

## CATECHISM FOR ADULTS:

## XII. 'REMISSION OF SINS'

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**W**E, writes St Paul, are chosen in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspoil'd in his sight in charity (Ephesians 1, 4). It is only in so far as man is chosen in Christ and one with Christ, that he belongs to God. Christ, raised from the dead, rules and is made 'head over all the Church' (Ephesians 1, 22). The Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1, 23); and to this body all those who at one time were afar off are joined, or in St Paul's phrase 'are made nigh' (Ephesians 2, 13). All men are born under the condemnation of Adam and are therefore afar off from God, but 'in the blood of Christ' they are made near to God. Made near because Christ 'is our peace' (Ephesians 2, 23). It is Christ who 'has made both one' and who breaks down 'the middle wall of partition, the enmities in his flesh . . . that he might make the two in himself into one new man, making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body by the cross, killing the enmities in his flesh' (Ephesians 2, 14-16).

The cross of Christ, which is the presence in the world of God's judgment and love, is creative of that peace or unity that overcomes all division and enmity. The divisions that arise from sin or pride, all conflict as between flesh and spirit, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, are transcended in Christ. The death of Christ created a new unity, that of those who are called apart to live in charity in the presence of God. No escape from the world, but a transformation of all that goes to make up the world. This holiness of life is the basic category of life—the only purpose of existence. By it not merely the middle wall of partition between men is destroyed but the division between man and God, opened by sin, is closed. 'You are no more strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and domestics of God' (Ephesians 2, 14).

The healing of divisions is, then, brought about by the new creation in Christ. Men are united into 'one new man', into 'one body'. This is not some strange gnostic fancy of a heavenly being existing on some exalted plane—it is Christ, the head, in union

with his members, who are his body. The people of God, living by the life of Christ, are so at one with him that they grow up into one body or are built into one temple.

The victory of Christ, who ascending on high leads captivity captive (cf. Ephesians 4, 8), is a conquest of sin in which the power of Satan and the world is overthrown. Christ, says St Paul, carries off the spoils of victory and gives gifts to men. The giving is 'for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4, 12). The grace that flows from Christ, the head, into the Church, builds up the Church. The body is so united to the head that it makes up what was wanting in the sacrifice of Christ, it completes creation's service of God. One with Christ, the Church looks to the perfect fulfilment of her growth in Christ. 'We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like to him' (1 John 3, 2).

In each moment of time this oneness with Christ is the burden of the witness of the Church, whose task it is to prophesy of the things that are above to the world that still is blind to Christ.

The Church is a witness to sin and to the conquest of sin. She must recall man from the delusion that sin is simply ignorance, a mere mistake. The evil in the world is real and man's responsibility is real, in the sense that before God he has chosen the things that are evil. Man cannot shed his responsibility on to fate or economic necessity; however he may be hemmed in by environment he still can choose, and that choice is taken before God, as in it he either accepts or rejects the word of God. Being responsible, man is guilty, he is as one convicted. True, this sense of sin is only given when man becomes aware of himself as under the Law, as subject to God; it must not be confused with psychological unease. 'I will show thee, O man, what is good and what the Lord requireth of thee: verily to do judgment and to love mercy and to walk solicitous with thy God' (Micheas 6, 8). This awareness of sin is the knowing 'of the justice of God', to act against which is to render 'worthy of death' (Romans 1, 32).

God does not leave man to wallow in self-pity, to indulge in complaints about the Creator. That he does complain is a fact—even Elias longed for his soul to die, to fall into oblivion. But he did not remain enveloped in his despair, for having rested and fed, having increased his trust and faith in God, he journeyed in

response to the call. 'Arise . . . for thou hast yet a great way to go' (3 Kings 19, 7).

Man is freed from sin by baptism and rises to a new life in Christ, he is nourished by the medicine of immortality, that is the Eucharist. By these sacraments man is set on his journey towards heaven and given strength for his way. 'For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and staff they have comforted me. Thou hast prepared a table before me against them that afflict me' (Psalm 22). The royal shepherd directs and leads; the royal victim gives himself as food and strength.

The journey is made in the vigour of a newness of life, for in so far as we live in grace we are free of the condemnation of the Law. St Irenaeus wrote: 'We have no need of the law as a pedagogue, because we have received the Lord of the Law, the Son of God'. It is a journey in freedom, in constant self-giving. But once the soul closes itself to God, shuts up its generosity and chooses what is not one with Christ, it falls back under the Law and being condemned becomes alien to God, a fomentor of division, a child of disobedience.

Each sin in so far as it involves disobedience to the word of God plunges the soul into death. The new life, the creation of God's saving love, dies in the soul and it is at once bound within the prison of its own self-will. It no longer journeys but rests immobile in the trap of its own pride.

God does not leave the faithless soul but the charity of Christ always presses in upon it, ready to raise it up, if only pride can submit. The purpose of the sacrament of Penance is to forgive the guilt of post-baptismal sin. The unfaithful Christian is not shut off from the mercy of God. As the charity of Christ reached out to the woman taken in adultery, so must the ministry of the Church extend to all who humble themselves.

In the sacrament of Penance the Church, acting in the name of Christ, forgives the guilt of sin. This she does with confidence because to her are given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. 'I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth it shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16, 19).

The forgiveness is given through the absolution spoken by the

priest who acts as the instrument of Christ the judge. Often it is imagined that this is an automatic process, a bit of priestly magic. Nothing could be further from the truth. The priest sits as the judge appointed by the Church, but the penitent does not play a merely passive role. He must be a real penitent—his approach and response must be human. He must be sorry that he has sinned. For though he may feel no emotional aversion from his sin, yet he rejects it, he chooses to avoid it because it is against God's law and because he loves God. Perhaps at times he is unable to reach this level, he rejects sin only because he fears God's justice; yet even this servile fear can be transformed by the grace of the sacrament into the service of a child of God, for though the justice of God is inviolable and this is a sacrament of justice, yet is it primarily a sacrament of mercy.

The penitent must have sinned and having recognized his wilful rejection of God, comes with sorrow to obtain the pledge of God's forgiveness. He accuses himself of his sin against Christ before Christ's representative, submitting to the judgment of the Church in willingness to do penance for his sins.

In his accusation he speaks the truth—without extenuation, without favour. This is an act of reverence to God, who is Truth itself and to whom untruth is always offensive.

The sacrament presupposes for its validity a free exercise of man's will. 'A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit; a contrite and a humble heart, O God, thou wilt not despise' (Psalm 50, 19). If this be present, then man is graced by the absolution; the forgiveness is a making holy of man before God.

By the grace of penance the very soul of man is restored and in humility before God he learns to reject those mere outward observances, the respectability of the world, and to conform all his actions to Christ. He learns that true contrition and the sanctification of life is God's gift. It is only God who can make the dead bones live. This sacrament is not a mere rite, it is the temporal meeting-point of the soul with the assurance of God's mercy, for it is Christ exercising through his Church the ministry of reconciliation.