

Scotland's Third Order Franciscan Spiritual Journal



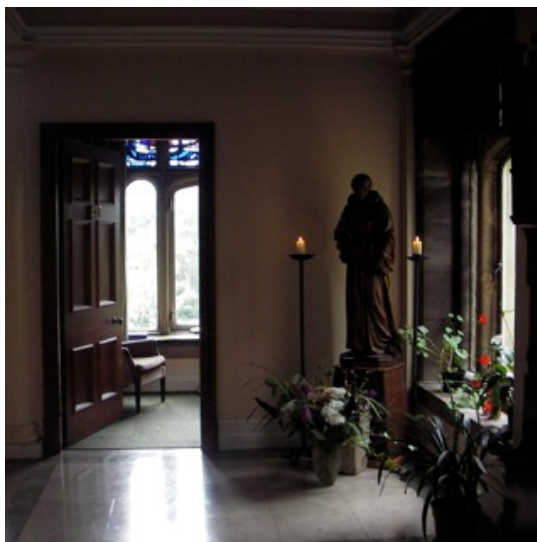
April 10th 2008 - Newsletter 6

Being a Tertiary and the Discipline of 'Confession and Absolution'

Dear Friends of St Francis in the Third Order,

In recent issues of my newsletter, I wrote about 'accountability' and the 'examen'. If you didn't manage to receive these, then do let me know, and I will email or send them to you. In this issue, I want to look at another aspect (if that's what it is!) of the 'accountability' aspect of spirituality - confession.

Now, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's anniversary is this week. He was one of the key Christian communicators and martyrs of the 20th Century. Here was a Lutheran Pastor and theologian whose life, prayer and thinking lead him to the awesome conclusion that he had to choose between being loyal to a conciliatory approach to the political brutalities of the Third Reich or to join those who felt that there was no alternative but to plan for the assassination of Adolf Hitler. The latter choice Bonhoeffer knew would lead him perhaps to being condemned by his Church. Much more than that, he had to risk alienating himself from what became known as the 'Confessing' Church which had begun in the late 1920s and early 1930s to risk publishing its critique of the totalitarian philosophy of the Reich and the consequent racism that eventually led to the Holocaust. However that Confessing Church did not go far enough for Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators. He was discovered and executed in 1945.



The reason I tell this story is to illustrate the true significance of the word 'confession'. To confess is to declare, along with the community of which you are a part, something of supreme significance for the life of that community. For the 'Confessing' Church in Germany, it meant a common proclamation that Jesus was The Man for others, and that Christians as His disciples were to live in Christ for Others in sacrificial love among the destitute and alienated. (Francis would have approved! Come to think of it, he may have been present!) The verb 'to confess', of course, has in English become used (or, perhaps, misused) as meaning 'to own up to' individual sin or misdemeanour. The prefix 'con-', however, is the key. That assumes that 'confession' is happening in the context of some partnership or community - 'con' suggesting 'with'...

Of course, this approach to confession does include the proclamation of forgiveness of sin, sin being the resistance in us to live that Christ-like for others. That is why, to all intents and purposes, there is only one 'sin', as John O'Donohue put it: 'to live the un-lived life'. ('O Lamb of God who takes away the 'sin' - singular - of the world....') Perhaps members of the Third Order might practice the in-depth confession of sin when they meet together, in order to help our Anglican Church to become a 'confessing' Church. I don't just mean that brief 'nod' to confession in our liturgies, but something more extensive and supportive. Perhaps we might look at some possibilities for this in later Newsletters, if that would be helpful. After all, St

Francis of Assisi regarded confession of sin as the fundamental basis of all Christian praying and living. Tertiaries are truly penitents and must remain so!

The Roman Catholic Church no longer uses the word 'Confession' in the context of what some still call 'The Sacrament of Confession'. The phrase 'Sacrament of Reconciliation' is used, which is much more in keeping with the positive send of the word 'confession' as it is better understood. So where does the sacrament fit into Tertiary practice?

Let me put my cards on the table. For me, 'The Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession' is utterly essential for me as a tertiary, let alone a Bishop! When you go to a priest to 'make your confession', the principal reason is to be reconciled. The reconciling 'factor' or 'instrument' is - absolution. The economy of God's Love is constant. His forgiveness is perpetual, eternal and in this moment. So why bother with the 'sacrament'? The answer is quite simple. If I say to you that you are my friend, you might simply say 'Well, thank you Martin, but show me!' You are already forgiven, but receiving absolution from a Priest is to be given the sacramental 'hug', if you like.

However, the process of preparation for receiving the sacrament of absolution is important and time honoured. I would remind you of Brother Thomas Antony's 'Penitence, Confession and Reconciliation' booklet published by St Clare leaflets (No.27) which gives useful guidelines and background to preparing yourself for 'making your confession'.

So, I give myself an hour to look at three simple questions:

1. I have sinned against God. I would become aware in what ways I have done so.
2. I have sinned against my neighbour. I would become aware in what ways I have done so.
3. I have sinned against myself. I would become aware of what ways I have done so.

Now, it is essential not to be so scrupulous that you either slip into a state of anxiety or indeed of avoidance. The job of the priest is to help you be clear not of the negative in you, but what lies at the root of what you are confessing. In fact, it is theological exercise, NOT one of counselling! The priest does not have this role when 'hearing' your confession. His or her task is quite simply to give your gift.

Another feature of the 'rite' of 'confession and absolution' is to be clear about what you desire, which might simply be expressed in what ways you want your life to show the gift of love and freedom which the sacrament of absolution has given you. The old-fashioned word for this is 'contrition'...the ways you want - or more accurately - God wants your life to change. But, it may not be 'change' as such that God is asking for. It may be for you to accept and, indeed, for you to love yourself as you are. God does!

Having, perhaps written down, in your preparation time what you are confessing, there is a wonderful sense of trust. The priest in the confessional is expected to keep absolute confidentiality about what you have shared; hence the term 'the seal of the confessional'. There are no exceptions to that whatsoever. To go into the 'what ifs' is not appropriate here. If exceptions are made in the confessional to confidentiality, in my view the whole trust that is assumed in the sacrament of reconciliation collapses. That sense of confidence in the priest is such a wonderful gift that I cannot begin to tell you what a glorious experience it is. Quite genuinely, so delicate and so tender is the art of 'hearing' someone's confession that when the session is finished, I quite honestly forget what was said. The love and the humanity of the person touches me with the beauty of the occasion, the content evaporates. It is almost as if there is a 'given' erase mechanism, for want of a better way of putting it.

How often might you go to 'the sacrament of reconciliation' or 'sacramental confession'? Some go when they feel the need. Some go regularly. Some choose both. I go before Christmas, in Holy Week and around Pentecost. That may not be enough for



some. I have a suspicion if I only went when I needed to, I would probably try and avoid it. After all, I remind you that God's forgiveness is a constant process, that touches you with a taste of 'eternity' in receiving absolution.

There are wonderful traditional words that some priests use for administering the sacrament of absolution, but they are by no means the only ones: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and turn to Him, have mercy upon you and forgive you your offences. And by His authority committed to me, I absolve you of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Lord has taken away all your sins, but go from here and remember to pray for me a sinner also.' In other words, you are among friends!

If you have anything to share on this issue, please email me or write to me and I will draw the responses together for the next Newsletter. alexandermartin.shaw@virgin.net

(My apologies for the length of time it has taken to write this issue.)

In the Love of God,

+*Martin*

Bishop of Argyll and The Isles
April 10th 2008.

