



Hearing confessions is the most sublime of our ministries in its greatness, usefulness and necessity for the good of Christianity and the Church. And so, the priests (to whom this ministry belongs) should prepare themselves well to exercise it and cultivate in themselves all the qualities which are indispensable to administer it. As it is great, useful and necessary so also it is very difficult, heavy and risky! And so the priest should approach and take up the task with a certain fear and trembling.

Desire and trembling are two things different and even opposed. The desire draws and pushes a person towards the desired thing; fear on the contrary stops the person and holds the person far from it. There is the desire to celebrate the sacrament and at the same time there is a fear of celebrating it! How are these two emotions put together in the same person, at the same time and around the 'same subject'? Let us imitate the doctor who has to treat a plague-stricken patient. He

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desires to treat him and looks forward to restoring him back to his health. But he has the fear of contracting the plague himself. So what does he do? He does not abandon his profession. He prepares to treat him. He takes every precaution to avoid contracting the infection himself while at the same time treating the patient. In this way, the excessive fear disappears because he keeps the focus on the sick person.

The priest should do likewise: he should cultivate those virtues and qualities which are needed to administer this sacrament; he should use the means and methods that will keep him away from danger while doing good for the penitent. In this way, he retains the salutary fear which makes the confessor cautious while doing away with the excessive fear that blocks the confessor from exercising the ministry.

We shall concentrate on the remote preparation of the priest before he goes to the confessional. We shall talk of the dispositions that the confessor should cultivate in himself. I reduce the dispositions and qualities of the confessor to two: Excellence of life and Proportionate and sufficient knowledge. These two are indispensable for the priest.

A. EXCELLENCE

Excellence of the confessor is easily visible and one does not need a special proof of it. How good will a confessor be when he does not have this excellence? It would be like claiming that the wall is white when it is clear that it is not. If we were to be satisfied with 'any' confessor (he may be without this excellence), very well! But good confessor is difficult to find! And it is difficult to imagine a confessor without this excellence.



1. The Necessity of Excellence

This great gift is necessary to believe in the very ministry of confession, for the confessor to be confident of himself and for the penitents to have faith in the confessor.

For the ministry of confession

This zealous and delicate ministry is entrusted solely to the faith of the minister. He exercises it without depending on someone else or without anyone on earth overseeing it! Have you ever heard that the confessor was called to give reasons for what he may have done? There is no appeal on the judgement he pronounces! The penitent may go to another confessor and ‘reconfess’, but not by way of an appeal on the first judgement. It is because in that act, the confessor does not have a superior on earth.

Moreover the confessor operates in secret with no witnesses apart from the penitent! Hence, he does not have the constraints which naturally come with operating in public. Since, the confessor operates alone in so many ways he cannot avail himself of the help and assistance of others. This should open the eyes of the superior or the Bishop, before entrusting someone with this ministry. It is true that there are other requirements needed to have such confidence, but the excellence about which we speak is the top most as it forms the basis of all others.

For the confessor to trust himself

Woe to the priest who is not excellent! Woe to the weak and inexperienced soldier who jumps into the area without the courage or skill! I would like to list the series of dangers that would befall a priest who takes up without goodness and virtue. There are many dangers whether we consider the nature of the matters involved or the

quality of the persons or the variety of sins. To this list we need to add the anger and the hatred that the Devil harbours against the sacrament and the minister: the Devil will use every opportunity to lure one to transgress or to profane it – sometimes it is sloth, sometimes anger and impatience, sometimes curiosity, sometimes human respect: feeling for the other, sympathy, talent, delicacy, sensitivity, to leave out greater sins. He will arrange everything in order to achieve his goal! And what will the priest (non-excellent) do? Oh, ... may the Tribunal of mercy not become a Tribunal of sin and ruin!

For the penitent to have faith in the Confessor

Finally, this goodness is necessary so that the penitent can trust the Confessor and approach the sacrament with sincerity. Will a sick person have the courage to go to a doctor if he knows that the doctor himself is infected with the same disease and that he himself does not know how to cure himself? Will a traveler be confident to ask the right path from someone who is himself walking the wrong path? Such is the miserable fate of the penitent who approaches a bad confessor: he is going to bare his wound to one who is even more sick; he is going to ask for the way to Heaven from the one who travels on the road to Hell!

If the confessor has in himself all the qualities we have just mentioned then the confessor has the desired excellence for this ministry. Honour of the sacrament, the tranquility of the faithful and the security of the priest demand it of the priest.

To be continued