

On the Duty of Priests in the Confessional III

#15: “The penitent says at least, ‘I confess to almighty God and to you, father...’ Next he confesses his sins in detail, being aided whenever necessary by the priest. The latter is not to reprove the one confessing until the enumeration of sins is completed, nor is he to interrupt with questions, unless this becomes necessary for fuller understanding.

- By beginning with the phrase, “I confess to almighty God...” the penitent has a good reminder of what is happening in the Sacrament of Penance, namely confessing one’s sins to God.
- The priest should remain quiet until the penitent is finished. This helps the courage necessary to confess sins in their entirety, so that the false shame which the devil wishes the penitent to have can be resisted.
- Sometimes however, if the priest cannot hear the sins, or if he thinks the penitent needs a little encouragement, or to be put at his ease, or if priest does not understand what the penitent says, then he may interrupt. But otherwise, he should remain quiet, and focus on listening to the penitent.
- It is important for the penitent to let the priest know when he is finished with his confession. The old formula for this is, “...and I ask pardon and absolution from you, my spiritual father, should you so judge me worthy.”

#16: “If the penitent does not mention the number, species, and circumstances of sins which require such explanation, the priest shall prudently question him.”

- For a “full and integral confession (a phrase from moral theology), the penitent should try to estimate the number of times a particular sin has been committed. That is a way to express sorrow for all of the sins, and the day will come when we will have to account for all our sins anyway.
- The species of a sin (as opposed to the genus) is important to mention. In other words, it does not help to confess ‘feeling angry,’ but it does help to confess an act of unrighteous anger towards someone. It does not help to confess “being impure,” but it does help to confess a particular act of impurity.
- The circumstances are important as well. If a child confesses theft, but the act was taking a cookie from the kitchen, then the sin is not theft, but disobedience. If one confesses listening to gossip, it is helpful for the priest to know that the penitent was engaged in a good conversation say, but then it suddenly turned into detraction. The missing of Mass on the Sabbath is a sin, but the circumstances can change the morality of the act, so that if the penitent was unable to go to Mass (as in making a prudent judgment with inclement weather), then there is no sin involved.
- But the penitent should refrain from describing the sin in any graphic detail. If more details are needed for the priest to make a judgment about the sin, then he can ask the penitent for them.

18: “But he must take heed lest he discourage anyone by curious or useless questions; let him avoid imprudent questioning of young boys or girls (or others) concerning matters with which they are unacquainted, lest they be scandalized and learn thereby to commit certain sins.

- If for some reason (God forbid) should you confess to a priest who is obviously curious about a sin, or who wants some graphic detail, tell him that such would not be proper. If he insists on hearing about the sin, then just leave the confessional and don’t go back to him.

#18: “Only after he is finished hearing the confessions does he weigh the gravity and number of the sins acknowledged by the penitent, and administer with fatherly consideration the rebuke and admonition that he deems necessary, in keeping with the individual’s condition in life and the gravity of his sins. Moreover, he will attempt in moving words to inspire the penitent with contrition, induce him to amend his life, and suggest remedies against sin.”

- Usually there is no rebuke necessary, since the penitent has already rebuked himself by coming to the sacrament. The priest must keep in mind the culture in which he finds himself. Since we now live in a post-Protestant country, fairly secularized, materialistic, and very transitory, the ability of the faithful to take a hard rebuke is miniscule. Our culture produces very fragile Christians. For these reasons, the priest instead tries to inspire, to help him amend his life, and give practical advice as to how to overcome a particular sin.

#19: “Finally, he shall impose a suitable and salutary satisfaction, as wisdom and prudence will dictate, keeping in mind the status of the penitents and various considerations such as their sex, age, and disposition. But let him take heed lest he impose too light a penance for grievous sins, and by such possible connivance become a party in another’s sins. The confessor must bear in mind that satisfaction is not intended merely as a means for betterment and a remedy of weakness, but also as a chastisement for past sins.”

- Article 19 begins with “finally,” but there are 26 articles to the Instruction.
- In general, the priest tries to give a penance which can be done quickly, and is easy to remember. If the penitent cannot remember what the penance is, they can simply ask the priest to repeat what he said.
- The various considerations are important. Children must be given very simple penances. Men should not be given some penance which appears effete. Mothers with small children should not be given penances which are very time-consuming.
- It may go without saying, but a penance should not be vague. I remember receiving a penance once where the priest told me to be “open.” Huh?