



From A Bishop's Journal (774)

“To Learn Anew the Benefit of Individual Confession” (2)

The instruction given by Pope John Paul II in April, 2002, has made it compulsory in Canada as of January, 2008, to terminate the use of collective absolution except in situations of very grave necessity, and to reaffirm that individual confession is the only ordinary mode of confession for someone who is aware of grave sin, to be reconciled with God and the Church. This situation compels us to readjust our perception of the great sacrament of forgiveness as a divine gesture.

Grave Sin

Pope John Paul II refers to a sinner who is aware of having committed a grave sin... but what is a “grave” sin? In the early church there is mention of three “grave” sins: adultery, homicide, and apostasy. Then the Church began publishing lists of actions that could be “mortal sins,” and to some moralists the least peccadillo could be classed a “mortal sin.” Many people were deeply marked by this rather puritanical teaching. I shall always remember that there is a distinction between a mortal sin and a venial sin. I shall remember, too, that there must be at least three elements, to commit a mortal sin: grave matter, a thorough understanding of the gravity, and full consent of the will. If one of these elements is lacking, there is no mortal sin. The Church obliges us to confess our mortal sins once a year. When we talk of “grave” sin we refer to actions to be seriously considered, and which we have committed with full knowledge and will. The “lists” of sins that were familiar to us, not so far back, stressed mostly faults of a sexual nature: the sixth and ninth commandments of God were the focus, while honesty and justice should have been given more attention. The Lord Jesus left us only two commandments that are really only one: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” It is those faults against this commandment that must especially be confessed, when there is serious matter. We would have to be deaf or blind believers or else living on another planet, to assert that there are no longer any sins. Or one would need to no longer believe in God, to declare that our covenant was never weakened in our relationship with Him and with our neighbour.

Murderers without Borders

Last year I meditated long and hard on the biblical story of how King Ahab of Samaria and Queen Jezebel his wife falsely accused their neighbour Naboth and condemned him to death, in order to take his vine. The prophet Elijah had to step in for them to realise the seriousness of their crime they had committed in cold blood. When we look at everything that we inflict today on the poor in our society by exposing them to certain death, I have written this song because today, still, there are Ahabs and Jezebels: “Who will deliver us from the assassin Ahab? Who will deliver us from the murderess Jezebel? They rob us of our lands, and kill our families; they dishonour God. But God watches over the poor and gives them hope of living in a world of justice. Three thousand years ago there lived in Samaria Queen Jezebel and Ahab her husband. As they wanted to increase the size of their domain, they wanted to take the vine of their neighbour Naboth. ‘This vine is mine, it is my inheritance: never will I give it up for money.’ The king and queen decided to end the quarrel, and they set up a false trial, accusing their neighbour before false witnesses, of having cursed God. Naboth was stoned before his accusers, and Ahab and Jezebel shamelessly took over the vine, because they were all-powerful. The Lord sent the prophet Elijah to these remorseless murderers, for him to confront the truth: you have committed a most odious murder, and you shall die where Naboth was killed, and dogs will lick your guilty blood.’ Ahab repented, but Jezebel did not. There are bloodthirsty murderers today roaming the world. They shamelessly rob and kill without pity. They make the poor people poorer still, robbing them of even their basic needs as they raise prices and become almighty.”

Grave Matter...

The example of Ahab and Jezebel illustrates very well what we mean when we say that something is considered grave matter, a grave sin: stealing without shame, robbing from the poor, defaming others, breaking the bonds of kindness and friendship between people, becoming increasingly unjust toward others, not to care about the victims of bandits who take from them their very livelihood, whether it be food, lodging, clothing, means of getting around, or honour. “Whatever you have done to the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me.” These actions are far from being petty misdeeds. Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom had reason to react strongly against those who seized for themselves the wherewithal of the starving, the needy and the destitute. “The bread you keep for yourself belongs to the poor, the money you hide belongs to the impoverished, the things that you waste belong to the needy, the coat that you hide away belongs to the naked...” These are examples of grave sin, a lot more serious than “sins of the flesh,” without, however denying their graveness, such as sexual aggression or violence, prostitution, or so-called sexual tourism. And there are also grave sins committed against God Himself: conscious and willed blasphemy is one of them, and perjury, desecration of holy places and things, and religious indifference, rebellion against God, etc.

Helping Someone

If the prophet found the way of awakening Ahab and Jezebel from their murderous indifference, it is sometimes necessary for a colleague, a spouse, a pastor or a catechist to make us aware of the seriousness of the action we are doing. For instance, it would be a serious matter for parents not to

show concern for the Christian formation of their children, just as it would be a grave matter not to be concerned about their physical and intellectual development. In order to understand the seriousness or gravity of a believer's action, one must always place it under the gaze of God, and in relation to the covenant He has established with man and woman. Acknowledgement of the seriousness of our actions, and confessing them, can be a source of liberation.

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