiving of absolution is precisely and only for the forgiveness of sins and the objective restoration of the penitent to a renewed relationship with God.

If this tract aids a single baptised member of Christ's Body to experience the inexpressible joy and saving reality of the application of the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ to her or his soul, to God be the Glory.

Of your charity, pray for me, a sinner.

A priest of the Diocese of Nova Scotia
Ash Wednesday 2000

How can a priest forgive sins?

The short answer is: he can't. The absolution of the priest is the declaration of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. But this declaration of forgiveness is not general or conditional. The priest declares God's real and actual forgiveness of sins at a particular time for a particular adopted son or daughter of God who has made a sincere repentance.

Only an ordained priest of God's church has the authority to pronounce God's absolution or to withhold it. This ever has been the doctrine of the church, clearly stated by the great church father Chrysostom in the fourth century: "Whatsoever the priest hath entrusted is of God Alone to give—And why do I say priests? Neither Angel nor Archangel can effect any thing as to the things given by God, but the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dispenseth all; yet the priest lendeth his tongue and affordeth his hand" (*Homilies on John*). The priestly absolution is effective precisely and only because it is declaratory! The priest must never be thought of as a mediator or substitute for Christ. This thought is perhaps the most utterly abhorrent and damning notion we could imagine, making the most precious sacrifice of our Lord on the Cross of none effect.

In the Anglican tradition, the priest has responded to a call to the priesthood, knowing that it is nothing more than, but nothing less than, performing the function of a particular ministry within the Body of Christ which includes being available to God's people for the specific functions of baptising, celebrating Holy Communion, speaking the absolution or remission of sins, and preaching. The entire content of the wonderful Exhortation on pp. 648-651 of *The Book of Common Prayer* expresses the nature of the Christian priesthood beautifully.

But the specific notion of a Christian's privilege to seek out a priest to make a sincere confession, hear the words of absolution and receive spiritual counsel and advice is made most clear in the concluding

paragraph of the first Communion Exhortation on page 91 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

“And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy and with a quiet conscience, therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word, he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with spiritual counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and the avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.”

Does this ministry of comfort and counsel pertain only to priests and bishops? No. Any Christian can assure another of Christ's promise of forgiveness for the penitent. This is a ministry we should all practise to one another, comforting one another with the sweet Good News of Jesus Christ. The Medieval Church in the West did not sufficiently recognize this fact, and therefore the Prayer Book was revised in 1552 in a wonderful way which frees Anglican Christians from the rigid and institutionalized control of the spiritual life which characterized the worst of the latter middle ages. In fact, the Orthodox Church in the East has always acknowledged spiritual fathers and mothers who are inspiring and brilliant guides for Christian souls in their spiritual journeys to God. These spiritual mothers and fathers who possess inspired gifts of prophetic and spiritual discernment are often not ordained priests.

But only a priest or bishop can declare the precise words of absolution, even though nothing objective is added to a sincere confession by this priestly absolution. The absolution is simply the declaration of what is true and already effected by any sincere confession, but it declares the forgiveness of Jesus Christ to a particular person at a particular time. The Christian priest has been set apart by public ordination so that everyone may know that he does not speak for himself when he declares the words

of absolution, but that he acts simply as a mouthpiece of his Lord, much like the priest's function in the saying of the Words of Institution (This is my body . . . This is my blood . . .) in the Holy Communion.

But we must say a bit more about the Biblical, Reformed Christian and Prayer Book teachings.

Private confession and priestly absolution: What the Bible teaches

First of all, the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus has the authority and mission to forgive sins: “Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home” (Mark 2:8-11).

Second, we are in need of forgiveness: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9).

Third, Jesus teaches that his church (spoken of as the Body of Christ later in the New Testament) has His authority: “And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock [i.e. the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16: 18-19).

Fourth, Jesus makes provision for people to experience the face-to-face and effectual personal forgiveness of God in and through his Church. This is recorded in a profoundly moving Scripture passage in the

twentieth chapter of John's Gospel. Jesus had risen from the dead with the wounds of human sinfulness still visible in his hands and his side. The disciples were forced to contemplate the effects of their own sinful actions: “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, He shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:19-24). Jesus thus communicates his authority to confer personally and concretely God's forgiveness upon every baptised Christian who repents and has faith in the Gospel. This is how the Anglican Church has received God's Word since the time of the Reformation, and this authority to pronounce the forgiveness of sins has been passed on explicitly in every ordination of a priest since the sixteenth century.

Private confession and priestly absolution: What the reformed Christian tradition teaches

But isn't private confession one of those abuses of the Medieval Church that was abolished at the time of the Reformation of the Church in the sixteenth century? Not at all. On the one hand, the Reformers were keen to point out the abuses of private confession as it had developed in the later Middle Ages. John Calvin writes: “the people were possessed with this most pernicious superstition: that as soon as they had disburdened themselves of their sins, by pouring them into the ear of a priest, they were completely freed from guilt. This opinion many abused by a more unrestrained indulgence in sin, while even those who were more influenced by the fear of God paid greater regard to the priest than to Christ (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*). On the other hand, Calvin did not disapprove of the practice of private confession itself. He

says, “Let every believer, therefore, remember that if in private he is so agonized and afflicted by a sense of his sins that he cannot obtain relief without the help of others, it is his duty not to neglect the remedy which God provides for him, namely, to have relief by a private confession to his own pastor Should this individual lay open the secret wound of his soul to his pastor, and hear these words of the Gospel specially addressed to him, ‘Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee’ (Matthew 9:2), his mind will feel secure, and escape from the trepidation with which it was previously agitated.” Luther wrote in the *Babylonish Captivity* (1520) that “the secret (private) confession . . . is in my opinion highly satisfactory and useful or even necessary.” In Luther’s *Short Catechism* there is an instruction on confession for simple folk: “I, a poor sinner, confess myself guilty of all sins before God” The confessor is instructed to absolve the penitent with the words, “‘Dost thou believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?’ *Answer*: ‘Yes, reverend sir.’ Then let him say: ‘As thou believest, so be it unto thee. And by command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive thee thy sins, in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen. Go in peace.’”

Private confession and priestly absolution: What the Anglican Prayer Book tradition teaches

In the first English *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), authority given by Christ to his disciples is the one that the successors of the Apostles, the Bishops, hand on when they ordain Priests: “Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” In that same first English *Book of Common Prayer* (1549), the form of absolution in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick is also used ‘in all pryuate confessions,’ viz. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And

by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

The Christian priest has been set apart by specific priestly vocation and obligation of shepherding always to be available to His people to hear their confessions and declare the remission of sins. Christian folk have a right to hear a Christian priest boldly declare the forgiveness of Jesus Christ in the words of absolution when they sincerely repent and desire such assurance of the promises of the Gospel. This is the Prayer Book position, consistent with Scripture, the early Church, the Reformation fathers and the Reformed Prayer Book tradition.

What is contrition?

Contrition is a sincere and heartfelt sorrow for the sins which we have committed. It is to recognize that the nature of sin is to cut us off from our relationship with God because we have betrayed the One who loves us. God continues to love us all the same, but in our sin we have chosen to exclude him from our life. We must hate that sin which has caused our relationship with our loving and compassionate God and his world to be wounded and severed. Contrition includes a firm resolution not to commit the sin again. Contrition is a gift and a grace to be sought from the Holy Spirit. E. B. Pusey (nineteenth-century tractarian) says of the gift and grace of contrition: “deep contrition is, for the most part, slowly and deeply worked into the soul, deepening with deepening grace.” One of the greatest benefits of private confession is the gift of tears and weeping for one’s sins. Although every Christian should yearn for this gift, it seems especially to be true that those who engage in a thorough exercise of self-examination before a private confession experience the Christian blessing of weeping for one’s sins. We recall the second Beatitude of our Lord Jesus Christ: “Blessed—that is, happy—are those who weep.” From the earliest Christian centuries, unhappiness was seen to be the lot of those with dry eyes and a cold heart. Happiness is perpetual repentance with a contrite heart! Strange words for our present culture—or any secular culture for that matter! In our Lenten Collect

(BCP pg 138), we do not pray that God will take away or heal our ‘contrite hearts,’ but that he would give us contrite hearts! The new hearts we seek are contrite hearts. “Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness”

The Bible is full of accounts of the liberating power of repentance. The hearers of Saint Peter were ‘cut to the heart’ at the realization that they had crucified the Lord (Acts 2:37). Repentance is that contrition of the heart, the weeping for one’s sins, which is that moment of grace when the truth about ourselves and God strikes us, pierces the heart, and makes a new life possible. Symeon, the New Theologian (tenth century), taught that ‘tears of contrition’ are the clearest possible sign of ‘grace.’ Another early Father (Isaac of Ninevah in the seventh century) has said, “Let us then ask insistently that Our Lord give the gift of tears to us. If we receive this gift, more excellent than any other, we will attain to purity through tears.”

Pray that you may know that you are God’s beloved and you will be granted this gift of deep contrition. Pray for the joy and happiness reserved for those disciples of Jesus Christ who are granted this gift of “the ineffable sweetness of tears” because this gift comes only to those who experience the absolute and passionate love that God in Christ has for them.

What is penance?

Penance need not always be given, although some confessors will be consistent in giving penance. Penance is not a chastisement. The purpose of penance is to help place the absolved Christian in a position in which he/she is better able to resist temptation and know the joys of restored fellowship with God. The confessor will not issue a penance on the basis of the gravity of the sins confessed (we must avoid any notion of making ‘satisfaction’ for our sins), but rather the penance given will be determined by what will best console and strengthen the absolved for his ongoing Christian journey. Penance is not about the past, but about the future participation in the divine life and fellowship. Penance sometimes will have to do with a sincere attempt to reconcile and make restitution toward another whom you have wronged by your sin.

Should one always expect ‘counsel’ as well as ‘absolution’?

No. The giving of counsel is not an essential feature of private confession. As indicated in the introduction, the confessor’s role is not that of the penitent’s spiritual director, father or mother. Some will choose to have their confessor and spiritual director be the same priest, while others find it more spiritually helpful to separate these roles. The role of a spiritual father or mother is different from that of confessor or spiritual director and, like that of spiritual director, need not be performed by a priest at all. When the confessor sees the need or opportunity for either penance or counsel, he will give it of his own accord. On the other hand, the penitent always has a right to ask for counsel pertaining to any aspect of his or her confession.

How to prepare for your first private confession

If it is possible, a meeting with your confessor several weeks in advance of your first confession is very important. He will recommend a method or exercise by which you will systematically make your preparation and, by God's Holy Spirit, recall your sins. He will most likely give you a detailed listing of categories (sometimes based on the ten commandments or on the seven deadly sins) which will assist you in your thorough self-examination of how you have sinned in will, word or deed. A must for a first confession is to make a written account of the sins which the Holy Spirit brings to your remembrance. As you take the weeks and days to prepare for that first full confession, take copious notes of whatever comes to you—they can be organized in the later stage of your preparations. At the preliminary meeting with your confessor, he will also clarify the difference between a sin and a temptation (sins and not temptations are to be confessed, but many people confuse the two). Every confessor has his own manner, and he will discuss what you should expect from him regarding the giving of counsel and penance. Finally, he will review how the furniture will be set up and the precise structure and form which the confession will take so that you will be comfortable in knowing exactly what will happen. It is helpful even if he discusses with you in advance what he and you will do at the conclusion of the confession and the giving of absolution. Some confessors insist on departing the location immediately in order to leave the penitent alone in quiet meditation to give thanks for God's great goodness and mercy. If you are not expecting to be left alone in the chapel or church, you may be offended by what might seem to be cold and unfriendly behaviour. Other confessors are more than willing to converse and be friendly after the absolution, demonstrating the reconciliation which has been experienced.

You must know that in your preparatory self-examination, the Holy Spirit will help call things to your remembrance, but you must not be concerned that you fail to recall all your sins. Just because you have not recalled every one of your sins does not mean that you have made a partial confession only. There is no such thing as a sincere partial

confession, nor a partial absolution. Our form of absolution makes it clear that it does not forgive a penitent only for those sins which she/he remembered (this was the intention of the absolution used in the church before the first *Book of Common Prayer* significantly revised the medieval form). Rather, the absolution is unlimited: "By the authority committed unto me I absolve thee from *all* thy sins." Our Lord Jesus Christ did not say, "Whatsoever sin ye remit, it is remitted," but rather "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted." It is the person who is forgiven; the sin is nothing in itself. Of course this means that the first confession, like every subsequent confession, must be as complete as possible. If there is any sin whatsoever that you feel you cannot confess, then you must not come to confession at all until God grants you the grace to make a complete and unreserved confession. God's love is broader and deeper than any sin you could ever commit—but you must have sufficient trust in his Love to confess every one of your sins, holding none back. The forgetting of sins is no impediment to a full absolution and restored fellowship with God and neighbour, but what must be avoided is a willful and knowing concealment of any sin of which you are aware.

The confessor is utterly bound to confidentiality and will never reveal under any circumstance what has been confessed. The confessor may not even use what has been confessed in later discussions and spiritual direction sessions with the penitent. It is important to know that if you wish to discuss with the confessor at a later date any matter which you have revealed in the confession, you must retell any part of that matter that you wish the priest (who has been your confessor) to consider and discuss with you.

Conclusion

Perhaps too much of this tract has focused on the Biblical, traditional and Anglican understanding of private confession and priestly absolution, whereas our intention and desire would be to indicate how it might be that, in the words of former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, “A first confession may be an occasion of vivid realization of the Cross and a decisive turning-point in spiritual depth. Subsequent confessions in the early years can have a like vividness.” The author prays sincerely that Christians today might rediscover the blessed tradition of the Church Fathers, who recognized the grace of contrition and the gift of tears as an important part of the Christian’s transfiguration into the likeness of Christ. Many Anglicans seem unaware of the possibility that the discipline of private confession can be a significant means of sanctifying grace. In the nineteenth century, E. B. Pusey spoke of a regular making of private confession as a means of grace whereby the conscience grew “more delicate, more truthful, more alive to the truth; more real, more simple, more earnest, more exact.”

Around the same time as Pusey spoke these words, a small tract on private confession called *The Ministry of Consolation* was published in Lent 1854 in the Church of England. We adopt its final words as our own:

“As we commenced so we conclude—God grant that by the LOVE OF CHRIST to all unto whom it is given, to accept or to refuse this blessed Ministry of Consolation, that they may know it,—alike in the brief probation of this life, in the hour of death, and in the day of judgement, only in its one rich attribute of pardoning Love and Mercy.”

GLORY TO GOD IN EVERYTHING.