

ARTICLE 95

Legio Sanctae Familiae – The Legion of the Holy Family

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The Sacrament of Confession

Matthew Chapter 24 - Prophetic

In recent times I have been struck, time and again by chapter 24 of St Matthew's Gospel, where Our Lord warns His disciples to be aware of being seduced by false prophets saying, "For many will come in my name saying, I am Christ: and they will seduce many." (Matthew 24-5). I have often thought about what methods the devil will use to seduce those who seek to live up to the demands of the Catholic faith, in order to lead them astray. We find some answers in The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola where he gives us rules for the discernment of spirits. In the first such rule St Ignatius says.

Discerning the Spirits – The Enemy's Tactics

"In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins." (Spiritual Exercises 314)

One can see the effectiveness of such a strategy. It keeps the soul in darkness, because the soul in a state of mortal sin is deprived of the light of sanctifying grace, which would lead the soul to strive for union with Almighty God. St Ignatius then tells us how the enemy acts with those who are already striving to live a holy life.

More Tactics of the Enemy

"In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God Our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule. Then it is the characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing." (Spiritual Exercises 315)

Again, we can see the effectiveness of the enemy's strategy. He harasses the soul in its early journey on the road to holiness, in order to get her to give up, what he proposes, to be a futile struggle. He discourages the soul and often uses inner taunts such as "you will never become a saint, you're only kidding yourself". He reminds the soul of its past sinfulness in order to break down the will so that the soul returns to lukewarmness and mediocrity in the practice of the living out of their Catholic faith.

How the Enemy Deals with one who is Striving to be Holy

But what of the soul who perseveres and who gets past these initial stages and begins to advance in the spiritual life? It is important to remember that the devil never gives up as long as the person lives. The story is sometimes told of the elderly priest who was in his nineties and in hospital. A beautiful young nurse comes in to tend to him and the priest roars, "Get her out of here, I'm not dead yet". The moral of this somewhat amusing story is that the devil will tempt us and seek our souls right up until our last breath. In the prayer to the Holy Family we ask Jesus, Mary and St Joseph to assist us in our last agony, that is, our last battle with the devil.

The devil knows that he cannot tempt the soul who is advancing in the spiritual life with obvious mortal sins or even with obvious venial sins and so he must change his tactics. Subtle as ever, the devil once more rises to the attack. St Ignatius explains this to us in his second set of rules for the discernment of spirits.

“If a cause precedes, both the good angel and the evil spirit can give consolation to a soul, but for quite a different purpose. The good angel consoles for the progress of the soul, that it may advance and rise to what is more perfect. The evil spirit consoles for purposes that are the contrary, and that afterwards he might draw the soul to his own perverse intentions and wickedness.

The Devil may appear as an Angel of Light

It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, and ends by suggesting his own. For example, he will suggest holy and pious thoughts that are wholly in conformity with the sanctity of the soul. Afterwards, he will endeavour little by little to end by drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs” (Spiritual Exercises 331 – 332)

It is a somewhat terrifying thought to think that the devil can appear to men as an angel of light. That the devil can propose to us things that are good in themselves, in order to eventually lead us astray. Christ, through His Catholic Church, has not however left us defenceless against the work of the devil in our lives, and one of the great blessings he has bestowed on us is that of frequent use of the sacrament of confession. But the devil can also attack the sacrament of confession, even using cardinals of the Church to do so.

Current Threats to the Salvation of Souls

In my last article, I broke with my practice of not naming individuals concerned in what I write about. The reason for this is, that I am now dealing with a current threat to the salvation of souls, which is being spread about in Ireland and elsewhere in the run up to the world meeting of families 2018. I was not judging the state of Cardinal Schonborn's soul, indeed I pray for the man, but I was doing a critical analysis of his words in light of the constant teachings of the Catholic Church, and showing where his words fail to uphold that teaching. The Cardinal's words constitute a real danger to souls and people need to be warned of this danger and of where it is coming from.

To command that a priest **must** absolve a penitent who does not confess all mortal sins, particularly the mortal sin of adultery, is to contradict Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of confession and so, in this article, I want to look at this beautiful sacrament so that Catholic Voice readers will have a clearer understanding of what this sacrament requires.

Many Will Come – They Will Lead Many Astray

Otherwise, there is a real danger that the evil one will lead us astray under the guise of a false compassion for those who put themselves in difficult situations. I am thinking in particular of those situations where people have begotten children outside the bonds of their marriage, in a relationship that is adulterous and where there is a duty on them to provide for the welfare of the children of this adulterous union. Sometimes there may be children from both the marital relationship and from the adulterous relationship. These situations are particularly complex because no matter what the guilty party does, more hurt will be caused to everyone involved. The results of sin are never pleasant for mankind.

The Form and Matter of the Sacraments

In order to be valid, all Catholic sacraments have form and matter. For the sacrament of confession, the form is the priest reciting the formula of absolution “I absolve thee from thy sins”. The matter of the sacrament consists of two parts; the remote matter, and the proximate matter. The remote matter consists of the sins committed by the penitent after baptism and the proximate matter consists of the acts of the penitent themselves which includes contrition, confession and satisfaction.

There are two parts to contrition, namely, sorrow for the sins committed and the firm purpose of never committing those sins again. The Catechism of St Pius X teaches us the following about contrition which is particularly relevant to the current move by certain prelates within the Catholic Church to allow those in adulterous relationships to present themselves for Holy Communion in certain cases.

The Necessity of Contrition

“Of all the parts of the sacrament of Penance the most necessary is contrition, because without it no pardon for sins is obtainable, while with it alone, perfect pardon can be obtained, provided that along with it there is the desire, at least implicit, of going to confession.”

In the case presented by Cardinal Schonborn, which I analysed in the last issue, the penitent was sorry for having killed her child through abortion, but was not sorry for her adulterous relationship. The Cardinal said that the priest must absolve her, thereby permitting her to receive Holy Communion whilst continuing to live in an adulterous relationship. The Cardinal used the hard case of abortion to side step the issue of adultery in order to show that in certain cases adulterers can go to Holy Communion without giving up the adultery. Adultery was not portrayed as being gravely sinful. The problem with this is, that the Cardinal is wrong, and he contradicts Catholic doctrine all the while claiming that he upholds it. This Cardinal and others like him, say that what they are proposing is a new way of accompanying people in irregular unions. This is an example of the kind of trick, a false compassion, which is used by our enemy in order to lead those of good will astray.

Making a Bad Confession is Sacrilegious

The 1958 penny catechism was very clear and simple on this matter.

“If a person sinfully conceal a mortal sin in Confession, he is guilty of a great sacrilege by telling a lie to the Holy Ghost in making a bad Confession”

Now we can split hairs all day in asking if the person was really aware of the mortal sinfulness of their actions, but one thing is certain, it is almost impossible to commit adultery by accident. The only time that it could happen would be if someone were to go through the marriage ceremony in good faith, with someone who had concealed a previous valid marriage. However, in the case as it was given to us by Cardinal Schonborn to justify Holy Communion for an adulterer, the woman knew that she was in an adulterous relationship. The Cardinal therefore is also guilty of encouraging sacrilegious Confessions. This is a most serious matter.

True Contrition opens the Soul to God’s Mercy

True contrition is a state that opens the soul to the mercy of God, and without contrition, no pardon for sin is obtainable. This brings us to another point that needs to be addressed in this politically correct world of ours where linguistic political correctness has now entered firmly into the realms of the Church. I am talking about judgement and the often misused phrase “who am I to judge”

The Judgement Seat

In the sacrament of Confession, the priest sits to hear the confession because he is on the judgement seat and because he is acting as a judge. In the confessional the priest is called upon to judge the penitent and he cannot absolve their sins unless he first judges them. This is not to be confused with the final judgement, but it is a judgement nonetheless. People forget that Christ gave, not only the power to forgive sins, but the power to retain sins as well, that is, to withhold absolution in certain cases. For the priest to act on this power from Christ, he has to judge. In this case, the answer to the question “who am I to judge” is, “I am the priest in the confessional!”.

There are several things that the priest is called upon to judge in the confessional. He must judge the nature of the sin being confessed. Is it a venial sin or a mortal sin? If the matter is grave, did the penitent have full knowledge and full consent or were their extenuating circumstances which would lessen the culpability of the penitent meaning that they have not sinned mortally? The priest is called upon to judge whether or not the penitent is truly sorry for the sins they have confessed. He is called

upon to judge whether or not there is a true purpose of amendment. If a penitent keeps coming back to confession with the same sins, and these sins are committed on account of occasions of sin that could be avoided but which the penitent makes no effort to avoid, then the firm purpose of amendment may be missing and the priest may not be able to give absolution.

No Rubber Stamp Absolution

The sacrament of Confession is not a 'rubber stamp' absolution service whereby the form and matter of the sacrament can be set aside in the name of a false compassion or a false understanding of mercy. The penitent is called upon to change their way of life, to avoid both actual sins and the occasions of sin in their life, otherwise there is a danger that the sacrament is invalid and there will be no grace obtained. People who are living as if married to a person that they are not in fact married to, are called to separate. If there are very serious reasons which require them to stay living in the same house, such as the upbringing and the protection of children, then they must refrain from the marital act. This living together in the same house whilst not married is far from ideal because of the temptations to mortal sin.

Cardinals and others Leading Souls Astray

Those cardinals and others, who seek to make certain exceptions to the rule that those living in an objective state of adultery must abstain from the acts proper to marriage in order to receive absolution, are not doing the people in question any favours. On the contrary, they are confirming them in their sinful unions and endangering their very salvation. These people need to go to confession and they need to confess these sinful unions which at the very least constitute fornication if not actual adultery, both of which sins are grave matter and with full knowledge and consent constitute mortal sin. In this age where, apparently, everybody goes to heaven and the very existence of hell is called into doubt by senior churchmen, the nature and the dangers of mortal sin are being ignored. Our enemy is doing his work very well.

Frequent Confession

Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter 'The Mystical Body of Christ' encouraged frequent confession and enumerated its benefits.

“We will that the pious practice of frequent confession, which was introduced into the Church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, should be earnestly advocated. By it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the Sacrament itself.” (Mystici Corporis 88)

We Can all Benefit from Frequent Confession

Is there any Catholic who would not benefit from, or who should not desire, these many graces that come from the practice of frequent confession? So what are you waiting for? Go to confession and encourage others to go and do likewise. Become a promoter of this great sacrament. If it has been a while since your last confession, know that Christ thirsts for you to come to Him in this sacrament because He desires to be united to you so that He can fill you with sanctifying grace. Remember that a contrite heart opens wide the door to God's mercy.

Proper Preparation for Confession

It is important to go to confession, but it is also important to prepare well. This begins with a proper examination of conscience. Do not make excuses for sins. Identify them, if there are any mortal sins enumerate them, and then confess them, simply, to the priest in the confessional. One must then strive not to commit these sins in the future, and this is where avoiding the occasions where these sins were committed comes in. Finally, the priest gives a penance so that the requirement for satisfaction may be done. In certain cases, like where something was stolen, or where a reputation was damaged, there may be a requirement to make restitution as far as is possible.

No Cheap Mercy

There is no cheap mercy. Look to the agony of Our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross if you want to see the cost of mercy. Look into the sorrowful eyes of Our Blessed Mother Mary at the foot of the cross, while her Son is dying there in agony, if you want to see the cost of mercy. Then... Go To Confession!

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