

On the Duty of Priests in the Confessional IV

#20: “Wherefore, he should strive so far as possible to enjoin as penances practices which are opposed to the sins confessed, for example, almsgiving in the case of the avaricious, fasting or other mortifications of the flesh for the dissolute, acts of humility for the proud, exercises of piety for the lax. In the case of persons who come to confession irregularly or very seldom as well as such who fall back readily into sin, it will be most advantageous to counsel frequent confession, about once a month or on occasions of special feast days. Likewise he will advise them to communicate that often, if this is practicable.”

- The confessor must also be cognizant of the fact that there is a danger of the penitent not making his penance if it is difficult to remember, or if it takes a considerable amount of time to perform. It is usually best to give the penitent something which he can perform quickly and completely.

#21: “A confessor must not enjoin a penance which would be remunerative to himself, neither may he exact nor accept anything at all from the penitents in return for his services.”

- A priest can accept a stipend for celebrating Holy Mass for a particular intention, or for what is called a “stole fee,” i.e., his services at a wedding, funeral or a baptism. The sacraments or services are planned and agreed to and even performed, before he accepts the gift. At no time can he agree to these services depending on the stipend. But at no time may he accept any fee for his services in the confessional.

#22: He must not impose a public penance for sins that are secret, no matter what their enormity.”

- The problem with public penances is that they can reveal what was confessed. For example, if a sin of schism was confessed, then the priest may not impose a public renunciation of the schism, via a newspaper.

#23: “The priest must take great pains to decide in which instances absolution should be given, denied, or deferred, lest he absolve such as are indisposed for this benefit— persons, for example, who give no indication of contrition, who refuse to put an end to hatred and enmity, to make restitution when they are able, to give up an approximate occasion of sin, or in any other way refuse to forsake their sins and amend their life. To this class belong also such persons who have given public scandal, unless they make public satisfaction and remove the scandal. Moreover, he cannot absolve any whose sins are reserved to higher authorities.”

- This is one of the most trying aspects of hearing confessions. To deny absolution to a penitent is a very serious act, and it will mean a sleepless night for the priest, since he must beg God to obtain the grace for the penitent to renounce his hardness of heart.
- The priest will try to work with the penitent in the confession, to at least make an act of attrition. Contrition is manifested by a real desire to do something different in life, to repent. That is why mere bad feeling about a sin is of little or no value. A desire to change is a real manifestation of contrition. Actions speak louder than words (or feel-

ings). Attrition is the condition of soul where a poor sinner at least wishes that they were sorry for a sin. This suffices for absolution. If the priest cannot help the penitent to at least wish they were sorry, then he must deny absolution, but always making sure that the penitent knows that he can contact the priest any time (day or night), to confess again, only this time with contrition or at least attrition.

#24: “But if anyone who is in danger of death goes to confession, he must be absolved from all sins and censures, regardless of how they are reserved, for in this case every instance of reserved sin becomes void. Yet whenever possible he should first make satisfaction, if any is required of him. And if later he recovers, and there is any reason why he would normally have had to seek absolution from higher authority, he must have recourse to this authority as soon as possible, and be ready to do whatever is required.”

- “Every instance” means just that. Even a direct sin of sacrilege against the Holy Eucharist can be absolved in danger of death, which is normally reserved to the Holy See. But if the sick penitent recovers, then he must have recourse to the Holy See and go through the normal channels in order to have the excommunication lifted.

#25: “If a sick person while he is confessing or even before he begins should happen to lose the power of speech, the priest should endeavor to ascertain the penitent’s sins by means of nods and signs, in so far as he is able. And having ascertained them either in a general way or in detail, the party is to be absolved, whether he gave evidence directly or through another that he was desirous of confessing.”

- Though this is rare, a third party can be put under the seal of confession, for the purposes of translation, if the priest and penitent do not have a common language.

#26: “Furthermore, the priest should remember that one may not impose a heavy or onerous penance on the sick. At most he may simply indicate the type of penance which they could fulfill at an opportune time, should they get well. In the meantime, the priest may enjoin a type of prayer or light satisfaction suitable to the condition of the sick person, and after the latter has accepted it he should be absolved, as the case requires.