

The Sacrament of Penance - Part IV

The Tradition of Lay Confession

There is another tradition about reconciliation in the Church that also goes back to Sacred Scripture and that also had a history of its own, though unfortunately since the time of the Reformation it has lost its importance and practically vanished from the Church's life.



This is the practice of lay confession. In other words, besides the tradition of reconciliation to the community through the Sacrament of Penance, there has also been a tradition of reconciliation within the community through lay confession and lay forgiveness.

The practice of lay confession has its roots in Sacred Scripture. In the Epistle of James (5: 16-19) we read this admonition:

"So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and this will cure you; the heartfelt prayer of a good man works very powerfully . . . My brothers, if one of you strays away from

the truth, and another brings him back to it, he may be sure that anyone who can bring back a sinner from the wrong way that he has taken will be saving a soul from death and covering up a great number of sins."

The concept of reconciliation within the community through lay confession and lay forgiveness is implicit in the words of Jesus, when He tells us:

"If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering." (Mt. 5: 23-24)

It should be noted that this action does not belong to sacramental penance in the strict sense, for no official minister of the Church is involved. Yet the Scriptures clearly suggest that the practice of lay confession and lay forgiveness is an important means of achieving reconciliation within the Christian community.

It would appear that up until the late

Middle Ages lay confession was a not uncommon practice in the Church. Indeed it seems to have been regarded as the ordinary means of achieving peace in the community after minor sins. Though it was not regarded as a sacrament, it was considered as a relevant part of the process of salvation. St. Thomas Aquinas refers to it (S. T., Suppl. q. 8, a. 2, 3). He calls it an "incomplete sacrament" or a "sacramental" and urges its practice for the forgiveness of venial sins.

In the late Middle Ages lay confession became increasingly rare; and, with the advent of the Reformation, this valuable tradition was lost altogether. Today, in the light of the increased problems arising in family life and in husband and wife relationships, we might well ask the question: would not the revival of this long and fruitful tradition in the life of the Church be productive of great good for the Christian community? Would it not be wisdom on our part once again to see lay confession and lay forgiveness as a part of the whole process of reconciliation?

(to be continued)

The Slot Man

For more than a year now the *Courier-Journal* has been running guest columns written by pastors from throughout the diocese.



Individually the columns have been a great success and collectively they have provided a cross-cut of opinion and perspective to help *Courier* readers come to grips with the multitude of issues facing the Church today.

We hope we have contacted every pastor in the diocese; that is our intention. However, if we have failed to contact

any pastors we are using this column as an open invitation. Just contact me and let me know when the article can be expected.

Very soon in this space we plan to begin a series of columns written by the associate pastors from around the diocese. We are working on the logistics involved in contacting each priest and then setting up a schedule for running their columns.

There is no question that there is much room for discussion on many issues in Catholic life — and even more important that such discussion should take place. By providing a forum for all the priests of the diocese to express their views we hope to provide enough grist to keep the mills of interest grinding.

Reader response has indicated that the pastors' columns were well-received and helped make this page, along with Bishop Hogan's column and the editorial, one of the most popular in the *Courier-Journal*.

We'd also like to take this opportunity to thank all the pastors who have contributed guest columns which were variously educational, poignant, humorous, spiritual, provocative, challenging and always interesting. On behalf of our readers, we are grateful.

We are sure that the rest of the priests will continue this high level of service. Our readers should consider these columns worthwhile reading at the least and good Christian input at the best.

By Carmen Viglucci

Our Thanks to Contributors

Editorial

St. Patrick's Day and Hard Times

The Irish, God love 'em, are a difficult race to keep down.

Their lot has never been an easy one. And on this St. Patrick's Day they indeed are suffering much grief. The continuing tragedies in Northern Ireland have racked not only bodies but also souls and consciences.

So this year many agree that perhaps the joy of St. Paddy's Day should be watered down a bit, that there should be an air of gravity, and that prayers for peace and justice in Northern Ireland should be in vogue. Prayers are always in style with the Irish and we cannot help but feel that even the depressing events of recent times can bring despair to the people who brought us the Irish wake.

It was the great G. K. Chesterton in

the Ballad of the White Horse who wrote, "For the great Gaels of Ireland, Are the men that God made mad, For all their wars are merry, and all their songs are sad."

So despite the sentiment for decreased exuberance on this St. Patrick's Day there is something called the Irish spirit which cannot be quelled, not even by the most dire events.

This spirit is manifest in the project of two Chicago lads, Dave Condon and Ed Moran, who are campaigning to make St. Patrick's Day a national holiday. Since they already have embarked on a plan to make Ireland the 51st state and look forward to such phenomena as The Boston Green Sox and to coloring all oranges green, they are indeed a force to be reckoned with.

They have a fine idea for making March 17 a legal holiday. The banks would be closed for the day and "the world would be improved if we can lure the bankers into church one day a year."

We'll drink to that.

And also to the indefatigable spirit that confronts adversity with a smile.

Sure, there are faults with the Irish; doesn't even a rose have thorns? But on this one day of the year, on this one particular day of the year 1972, let's pretend that these faults do not exist.

There's a famous question in an old song, "How's poor old Ireland, and how does she stand?"

Like her sons and daughters she stands proudly, a smile concealing the hurt in her heart.