

THE SECRET
OF CONFESSION

BOOKS BY
FATHER PAUL O'SULLIVAN, O.P.

HOW TO BE HAPPY—HOW TO BE HOLY

ALL ABOUT THE ANGELS

AN EASY WAY TO BECOME A SAINT

THE HOLY GHOST—OUR GREATEST FRIEND

READ ME OR RUE IT

HOW TO AVOID PURGATORY

THE SECRET OF CONFESSION

Including

The Wonders of Confession

by

Father Paul O'Sullivan, O.P.
(E. D. M.)

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained."

—John 20:23

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*“The writer has conferred with many
experienced confessors,
and all, without exception,
agree that no vice is so gross,
so deep-rooted, so vicious
that it will not yield
to frequent Confession . . .”*

(Page 91)

NUNCIATURE APOSTÓLIGA
EM PORTUGAL

9 April 1943

Dear Father O'Sullivan,

I approve most heartily of your booklet on Confession. It supplies a need much felt, viz., a clear and practical explanation of the strength and consolation which Confession gives to the faithful.

You rightly emphasize the fact that Confession does not only pardon sin but that it efficaciously helps the greatest sinners to sin no more; it gives the weakest strength and consoles the most abandoned, if only they confess frequently.

You touch on points which are little understood, even by many Catholics, and your book will afford most interesting and useful reading, not only to Catholics, but also for those who do not belong to the Church.

Every chapter has an attractive title and grips the attention.

I have no doubt that the book will throw new light on the minds of many regarding the great Sacrament of Confession and exercise a beneficent influence even on non-Catholics.

With best wishes for the success of your book and with my cordial benediction,

✠ P. CIRIACI, *Apostolic Nuncio*

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—Part I—

THE SECRET OF CONFESSION

Including

Confession Was Instituted by Christ
What Protestants Think of Confession
Facts Are Stubborn Arguments
Why Does God Oblige Us to Confess?
All Men Need a Friend
The Choice of a Confessor

Chapter 1

WAS CONFESSION INTRODUCED BY A BISHOP?

At a fashionable reception in the metropolis [of Lisbon], a party of well-known Catholics was gathered together to pass a social evening.

Just as a distinguished foreigner was addressing a group of ladies and gentlemen, a friend of mine entered the room and overheard the following remark:

“Excuse me, Madam,” said the stranger, “I did not exactly say that Confession was bad or evil, nor did I wish to imply that it was useless. I merely said that it was all very well for ladies, who, doubtless, find it very consoling to be able to unburden their consciences to a priest. But we men do not require such consolations!”

The lady thus addressed quickly replied: “And pray, Sir, how can men consider themselves dispensed from a law which was established for all? Don’t men also have souls to save, and are they not, too, obliged to obey the commands of God?”

The stranger continued: “My dear Lady, the idea that Confession was instituted by God is an illusion. It was not God who instituted Confession; it is a

purely human invention. Where do we find mention of it in the first ages of Christianity? If it were of divine origin, of course the obligation to confess would also fall on us. Confession was, as a matter of fact, instituted and introduced first in Germany, in the fourteenth century, by Bishop Fuller." And the stranger supplied, with the utmost effrontery, names of places, dates, and facts entirely fantastic.

On hearing this, the listeners were aghast. Some made attempts to defend the doctrine of the Church, but none of them was sufficiently grounded in his or her religion to be able to refute with authority the falsehoods of the distinguished guest.

On the following day, the friend who had witnessed the above incident called on me and, regretfully admitting his inability to disprove the stranger's statements, asked for full enlightenment on the matter.

Now it seems to me that many Catholics, if they found themselves in like circumstances, would experience the same difficulty. True, they have a certain *vague* knowledge that Confession was instituted by Our Lord and practiced from the earliest times, but were they asked for a proof, they, like the Catholics just mentioned, could not give a reason for their faith. Still less could they explain—if challenged by a Protestant or unbeliever—the sublime beauty, the divine efficacy, the splendid results and the immense consolations of Confession. And least of all could they answer the many difficulties so frequently urged against this great Sacrament.

To supply what we consider a great want, we venture to offer the public the following little work, which while showing that Confession was indeed instituted by Christ, will also show what a source of deep consolation and strength it is to those who understand it. Many Catholics never grasp the true idea of Confession, and some even find it a very painful and disagreeable duty.

Protestants, as a rule, find the idea repugnant, but strange to say, many among them, when once they hear it explained, feel a positive need of it, and it not infrequently hastens their entrance into the Catholic Church.

We flatter ourselves that both Catholics and Protestants will read our little book with keen interest and derive not a little profit from its perusal. It is popular in style and stresses several points of importance. The method is simple but attractive, and the reader becomes so engrossed that he is reluctant to put the book down until he has read the last page.

One of the special features of the little work is that it shows what an infinite source of consolation and help Confession is to the sorrowful and weak and what a powerful means it is of snatching boys and girls from the brink of some hidden danger. It also proves that, far from robbing a man of his manliness—as a distinguished Protestant statesman has rashly asserted—auricular* Confession makes a man a brave soldier, a loyal citizen and a trusty friend.

* The term “auricular” refers to Confession made privately and “heard” by a priest.—*Editor*, 1992.

Chapter 2

CONFESSION WAS INSTITUTED BY CHRIST

The Son of God came on earth to save man. From what? Clearly from sin and its consequences. All Christ did when on earth—the sublime lessons He taught, the admirable doctrine which He bequeathed us, the Sacraments He instituted, the miracles He worked, the law He promulgated, His precepts and counsels—*all* were destined for the great end of saving man from sin.

The 33 years Our Lord passed with us here below, His cruel sufferings, the Precious Blood He shed, and His death on Calvary had for their one great aim to purge the world of sin. Had He not achieved that end, His mission would have been a failure.

It was for this object that He came. He loved sinners, lived with them and called them to Himself. One of them, **Peter**, a weak and sinful man, He made the head of His Church. **Paul**, a fierce and relentless persecutor, He made the Apostle of the Gentiles and a “vessel of election.” **Magdalen**, an erring, sinful woman, the scandal of the city in which she lived, He chose for His special friend, made her a model for penitents, and eventually asso-

ciated her with His Immaculate Mother.

If Our Lord's acts were not sufficient to clear away doubts on the subject, let us listen to His express declaration: "I am not come to call the just, but sinners." (*Matt.* 9:13).

Now, if Christ has given to His Church the power to continue His mission for all time, and guaranteed it His fullest protection—"Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (*Matt.* 28:20), "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (*Matt.* 16:18)—it would be, indeed, a matter of surprise if He had not given to that Church an excellent and supreme remedy against sin, since He had come on earth expressly for this end, moved thereto by infinite pity, mercy, goodness and love.

Surely no one will doubt Our Lord's power to achieve what He so ardently desired, and still less call into question His boundless love and generosity. That omnipotent Power which drew the vast universe from nothing by a single word could find no difficulty in raising up His weak ones, forgiving them and confirming them in the path of justice. That same love and generosity which led Him to lay down His life in the midst of terrible torments would surely do all it could for those for whom He had died.

The means—the remedy Our Lord left against sin—is Confession, in which the sinner is not only pardoned of his guilt, but (mark it well, Dear Reader) receives strength and power to avoid sin for the future.

He says to each penitent who goes to Him in this

Sacrament what He said long ago to the sinful woman: "Thy sins are forgiven thee, go in peace and sin no more." Not only does He *bid* penitents sin no more, but He gives them the *strength* and the *will* to sin no more.

HISTORY SPEAKS

All Christian peoples, and at all times, have held that Confession was instituted by Christ. So certain and unshaken was this belief that the Church was never called upon to publish in regard to the doctrine of Confession any of those numerous and dogmatic declarations or carefully worded explanations and definitions which she was obliged to publish regarding many other doctrines which were controverted or denied by heretics at one time or another.

It has frequently happened in the history of the Church that doctrines not yet defined have been freely discussed by theologians of different schools of thought until the moment when the Church thinks well to intervene. Then of course all discussions cease, according to the saying of **St. Augustine**: "Rome has spoken, the case is closed." [*Roma locuta est; causa finita est.*] But with regard to Confession, the opinion of theologians has always been unanimous. Infallible authority has never had to intervene.

WHAT THE HOLY FATHERS SAY

St. Basil writes as follows: “Necessarily our sins must be confessed to those to whom has been committed the dispensation of the mysteries of God. It is written in the Acts of the Apostles: ‘They confessed to the Apostles, by whom also they were baptized.’” (*In Rrg. Brev.*, q. 229, 2, 11, p. 492).

St. Ambrose: “The poison is sin, Confession is the accusation of one’s crime; the poison is iniquity, Confession is the remedy against the relapse. But art thou ashamed? This shame will avail you little at the judgment seat of God. Overcome it at once.”

St. Augustine: “Our merciful God wishes us to confess in this world that we may not be confounded in the other.” (*Hom. XX*).

St. John Chrysostom: “We have reached the end of Lent. We must make a full and accurate Confession of our sins.” (*Hom. XXX*). “To priests is given a power not given to Angels or Archangels, for Jesus says: ‘Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.’”

St. Jerome: “With us the Bishop or priest binds and looses for having heard, as is his duty, the various kinds of sin; he understands who should be bound and who should be loosed.” (*Com. in Mth.*).

Reading the context of these Fathers, it is abundantly clear that they are speaking of auricular Confession [i.e., Confession spoken privately to the priest, who *hears* it].

Thus the doctrine of Confession never raised any controversy. We find no mention of such in history, nor are documents relating to it preserved in libraries or archives, for the simple reason that no doubts ever existed regarding the Divine institution of auricular Confession.