

## SUPPLEMENT TO THE THIRD PART, QUESTION 9

### Of the Quality of Confession (In Four Articles)

We must now consider the quality of confession: under which head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether confession can be lacking in form?
- (2) Whether confession ought to be entire?
- (3) Whether one can confess through another, or by writing?
- (4) Whether the sixteen conditions, which are assigned by the masters, are necessary for confession?

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#### Whether confession can be lacking in form?

Suppl. q. 9 a. 1

**Objection 1.** It would seem that confession cannot be lacking in form. For it is written (Ecclus. 17:26): "Praise [confession] perisheth from the dead as nothing." But a man without charity is dead, because charity is the life of the soul. Therefore there can be no confession without charity.

**Objection 2.** Further, confession is condivided with contrition and satisfaction. But contrition and satisfaction are impossible without charity. Therefore confession is also impossible without charity.

**Objection 3.** Further, it is necessary in confession that the word should agree with the thought for the very name of confession requires this. Now if a man confess while remaining attached to sin, his word is not in accord with his thought, since in his heart he holds to sin, while he condemns it with his lips. Therefore such a man does not confess.

**On the contrary,** Every man is bound to confess his mortal sins. Now if a man in mortal sin has confessed once, he is not bound to confess the same sins again, because, as no man knows himself to have charity, no man would know of him that he had confessed. Therefore it is not necessary that confession should be quickened by charity.

**I answer that,** Confession is an act of virtue, and is part of a sacrament. In so far as it is an act of virtue, it has the

property of being meritorious, and thus is of no avail without charity, which is the principle of merit. But in so far as it is part of a sacrament, it subordinates the penitent to the priest who has the keys of the Church, and who by means of the confession knows the conscience of the person confessing. In this way it is possible for confession to be in one who is not contrite, for he can make his sins known to the priest, and subject himself to the keys of the Church: and though he does not receive the fruit of absolution then, yet he will begin to receive it, when he is sincerely contrite, as happens in the other sacraments: wherefore he is not bound to repeat his confession, but to confess his lack of sincerity.

**Reply to Objection 1.** These words must be understood as referring to the receiving of the fruit of confession, which none can receive who is not in the state of charity.

**Reply to Objection 2.** Contrition and satisfaction are offered to God: but confession is made to man: hence it is essential to contrition and satisfaction, but not to confession, that man should be united to God by charity.

**Reply to Objection 3.** He who declares the sins which he has, speaks the truth; and thus his thought agrees with his lips or words, as to the substance of confession, though it is discordant with the purpose of confession.

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#### Whether confession should be entire?

Suppl. q. 9 a. 2

**Objection 1.** It would seem that it is not necessary for confession to be entire, namely, for a man to confess all his sins to one priest. For shame conduces to the diminution of punishment. Now the greater the number of priests to whom a man confesses, the greater his shame. Therefore confession is more fruitful if it be divided among several priests.

**Objection 2.** Further, confession is necessary in Penance in order that punishment may be enjoined for sin according to the judgment of the priest. Now a sufficient punishment for different sins can be imposed by different priests. Therefore it is not necessary to confess all one's sins to one priest.

**Objection 3.** Further, it may happen that a man after going to confession and performing his penance, remembers a mortal sin, which escaped his memory while confessing, and that his own priest to whom he confessed first is no longer available, so that he can only confess that sin to an

other priest, and thus he will confess different sins to different priests.

**Objection 4.** Further, the sole reason for confessing one's sins to a priest is in order to receive absolution. Now sometimes, the priest who hears a confession can absolve from some of the sins, but not from all. Therefore in such a case at all events the confession need not be entire.

**On the contrary,** Hypocrisy is an obstacle to Penance. But it savors of hypocrisy to divide one's confession, as Augustine says\*. Therefore confession should be entire. Further, confession is a part of Penance. But Penance should be entire. Therefore confession also should be entire.

**I answer that,** In prescribing medicine for the body, the physician should know not only the disease for which he is prescribing, but also the general constitution of the sick person, since one disease is aggravated by the addition of an-

\* De vera et falsa Poenitentia, work of an unknown author.

other, and a medicine which would be adapted to one disease, would be harmful to another. The same is to be said in regard to sins, for one is aggravated when another is added to it; and a remedy which would be suitable for one sin, might prove an incentive to another, since sometimes a man is guilty of contrary sins, as Gregory says (Pastoral. iii, 3). Hence it is necessary for confession that man confess all the sins that he calls to mind, and if he fails to do this, it is not a confession, but a pretense of confession.

**Reply to Objection 1.** Although a man's shame is multiplied when he makes a divided confession to different confessors, yet all his different shames together are not so great as that with which he confesses all his sins together: because one sin considered by itself does not prove the evil disposition of the sinner, as when it is considered in conjunction with several others, for a man may fall into one sin through ignorance or weakness, but a number of sins proves the malice of the sinner, or his great corruption.

**Reply to Objection 2.** The punishment imposed by different priests would not be sufficient, because each would only consider one sin by itself, and not the gravity which it derives from being in conjunction with another. Moreover sometimes the punishment which would be given for one sin would foster another. Again the priest in hearing a confession takes the place of God, so that confession should be

made to him just as contrition is made to God: wherefore as there would be no contrition unless one were contrite for all the sins which one calls to mind, so is there no confession unless one confess all the sins that one remembers committing.

**Reply to Objection 3.** Some say that when a man remembers a sin which he had previously forgotten, he ought to confess again the sins which he had confessed before, especially if he cannot go to the same priest to whom his previous confession was made, in order that the total quantity of his sins may be made known to one priest. But this does not seem necessary, because sin takes its quantity both from itself and from the conjunction of another; and as to the sins which he confessed he had already manifested their quantity which they have of themselves, while as to the sin which he had forgotten, in order that the priest may know the quantity which it has under both the above heads, it is enough that the penitent declare it explicitly, and confess the others in general, saying that he had confessed many sins in his previous confession, but had forgotten this particular one.

**Reply to Objection 4.** Although the priest may be unable to absolve the penitent from all his sins, yet the latter is bound to confess all to him, that he may know the total quantity of his guilt, and refer him to the superior with regard to the sins from which he cannot absolve him.

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**Whether one may confess through another, or by writing?**

Suppl. q. 9 a. 3

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**Objection 1.** It would seem that one may confess through another, or by writing. For confession is necessary in order that the penitent's conscience may be made known to the priest. But a man can make his conscience known to the priest, through another or by writing. Therefore it is enough to confess through another or by writing.

**Objection 2.** Further, some are not understood by their own priests on account of a difference of language, and consequently cannot confess save through others. Therefore it is not essential to the sacrament that one should confess by oneself, so that if anyone confesses through another in any way whatever, it suffices for his salvation.

**Objection 3.** Further, it is essential to the sacrament that a man should confess to his own priest, as appears from what has been said (q. 8, a. 5). Now sometimes a man's own priest is absent, so that the penitent cannot speak to him with his own voice. But he could make his conscience known to him by writing. Therefore it seems that he ought to manifest his conscience to him by writing to him.

**On the contrary,** Man is bound to confess his sins even as he is bound to confess his faith. But confession of faith should be made "with the mouth," as appears from Rom. 10:10: therefore confession of sins should also.

Further, who sinned by himself should, by himself, do penance. But confession is part of penance. Therefore the penitent should confess his own sins.

**I answer that,** Confession is not only an act of virtue, but also part of a sacrament. Now, though, in so far as it is an act of virtue it matters not how it is done, even if it be eas-

ier to do it in one way than in another, yet, in so far as it is part of a sacrament, it has a determinate act, just as the other sacraments have a determinate matter. And as in Baptism, in order to signify the inward washing, we employ that element which is chiefly used in washing, so in the sacramental act which is intended for manifestation we generally make use of that act which is most commonly employed for the purpose of manifestation, viz. our own words; for other ways have been introduced as supplementary to this.

**Reply to Objection 1.** Just as in Baptism it is not enough to wash with anything, but it is necessary to wash with a determinate element, so neither does it suffice, in Penance, to manifest one's sins anyhow, but they must be declared by a determinate act.

**Reply to Objection 2.** It is enough for one who is ignorant of a language, to confess by writing, or by signs, or by an interpreter, because a man is not bound to do more than he can: although a man is not able or obliged to receive Baptism, except with water, which is from an entirely external source and is applied to us by another: whereas the act of confession is from within and is performed by ourselves, so that when we cannot confess in one way, we must confess as we can.

**Reply to Objection 3.** In the absence of one's own priest, confession may be made even to a layman, so that there is no necessity to confess in writing, because the act of confession is more essential than the person to whom confession is made.

**Objection 1.** It would seem that the conditions assigned by masters, and contained in the following lines, are not requisite for confession:

Simple, humble, pure, faithful,  
Frequent, undisguised, discreet, voluntary,  
shamefaced,  
Entire, secret, tearful, not delayed,  
Courageously accusing, ready to obey.

For fidelity, simplicity, and courage are virtues by themselves, and therefore should not be reckoned as conditions of confession.

**Objection 2.** Further, a thing is “pure” when it is not mixed with anything else: and “simplicity,” in like manner, removes composition and admixture. Therefore one or the other is superfluous.

**Objection 3.** Further, no one is bound to confess more than once a sin which he has committed but once. Therefore if a man does not commit a sin again, his penance need not be “frequent.”

**Objection 4.** Further, confession is directed to satisfaction. But satisfaction is sometimes public. Therefore confession should not always be “secret.”

**Objection 5.** Further, that which is not in our power is not required of us. But it is not in our power to shed “tears.” Therefore it is not required of those who confess.

**On the contrary,** We have the authority of the masters who assigned the above.

**Answer that,** Some of the above conditions are essential to confession, and some are requisite for its well-being. Now those things which are essential to confession belong to it either as to an act of virtue, or as to part of a sacrament. If in the first way, it is either by reason of virtue in general, or by reason of the special virtue of which it is the act, or by reason of the act itself. Now there are four conditions of virtue in general, as stated in *Ethic. ii, 4*. The first is knowledge, in respect of which confession is said to be “discreet,” inasmuch as prudence is required in every act of virtue: and this discretion consists in giving greater weight to greater sins. The second condition is choice, because acts of virtue should be voluntary, and in this respect confession is said to be “voluntary.” The third condition is that the act be done for a particular purpose, viz. the due end, and in this respect confession is said to be “pure,” i.e. with a right intention. The fourth condition is that one should act immovably, and in this respect it is said that confession should be “courageous,” viz. that the truth should not be forsaken through shame.

Now confession is an act of the virtue of penance. First

of all it takes its origin in the horror which one conceives for the shamefulness of sin, and in this respect confession should be “full of shame,” so as not to be a boastful account of one’s sins, by reason of some worldly vanity accompanying it. Then it goes on to deplore the sin committed, and in this respect it is said to be “tearful.” Thirdly, it culminates in self-abjection, and in this respect it should be “humble,” so that one confesses one’s misery and weakness.

By reason of its very nature, viz. confession, this act is one of manifestation: which manifestation can be hindered by four things: first, by falsehood, and in this respect confession is said to be “faithful,” i.e. true. Secondly, by the use of vague words, and against this confession is said to be “open,” so as not to be wrapped up in vague words; thirdly, by “multiplicity” of words, in which respect it is said to be “simple” indicating that the penitent should relate only such matters as affect the gravity of the sin; fourthly none of those things should be suppressed which should be made known, and in this respect confession should be “entire.”

In so far as confession is part of a sacrament it is subject to the judgment of the priest who is the minister of the sacrament. Wherefore it should be an “accusation” on the part of the penitent, should manifest his “readiness to obey” the priest, should be “secret” as regards the nature of the court wherein the hidden affairs of conscience are tried.

The well-being of confession requires that it should be “frequent”; and “not delayed,” i.e. that the sinner should confess at once.

**Reply to Objection 1.** There is nothing unreasonable in one virtue being a condition of the act of another virtue, through this act being commanded by that virtue; or through the mean which belongs to one virtue principally, belonging to other virtues by participation.

**Reply to Objection 2.** The condition “pure” excludes perversity of intention, from which man is cleansed: but the condition “simple” excludes the introduction of unnecessary matter.

**Reply to Objection 3.** This is not necessary for confession, but is a condition of its well-being.

**Reply to Objection 4.** Confession should be made not publicly but privately, lest others be scandalized, and led to do evil through hearing the sins confessed. On the other hand, the penance enjoined in satisfaction does not give rise to scandal, since like works of satisfaction are done sometimes for slight sins, and sometimes for none at all.

**Reply to Objection 5.** We must understand this to refer to tears of the heart.