

THE THEOLOGY OF DEVOTIONAL CONFESSION

As early as 1934 Karl Rahner studied the question of the inner meaning of devotional confession and published his reflections in *Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik*.¹ In 1957 this article was exhumed and reprinted in the third volume of his *Schriften*.² It has been translated into Spanish³ and French⁴ but has not yet appeared in English. We will begin with a summary of this article.

The question Rahner puts is not whether sacramental confession of venial sins is possible. That question is already settled.⁵ Nor is it a question of the usefulness of frequent devotional confession. Rahner simply supposes this because of the approval and encouragement given it by the Church.⁶

The question is: what is the intrinsic meaning of frequent devotional confession? In other words, what is the proper place that it occupies in the spiritual life? How does it fit into the total structure of the spiritual life meaningfully and harmoniously? What Rahner is looking for is not evidence that frequent confession is necessary for the preservation or growth of the spiritual life, since, he says, a

¹ "Vom Sinn der häufigen Andachtsbeicht," *ZAM* 9 (1934), 323-336.

² *Schriften zur Theologie* III, 221-225.

³ "Sobre el Sentido de la Confesion Frecuente por Devocion," *Escritos de Teologia* III, 205-218.

⁴ "Quell est le Sens de la Confession Fréquente de Dévotion," *Éléments de théologie spirituelle*, 145-160.

⁵ Cf. DS 1458, 1680, 1707, 2639; CJC 902. That mortal sins already forgiven through the sacrament of penance are sufficient matter for repeated absolution is also settled. Cf. DS 880 and CCJ 902. Devotional confession of these sins presents the same problem as confession of venial sins and so needs no special consideration.

⁶ The usefulness of frequent devotional confession is taught by Benedict XI (*Inter cunctas*), the Council of Trent (sess. 14, cap. 5), Pius VI (*Auctorem fidei*), Pius XII (*Mystici Corporis*, and *Mediator Dei*), and the Second Vatican Council (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and *Christus Dominus*); it is presumed in the official approval of the rules of religious communities and in the prescriptions of canon law; and it is confirmed by the unanimous agreement of theologians. Rahner notes that the fact that the practice of devotional confession did not exist in the Church for a long time does not negate its value, since the Body of Christ following the Spirit grows and develops in history.

necessity cannot be demonstrated. It will be enough simply to come up with a reason which gives devotional confession special meaning among the various ascetical practices of the Christian life.

Rahner groups the values which are had in devotional confession under three headings: 1) spiritual direction, 2) forgiveness of sins, and 3) increase of grace. Certainly, he says, these things are gained in frequent confession. But it is doubtful that they explain sufficiently the peculiar function of such confessions in the spiritual life.

Spiritual direction certainly can have an important place in a good devotional confession, and there is no reason to regret that the two are not separated. But this is only an extrinsic reason for devotional confession, not its intrinsic meaning and justification. For spiritual direction can be had outside and independent of confession; in fact, sufficient spiritual direction often cannot be given in confession. What is more, if this value is exaggerated there is danger of overlooking the sacramental character of penance, seeing it primarily as an occasion of psychological or spiritual counselling. Accordingly, although the utility or necessity of spiritual direction establishes its function in the spiritual life, it does not found a sacramental event.

Similarly, the pardon of sins in itself is not the *raison d'être* of frequent confession, because the venial sins of a man in the state of grace are already forgiven by the imperfect contrition which is required as the necessary disposition for receiving the effect of the sacrament.⁷ Furthermore, venial sins are forgiven by many other means. Every supernatural act of a just man opposed to a certain venial sin is virtually a repentance of that sin and results in its pardon. What is more, the Council of Trent teaches that the Eucharist frees us from our "daily sins." In fact, it seems that it is the Eucharist, a sacrament of the living, rather than penance, a sacrament of the dead, which is aimed at overcoming those sins which retard rather than kill the supernatural life of grace. Therefore, it

⁷ Rahner points out that even if one holds with some theologians that attrition remits venial sin apart from the sacrament only if it is of a certain intensity or proceeds from motivation of a certain degree of perfection, one still has not avoided the problem. For frequent confession, he says, presupposes an ardent love of God, desire of growing in the spiritual life, and aversion from sin, so that one can presume even in this theory that in practically all instances the attrition will be sufficient for the pardon of venial sins.

seems that devotional confession provides in all cases the sacramental pardon of venial sins already forgiven, and one cannot be motivated to receive an optional sacrament by an effect which is already had without it. For these reasons it is difficult to maintain that pardon of sins as such is sufficient to explain the proper function of devotional confession in the whole life of grace.

The same must be said about the increase of grace. True, devotional confession increases grace, but so do all the other sacraments. And it is precisely because an increase of grace is a common effect of all the sacraments that it is inadequate to explain the special role of devotional confession in the spiritual life.

What Rahner is after is that characteristic of devotional confession which gives it its special identity and function among all the other practices of the spiritual life. That special characteristic, he argues, must result from the nature of confession as an act of forgiving sins directly and sacramentally. Therefore, he submits, the proper and distinctive characteristic of devotional confession is not mere pardon of sin but sacramental pardon, that is, forgiveness of sin precisely through a sacrament whose primary and proper purpose is forgiveness of sin.

But what does sacramental pardon add to mere pardon? Sacramentality brings three things. One is a clear manifestation of the gratuity and supernaturalness of divine forgiveness. A man who in the privacy of his room examines his conscience and elicits acts of sorrow is forgiven by God. But sacramental confession and the reception of absolution dramatically and visibly demonstrate the truth about all forgiveness—that man's acts of repentance are in reality the work of God and that it is not the good repentant sinner who effects the pardon of sin but the free God of grace.

Another thing that the sacrament adds is a visible manifestation that the grace of forgiveness, like all grace, is a free, unique, historical break-in of God. Forgiveness is not given to man by a transcendent, always merciful God according to some general, univocal, and necessary law. It is the free action of God showing mercy to whom he will show mercy, unpredictable, incalculable, unique, and historical. This truth is visibly shown and accentuated in the sacramental event.

Sacramental confession also signifies and effects not only pardon

by God but also pardon by the Church.⁸ Since even venial sin is an offense against the Church, devotional confession has a special meaning in that it is a visible sign of a man's reconciliation and deepening communion with the visible Body of Christ.

Therefore, the special characteristic of devotional confession, which gives it its own identity and special function among all the other ascetical practices, is that it directly effects the sacramental pardon of venial sins. This differs from the pardon effected through other sacraments or extrasacramentally because it manifests in a clear and dramatic way that all repentance and forgiveness is the free action of God in man, that God's grace touches man personally and historically, and that the repentant sinner is reconciled with the Church which also has been harmed by his sin.⁹

From this the value of frequent confession is clear. But exactly how frequent cannot be decided in mathematical terms. Rahner suggests that the present practice of the Church is a good general norm. But in a particular case the judgment will have to be made in light of the needs and circumstances of the individual soul.¹⁰

⁸ In another place ("Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance," *Theological Investigations* II, 136-174; cf. esp. 170-171) Rahner develops this notion at length and describes reconciliation with the Church as the *res et sacramentum* and reconciliation with God as the *res sacramenti*. In this he follows B. F. Xiberta, O. Carm., *Clavis ecclesiae: De Ordine absolutionis sacramentalis ad reconciliationem cum ecclesia*; Rome, 1922.

⁹ Even extrasacramental forgiveness, according to Rahner, is ordered to sacramental pardon, for the sinner's subjective acts of repentance are the matter of the sacrament and are elevated by the sacramental absolution so as to form part of the total sacramental sign. Here the subjective acts (*opus operantis*) reach their climax and a new fulfillment of their own intensity not only because of their new expression but because of the grace of the sacrament (*opus operatum*). Cf. "Personal and Sacramental Piety," *Theological Investigations* II, 109-133.

¹⁰ In an article in the May, 1966 issue of *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* entitled "Frequent Devotional Confession" (pp. 650-658) Ronald E. Modras argues that the actual increase of grace received in a sacramental confession is contingent upon an act of sorrow which is more intense than the one elicited in the previous conversion; and therefore he asks: how many people are capable of having a change of heart or intensifying such a change once a week or even once a month? Commenting on this Richard McCormick, S.J., *Theological Studies*, 27 (1966), 625-626 suggests a caution about the use of the word *intense*: the intensity of our acts cannot be measured by our reflex conscious experience of their intensity, much less by our sensible feeling; for our

Reflecting on Rahner's ideas, Brian Kelly, C.S.Sp., thinks that Rahner has circled around and above the real problem but has not remained at the level of the point under discussion.¹¹ This issue, according to Kelly, is simply this: how can there be further forgiveness in the confession of devotion of what has been already forgiven?

The answer to this, Kelly suggests, lies in a less judicial understanding of forgiveness. Sacramental forgiveness is not merely a legal statement of non-imputation or de-imputation, which once authentically and validly made makes any further restatement superfluous. Sacramental forgiveness is rather an interior refashioning of a person by which he is set apart from sin both psychologically and ontologically.

The subjective acts of repentance by which a sinner prepares for absolution are the psychological beginnings of this process of withdrawal from sin. The sacramental grace imparted in confession effects an ontological reversal of sin: it makes the sinner more unlike what he was when he sinned and more united to God from whom his sin created a distance. This ontological reversal of sin generally results in renewed penitential acts and so in a fresh psychological turning to God and away from sin.

Forgiveness of sin, therefore, means not merely making a judicial statement about the sinner; it means changing him sacramentally. This process of ontological and psychological conversion from sin to God can go on indefinitely. And this is the proper aim and work of frequent confessions of devotion.

Kelly criticizes Rahner's solution on two counts. First, Rahner fails to give us the specific key to an understanding of confession when he says that it expresses the fact that forgiveness comes from a God who meets us not in a purely spiritual and timeless communion but through historical events. For this is characteristic of the whole

profound personal orientation toward God involves a depth of our person beyond the grasp of our reflex consciousness; but to question a person's ability to intensify his acts of repentance weekly or monthly seems to presume that the intensity of our acts can be measured in our reflex awareness of them. Besides, McCormick notes, perhaps a series of equally intense acts can be the normal prelude and disposition to greater intensity, for no growth is discontinuous.

¹¹ "The Confession of Devotion," *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, 33 (1966), 84-90.

Christian approach to God and therefore is not the special and proper characteristic of penance.

What Kelly seems to miss here is this: although it is a universal truth that God always meets man with his grace in an historical way, the clear manifestation or faith-confession of this truth in a devotional confession does serve to set off sacramental pardon of sins received in confession from the pardon granted through other means, and so it does specify and identify a proper function of devotional confession.

Kelly's other criticism of Rahner's solution is that the faith-confession that God's forgiveness is the free work of God in man and not man's work is not the specific characteristic of devotional confession but is true of the sacrament of the penance in general. Kelly makes the same comment about reconciliation with the Church: admittedly, this return to the visible Church is not evident in an interior act of sorrow as it is in sacramental confession. But this point concerns the sacrament in general rather than the specific problem of the confession of devotion.

This criticism again seems to mistake the question. For the point Rahner wants to make is that the visible manifestation of these two facts, while primarily had in the sacramental forgiveness of grave sins, is also had at least in an analogous way in the confession of devotion; and therefore devotional confession of venial sins has a special meaning and role distinct from the role of the other ascetical practices by which venial sins are removed.

Kelly has in fact made valuable contribution to an understanding of the further forgiveness of forgiven sins which occurs in devotional confession. But since Kelly's question, important as it is, is not Rahner's question, it is no surprise that his answer does not contribute to the solution of Rahner's problem. For even when understood not as a legal statement of non-imputation but as an interior refashioning whereby the sinner is ontologically and psychologically set apart from sin, forgiveness of venial sin is not that characteristic of devotional confession which gives it its own special meaning and peculiar identity among all the practices of the spiritual life. For this interior refashioning, we can assume, is what occurs in all forgiveness, whether it is received in a sacramental confession of de-

votion, in the Eucharist, in some other sacrament, or extrasacramentally.

Karl Rahner's explanation of the intrinsic meaning of devotional confession is persuasive and attractive. It makes good theological sense and is in all likelihood true. But there seems to be at least one point of uncertainty. Is it altogether certain that venial sins in practically all instances are already forgiven before a confession of devotion is made? Many theologians hold as probable that the attrition required for remission of venial sin outside the sacrament of penance must be more perfect either in intensity or in motivation than the attrition required for sacramental remission; in fact, they hold as not altogether improbable that if a person has attrition for at least one venial sin the sacrament of penance has the power of remitting all the venial sins confessed as long as the penitent has no actual adherence to these sins and has the intention of receiving the sacramental effects.¹² Hence it seems that these theologians could argue at least with some probability that an *ex opere operato* forgiveness requiring a less perfect disposition of the penitent would serve to identify the proper and distinctive role of devotional confession. At least it is only fair to note that Rahner's solution, reasonable and incisive as it is, does not rule out the possibility of another response to the question he raises.¹³

Finally, it is important to remember in pastoral practice that there are many reasons which justify frequent devotional confession. It does provide a practical means of obtaining spiritual direction; it does increase grace; it does forgive sin (particularly in the sense of an ontological and psychological refashioning and setting apart from sin). It can remove or diminish the debt of temporal punishment (*reatus poenae*) and the impediments that remain from previous sins (*reliquiae peccatorum*); and it gives a title to actual graces to avoid these sins in the future. As Pius XII pointed out,

¹² Cf., e.g., Lercher, *Institutiones Theologiae Dogmaticae* IV/2, pars altera, pp. 215-216, nn. 623-624, and Cappello, *De Poenitentia*, pp. 83-85, nn. 95-96.

¹³ We might note that another point of uncertainty in Rahner's explanation is his notion that reconciliation with the Church is the *res et sacramentum* of the sacrament of penance. For a sometimes penetrating, sometimes trifling criticism of this idea see Clarence McAuliffe, S.J., "Penance and Reconciliation with the Church," *Theological Studies*, 26 (1965), 1-39.

... by it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are countered, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the sacrament itself.¹⁴

These effects do not represent the peculiar characteristic or inner meaning of devotional confession, but they are in fact important effects. They may be in many concrete instances more important than the specific identifying note, and so they should not be neglected as motivation for frequent confession in pastoral practice.

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¹⁴ *The Mystical Body of Christ*, Paulist Press edition, #95. Karl Rahner, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, pp. 87-88, gives these pastoral and ascetical motives:

... with the practice of frequent confession, we examine our conscience better, we are more serious about our sorrow for our sins, we submit ourselves to an external and objective control that is healthy, we receive an admonition that puts a little more pressure on us, and so forth. We should also consider the following: If priests only go to confession when they have mortal sins to confess, then sooner or later lay Christians will imitate them. Eventually, this would mean that everyone who goes to confession, by his very going, publicly declares himself to be guilty of mortal sin. This, then, would be a characterization of the sacrament of penance that, even though it would not be contrary to its nature, still would only mean a reintroduction of the administration of the sacrament of penance that was current in the early Church, and that was found to be unsound from a pastoral point of view. For this practice brought it about that real sinners put off their reconciliation with the Church until the moment of their death.