

ST. CAFASSO'S CONFERENCES

ON THE QUALITIES OF THE CONFESSOR

(Part 2)

FR. PATHIARAJ RAYAPPAN SDB

2. What sort of excellence?

We are not talking about excellence of character: naturally pleasant, courteous, lovable, compassionate. The excellence that we refer to here is a set of extraordinary virtues, virtues that produce in the priest three effects: (1) it makes him determined and strong in the face of sin so that instead of conquering he is not conquered or struck down; (2) it makes him authoritative and venerable

among the people so that they will listen to him; (3) it makes him practical and expert in virtue so that he can teach others.

In other words the excellence of the confessor should be real and true. It should be an excellence experienced by others. It should not only insulate him and keep him away from sin, but also make him an experienced teacher of virtue.

Consequences of a confessor who is not in the state of grace

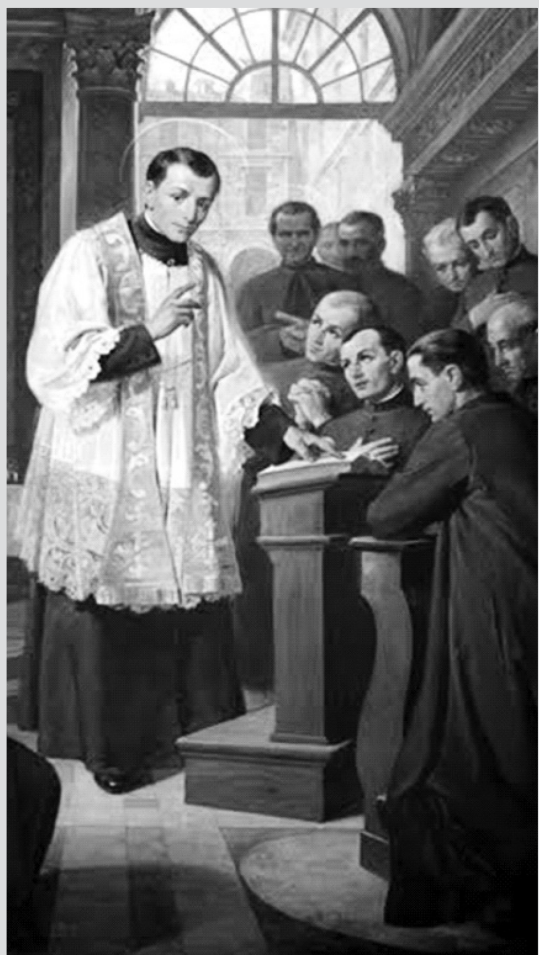
Let us examine the consequences of the lack of excellence in the confessor. Let us say that a priest is in sin and he goes to the confessional and he tries to fight the very same sin in the penitent! Sinner with a sinner, demon with a demon, what a battle is it? The enemy must explode at that moment angry and stunned! But here it is quite the opposite! I know that the sacrament can operate by its own power without the concurrence of virtue in the minister, but do you know that only a few, in reality, come to confessions contrite and truly repentant of the sins, and that most need the help of the confessor? So if these penitents approach the confessor and expect the confessor to be capable of making them understand what confessor himself has not understood; to make them to come to repentance, to have that horror for sin which he himself does not have; to talk to them, to persuade them and to lead them to 'death rather than sin' when he himself falls into sin easily and, what is more, has sin on his heart!

This confessor may speak, advice and scold, ... but they are mere words, wind and nothing more; the penitent remains cold and the confessor is even colder; the penitent does not recognise his sin and so does not detest it; and the confessor is not able to bring him to recognise his sinfulness! The confession may be sincere, perhaps longer than needed but it is languid, cold and not at all



sorrowful! As it begins so it ends! The confession is made but the sin is not forgiven. I do not say that it was a sacrilegious confession. But it was invalid and null for there was no true contrition and sorrow. Who knows how many such confessions! And why such confessions? Most of the time it is due to the lack of excellence in the confessor.

At times how effective just a word or a groan or a sigh of a good confessor to pierce the heart of the penitent! When St. Ambrose listened to confessions, he would moan, sigh and shed tears



that even the hardened sinners were forced to shed tears! One penitent told his confessor: “Father, you don’t cry and sigh, it is I who have sinned!” Another repeated, “Father, please give me a little of the horror and hatred that you have for sin.” You see what effect the expression of such emotions of the good confessor has on the penitent!

It is not the length of the discourse or the flowery words or the severity of the correction that move the heart but the gracefulness and the unction that accompany our words. And these are specific to the priest. When this excellence of the priest become known, then his words are very effective and hits the heart of the penitents like a thunderbolt. And since every word we tell them is founded on facts, the penitents cannot but believe that the priest is right, that he speaks the truth and that he says what he himself does. If the excellence of the priest is absent (or even if only the penitent suspects it) the confessions are made fun of with other penitents after confession!

Consequences of a confessor who is not steadfast in virtue

We have so far talked about the situation when the confessor is not in a state of grace but in sin. Now let us see the next case of the confessor who is not steadfast in virtue and easily falls into temptations. He is easily wounded. He does not have the horror for sin. He does not face temptation with ‘death rather than sin’. He has not cultivated the habit of running to God for help or of recalling to mind the last things. If he falls so many times and so easily, how many sins in a single morning? When and how will he stop? Now you see why I told you that ordinary goodness is not enough. It is one thing to be good enough to administer the sacrament and it is completely another thing to be excellent to be able to administer it fruitfully and without risk to ourselves.

(To be continued)