



'ALL MAY, NONE MUST, SOME SHOULD': THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION *otherwise known as the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

For many people 'making your confession' is something only Roman Catholics do. However, Anglicans have always been encouraged to 'make their Confession' to a priest. *The Visitation of the Sick* (Book of Common Prayer 1662) contains the following note: "... the sick person shall be moved to make a special Confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it)..."

The Rite then gives the formula of Absolution:

*'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''*

This is still the formula many priests use when pronouncing Absolution. However, the practise of 'making your confession' fell out of general use after the Reformation and only returned with the 19th century Catholic Revival in the Church of England. Many priests, who realised and sought to explain its benefit, were persecuted and even imprisoned. Yet, gradually, the practice became more common and today is widely available. Although every priest may hear confessions as a consequence of their ordination (see *The Declaration - Ordination of Priests*) not all wish to do so and it is usually necessary for them to obtain the permission of their Bishop if they wish to offer this pastoral ministry on a regular basis.

It is clear that all of us carry the burden of unresolved issues - anger, guilt, sin, etc. Research into human psychology has shown how important it is to be able to deal with these matters. Whilst Confession is *not* the same as therapy, there are connections not least in the matter of needing to vocalise what lies deepest in the heart to another who is bound by rules of confidentiality. It has been observed that many Christians would be helped if they realised they could unload the burdens they carry within the confidentiality of the Sacrament and it has wisely been said that the Anglican attitude to Confession is: '*All may, none must, some should*'.

Evangelicals and Confession

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

"If we're not careful, we fall into cheap grace, we don't pay any specific attention to a lot of the bad things we do. A lot of people get two or three things that they struggle and those are the only sins that they only considered that they have committed. Sin separates us from God ..."

It's good to review what we are doing wrong. If we say that we love Jesus but we want to do things that separate us from him then once again we're lying and the truth isn't in us." (Prof. John Mark Reynolds: 'The Christian Post'. Feb 2011)

Some Christians are concerned about the notion of confessing to a priest maintaining that only Christ, not the priest, has the power to absolve us. However the priest only declares the reconciliation that Christ attains for us: it is not the *priest's* absolution, nor any power s/he might have that secures forgiveness and reconciliation for us. While it is true that the Sacrament may be celebrated only by an ordained priest its power does not belong to them. The priest is "necessary" to the sacrament only as officiant, not as the person with the power, in and of himself, to forgive or absolve. That power is Christ's and Christ's only (see John 20:22/23).

Archbishop Justin Welby, whose background is as an Evangelical, has said: *"It is enormously powerful and hideously painful when (Confession) is done properly ... it's really horrible when you go to see your confessor – I doubt you wake up in the morning and think, this is going to be a bunch of laughs. It's really uncomfortable. But through it God releases forgiveness and absolution and a sense of cleansing."*¹

Whilst many believe they don't need to 'make their confession' nonetheless, we *all* carry a burden of sin which needs dealing with. As John Newton observed: *"We can easily manage if we will only take, each day, the burden appointed to it. But the load will be too heavy for us if we carry yesterday's burden over again today, and then add the burden of the morrow before we are required to bear it."*

Confession and Conversion of the Heart

This Sacrament recognises our need to practice 'continuous conversion' of the heart. *"We have to be continuously converted all the days of our lives, continually to turn to God as children."*² And as God's children the centre of our being – the heart – needs to be constantly re-focussed into Christ: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* Our Faith is all about that gentle re-ordering of the whole of our being in Christ and this process will reveal our need to be freed from those influences that draw the heart of who we are from God and His Reign. *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt.18:3). This command is less about being barred from that Kingdom as our ability to enter it. Through the use of this Sacrament we open our hearts to the Beatitudes, ask that our failings be forgiven and acknowledge our need to be converted to the Reign of God. To confess our sins to God is not to admit to God anything God doesn't already know but it admits to us what *we* need to know and to have the slate wiped clean.

Companions and Confession

Those seeking to live out the charism of the Association will realise their need of this 'continuous conversion' and seek the means whereby they can re-focus their lives. It is not *necessary* for Companions to make their Confession but, in seeking to enable members (Companions) to: *'nurture a 'new heart', the heart of Christ; to enable continuous conversion in the hearts of members.'* (Purpose of the Association), the Sacrament is a traditional means of grace and of renewing the heart – re-focussing our lives. Companions *'look to the Sacrament of Confession (Reconciliation) as a means of cleansing and for renewing their own hearts'* (Charism of the Association). Whilst they recognise the Sacrament as a means of Grace they are not required to use it. But they do seek to be living with that humility which recognises and admits the truth of who we are in God's sight – beloved sinners seeking amendment of life. As S. Augustine said: *'The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.'*³ And, one might add, it is the means whereby we find that peace which Christ offers his disciples.⁴

So in our calling to be disciples of the Compassionate Heart of Jesus Companions will take seriously this call to be open with God about who they are, desiring that God might create in them clean hearts and renew the Spirit within them.

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. (Ps. 51:6-10)*

Notes:

¹ Justin Welby: *Daily Telegraph*. October 9th, 2013

² 'Continuous Conversion': Oswald Chambers. *My Utmost for His Highest*

³ S. Augustine: *Tractates on the Gospel of John*; tractate XII on John 3:6-21, § 13

⁴ 'Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20: 21-23)