

The Evolution of Auricular Confession

The Catholic Church teaches that the Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance and the private confession to a priest. The Council of Trent sternly warns those who deny that auricular confession was commanded by Christ.

If anyone denies that sacramental confession was instituted by divine law or is necessary to salvation; or says that the manner of *confessing secretly to a priest alone, which the Catholic Church has always observed from the beginning* and still observes, is at variance with the institution and command of Christ and is a human contrivance, let him be anathema. [1]

The Catholic Church claims that secret confession to a priest has been observed “from the beginning”. But is this historically correct?

We search in vain in the pages of the New Testament for auricular confession. The disciples confessed their faults to each other and freely forgave one another. But they sought *God's forgiveness* from God himself, as the Lord Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven... Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Luke 11:4). To God the Father they confessed: “If we confess our sins, he (God the Father) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). The disciples in the apostolic churches knew nothing of private confession to a priest.

What about the first centuries of the early church? Did these early Christians privately confess their sins to a priest to receive absolution? St John Chrysostom (347-407) said that they confessed to God in prayer without having to disclose their sins to anyone else.

Let us persuade ourselves that we have sinned. Let us say it not with the tongue only, but also with the mind. Let us not call ourselves sinners, but also count over our sins, going over them each specifically. I do not say to you, Make a parade of yourself, nor accuse yourself before others: but be persuaded by the prophet when he says, 'Reveal your way unto the Lord' (Psalm 37:5). Confess these things before God. Confess before the Judge your sins with prayer; if not with tongue, yet in memory, and be worthy of mercy. [2]

In his sermon to the catechumens, St Augustine (354-430 AD) gives us a snapshot of the practice in his time; he said that Christians prayed to God for forgiveness:

For the sake of all sins was Baptism provided; for the sake of light sins, without which we cannot be, was prayer provided. What has the Prayer? "Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors." Once for all we have washing in Baptism, every day we have washing in prayer. [3]

Except for very grave sins (such as adultery, murder and idolatry, for which the offender was required to publicly confesses his sins to the church), at that time, Christians confessed to God and not to a priest.

Private confession to a priest was introduced more than six hundred years after the birth of the church. Interestingly the Catechism of the Catholic Church admits this historical fact:

During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the "private" practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament

has been performed in secret between penitent and priest. This new practice envisioned the possibility of repetition and so opened the way to a regular frequenting of this sacrament. [4]

Please notice that in the seventh century, private confession was a “new practice.” Subsequently it became more and more popular, but even up to the 12th century, the scholastic theologian Peter the Lombard did not make the mediation of the priest a requirement, but declared that confession to God was sufficient. Furthermore he says that there was no agreement in his time whether confession to a priest was essential. [5]

Finally the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) made auricular confession obligatory on all Catholics, who were compelled to “individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year.” [6]

This rule remains to the present day. The canon law states that “all the faithful who have reached the age of discretion are bound faithfully to confess their grave sins at least once a year.” [7]

But the early Christians did not confess their sins to a priest, not in a year, not even in a lifetime. Yet the Catholic magisterium has the audacity to compel the people of God to submit to a human invention that Christ never commanded.

But perhaps God will give you courage to cast off the human tradition of auricular confession, and like the early Christians, you begin confessing your sins directly to God, just as the Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray for forgiveness to the Father. God is faithful. He will hear you. He will forgive you if you apply your heart to him.

References:

[1] Council of Trent, Session 14, Canon 6.

<http://www.americancatholictruthsociety.com/docs/TRENT/trent14.htm>

[2] St. Chrysostom. Homily 31 on Hebrews.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240231.htm>

[3] St. Augustine. A Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1307.htm>

[4] Catechism of the Catholic Church, Paragraph 1447.

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm>

[5] Philip Schaff. History of the Christian Church. 5; 117.

http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/5_ch14.htm#_ednref108

[6] Fourth Lateran Council.

<http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum12.htm>

[7] Code of Canon Law, 989.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P3H.HTM