

Counsels to Confessors

A Discourse

ADDRESSED TO AN ASSEMBLY OF MISSIONARY PRIESTS

by Saint Leonard of Port Maurice

“The most divine of things divine is to
cooperate with God in the salvation of souls.”
(Dionysius the Areopagite)



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Approbation of His Eminence Paul Cardinal Cullen

Blessed [sic] Leonard of Port Maurice, in Italy, was a distinguished missionary in the last [*i.e.* nineteenth] century, who gained many souls to God by his preaching and his writings. His works were published in Rome in thirteen volumes in 1853, and duly approved. The treatise now published in English, and entitled Counsels to Confessors, has been always considered to be a most useful and valuable guide in the administration of the sacrament of penance. As I have been informed that the translation, which has been made by a skillful theologian, faithfully expresses the opinions and feelings of the holy author, I am happy to recommend it to those who have the direction of the consciences of others, hoping that they will derive light and instruction from the words of a most holy and zealous laborer in the vineyard of the Lord.

+ PAUL CARD. CULLEN,
Archbishop of Dublin.

Excerpts from the Encyclical Letter *Charitate Christi*

BY POPE LEO XII TO ALL THE PATRIARCHS, ETC., DATED 8
JANUARY 1826 [OR 25 DECEMBER 1825] CONCERNING THE
EXTENSION OF THE JUBILEE YEAR

[Translation by Bernard A. Hausmann, S.J., in: *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1878*, edited by Claudia Carlin, I.H.M. (McGrath Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 209-215. Citation at 211 f. English translation revised by Michael J. Miller.]

You must take diligent care that those whom you select to hear confessions remember and exemplify what our predecessor Innocent III prescribes for the minister of penance, namely “that he be discreet and cautious. According to the manner of the wise physician, he should pour wine and oil on the wounds of the injured, and diligently inquire into the circumstances of the sinner and of the sin so as to learn what kind of advice he ought to give, and by making use of various tests, to discover what kind of remedy must be applied in order to heal the sick soul.” Let him keep in mind the warnings of the *Roman Ritual*: “Let the priest weigh diligently when and to whom absolution is to be given or denied or deferred, lest he absolve those who are incapable of receiving such a blessing: that is, those who show no signs of grief, those who do not wish to give up hatreds and enmities, to make restitution when they can, to avoid the proximate occasions of sin, or to use other means of abandoning their sins and amending their lives, and those who have given public scandal, unless they make public satisfaction and remove the scandal.” Anyone can see how far removed these precautions are from those priests who, hearing some serious crime or finding someone infected with many kinds of sin, at once say that they are not able to give absolution. To be sure, they refuse to attend the very ones whom they have been

appointed to care for especially, by Christ who said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” This is also far removed from those priests to whom the least diligence in making an examination of conscience or the slightest sign of grief and purpose of amendment seems sufficient that they think they are able to absolve. And finally, they think that they have taken a safe plan if they dismiss the people to another time for absolution. If ever the mean should be observed, then it is especially necessary in this matter, because excessive ease in granting absolution may encourage facility in sinning, and excessive rigor may alienate souls from confession and tempt them to despair over salvation.

Indeed, many penitents present themselves to the ministers of the sacrament of penance entirely unprepared, but nevertheless in such a way that they can usually be made ready if the priest now, clothed in the mercy of Jesus Christ, who “did not come to call the just but to call sinners”, knows how to deal zealously, patiently, and gently with them. If he fails to do so, he himself should not be deemed ready to hear confessions any more than the others are to go to confession. Indeed, those who have been guilty of grievous crimes or have been away from the confessional for many years are not for this reason only to be judged unworthy of confession, for “the mercy of the Lord is not limited, but is rather an infinite treasure.” Those who are uneducated or slow-witted and so have not examined themselves sufficiently—and will not know how to unless the priest himself assists them—are likewise eligible for confession. Unworthy, however, are those who—after he has shown due diligence in questioning them (but not so as to burden them excessively), and has endeavored to elicit in them a detestation of sin, while pouring out heart-felt prayers to God for them in all charity—nevertheless are prudently judged to lack the sorrow and contrition by which they may be disposed to receive the grace of God which is obtained in the Sacrament. But whatever the penitents’ disposition of soul when they come to the minister of penance, he must avoid at all costs sending anyone away, through his own fault, with a mistrust of God’s goodness or with hostility to the sacrament of reconciliation. If, for a just reason, absolution must be postponed, let him persuade the penitents as kindly as

possible that it is necessary, that it is the confessor's duty and obligation, and that their own salvation demands this. The priest should encourage them very tenderly to return as soon as possible, so that, having done faithfully the things which were prescribed for their salvation, they may break the bonds of sin and be refreshed by the sweetness of heavenly grace.

A very apt model of this charity is St. Raymond of Peñafort, whom the Church calls a remarkable minister of the sacrament of penance. He writes: "Knowing the sins of his people, let the confessor be benevolent and prepared to raise up and carry the burden himself. Let him show kindness in his demeanor, compassion for the sinner, and discretion in making allowances. The confessor should aid the penitent with prayer, almsgiving, and other good works; he should assist with leniency, consolation and a promise of hope and, when the occasion demands, also with rebuke."

"It is better for the priest to tell the penitent how great a penance ought to be assigned to him, and nevertheless to assign something that the penitent might do tolerably" (St. Thomas Aquinas).

"For my part, I am able to list many great sinners who were saved only because a worthy penance, one on a par with the crime, was exacted" (St. John Chrysostom).

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“TEACH ME GOODNESS AND DISCIPLINE AND KNOWLEDGE.”
— PSALM 118:66.

ONE: How beautiful is this prayer of the holy prophet! He asks of God not riches nor honors, not the prosperity of this world nor its joys; his only desire is, that he may be endowed with goodness, prudence, and knowledge — “Teach me goodness and discipline and knowledge.” His petition corresponds with that of the man mentioned in the Gospel, who solicited from his friend three loaves for the support of his family — “Friend, lend me three loaves” — Luke 11:5; the bread of goodness, prudence, and knowledge, so needful to such as are charged with the holy ministry, and which each confessor should daily ask of God, that he may worthily acquit himself of his duties. For, my dear sirs, the high and noble functions of a confessor are almost divine; they are all directed to wage war on hell, and conduct souls to heaven. Let it suffice to remind you how the apostle, intending to have you revered and cherished by the Church of God, has expressed himself in similar terms regarding the attributes of your ministry, making use of these remarkable words: “We are God’s coadjutors” — 1 Corinthians 3:9. In truth, it can be said of the confessor, that he is, to some extent, a coadjutor of God in the sanctification of souls, since he is directly instrumental in communicating grace to them. The confessor, then, engaged in a work that so much tends to the glory of God, has reason, at once, to felicitate himself on the sublime nature of his employment, and to tremble lest he should become guilty by his manner of fulfilling it. Devoid of the above-named three qualities, he exercises his ministry with irreverence, or is wanting in fidelity, or he suffers its fruit to be lost through negligence; or perhaps (horrible to think!) he may even come to profane its sanctity. “It is dangerous to give an account of that position,” was a customary expression of St. Augustine when speaking of the episcopal office

(in Psalm, 126). This saying of the holy bishop fully applies to the office of a confessor: "It is dangerous to give an account of that position." Oh! How many priests are now burning in hell, who would instead be enjoying the presence of God but for their having undertaken the duties of the tribunal of penance!

We are here assembled in conference, my dear sirs, the chief object of which is to engage in a holy league that will secure amongst us uniformity in the manner of administering this divine sacrament, and to stimulate each other to zeal in discharging its sacred functions, which call for qualities almost divine. If it be not given us to attain the wished-for perfection, at least let us aim at the acquisition of the three virtues which the prophet prays for with so much instance - "Teach me goodness and discipline and knowledge." These three essential qualities shall form the matter of our conference. Herein will rest all the success of our holy mission. United by conformity of doctrine, each being fully provided with these three qualities, goodness, prudence, and knowledge, what an amount of good shall we not effect! How great the glory to God! How precious the advantage to ourselves! To proceed:

TWO: The first and most necessary quality to every one charged with the sacred ministry, and especially to every confessor, is that of goodness. A good life is indispensable to every ecclesiastic; there is no better means of persuasion than good example; men are more inclined to believe what they see than what they merely hear; virtue will appear to them more easily practiced when they have only to imitate those who rule and direct them. It is with good reason that Saint Gregory says: "For indeed, that voice which the life of the speaker commends penetrates deeper into the heart." (*Past. Curæ, part 2, chap. 3*). This goodness does not consist merely in his living in the state of grace, but requires, moreover, that he should devote himself to the practice of the Christian virtues and works of piety, and that he should be inflamed with an ardent desire for the salvation of souls. When I meet with a confessor who, not content with leading a life free from serious crime, is all fervor, all zeal in devising means to draw souls to God, I find a real treasure; but, alas! how afflicting to witness the disorderly life of those who

bring public dishonor on their sublime ministry, and, what is still more deplorable, are not deterred from hearing confessions in a state, sometimes of doubtful, often of even undoubted mortal sin. These unhappy ministers, according to the commonly received opinion, commit as many sacrileges as they give absolution; thus opening the gates of hell for themselves in the same proportion as they open the gates of heaven for their more fortunate penitents!

THREE: It is an irrefragable maxim of Saint Thomas (3 p. q. 64, art. 8, ad 1), that a confessor who, in administering the sacrament of penance acts as a living instrument whom it is God's pleasure to employ in the accomplish of His will, if he would labor effectually for the salvation of souls, requires not only to live in the state of grace, but must also apply himself to the practice of every virtue. Assuredly a confessor who is tepid and dissipated, who has but little taste for prayer and self-denial, can but inadequately fulfill the duties of his sacred ministry: charity will not impart warmth to his words, zeal will not animate his admonitions, confidence will not give authority to his counsels, and perhaps it will even end in a perversion of the sacramental judgment either in his absolving the unworthy, or omitting admonition in the case of those requiring it, or in yielding to the obstinate; in fine, he will remain mute in the sacred tribunal, lacking courage to reprehend others for faults from which he fears he is not himself free. The result of this will be, that it will become generally understood that a certain father says nothing against such a sin — usury, for instance, or a passion for gambling — in consequence of which, numbers flock to him from all sides, and sacrilegious confessions become multiplied; for they have no real desire to be cured of their faults who designedly make choice of a confessor who will not reprehend them. Now, as the sacrileges of penitents are imputed by the divine justice to the confessor who has been the cause of them, far better would it have been for him had he never received power to give absolutions which serve only to bind others and himself also! Speaking of Judas, Jesus Christ says: "Woe to that man by whom the Son of man shall be betrayed. It were better for him, if that man had not been born" (Matthew 26:24). These words may be applied to confessors guilty of ruining

souls: "Better for him if he had not been a confessor!" What can be more true than the saying of the Holy Ghost: "He that is evil to himself, to whom will he be good?" (Ecclesiasticus 14:5). Permit me now, gentlemen, to take the liberty of calling your attention to what I have so frequently recommended to seculars on the occasion of missions, namely, that all should make a general confession, to become renewed in the spirit and to put their accounts in order. It is a point of essential importance, both in order that we may pass our life in peace, and especially that we may be full of confidence at the hour of death. Now, in my opinion, this spiritual renewal is much more necessary for priests than for the laity. I suppose that this general confession is already made; but should it so happen that any one has omitted it, to him I will be so bold as to say: Make it, I beg, make it; hasten to give peace to your conscience; this peace is the principal basis of a good life, the chief support of every minister of the altar. If you have already made a general confession, occupy yourself now with an extraordinary confession, in which you will take into account the obligations of your state. Examine yourself on these two precepts: "Decline from evil and do good" (Psalm 36:27). See how you have fulfilled the former in avoiding all that could cause even the slightest scandal. What a misfortune if you find yourself of the number of those to whom, to their shame, may be applied the words: "As the priest goes, so go the people"; of the number of those priests who dare to show themselves in public with all the surroundings of studied foppishness, and whom one would take for the priests of some pagan divinity rather than for ministers of Jesus Christ.

FOUR: Give an account of all the obligations of your state, and commence by examining in what manner you recite the Divine Office. If under the obligation of reciting it in choir, see if you make the prescribed pause at the asterisk, or if, precipitately muttering the words, your great object is to hasten through it, without further intention than that of ridding yourself of an obligation. Examine as to how you celebrate the holy Mass. Do you bring to it the necessary respect, modesty, and recollection? Are you exact in conforming

to all things enjoined by the rubrics – the crosses, genuflections, and the other ceremonies demanded by the dignity of this august sacrifice? Oh! How sad it is to see in the evening engaged with the cards and dice, the same priest whom we have seen in the morning handling the chalice and paten, consecrating and tilting about the sacred host as if it were some worthless bauble! It surely was with some reason that John of Avila, approaching a priest of this description, whispered into his ear: “Treat Him whom you hold in your hands somewhat better, He is the Son of a worthy Father”. How many times (I feel shame in relating such disorders), how often have remarks such as the following been overheard regarding the priest at the altar: “See that priest who is officiating; he is able to drink more than anybody; he is a first-rate sportsman; no one is a match for him at gambling; have you not remarked him the other day in such a tavern, in such society?” Alas! you know the sentence pronounced on these men of joys and pleasures. “Alas, alas, Lord,” sadly exclaims Saint Bernard, “for those who are the first in persecution are the very ones who seem to exercise preeminence in God’s Church.” (*De Consid., lib. 3, ad Eug.*). No doubt, gentlemen, these disorders do not exist amongst you; I repeat it, they do not; but this I know with equal certainty, that one such priest as this is enough to destroy all the respect due to the priesthood. Let me then say boldly to him who is forgetful of his duties: “Decline from evil, my dear brother in Jesus Christ, decline from evil.”

FIVE: “And do good.” It is not enough that a priest be good in himself; it is requisite also that, by his example, his knowledge, his labors, his counsels, he should be useful to others. As, when a church has been demolished, the materials cannot be used for building an ordinary house, but must only be employed in the construction of another church, for a much stronger reason the man whom holy orders have consecrated to God, should only be occupied with sacred things and such as tend to the service of God. His home is the church; his books the sacred scriptures; his business, helping the poor, instructing the ignorant, and administering the

sacraments. To acquit himself well of these functions, a proper distribution of his time is necessary, determining the portion of it to be devoted to study, particularly to the study of moral theology, the time for spiritual reading, for examination of conscience, for prayer. Above all, there are two pivots on which the whole life of the priest ought to revolve, namely, prayer and mortification. As to mental prayer, which, in its ultimate analysis, is nothing else than thinking seriously on the great affair of eternal salvation, I only venture to ask of you for the performance of this duty one half hour each day. Suppose a poor man saw you casting gold pieces into a river, would it be unreasonable of him to ask you for one for the love of God? And shall I be accounted unreasonable in laying claim to one half hour each day from one who dissipates so much of his time in idleness, sports, and amusements? And, I ask this half hour for your own soul's welfare, and not for any advantage to myself! If you had on hands a lawsuit or other affair of great importance, would you be reluctant to give to it half an hour each day? But what is our great affair in this world? To save our soul, my dear sirs, to save our soul. Let each one then resolve to consecrate half an hour each day to the important affair of his salvation. But prayer cannot be fruitful without a spirit of mortification. Happy he who has preserved his baptismal robe unstained, and has no fault wherewith to reproach himself. Not to such do I address my words; but let him who has sinned hear me. To him I would say: You have to do penance either in this life or the next; in which had it best be done? Is it not our body that, by craving for indulgence, has drawn us into sin? Consequently it also should bear the penalty. Saint Francis of Assisi used to say: "He who indulges the flesh in all, that is lawful, will end by yielding to it in what is forbidden". Experience only too truly confirms this saying. Courage! Then, my dear sirs; let us enter resolutely on the practice of mortification, subduing the unruly propensities of the flesh, mortifying the eyes, the tongue, the palate, in fine, all our senses, and we shall experience great peace in ourselves. "I chastise my body and bring it into subjection," said Saint Paul (1 Cor. 9:27), that apostle so full of virtue; and we, forsooth, would be for doing nothing of the kind!

SIX: As to the aspirants to holy orders, I have invited them to our conference to say to them these few words: Your ambition to be numbered amongst the priests of Jesus Christ; from what motive does your desire to embrace a state so holy proceed? Your relatives have, perhaps, said to you that the life of the missionary priest is the pleasantest of any, being equally removed from the cares of the world and the rigors of the cloister; that he has nothing to think about, but to live and enjoy himself; that by adopting this line of life a person may aspire to the highest dignities; that a priest can be of the greatest service to his family, freeing them from debt, adding to his sister's fortunes, procuring them good matches, and other things of the kind. Ah! my dear friends, mind well what I say. Either renounce this state of life, or relinquish your guilty designs. The first end which a person, in embracing the priesthood, should propose to himself is to give himself entirely to God, to devote himself wholly to the sacred ministry, and secure his own salvation. He that embraces this state through motives other than these simply rushes towards the eternal abyss. But I would ask you: Do you feel that you have sufficient strength to bear so weighty a burden, especially are you competent to lead a life of the strictest purity? How monstrous to see a young man, habituated from an early age to shameful crimes, impudently presenting himself to pronounce a vow of perpetual chastity! Why, even in the case of a simple vow of chastity, when, on account of his sinful habits, the person fails in its observance, the probability of his not reforming affords a sufficient cause for a confessor to apply for a dispensation of his vow "for the purpose of entering matrimony", and a young man, a slave to the like habits, will have the hardihood to charge his conscience with a solemn vow from which he can never be dispensed! What temerity! To you, confessors, I now address myself. I do not say that you cannot absolve a cleric who casts himself at your feet and manifests a sincere sorrow for his vicious habits, as shall be explained later on when discussing the subject of prudence; I will even add that, notwithstanding his crimes, if there appear to be a hope that, with the help of Divine grace, he will amend, if he have the firm purpose to do all that in him

lies to bring this about, if he display signs of true contrition, he is in the disposition to entitle him to absolution; but I maintain that for the reception of holy orders, the resolution not to sin again is not sufficient; it is further requisite that the candidate for holy orders should believe, with a well-assured conscience, that, aided by the grace of God, he will correct and totally rid himself of his bad habits. Although this conviction be not rigorously necessary in order to receive the sacrament of penance (for the heart may be firmly determined on an amendment about which the mind still experiences some misgiving), it becomes a matter of indispensable necessity when there is question of receiving holy orders. If, without possessing this assurance, the candidate for orders should persist in embracing a state of life, the duties of which the confessor believes he is not capable to discharge, he undertakes a burden which he knows to be beyond his strength by reason of his criminal habits, And he willfully puts himself in the occasion of committing innumerable sacrileges. Will any one dare to say that such a subject can be admitted to orders? Should he persist, I would ask: How could you be justified in absolving him? Confessors, have you seriously reflected on this truth? What then should be done, it may be asked. This: Put your clerics on their trial, and when they come to you sullied with impurities, say plainly to them: "My friend, it is not sufficient that you promise me never more to sin in these ways again, you require to make strenuous efforts to free yourself from these evil habits, you must attain to a well-grounded confidence, that, with the help of God's grace, you will altogether abstain from them for the future". Profit, therefore, by the counsel which I now give you, before you receive subdeaconship, and still more, before you advance to the priesthood, put upon your evil inclinations the most rigorous restraint, prove your virtue for **a year or two**, and when you have by this means established yourself in holy purity, you shall receive the sacerdotal character, because after this trial it can be readily judged that you have that firm and sincere assurance which I require of you. Does the cleric refuse submission to your advice? Does he still persist in aspiring to holy orders without being assured of his amendment? Send him away; he is not worthy of

absolution. Blinded youth! Hear me. If you have not the strength to lead a life of purity, the ecclesiastical state is not suited to you, the clerical collar which you wear shall become a collar of red hot iron, which you shall have to wear for all eternity.

SEVEN: A blameless life is essential for an ecclesiastic; but without the quality of great prudence, the confessor will but badly discharge the duties of his ministry; for prudence is, so to say, the soul of his holy functions; therefore it shall form the chief subject of our conference. Prudence (I speak not now of that prudence of the world which degenerates into cunning, and is therefore unworthy of a man clothed in the character of the priesthood), spiritual prudence, I say, is a great virtue, that teaches us to accommodate all our actions to the manner, the time, and place which our duties indicate. Its essential parts are circumspection and precaution; and its principal exercise is in our thinking and judging aright. Now, this virtue, my dear sirs, is to be obtained from God by study, and still more effectually by tears and prayer; and it is to be sought all the more earnestly as the confessor cannot properly discharge his threefold functions of judge, physician, and doctor, without a great prudence supernaturally enlightened by God. True, it is not for him in quality of judge, **to make laws**, but neither should he ever infringe those already existing. Does his penitent manifest the requisite dispositions? He looses him by imparting to him sacramental absolution. Is the penitent wanting in these dispositions? He binds him or leaves him bound as he found him. But, as the justice which he administers in the tribunal of confession is directed to the amendment of the guilty, its decisions are different from ordinary and coercitive judgments. What an amount of prudence does it not call for on his part to compass his great object, the conversion of the sinner! In truth the rock against which the greater number of confessors make shipwreck is imprudence. See this confessor, indiscreet and hasty, who from lassitude, or precipitation, or a disorderly anxiety to hasten through a great many confessions, allows not his penitent to unfold the complications of his conscience, but keeps impatiently asking him: "Have you anything more to tell?" So that, and in consequence of his

so acting, the unhappy penitent omits a portion of his confession. This other, the moment that something shameful or very grievous is told to him, sets forthwith to scold and reproach the penitent; he thus hardens the heart of the penitent at his feet, and arrests the avowal of all his sins. Others, in fine, are not deterred from putting questions from mere curiosity, and fritter away their time in going into useless details. The confessor also who employs no means to help his penitent in the revelation of those faults which he feels it the more difficult to confess, deserves the reproach of imprudence. A servant of God once told me that he had gained to God a vast number of souls by one simple question. When a stranger presented himself, and from the drift of his confession gave him some reason to think that at the bottom of the penitent's heart there lurked some sin not yet avowed, he used to ask: Have you, at any time, concealed a sin? In your youth, for instance — in childhood. Acknowledge it frankly now; have no hesitation about it. I will help you to explain it, etc. By these kind words he often succeeded in ridding the heart of the penitent of an infernal serpent that drew after a long trail of null and sacrilegious confessions, thus verifying the words of the Holy Ghost: "His obstetric hand brought forth the winding serpent" — Job 26:13. Wise and happy practice! Have recourse to it, gentlemen, as often as in your prudence you deem it useful, and you will derive much advantage from it both for the sanctification of your own souls and those of others.

EIGHT: If a confessor needs great prudence in his quality of judge, he requires it very much more in his quality of physician; for he has to examine minutely not only the sin, but the sources, the causes, and the occasions of sin, in order to be able to apply the proper remedy. He must be most circumspect in his speech; a single incautious expression is capable of doing much mischief both to himself and his penitents. "Wisdom shineth in the face of the wise" (Proverbs 17:24), says the Holy Ghost, which De Lyra explains, "through maturity and honesty". He will, according to time and place, assume his soutane and stole, conformably to the Roman Ritual; he will be most precise in consulting for everything that tends to the strictest modesty and the dignity

of the priestly character. He will be particular in not hearing the confessions of females elsewhere than in his confessional, unless in case of unavoidable necessity; not to confess them except in the day time, or, at least, when there is full light; and he ought not to confess even sick females unless with the door of the chamber open. In fine, he will comport himself in all things as a true minister of God, exhibiting a grave and guarded demeanor, a serenity of manner not to be disturbed by any sign or gesture that would indicate tedium or displeasure, and might lead those present to surmise that the penitent had confessed some weighty sin. The confessor should also so place the penitent as not to be too close to his ear or his face. These precautions may perhaps seem trifling; they are however requisite for the proper arrangement of all the circumstances of so holy an action, and in order to do away with all that might diminish the respect due to the sacrament, or harm the soul or the reputation of the priest. To the prudence of the confessor it chiefly belongs to ascertain whether his penitent be an habitual or relapsing sinner, if he be in the proximate occasion of sin, and if he have an explicit knowledge of those mysteries which all are bound to know by the necessity of a means to an end. These, my dear sirs, are the three important points which shall fittingly engage our attention. We are here assembled for the purpose of entering into a holy league, which shall secure amongst us strict uniformity in practice; but, that we may proceed securely towards our object, allow me to observe to you that it is not my intention to discuss probabilities, or the opinions of such or such an authority. No, gentlemen, I desire to place before you those principles of moral theology only, which have been universally adopted by all the doctors, confirmed by the authority of holy fathers, and especially which have been unalterably fixed by the infallible decisions of the Holy see. I proceed now to develop three propositions which the Church has condemned; these decrees will serve as our guide, they will throw light on our decisions and save us from error. The first regards habitual sinners "The penitent who has the habit of sinning against the law of God, of nature, or of the Church, even if there appears no hope of amendment, is not to be denied

absolution or to be put off, provided he professes orally that he is sorry and proposes amendment.” This is the sixtieth of Innocent XI. The second has been fulminated against those circumstanced in the occasion of sin, and is the sixty-first of the same pontiff – “He can sometimes be absolved, who remains in a proximate occasion of sinning, which he can and does not wish to omit, but rather directly and professedly seeks or enters into.” The third refers to those ignorant of the mysteries of faith – “A person is fit for absolution, however much he labors under an ignorance of the mysteries of the faith, and even if through negligence, even culpable, he does not know the mystery of the most blessed Trinity, and of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the sixty-fourth of the same Innocent XI. These cut off the three heads of the Hydra that caused so much terror and havoc, and dragged to their perdition so many souls misled by a false doctrine. Let us now analyze these propositions, and the truth of them will become only the more evident; and let us commence with the first, which refers to those involved in habits of sin. First, I ask, from what motives does the Church condemn the proposition which asserts that absolution ought never be delayed in the case of a penitent who is a recidivist and an habitual sinner, provided he only say that he is sorry for the past and means to amend? Her motives, without doubt, gentlemen, are these: that a prudent confessor, in his quality of judge and physician of souls, before pronouncing sentence, ought to be able to form a probable opinion that the penitent has really the interior dispositions, without which the sacrament would be null and without effect; and also because the frequent relapses of an unfortunate habitual sinner give just cause to a confessor to presume that such a penitent has not the interior disposition of regret for the past, and a firm purpose for the future, which are the proximate matter of the sacrament; therefore, it was with every justice that this proposition has been condemned as rash, erroneous, and scandalous. Saint Thomas gives us the key to this question, and decides clearly that the confessor, “cannot bind and loose **according to his own judgment**, but only as has been prescribed by God” (see Commentary on Book IV “of the

Sentences”, q. 18, art. 3-4.). The holy doctor would have every confessor, before giving absolution, to have sufficient grounds for forming a prudent and probable opinion that the penitent is in the proper dispositions. But since God alone “beholdeth the heart” (1 Kings 16:7) and man can discover its secrets only by the help of certain external signs, I think that our object shall be fully attained by supplying confessors with the means for recognizing these signs, and thereby enable them to decide in practice when a penitent may be absolved although he be addicted to the habit of sin; and when absolution ought to be deferred, so as to be in conformity with the decision of holy Church forbidding the practice set forth in the condemned proposition. I shall point out seven of such signs favorable to the habitual sinner, and seven that are the contrary. I say, therefore, that a person who sins habitually in one way or the other, whether by positive acts, such as blasphemy, hatred, impurity, theft, or any other sin; or whether, to consider the matter negatively, by willfully neglecting to restore the goods of another, to set right a reputation injured, a good name filched away, to discharge pious trusts, such as those for Masses, etc.; I say, with regard to such sinners, that, generally, speaking, they may be absolved when the confessor can judge by some of the following signs that they possess internally the requisite dispositions.

NINE: Firstly, if the habitual sinner have **never** been warned nor admonished by any confessor regarding his unhappy state, and if, now that he is actually and fully made aware of it, he promises from the heart [*i.e.* sincerely] to reform, accepts readily every penance, preservative or expiatory, that is imposed on him, and manifests a firm resolution of amendment. Second, if he exhibit signs of a lively sorrow, if his tears proceed from a supernatural motive, and not the effect of particular afflictions, temporal motives, or an effeminate temperament, showing that he has been truly touched by grace, and detests his sins. Third, if he come to confession during a mission or a time of other spiritual exercises, in consequence of having heard a sermon that stirred up compunction in his heart, and if, terrified by

the threats of the divine justice, he forms the firm resolution to change his life. The very opposite, however, should be the conclusion in the case of the sinner who, notwithstanding the sermons and reflections, exhibits no signs of remorse, and, much more, when he continues to sin during this time of sanctification without the slightest amendment. Fourth, if he have profited by the advice previously given by other confessors, and had recourse to the remedies which they prescribed, and if, reformed by it — **I do not say completely, but at least to some extent** — he now falls **less frequently** into his former sinful habits. Fifth, if he come to confession in consequence of being terrified by some striking event, by the sudden death of some obstinate sinner, particularly if that of an accomplice, or by reason of some calamity impending over himself or others, and which he regards as a just punishment from God, and the like. Sixth, if he feel an internal inspiration urging him to have recourse to a good confessor and cast himself at his feet, not because it is Paschal time, nor because he is forced to it by father or mother or master, nor because he is accustomed to confess on the vigils of the feasts of the blessed Virgin, every eight days, or the like, but solely because he is animated by an ardent desire to amend his life and recover the grace of God. Seventh, if he be on the point, or even in danger of death: it is to be presumed that in such circumstances every one is in concern about his eternal salvation, and really intends to amend. We cannot doubt that in the foregoing cases a confessor has **sufficient** reasons for judging with prudence of the internal dispositions of his penitent, and can absolve him because there is hope of amendment; we consequently do not adhere to the pernicious doctrine of the condemned proposition, which would grant absolution even if there is no hope of amendment. Some doctors hold that even in the foregoing cases the confessor may defer absolution when this delay is a means of securing some great advantage to his penitent; but, in ordinary circumstances, it is not expedient to follow this opinion, especially when there is room to fear lest an unhappy penitent, carried away by anger or by terror, might fall into despair or absent himself from the sacraments.

TEN: Having gone through the signs which denote a heart really moved, it remains for us to examine those that mark out the false penitent, whom no confessor can absolve without running the risk of disobedience to the decision of the Church which forbids the practice referred to in the proposition already cited. First, if, though warned **two or three times** of the danger of his state by a **zealous** confessor, the penitent always relapses, and perhaps even more frequently, into the same sins, and evinces no disposition giving hope of a change. Second, if he manifest no greater horror for sin than before, and by his tepidity leave no reasonable grounds to judge him otherwise than as a cheat in saying he detests that which is offensive to God. Third, if he have taken little heed of the remedies pointed out to him by the same or various confessors, and seem nowise disquieted in having neglected them. Fourth, if during the past he have always exhibited the like negligence, intent only on the indulgence of his passions, and not making **the least effort** to restrain them; if, so far from that, by falling more and more frequently into his habitual sins, he have proved the little concern he has about his eternal salvation. Fifth, if he come to confession only under pressure, because it is Easter time or because his parents or his master order him to do so, or because he has been accustomed to approach the sacraments every eight days, or by reason of any other motive springing from human respect, and if he show little or no disposition to change his life and fulfill the duties of a good Christian. Sixth, if he excuse his faults, dispute with his confessor, object to the penance, preservative or expiatory, imposed on him, and by his indocility give proof that he is incorrigible and obstinate in his habits of sin. Seventh, finally, if there be perceptible in him a great inclination to sin, a vicious propensity so marked as to make it evident that he is strongly attached to it, and if in consequence, despite his protestations of sincere sorrow for his faults, the confessor cannot in prudence put faith in him, but on the contrary has every right to conclude, from so determined an attachment to vice, that there is no real repentance in his case. You will agree, gentlemen, that these signs, clearly exhibited before your eyes, warrant me in declaring without hesitation, that in the aforesaid cases (**weigh well all the circumstances**) the confessor ought to refuse absolution,

because he cannot judge with any degree of probability that the penitent is duly disposed for it, and, much more, if he judges him to be interiorly devoid of the proper dispositions. Is the confessor in a state of doubt? **He should endeavor** to dispose the penitent by charitable exhortations, and if he does not succeed in dispelling his doubt, he should defer absolution until such time as the penitent give satisfactory evidence of his good dispositions.

ELEVEN: See then, the whole difficulty solved; see the error of these confessors proved, who would fain set up a universal rule regarding matters which are not susceptible of one; who say that absolution should be **always given**, or that it should be **always refused**, to relapsing sinners; two propositions equally **false**, both of them dis-edifying and scandalous: the former especially, having been formally condemned by the Church, should be absolutely rejected. It is for the priest, in his prudence, to decide in particular cases. He should be particularly on his guard not to suffer himself to be biased by his own individual inclinations or by the example of others; his sole solicitude should be to secure the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and to unite sound doctrine with earnest prayer. The experience of very many years has, unfortunately, only too surely convinced me that many confessors grant absolution with a strange facility to every penitent, **without examining** into his state, **without helping him** by their advice and exhortations, and without, if I may say so, putting his amendment to the proof. From this proceeds the ruin of innumerable souls, who, habituated in crime, seek to snatch an absolution from some heedless confessor, only to return immediately to their former habits, and plunge anew into the torrent of their iniquity, “they have slept their sleep” (Ps. 75:6); and, finally, in an instant they go down to hell. In truth, I should be playing my conscience false if I did not declare my opinion openly and without reserve. Yes, such confessors as these are hurrying the Catholic world to its destruction, and are ruining themselves. Let me now ask distinctly: How can I persuade myself that the confessor fulfills his duty, who, hearing his penitent’s confession, and finding him engulfed in a very chaos of sin of every kind, does not question him, **takes no pains to help him**, seeks not for the source of his

faults, or how long he has been wallowing the mire of sin; enquires not whether he has sinned from habit or from occasion, so as to be able to apply to his wounds their proper remedy? When, as we read in the Gospel, according to Saint Mark, they brought to our Lord one that was possessed, He at once asked the father how long his child had been in that unhappy state: "How long time is it since this hath happened unto him?" (Mk 9:20). Ah! Lord, the sorrowing father replied, "from his infancy", from his earliest years my unfortunate child has been the victim of this dreadful malady. How serious therefore, is the error of so many confessors in never informing themselves about the habit of sin! How many penitents, in reply to questioning on this point, should have to say, "from my infancy". In my childhood I began to sully myself with this turpitude. I have continued it up to the present time, and at each successive confession I have, unfortunately, had to accuse myself of just as many sins as before. And some would venture to give immediate absolution to sinners of this class, though they show not **the least appearance** of compunction or amendment. "Since the confessor is a judge and a physician, he must know the penitent's state with regard to his customary behavior in the past, so that he might know what medicine should be applied to him here and now, and whether he requires a postponement of absolution, and in this way he is finally cured" (De Lugo I. i. n. 73). Thus expresses himself the wise Cardinal De Lugo. His opinion is in complete accord with that of Corregia, and many other doctors, who, in conformity with the rule already proved, require in the case of a sinner who has been several times admonished about his unhappy state, and still gives no sign of amendment, that absolution should be deferred for some time, that he may enter into himself, that he may conceive a greater horror for sin, and form an efficacious resolution to amend his life. Important advice this, to those confessors, who, no sooner have they at their feet a sinner of this sort, than they are quite ready to raise their hand over him in absolution. How can they prudently judge that he is disposed, after continual falls and relapses? How believe a purpose efficacious, when no means are employed for attaining the proposed end? Has he come to confession with a firm resolution — a resolution sunk deeply, like an inscription graven

on marble? Hardly would it bear comparison with characters traced upon sand. Be it known to such confessors, that this abuse is one of the greatest of which they could be guilty in the administration of the sacrament of penance, an abuse that results in the damnation of a great number of Christians, by leaving them to die in their sins. Inconstant and unstable beings indicated by the prince of the apostles (2 Peter 2:14), who flit about from one confessor to another to escape being recognized, and only become stationary in hell. Confessors unheedfully, devoid of all zeal, murderers of themselves and others, they shall, on the day of judgment, have to account for the loss of these miserable sinners.

TWELVE: But, father, you may say to me, this remedy which you propose of deferring absolution, is an extreme one, and therefore should not be employed until all others have been tried and have failed. I answer that in the cases to which reference has been made, wherein the confessor can perceive no sign of real compunction, and can judge with no degree of probability in favor of the disposition of the penitent, this remedy is the only one. I maintain that he cannot deviate from this rule without failing in his duty as an experienced judge and physician of souls, charged with the administration of the sacrament of penance. Still, could he not excite the penitent to contrition by fervent exhortations? Would that simple exhortations could produce so desirable an effect! Unfortunately, however, it cannot always be hoped for; even amidst all the terrors of a mission, there are sinners to be found who hardly evince even moderate compunction; what, then, can be the great effect of a few words uttered in the confessional? Ah! I perceive, I perceive only too well, that this opposition proceeds from an inordinate wish to hasten over duty and to be complaisant to all. Whether a sinner be disposed or not, they would in any case absolve him. Is not this setting oneself in direct antagonism to the decisions of the Church, which condemn such scandalous conduct? Would you have me not to be moved to grief in witnessing the perdition of so many souls? Great God! we hear complaints expressed because a small number of confessors refuse absolution in obedience to the

decrees of the Church; and no voice is raised, no pen is employed to stem the torrent of destruction, to instruct a multitude of negligent confessors who do naught else than to raise their hands and pronounce absolutions! You are surprised to hear me say, “a multitude of negligent confessors”. Well, then, accompany me to a mission, go into a confessional, hear the confessions of an hundred penitents who will come to you; of these you will frequently find eighty and more given up to habitual vice; some to blasphemy, or swearing, or impurity, others to theft, or enmity, or evil thoughts. Ask them: My child, how long have you been committing these sins? For the last eight, ten, twenty years, father. Used you often to relapse into the same sin? Twice, three times in the week – perhaps every day. Have you always confessed them? Yes, father. Do you always go to the same confessor? No, father, I go sometimes to one, sometimes to another, as happens to be most convenient. So that during this long period of time you have tried all the confessors of the locality? Yes, father. Well now, tell me, did these confessors invariably give you absolution? Yes, father. But before absolving you, did they not say anything to you? They told me not to commit them again. But have they never made you aware of your unhappy state? Have they not pointed out to you the means of amendment? Have they not tried to excite contrition in your heart? I own, father, that two or three have addressed to me some words of exhortation, but all the others were content with giving me absolution. Nearly all them have given you absolution without saying anything more to you? Yes, always, father. Poor murdered creatures! The admissions of this one penitent make you aware of the weakness of nearly all the confessors of a whole neighborhood. Are you not filled with horror and indignation in finding that of eighty sinners from habit, seventy and more have, in this manner, been led on to their destruction through the imprudence and negligence of their confessors? The dialogue which I have repeated may seem to you a fiction. Alas! it is but too true, and would to God that frequent instances did not furnish the most authentic proofs of it. The holy Cardinal Bona (*Princip. Vitæ Christ.*, c. 13) with good reason deplores a system so prejudicial to the salvation of

souls. He observes that in consequence of this false charity, this culpable condescension, the greater part of Christians pass their life in a sad confusion, in continual alternations of sacraments and sin, of confession and relapse. Another prince of the Church, the wise and saintly Cardinal Bellarmine, mourns over the same abuse, and, regarding this too great readiness to absolve penitents without a sufficient assurance about their interior dispositions as productive of the greatest injury to Christian souls, he announced both from the pulpit and in his writings, that "There would not be such great ease in sinning today if there were not also such great ease in absolving."

THIRTEEN: What, then, is to be done? This, my dear sirs, is the important question, to discuss which we are assembled, the chief object of our conference. What it is for us to do, is to come to an agreement to establish amongst us a holy league, so as to secure the fullest uniformity in our manner of administering the sacrament of penance; and as on this depends the success of our holy mission, as also the welfare of an entire population, whom we have to impress with a high sense of its importance, kindly allow me to direct your attention to a circumstance which took place in a certain locality in which the name of God and those of His greatest saints used to be shamefully profaned, the inhabitants of which had contracted the detestable habit of uttering blasphemy in a manner so publicly scandalous as to cause the utmost horror. God inspired some holy religious who resided in this place, and prompted them to entreat all the confessors of the district to form amongst themselves a holy association for the purpose of remedying this frightful evil, and rooting out of the land an abuse more contagious than the plague, and which, increasing with time, threatened to overspread the whole country. With one accord they determined, that when these blasphemers should present themselves at the tribunal of confession without manifesting very special signs of repentance, they should be denied absolution for eight days, and that they should have a salutary and remedial penance imposed on them, accompanied with a fervent exhortation, calculated to make them fully conscious of the bad state in which

they were. A festival of the Blessed Virgin occurring shortly after, these sinners came to confession, and sought absolution from the horrible blasphemies of which they had to accuse themselves. "My dear child", the confessors said to them, "for the love of the blessed Mother of God, refrain from blasphemy, perform such a penance, come again to confession in **eight or ten days**, and I will then absolve you; doubt not that I will receive you with charity, and, so far from scolding you, I will then have it in my power to offer you words of consolation," etc. "What! Father, do you refuse me absolution?" "Yes, my child, I cannot give it to you just at present". "But, father, today is a festival of the blessed Virgin: I wish to communicate". "No matter; have patience. In eight days I will absolve you, and you can then communicate". The penitent, astonished, seeks another confessor, and meets with the same replies, the like refusal. The same mode of proceeding being observed with all who were guilty of blasphemy, the result was, that they were moved to compunction, and were heard saying to one another: Oh what a sin! – What an enormous sin it must be since no priest will absolve us from it. They accordingly conceived for it so great a horror, that at the end of a month none amongst them was heard to blaspheme. My dear sirs, the disorders of a great proportion of sinners proceed more from ignorance than from the will; they do not understand the gravity of mortal sin, they have no just conception of it. This is really the primary cause of evil. Therefore, nothing is better calculated to arouse them, and make them enter into themselves, than the salutary penalty of refusing them absolution for **a few days**. Be assured that this is one of the most effectual means to recall a relapsing sinner to a proper course of life; and though absolution be only deferred for a short time, it acts as a powerful incentive, gives great help to the soul, and frequently succeeds in extricating it from a lethargy that was closely verging on the sleep of death. The penitent thus disconcerted comes to recognize his real state, he gets concerned about it, and consequently sets about remedying it; compunction enters his heart, and if the correction finds it already somewhat moved, the contrition increases wonderfully, and his repentance, so weak and languid at first, as to be easily overcome by slight

temptations, assumes new vigor, and is able to withstand the severest assaults. In the end, by this means, victory is achieved, the sinner, thus reformed, relapses much less readily into his faults, and nothing is more true than the remark of the wise cardinal already quoted: “There would not be such great ease in sinning today if there were not also such great ease in absolving.”

FOURTEEN: It is not here sought to set up a **general rule** that the absolution of habitual sinners should always be deferred — we leave that to the prudence of the confessor; it is his province to judge if his penitent gives some signs of an internal disposition which would warrant him in absolving him in accordance with the marks already explained. As to the rest, when these marks are not observable, it is both wise and prudent to defer absolution. Fear not that this practice will render our confessional a merciless tribunal; on the contrary, it will change it into a tribunal of mercy, since you cannot exercise a greater charity towards your penitent, than by employing the most effectual means for conveying grace into his soul. Such has ever been the practice of confessors who were animated by zeal and influenced by the fear of God. Many of the greatest saints have acted precisely in this way. Saint Bernard refused to absolve a man addicted to a criminal habit until, after a probation of some weeks, he was enabled to perceive in him signs of a real amendment (*In vita*, lib. vi. c. 17). Saint Francis Xavier, in ordinary, did not give absolution to habitual sinners until after some days of trial, in order that they might enter into themselves and conceive a just horror of their faults. Saint Francis de Sales, whose heart overflowed with benignity, used to say with a sigh to obstinate sinners who manifested no signs of compunction: “O my child, I am grieved because you are not grieved, and I think it well that you should take **a little time** to put yourself in better dispositions”. The same method has been constantly observed by many other servants of God; and it is also entirely conformable to the spirit of the Church, for, by fulminating her censures against those who should dare to teach that absolution ought never to be refused to habitual sinners, the Church gives it plainly to be understood that she wishes it to be deferred in certain cases.

Observe, moreover, that in adopting this practice the confessor acts in a way that is both safe for himself and advantageous to the patient; he is safe in adopting it, for he is warranted in sometimes deferring absolution, even though the penitent manifests signs of compunction, if he believe that such delay will be more profitable to the penitent, according to the opinion of various doctors (See Card. de Aguire, Concil. Hisp., vol. 2, dissert. 8 Concil. Tolet.; a. n. 161-167). With how much greater reason can he do so when these signs are wanting. And this practice is to the advantage of the unhappy habitual sinner. I appeal in proof to the testimony of those who, from motives of charity and a desire to fulfill their duty, are accustomed to defer absolution in the **cases before mentioned**; all these will agree in saying that a penitent thus brought **with due kindness** to perform, during a certain time, a penance of a nature both salutary and remedial, hardly ever returns to confession without showing **some notable improvement**. But many do not return . . . If they do not come back to you, they go to some other confessor; and they go with better dispositions by reason of the penance imposed on them by you, and their absolution will in consequence be all the more fruitful. And suppose that they neither return to you nor go to another priest, that should not disquiet you; sinners so **obstinate** show plainly that they neither had the right dispositions nor the sincere desire to acquire them; and even as regards them, the prudence of the confessor is not altogether useless, for it will leave in their souls the seeds of a fear which, some day, will produce fruits of penance. This is the doctrine of the learned Aversa, who assures us that we consult for the advantage of the penitent by deferring absolution on suitable occasions. "For the very practice proves that this delay often helps" (*De Poenit.* ix., 17, sect. 12).

FIFTEEN: It now only remains for us to fix upon a method of administering this sacrament which shall be at once edifying and kind—which will make captive and keep hold of the souls of penitents. Some may be inclined to say that the remedy proposed is not free from severity; well, your exhortations will be able to soften all this if only they be **full of unction and benevolence**.

Certain confessors very reprehensibly terrify unfortunate penitents by ill-timed rudeness and harshness that astounds me. The penitent should be received with calmness both of mind and manner; and it is by your kind treatment of him that he will most of all come to understand that everything is done with a view to his greater good. Inform his mind, so that he may be able to enter fully into your intentions and perceive how suitable they are to his case. Say to him: "You see, my child, the great number of years that you have been sunk in the mire. You have never given **any** satisfactory sign of amendment, since, as you yourself acknowledge, each time that you came to confession you have had **always the like** number of sins to accuse yourself of; a convincing proof that you must have had neither a true sorrow nor a firm purpose of amendment. There is, consequently, but too much reason to fear that your former confessions have been null and sacrilegious. Are you content to live on thus in such great danger of your eternal salvation? Therefore, for your own good, and the better to attain to a sincere repentance, which shall be the beginning of a real change of life, I pray, I exhort, I conjure you, in the name of that which is most dear to you, the salvation of your immortal soul, to do real violence to your inclinations, and prove yourself **for some days**. Undertake a light penance which I shall give you; recite each day a third part of the Rosary of the blessed Virgin; say every morning and evening three Hail Marys in honor of the Immaculate Conception; say at the same time an Act of Contrition; in the morning form the firm purpose not to commit sin during the day on which you are entering; in the evening, in like manner, determine that, with the help of God's grace, you will keep yourself free from sin during the night. Every morning think, if only for a moment, on death, hell, or eternity; above all things, be particular, when assailed by temptation, to have instant recourse to God, crying out: Mercy, O my Jesus! or such like ejaculatory prayer, to implore help in your time of dreadful danger. You will derive the greatest advantage from following these directions. Take courage, then, my dear child, and be assured that I will treat you as a father;

so far from reproaching, I will console you, and I am convinced that, hereafter, you will be grateful to me both in this world and the next". Experience proves that penitents, when taken **gently** and kindly, most cheerfully submit to a delay of absolution, and that they derive much advantage from it. I do not expect that they will succeed all at once in ridding themselves of an inveterate habit; all I require is **some** needful effort on their part towards uprooting it. If, during these days of probation, they fall again into their customary faults, but **somewhat less** frequently, do not hesitate to give them absolution, because these relapses proceed more from **frailty than malice**. This **slight** amendment gives you an assurance that there is hope of **amendment**. You will perceive, gentlemen, that the course I propose for your adoption is in every respect a prudent one, being equally removed from the practice of those theologians who, under a semblance of mildness, are wanting in priestly zeal, and from the rigorous opinions of those who turn the fruits of charity to bitterness. Let us, therefore, adopt this course — let us adopt it with all our heart, and form amongst us a holy league which will be productive of so many precious advantages to the people amongst whom we are called upon to labor. Your penitents themselves will express their gratitude to you for it, and invoke a thousand blessings upon you. How often has it been said to me: "O father, if I had at the outset met with a **kind** confessor who would have deferred **absolution for some days**, and treated me as you have done, I should not be now in so bad a state — I would not have been guilty of such an amount of sin"; and these were evidently the expressions of a soul that felt at peace. The difficulties which seemed to us almost insurmountable, have now, thanks be to God, been removed. Let us take the course in which we have the saints for our guides, fully assured that in regulating our practice by their example, and being well provided with the bread of true prudence, we shall succeed in guiding a multitude of souls to heaven. Let those confessors who follow an opposite course take heed and tremble, lest through their fault the penitents who have recourse to them should come to perish eternally.

SIXTEEN: The confessor has two dangerous rocks to guard against, namely, excessive indulgence and extreme rigor. He needs great prudence to escape striking on one or the other, and to guide in safety the unhappy habitual sinner who has become entangled in the meshes of sin, and falls at every step. To break the chains which weigh down one who has been for long years the habitual slave of sin by reason of various sinful occasions, calls for all the intelligence and energy of the minister of God. He will succeed in overcoming all obstacles only by joining great firmness with great prudence; without a holy resoluteness proceeding from a mind fully made up, he will never bear away the victory. The words of our divine Redeemer in the Gospel are too precise to leave any room for doubt with regard to the vigor which must be employed in the treatment of those invalids whose cases are well-nigh desperate. "If thy eye scandalize thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee." Though the occasion should often be dearer to your penitent than the apple of his eye, it is absolutely necessary that he should quit it. "If thy hand scandalize thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee." If another continually soils his hands by gambling, revels, and debauchery, he must cut off the occasion. "If thy foot scandalize thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee." Let him who has been frequenting such a house, such an assembly, such society wherein he has habitually sinned, let him keep aloof from it forthwith and at whatever cost. "Throw it away; cut it off." These words are too definite and clear to admit of any hesitation in forming amongst us a holy alliance to refuse absolution in all cases to a penitent who can, and yet will not, relinquish what is to him a proximate occasion of sin. Keep in view the condemned proposition: "He can sometimes be absolved, who remains in a proximate occasion of sinning, which he can and does not wish to omit, but rather directly and professedly seeks or enters into." This false proposition tells you: "He can sometimes be absolved," but what does the Church teach? "He can never be absolved, who remains in a proximate occasion of sinning." etc. No, no, absolution can never be given to a sinner who obstinately refuses to remove himself from the proximate occasion of sin.

SEVENTEEN: In order to proceed surely and establish our doctrine on a solid basis, it is proper in the first place to define what really constitutes the proximate occasion; a very delicate point, and one on which doctors are not fully agreed. We shall attain this security by following the usually received opinion, which even its adversaries cannot reasonably contest. In the first place, I suppose every one to be aware that there is no strict identity between the danger of sin and the proximate occasion of sin. In reality, the proximate danger and the proximate occasion are not one and the same thing, because the proximate occasion necessarily depends upon some external circumstance which the proximate danger does not of necessity include. This will be explained by an example. David walking on the roof of his palace, sees over against him Bethsabee washing herself (2 Kings 11:2). Alas! The heart but too often renders our glances criminal! So far there was only the danger of sin; but soon his concupiscence is aroused, he yields to its evil promptings and ends by abandoning himself to his sinful desires. "And he sent messengers and took her" (v. 4). See here the proximate occasion produced by the circumstance of place and present object, supposing always the frequency of sinning, apart from which the proximate occasion does not exist. Two things, therefore, constitute the proximate occasion: the first is the internal proclivity to sin which gives rise to the danger; the other is the external circumstance which prompts and produces the readiness to sin. Without the external circumstance of place and present object, David would not have committed adultery, though he bore within him the internal disposition to so sin; as on the other hand he would not, though placed in the like circumstances, have committed the sin if he had not the evil internal disposition; nor could his fall be called a proximate occasion but for its being frequently repeated; for he lived in sin with Bethsabee for a whole year to the great scandal of all his subjects. This illustration will explain what is meant by the proximate occasion. That is commonly called a proximate occasion, in which, attention being given to the circumstances of the person, place, and experience of the past, one falls into sin either always, or nearly always, or at least frequently. In this it

is distinguished from the remote occasion in which one sins but rarely, although it be accompanied by the like circumstances. An occasion, therefore, is not proximate unless where it is connected, either absolutely or respectively, with the frequent commission of sin. This is the definition adopted for the most part by theologians to distinguish it from the remote occasion. Some few others make use of a different form of expression, but which still comes to the same in sense: all concur in saying that there must be a frequency of relapse before an occasion can be called proximate; that is to say, that the person much more commonly than otherwise commits sin in certain dangerous circumstances to which he exposes himself. To come to particulars: it may be asked, Is a person who, out of ten occasions, falls but six times into sin, to be regarded as in the proximate occasion? Or rather, should an occasion be judged proximate according to what commonly happens, as for instance, in the case of a young man of an ardent temperament and addicted to evil habits, who, placed in certain circumstances with a certain person, will surely sin; it will be for the confessor in his prudence to judge the particular circumstances. Prudence will teach him that certain occasions are absolutely proximate for all, that others are only respectively proximate that is to say, with regard to certain persons, that an occasion accounted proximate for a young man will not be such for an old man, because the first condition, namely, the interior propensity to sin, is wanting in the latter. In order to fully elucidate this subject, it will be necessary to explain the precise meaning of the two conditions already indicated, which constitute the proximate occasion.

EIGHTEEN: The first of these conditions, the interior propensity which produces the proximate danger of sin, is easily explained: each one knows what it is in his own case, as it proceeds from the leaven of sin which we have inherited from our first parent Adam. It is true that this propensity is less violent in some than in others, according to the extent to which sinful habits have been contracted. Sometimes we are obliged to destroy it by acts that oppose it contradictorily, as we shall explain when we come to speak of the proximate occasion, which is necessary

or involuntary. This is the case when, not having it in our power to remove the external circumstance, we would have to extirpate the internal disposition, to prevent the proximate occasion from becoming voluntary. The second of the conditions which constitute the proximate occasion is the external circumstance. As to this, it is not necessary that the circumstance should be always in itself bad; it may even be of its nature (to use a theological expression) sometimes good, holy, and most holy. That we may not be led astray by what is good in appearance, let us take the case of a frail confessor. Placed in the external circumstance of hearing confessions, a circumstance in itself most holy, still it must be said that he is truly in the occasion of sin, if from the effect of an evil habit he very often yields to guilty thoughts, in consequence of being so occupied. In such a case he would, without doubt, be bound either to discontinue the hearing of confessions, or to have recourse to the most efficacious means of correction. Are we asked to specify these external circumstances? I answer that they are as many, so to say, as there are things in the world. Some are in the proximate occasion by reason of a certain person, certain intercourse; others by reason of gaming, trading, frequenting taverns, company keeping, and a thousand such like things; there is nothing in the world, however good or harmless, but may be perverted to evil through the malice of man. Therefore, as often as a sinner finds himself placed in certain circumstances, whatever they may be, in which he frequently falls into sin, he is, without doubt, to be accounted an "*occasionarius*" [*i.e.* one who gives in to an occasion of sin], and one, consequently, not to be absolved until he shall have effectually removed himself from this occasion in the manner already explained.

NINETEEN: It now remains for us to examine the subject of the frequency of relapse, without which an occasion would not be proximate, according to our definition. It has been stated that an occasion is proximate in which a person invariably, or almost always, or at least frequently, falls into sin. A little explanation will be useful, in order to understand the meaning of these two expressions, to *fall frequently*.

As to the first, those confessors and penitents are laboring under a great mistake in supposing that only to be judged a proximate occasion, in which sin is fully committed in its grossest forms; that it is not at all a proximate occasion in which one sins only by discourse, looks, or licentious touches; and, much less, when the person commits sin only in his own heart, or through simple omission. To dispel so fatal a delusion, let us take the case of a youth who has conceived a guilty love for a young girl. He neither converses with her, nor does he in any outward form manifest his sinfulness. He, however, posts himself under her window evening after evening. He gazes on her; his heart is aflame with impure passion, and he frequently gives himself up to the most sinful thoughts. Why should not this be reckoned a proximate occasion, when every circumstance exists in it to make it one? You have here the internal disposition to sin, the external circumstance of place, and the frequency in the commission of sins of thought. See here united all the members that go to make up the “vile body” [*corpus vile*], *i.e.* the necessary set of degrading factors] of the proximate occasion. Who then will question that it is such in fact? We will take another example regarding sins of omission. A pastor, who is bound by his office to instruct his people, and visit the sick in danger of death, lest they should die without the last sacraments, goes hunting, not the “*venatio clamosa*” prohibited by the sacred canons, but such as is permissible, and only for the sake of recreation; or he goes to other amusements which we assume to be of a kind to which no just objection can be made; he goes in becoming company; there is not even the shadow of evil about the whole proceeding; but every time that he attends those amusements, or at least ordinarily, when he does so, he neglects to preach or to visit the sick. Who will fail for a moment to perceive that this pastor is in the proximate occasion, and consequently sins each time he goes to such places, by exposing himself to commit a sin of omission in a matter of such grave moment as that of instructing his people, or neglecting the sick, who are in need of his ministry?

Having explained the first expression *to fall*, we now come to the second, namely, to fall *frequently*. And that there may not be a mistake about my meaning, it will be proper for me here to

explain that the frequency of relapse must not be always regarded as absolutely depending on the length of time and the number of acts, in such wise as that to constitute a proximate occasion the person should have sinned every day or nearly so, or that he had committed within a like space of time a certain number of sinful acts; no, it is enough that the frequency be relative, that is say, in proportion to the number of times the person exposes himself to the occasion. As for example, a certain man does not in reality keep in his house a female with whom he is accustomed to sin, nor does he lodge her in any place belonging to him: the concubinage would be then too evident: but he visits her elsewhere, and is clever enough to give a color to his criminal intrigue, and to divert the suspicions of those who might observe his movements, by visiting his accomplice only once in the month or even less frequently; but assuredly if this man sins, almost as often as he resorts that house, if out of twelve times in the year there are not five or six times that he escapes sinning, he undoubtedly must be regarded as in the proximate occasion of sin. Moreover, attention should be directed not so much to the material number of sins as to the ascertaining to what extent the occasion superinduces sin, and how far the sin depends on the occasion. All these considerations must be left to the prudence of a discreet confessor, who will carefully weigh the facts with all their circumstances.

TWENTY: These principles being now clearly understood, and the commonly received doctrine regarding the proximate occasion fully explained, we come now to the practical application. But before proceeding further, we will glance again for a moment at the condemned proposition: "He can sometimes be absolved, who remains in a proximate occasion of sinning, which he can and does not wish to omit, but rather directly and professedly seeks or enters into." It is true that the application of this proposition to particular cases is not unattended with considerable difficulties; but one single principle will solve them all, namely, that nothing short of a physical or moral impossibility can be a sufficient cause for exempting a sinner from the obligation of quitting a proximate occasion of mortal sin. That a cause be honest and useful is

yet not sufficient, the Church has decided, in passing censure on another proposition to that effect. It follows, therefore, that necessity is the only admissible excuse, for then, following the rule of contraries, we have on one side the necessity, but we are arrested on the other by the impossibility. It will tend very much to clear up this matter if we bear in mind the distinction which we are accustomed to make between the proximate occasion, which is involuntary and necessary, and that which is voluntary. We will examine each of these in order. The necessary or involuntary proximate occasion is that which the unhappy sinner can neither avoid nor remove. How then is he to act? Please to give your particular attention, gentlemen, to this very intricate subject. In order to explain it, I wish you to bear in mind that this necessity may arise in any one of three ways: either on the part of the man only, or on the part of the female only, or on the part of both together. The case in which the man only is concerned would be that of one who is a junior member of a family, who is not at liberty to withdraw from the authority of his parents without causing scandal; nor to dismiss a servant, the ordinary cause of his falling into sin. The case relating to the female only, would be that of a young married woman who has not the power to send away a domestic, or an admirer who has access to her house, by reason of his intimacy with her husband. The case of both together would be that of two members of the same family, brother and sister, or brother-in-law and sister-in-law, who cannot separate, because such separation would evidently lead to danger of the greatest scandal and infamy, by bringing their criminal intercourse into light. Truly, cases such as these require singular prudence on the part of the confessor — first, to decide whether the occasion is really necessary or voluntary; and, next, whether the impossibility of separation is true or false, whether it is a well-founded excuse or a mere pretext. But, suppose you are dealing with a case of real necessity, what is to be done? We have here all that constitutes the proximate occasion; the internal propensity which brings with it the proximate danger of sin, the external circumstance of present object and place, and the frequency of relapse. Observe the great importance of being guided by clear

theological principles; one only reflection removes the obscurity in which this matter is involved. It all comes to this: In the three cases referred to you cannot remove the external circumstance, the second of the conditions constituting the proximate occasion. Well, then, it becomes requisite to destroy the propensity, the proximate danger which springs from the internal propensity to sin, and in this way to make the occasion remote which before was proximate. A confessor can do nothing else than to treat such sinners from occasion exactly in the same way as he ordinarily deals with sinners from habit. If they manifest signs of sincere sorrow, or other evidence of good internal dispositions, absolve them and at the same time prescribe the means by which the danger is to be destroyed; but when you fail to perceive **any** of the marks which we have indicated when speaking of relapsing sinners, which would warrant you in forming a **prudent** judgment regarding their internal dispositions, much more when, although reprov'd two or three times, your penitents still exhibit no sign of amendment, it would be excessively imprudent to absolve them. In that event absolution should be deferred, and the means prescribed which, if attended to, will be effectually capable of destroying the proximate danger. These means may be reduced to four. First, not to remain alone with the person who is the occasion of sin; not to look upon her or speak with her, unless of absolute necessity. Second, to have recourse to God, supplicating His aid, saying: Mercy, O my Jesus! or some such short prayer, and repeatedly renewing the resolution not to sin again, a resolution which must not be lukewarm, which would prove inefficacious, but fervent, earnest, and determined, proceeding from a deep sorrow for having heretofore offended God, and a firm purpose of a total change of life for the time to come. Third, to have frequent recourse to the sacraments of penance and the blessed Eucharist, under the direction of the same spiritual guide, and to adopt with fervor such remedies as he shall prescribe, such as to have recourse to the saints, to visit certain churches, or, in a word, any pious exercises that he may judge appropriate. Fourth, to undertake some easy work of penance, either by mortifying his palate or practicing some

other form of self-denial proportioned to his ability, and always undertaken under the advice or with the approval of the spiritual father of whom he has made choice. I do not mean that these means are to be employed **all at the same time**; the confessor will content himself by putting them gradually in force, until he finds that, with the grace of God, they have effected the purpose intended. If penitents show themselves docile, if these practices of piety help towards bringing about their amendment, there ought to be no hesitation in absolving them, always, however, bearing in mind what we have already observed with regard to relapsing sinners. But when, notwithstanding these remedies, penitents evince no appearance of amendment, then they can only be judged unworthy of absolution, and be told distinctly, you are responsible for your own damnation, because in such a case, let it be borne in mind, the occasion, how necessary so ever it may previously have been, becomes voluntary. The great difficulty is in discerning accurately when the moral impossibility is real, when false, or only apparent, which must be left for final decision to the prudence of the confessor. There is but one other remark which I wish to make on this subject; it is, that if there be greater difficulties in destroying the occasion than in avoiding the sin which the occasion procures, the impossibility is incontestable; otherwise you would increase the danger of multiplying sins through the very means laid down for you whereby to prevent them. Therefore, if the dismissal of the servant, attendant, or intimate would lead to grave scandal, it ought not be required, but the means already indicated should be put in force for the purpose of lessening the proximate danger. In fine, when you find yourself in such trying circumstances, raise your soul to God, and beg Him to guide you by His lights; they will not fail you; and when these embarrassing cares shall leave your judgment still in suspense, always take the side of rigor; under such circumstances it is always most advantageous to the sinner, because it removes him from sin. Just as the cutting off the head of Holofernes was equivalent to a complete victory, so experience will prove to you that by one determined stroke you may cut off the source of a multitude of sins.

TWENTY ONE: The proximate voluntary occasion which the sinner can, but will not, avoid, is the most difficult and troublesome case which the minister of God meets with in the tribunal of confession. In dealing with it, he has need for all his fervor and all the resources of his zeal, in order to succeed in overcoming this obstacle that is well nigh insurmountable. It is inconceivable the number of excuses that will be pleaded by those thus sinning through the occasion; what subterfuges they will have recourse to for the purpose of escaping the obligation of giving up the occasion. The confessor should therefore be strictly on his guard, and be not too ready to put faith in all they say; he must be ready to meet objections, to dissipate pretexts, in such wise as that the penitent may be convinced that the difficulties arise only from his own want of will. In fact, when the confessor does not observe a firm and determined purpose, he ought not to grant absolution. To proceed in order, we should here, with Saint Charles, distinguish between occasions in *esse*, namely, those caused by persons or objects existing in the house of the sinner, from occasions non in *esse* — those that are apart from it. The former are the most formidable, and call for fire and sword. The saintly archbishop would have us give them no quarter. For instance, if a man have a female in his house with whom he frequently sins, and if he can send her away at once, he should be required to do so without any delay. If a libertine has set up in a chamber which he frequently occupies the portrait of one for whom he has conceived an impure love, and if he can remove it at once, he cannot be allowed to defer doing so. So also with regard to a servant whom her master solicits to evil, who yields always or nearly so to these solicitations, though she does not provoke them nor even wish to be so solicited: If she can at once, by leaving the place, cut off the occasion, she is bound to do it. It is certain that in this and such like cases absolution should not be given until the actual occasion of sin is removed. Be very slow to hearken to the reasons which men in the state of concubinage are accustomed to adduce. They will say that if deprived of this servant, they cannot use the food prepared by others; that they shall have the utmost difficulty

in obtaining another servant; that if they send her away they shall be at the loss of a considerable amount which they have advanced to her; that their domestic arrangements will be quite upset by parting her, she being so systematical, so economical, etc. They will add also that scandal and injurious suspicions will be the result, consequences which they will be sure to exaggerate and highly color. What will people say? Their suspicions will be confirmed, her reputation will suffer. What will become of this unfortunate creature if turned to the road and abandoned to her unhappy fate? They will promise, vow even, that they will never commit the sin again, that they will have recourse to the same confessor. Frivolous excuses, weak resolutions, which, weighed at their true value, are worth nothing. If these sinners excite the suspicions of the public, are they not bound to do away with the scandal? The truth in reality is, that they are not yet touched by grace; if they had compunction in their heart and a firm purpose of detaching themselves from the occasion of their sins, all difficulties would disappear, and a prudent confessor would easily devise a way for arranging their separation without such inconveniences being the consequence. I do not deny that there are cases in which the confessor has to temper his zeal by prudence: of this class would be the case of the master of a house who had in his employment a servant who was a proximate occasion of sin to him, but regarding which no scandal or suspicion had arisen, both enjoying a good reputation with the public. Now, a confessor who, for example, on the occasion of a mission, should persist in refusing absolution to this master unless this servant was sent away at once, by thus insisting on her instant dismissal at a time of public repentance, might readily create suspicions; people noticing it would naturally be led to suspect that it was done as a matter of conscience and not freely. In such like circumstances what means would prudence suggest to the confessor to employ so as that he may consult for the advantage of the penitent without at the same time acting in opposition to his own conscience? I will here briefly set down what an experienced confessor suggests in reference to such a ease: "Attend, my child" (he would thus address his penitent): "I

should not, and indeed could not, absolve you; but as I perceive your compunction and your firm resolution to send this person away, and as you show me unmistakable signs of sorrow for the sins you have fallen into during the time that this person has been in your service, I readily believe that this is no mere pretence on your part, and that you speak in the sincerity of your heart. I will therefore absolve you on condition of your promising me that, within fifteen days after the termination of this mission, you will send this person away; that during that time you will not suffer her to enter your chamber whilst you are alone in it; that you will not speak to her except what is absolutely necessary; that you will guard even against looking upon her. Moreover, during these fifteen days, you will go at least twice to confession to render an account of your conduct; and, finally, you will devise some plausible excuse for sending her away. This time ended, you will be most particular in not retaining her in your service an hour longer; if you do, be assured that you shall find no confessor who will or can absolve you". The adoption of this middle course in such circumstances as superinduce a kind of moral impossibility of acting otherwise, is commendable to a certain extent; but it ought not be acted upon with every penitent nor in every instance. Let the confessor be strictly on his guard if he would not be deceived, and let him adopt for his general rule — that the proximate occasion, when it exists in the house of the sinner, calls for the exercise of fire and sword, especially with regard to avarice and impurity. If the habit be deep rooted, the temptation violent, the propensity strong, trust not the fine promises of your penitent; with determined zeal say plainly to him: "Go, remove the occasion, and I will absolve you". If he alleges the moral impossibility to do so, be not ready to credit him; weigh, examine attentively the difficulties he raises, and you will frequently find that they are exaggerated, and that they are surely not greater than those which Abraham had to encounter in sending away his slave. Abraham surmounted those difficulties, though with regret; he submitted to the command of heaven, and delayed not even a single day in dismissing her. "[He] rose up in the morning... and sent her away". (Gen. 21:14).

TWENTY TWO: It seems to me that occasions which are apart from the dwelling of the sinner, call for less rigor and warrant greater indulgence. These consist in the frequenting of gaming-houses, parties of pleasure, holding appointments for the purpose of love-making, and the like. Regarding occasions such as these, the penitent; who sincerely promises to avoid them may, according to the opinion of Saint Charles, be absolved at least two or three times, but always provided the confessor is persuaded that the promise proceeds from a sincerely contrite heart. If, despite his repeated promises, the penitent does not amend, the saintly archbishop would defer absolution until he had actually relinquished the occasion. Amongst these occasions apart from the house of the sinner, I think that love meetings deserve the most attention. These have become at the present day the stumbling block of youth. Some disapprove of such an outcry being raised against this *company keeping*: they fear lest it may only teach evil to those who before knew nothing about it, or that things may be accounted sinful which in reality are not so; that it may create erroneous consciences, lead to false shame, and end perhaps not infrequently, in precipitating penitents beyond recall into sins and sacrileges. How little do they who argue thus know of the progress which libertinism and vice have made in these our days! It may, do not deny, happen that an imprudent confessor, learning from an innocent young female that she has formed an amorous attachment, may reprehend her too severely without first having ascertained the nature of this attachment; but this is a case of rare occurrence, and really does not merit the amount of attention that has been given to it. What calls for the sorrow and lamentation of the ministers of God is to behold how corruption has now broken all bounds — how it has spread on every side, and demoralized even those of the most tender age. Why then, it can justly be said in reply, why assail with such acerbity the perhaps excessive zeal of a small number of confessors, and at the same time pass in silence, and perhaps even connive at, the facile practice of so many others, who blindly absolve numbers of penitents, who, in their love meetings, give themselves up

to all manner of iniquity? It would be unwarranted to assume that such attachments are necessarily sinful; but it would be a far more fatal mistake to believe them to be always innocent. If we are to judge of them according to what commonly happens, we shall assuredly conclude, and with every reason, that these attachments, accompanied by the circumstances from which at the present time they are rarely free, are, as in most cases, proximate occasions of sin. Would to God this opinion were not proved true by a long practice and deplorable experience! The love of young people for each other is certainly sometimes innocent at the commencement, but it becomes sinful in its progress. It begins with a fondness for the society of each other; this feeling soon ripens into passion, and passion in turn precipitates them into an abyss of vice, of which the depth cannot be fathomed. Kindly give me your particular attention, my dear sirs, and let me ask you: Are we not the effective physicians of souls? Now, in our quality of such, how could we tolerate an evil so disastrous in its consequences, which spreads itself like a plague over the whole world, and is the unhappy source of numberless unholy marriages blindly contracted, and from which violent deaths, incest, hatred, and scandals and crimes of every kind proceed? It behooves us, therefore, more than ever to draw more closely the bonds of our holy association, and with unanimity to defer, and even to refuse, absolution to those thus guilty, and who will not engage to give up such meetings. Would you know whether they be innocent or criminal? You have only to interrogate your penitents; you will inevitably come to the conclusion that few, very few, of such intimacies are free from some shameful circumstance quite sufficient to render them unallowable and abominable. That you may have before your eyes a model of the caution to be observed in interrogating penitents, and the firmness with which, in certain cases, absolution should be refused, I will quote for you, verbatim, what Cardinal Pico de Mirandola, a bishop no less wise than holy, has decreed as the practice to be followed in his diocese. His pastoral letter deserves the thoughtful consideration of every confessor.

TWENTY THREE: “We admonish all confessors to withhold absolution from those who give themselves up to company keeping of a licentious character, when such sinners, after having been duly warned thrice, either by the same or by different confessors (of which warnings they will take care to inform themselves), have failed to amend their conduct; signifying to them that without a true reformation they may not hope for absolution from them or from any other. To render the practice of confessors uniform in this matter, as it ought to be in all others as well, we shall here briefly set down the cases of this sort, which more frequently occur, which are to be regarded as absolutely criminal; for just reasons we make use of the Latin language”.

1. Whenever it so happens, even between persons of the same social status and in the interest of marriage [*i.e.* during courtship], that kisses take place, or touches, or embraces, or morose delectations or the danger of falling into any serious sin. (*Quandocunque ita fiat, etiam inter pares et causâ matrimonii, ut intercedant oscula, vel tactus, vel amplexus, vel delectationes morosæ aut periculum labendi in quodvis grave peccatum.*)

2. When this is done between persons who differ in social status [e.g. a nobleman and a servant], on account of the scandal and the danger of sinning mortally. (*Quando fit inter eos qui sunt disparis conditionis propter scandalum et periculum mortaliter peccandi.*)

3. If this is done with persons with whom it is impossible to contract marriage, such as married persons, cloistered religious and men in Holy Orders, both because such love cannot be honored for the purpose of matrimony, and also because it involves scandal and the danger of falling into deadly sins. (*Si fiat cum illis, cum quibus impossibile est contrahi matrimonium, ut sunt uxorati, claustrales et in sacris Ordinibus constituti, tum quia non potest cohonestari talis amor fine matrimonii, tum quia intercedit scandalum et periculum labendi in culpas lethales.*)

4. If this is done in church, both because of the irreverence, and because of the danger of hearing Holy Mass without due attention, and also on account of the scandal. (*Si fiat in Ecclesia, tum propter irreverentiam, tum propter periculum audiendi Sacrum sine debita attentione, tum etiam propter scandalum.*)

5. If there is a command of the father or mother or tutor reasonably forbidding such love; for even if the other circumstances are decent, minor children and pupils are bound in a serious matter, as no doubt this is, to obey their parents or tutors under pain of mortal sin. (*Si adsit præceptum patris, vel matris aut tutoris, rationabiliter prohibens talem amorem; quia etiamsi reliqua sint honesta, filii familias et pupilli tenentur in re gravi, ut sine dubio hæc est, obedire parentibus vel tutoribus sub pœna peccati mortalis.*)

6. When this is done privately and secretly, both because one is exposed to grave dangers and the near occasion of sinning seriously, and also because, when it is done in this manner, it is usually going on against the will of the parents, or of the tutors to whom the children or pupils owe obedience. (*Quando clam fit et occulto, tum quia est expositus gravibus periculis et occasione proximæ graviter peccandi; tum quia, quando ita fit, regulariter exercetur contra voluntatem parentum, vel tutorum quibus filii vel pupilli obedientiam debent.*)

7. If it is done at nighttime, on account of the scandal and the danger of falling, etc. (*Si tempore nocturno fiat, propter scandalum et periculum cadendi, etc.*)

8. If it is done under the pretext of decent recreation and relaxing the mind, because danger and the near occasion of falling always result from a long interval in which there is conversation, mutual glances, professions of love, etc. (*Si fiat sub prætextu honestæ recreationis et relaxandi animum, quia semper urget periculum et occasio proximæ labendi ex longa mora in qua habentur colloquia, mutui aspectus, protestatio amoris, etc.*)

9. If it is done in such a way that it intrinsically involves the proximate danger of kisses, touches, etc., even if that love is otherwise expressed licitly, because it is between single persons and with a view to marriage. If, for example, the lover is admitted to the house, or draws near in such a way that no one sees that there is a proximate occasion of touches, etc. (*Si eo modo fiat, ut ex se involvat periculum proximum osculorum, tactuum, etc. etiamsi aliunde ille amor esset licite exercitus, quia est inter solutos et causâ matrimonii. Si, v. g. domi admittatur amasius, vel ita approximetur, ut nemo non videat adesse occasionem proximam tactuum, etc.*)

10. If the lover or the beloved notices that the accomplice in love is seriously tempted; or that the other urges him or her by foul words or in some other way to do indecent things, etc., even though the other accomplice is not tempted at all and feels no inclination to sin; in this case that love will be illicit for both, on account of the proximate danger of delectation and of active scandal in the one and of passive scandal in the other, in which charity toward one's neighbor is seriously injured. (*Si amator vel amatrix animadvertat complicem amoris esse graviter tentatum; vel alterum urgere verbis turpibus aut alio modo ad inhonesta, etc. etiamsi alter complex nihil tentetur et nullam sentiat inclinationem ad peccandum; in quo casu erit utrique illicitus amor ille, propter periculum proximum delectationis et scandali activi in uno et passivi in alter, in quo graviter lædetur caritas erga proximum.*)

11. Finally, generally speaking, whenever the lover or the beloved, on account of their love, frequently falls into any grave sin, then their love assumes the form of a near occasion of evil and is completely illicit. (*Denique, universaliter loquendo, quotiescunque, ob causam amoris, amator vel amatrix frequenter labitur in aliquem gravem noxam, tunc amor induit rationem occasionis proximæ mali, et est omnino illicitus.*)

Examine **attentively**, gentlemen, all the cases here indicated; interrogate, with due caution, those penitents who are tyrannized over by this passion, regarding these various cases, and then tell me if there remain on your mind the least doubt of the truth of the statement I have just made, if you are not firmly convinced that company keeping, such as we meet with at the present day be not, as in most cases, a proximate occasion of sin. Therefore, what just right has a penitent to complain, who, though warned repeatedly, yet fails to correct his fault, remonstrates with his confessor, and acts as if he would wrest absolution from him by force? I cite before the judgment seat of God those confessors who make parade of their pernicious facility, who absolve without reflection all who present themselves, and thus bring about the ruin of youth, I might say of the whole world, as from perverted youth proceed all the evils and disorders that render families unhappy; and thus the evil spreads, and by degrees infects the whole world.

TWENTY FOUR: Before leaving the subject of the proximate occasion, I ought to observe that many confessors who exercise a praiseworthy zeal in removing their penitents from the proximate occasion of sins against purity, fail to separate them from occasions of sin, which are but too common, against the other commandments of God. The illustrious St. Charles takes this important point into account, and reckons amongst occasions which are *non in esse* a great many which arise out of the penitent's calling or profession, and frequently lead to sins of the gravest kind, such as blasphemies, thefts, dishonesty, calumnies, enmities, frauds, perjury, and the like. After duly warning such persons two or three times, he would have us defer absolution if they show **no** signs of amendment; and, moreover, should such offenders, despite repeated warnings, fail to amend, the avocation, [which has] thus become a proximate occasion of constant sin, must be relinquished. However, a decision so extreme in its nature and consequences must be come to only after the most scrupulous consideration. It must not be put out of view that this physician, surgeon, innkeeper, merchant, lawyer — in a word, this person engaged in a particular calling, is placed in as it were, the moral

impossibility of abandoning it, as he has no other means of earning his livelihood. A sinner of this class should be treated for some time as if he were a relapsing sinner, one who sins without being led to it by any external cause; but if, after sufficient trial, he still continues to heap sin upon sin, manifesting no signs of amendment, then he must be compelled, however great the sacrifice, to abandon a line of life which would, if persisted in, inevitably cause his damnation. The holy archbishop would employ the utmost rigor against those who frequent public balls, those associating with blasphemers, resorting taverns, all which are, at least relatively, proximate occasions of sin to those who, by reason of their evil propensities and in consequence of frequenting them, fall constantly into sins of drunkenness, quarrelling, swearing, and other most grievous sins: He maintains that such persons should not be absolved unless they promise to avoid those places; and when, notwithstanding such promises, repeated twice or thrice, they still frequent them, he would have us to decidedly refuse them absolution. Pausing here for an instant, let me ask you, my dear sirs, in all candor to say, is the practice of the confessors of the present day in accordance with the teaching of our ancient and approved authorities? All that we have decided so far in this conference is grounded on the teaching of our most esteemed theologians, and especially on the decisions of the Church, which launches her censures against those who should dare to teach that absolution may be given to the sinner who continues in the proximate occasion of sin. For all that, what do we find to be the practice? Is absolution deferred or refused in accordance with the exigencies of the case and the needs of the penitent? Alas! I leave you to draw your own conclusions from the following details: A mission is opened; forthwith a great number of penitents present themselves who have for long years been leading very sinful lives, with souls covered with wounds that have become gangrened by time. My child, the confessor will say, how long have you been leading such a life as this? These eight, these ten years. Have you frequently relapsed into sin? Daily; two or three times a week. Have you always confessed it? Yes, father. How frequently did you confess? Once in two months. Was it always to the same confessor? No, father; I made my confession sometimes

to one priest, sometimes to another. So that, during this period of ten years, you have at one time or another gone to confession to all the confessors of the place? Yes, father. What did they say to you? They told me not to sin again. Have they always given you absolution? Always, father. Traitors! The zealous confessor will indignantly exclaim, who has at heart solely the salvation of souls: traitors! See this poor wretch, whose soul is ruined, who, during all this time “had no one” [*cf.* John 5:7], has never once met with a charitable confessor to conduct him kindly to the healing waters of a good confession, and there cleanse him of his sins. His Christian indignation will be all the greater in proportion to the multiplied instances of misdirected penitents and cruelly indulgent confessors he meets with. Kindly forgive me, gentlemen, for thus giving expression to my grief, and be not surprised that I quite agree in opinion with a certain minister of God, who, taking into account the laxity in practice of so large a proportion of confessors, who are always ready to absolve indiscriminately sinners from habit and sinners from occasion, totally unheedful of the decisions of the Holy see, once said to me with tears in his eyes: “Either the Church is wrong, or a great many confessors are damned; but as the Church, guided by the Holy Ghost, is not subject to error, it must consequently follow that these confessors are lost, for they prove themselves rebellious to the authority of the Church, which, in virtue of holy **obedience**, commands them not to absolve those sinners who remain in the proximate occasion of sin when it is **in their power** to quit it.” Such was the reasoning of this minister of God. His opinion, which I respect, will derive confirmation from the experience of those engaged in the zealous discharge of the apostolic ministry, and who earnestly labor to bring back erring souls. Oh! how can we restrain our grief when we behold the widespread ruin caused by tepid, unscrupulous confessors, who, **without** investigation, **without** discrimination, **without** any knowledge of the case before them, with equal readiness absolve those in the proximate and those in the remote occasion of sin, those living in concubinage and those observing a life of purity, women of abandoned life as well as those of unsullied conduct; thus cutting through all the bonds of conscience as one mows down a

meadow, and instead of breaking the chains of their penitents, only redouble those that bind their own souls, putting themselves in a state of damnation. But is there no remedy for this crying evil? The remedy, my dear sirs, is in our own hands; let us only adhere strictly to our holy engagement, and use plain terms in dealing with sinners in the occasion of sin, without allowing ourselves to be deterred from this course by silly fear or despicable human respects. Is the occasion within their control? We should distinctly say to them: Go, do away with the occasion; come, then, and you will get absolution. Is the occasion apart from their household? If they have already several times disobeyed the directions of a pious confessor, we should defer absolution until they totally avoid it, and give signs of a real amendment. This, gentlemen, is the remedy. Will we all faithfully carry it into effect? I venture to hope so. Let those, however, who act otherwise, and remain willfully blind in the midst of light, dread the anger of God.

TWENTY FIVE: The imprudence of confessors in absolving penitents who are not in the due dispositions, does immense injury to the salvation of souls: so much has been now sufficiently proved. But this evil is enhanced when absolution is given to those who are ignorant of those great truths, the knowledge of which is necessary, by the necessity of a means to the end. This brings us to the consideration of the third proposition already quoted: “A person is fit for absolution, however much he labors under an ignorance of the mysteries of the faith, and even if through negligence, even culpable, he does not know the mystery of the most blessed Trinity, and of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Gently, father, some one perhaps will say to me; do you mean to say that a confessor is obliged to teach the catechism in the confessional? Not at all; but I wish to remind him that it is a **duty** attaching to his office to teach his penitents all these things that, without the knowledge of which, they are not in a competent state to receive absolution — namely, the principal mysteries of our holy religion. When, then, one who is thus grossly ignorant presents himself at confession — one of those half-civilized rustics, who have received no instruction either from their parents or their pastors regarding

the life and duties of a Christian — the confessor ought to receive him with consideration and **kindness**; after getting him to make the sign of the cross, he should lead him to beg the assistance of God in order to make a good confession, and to implore His mercy, striking his breast, or using any other outward sign of devotion. After that he will question him about the mysteries of faith, and on those points about which such persons frequently are ignorant. If the penitent is ignorant of the mysteries of the unity and trinity of God, of the incarnation of the second person of the Blessed Trinity, and of the reward or punishment that awaits us hereafter, he is not in a condition to be absolved until he has acquired a knowledge of these mysteries, and is capable of making an act of faith — that is to say, according to the explanation of several authors, until he understands, so far as his gross intellect can compass it, that there are three persons in God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost; that these three persons are one God, and not three Gods. As to the Incarnation, that the second person was made man, and is named Jesus Christ, and that, although Christ is both God and man, yet there are not two Christs. Finally, as to future rewards and punishments, that God has set apart heaven for the good and hell for the wicked. My advice is: Never **refer** such penitents to others to be taught what is necessary for them to know, the only result of which very often is to leave them in the darkness of ignorance up to their death; it is much the better plan to teach them **briefly**, and in terms suited to their capacity, the principal mysteries, to get them to make an act of faith, hope, charity, and contrition, and then to enjoin upon them an obligation to have recourse to their pastors, to be more fully instructed in these, and also regarding the other articles of faith which it is necessary to know by the necessity of precept. This will not take up as much time as would at first be supposed, for all can be done quite briefly. They will then be got to accuse themselves of such fault as they have committed in not having learnt these truths, and after that the priest will absolve them. But an ignorance quite as dense is often to be found in those reared in towns and of a more cultured mind, and who consequently would be very much disconcerted to be questioned about the mysteries. As it is proper that the confessor

should have a rule laid down for his guidance on this important subject, and as those given up to vanity and vice commonly fail to repeat from time to time, as they are bound under sin to do, the following acts; I am in the habit of gently intimating to them that the most effectual means towards receiving the sacraments worthily and with fruit, is to commence with reciting the acts of faith, hope, charity, and contrition, and then at once add: If you please, we will now say them together; repeat them then after me, and from the bottom of your heart: "I believe, O my God, because thou, who art the infallible truth, hast revealed it to thy Church, that thou art one only God in three persons, equal in all things, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. I believe that God the Son became man; that he died for us on the cross; that he arose from the dead and ascended into heaven, from whence he shall come to judge us all, to bestow heaven on the good and condemn the wicked to hell". Do you not believe all these truths with your whole heart? Yes, father. We will now make an act of hope: "I hope, O my God, because thou art infinitely merciful and all powerful, that thou wilt grant me the pardon of my sins, and eternal glory hereafter, through the merits of Jesus Christ and as the reward of the good works which with thy divine assistance I will perform". You hope that God, who is so merciful, will pardon you your sins, do you not? Yes, father. Let us now recite an act of charity: "O my God, because thou art the sovereign good, I love thee above all things; and for thy love I love and I will love my neighbor as myself". Do you not love God, who is so good, with your whole heart? Yes, father. Behold the penitent prepared by these acts to make an act of true contrition. I then continue: Now, beg of God to pardon you your sins, and with true heartfelt sorrow strike your breast, and say: "O Lord my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee, because thou art the sovereign good, and I firmly purpose never more to offend thee". This last act I get my penitents to repeat twice over, first before giving them their penance, and again when I am giving them absolution. I do not assert that this practice is to be observed with every penitent; I am, however, fully convinced that in dealing with a certain class of persons, who are negligent and who are diverted from the care of their immortal soul

by the distractions of worldly pursuits, it will be most useful if the confessor would take the trouble of suggesting these acts to them, especially on occasion of general confessions. They will derive great consolation from it, and the confessor himself will be much better satisfied; for, of all the sacraments, it is of that of penance that it is especially to be said, that its validity depends much more on the acts of the recipient than on the zeal and care of the priest who administers it. The point which most of all calls for the exercise of prudence in the confessor is that he should assure himself as far as possible of the internal dispositions of his penitents, which dispositions altogether consist in their fervently eliciting the above-named acts, that, being thus nourished with the bread of prudence, they may be the better assured of their eternal salvation.

TWENTY SIX: We have now come to the last part of our conference. Besides the qualities of goodness and prudence, we have also to provide ourselves with that of knowledge, without which the minister of God would plainly expose his own soul and those of his penitents to the risk of eternal damnation. In what consists this knowledge, and to what extent is it necessary to the confessor anxious to fulfill the duties of his state? Is there not a difficulty in determining this? Placed in a position to enunciate the natural and the divine law, to decide cases of conscience often most complex and difficult, to pass judgment on the various human acts, many of them so intricate as to appear to demand immense labor and application, does not the confessor need a vast amount of knowledge? Not at all. The holy canons do not reject the person who is possessed of only moderate information, particularly when the want of great learning is counterbalanced by a holy life. I shall make this subject clear in a few words by simply stating, that every confessor is bound by the natural and the divine law to have, besides the judgment of his bishop and the testimony of his own conscience, such an amount of information as will render him capable of hearing the confessions of those amongst whom he is placed. Consequently, he should have studied moral theology during a proper length of time and **diligently**, so as to have acquired a speculative knowledge of the various opinions; he should also know how to make this

information available, how to make the proper use of it, how, in other words, he is to apply general rules to particular cases; it is in this that moral science mainly consists. He has need of **constant study**, he requires to read approved authors, to discuss, reason, and consult about cases as they occur to him, and regarding which he is not sufficiently informed. Every confessor should be able to give a prompt decision on cases ordinarily occurring; on more difficult points it will be sufficient if he knows when to **doubt**, so that before deciding upon them, he may examine them carefully and take advice. He should have available at all times the general rules which will enable him to distinguish one form of leprosy from another, to be aware when sins are mortal or venial, to weigh the circumstances that change the species and that notably aggravate or lessen their guilt. He should also be acquainted with the cases reserved to the pope or the bishop, those to which a reserved censure is attached, the circumstances in which a person is bound to restitution, the sins commonly committed in the different conditions, trades, or professions, the dispositions **essentially** necessary in order that penitents should be in a state to receive absolution, the circumstances in which it is necessary to return upon former confessions, the propositions condemned by the sovereign pontiffs, the recent decisions published from time to time in various dioceses, and which may, in some sort, impose a conscientious obligation. But all confessors are not required to have attained to an equal amount of knowledge. They whose duties as confessors are exercised in rural districts have not the same need of learning as they who are placed in large cities, or engaged in giving missions through the provinces: these latter require the largest amount of information. In a word, the confessor, like the physician, ought to give himself to constant study. He should assist at the diocesan conferences, and the bishop is strictly bound to provide that these conferences be held in the more populous towns and districts, in order to decide practical cases, to put confessors in mind of their obligations, and thus to animate them to study, however learned they may otherwise be; for nothing is more true than the remark of Chancellor Gerson (*Tract. de Ord.*): “It often happens”, he says, “that theologians who are most profound and subtle in speculative science, are found to be

the least informed with regard to moral theology”. Presuming too much in themselves, they disdain to consult the works of casuists, and end by committing errors in practice. Certain old priests who have grown tired of study, depend upon such experience as they have acquired, and would undertake to settle everything by referring to their **practice**, as if they could cut through every complication at a single stroke. To both these classes I would recall the words of the apostle: They have not learned “as they ought to know” (1. Cor. 8:2). In fact, to pretend to decide every difficulty by the sole medium of **practical experience** is most notable presumption. Study, then, my dear sirs — study, if you would properly fulfill your duties. As authors agree in regarding as a grievous sin, the act of a penitent, in designedly making choice of a confessor so devoid of knowledge as to be unfit for the due discharge of his ministry, so also they are unanimous in regarding as a far greater fault the imprudence of a confessor who undertakes the duty of hearing confessions without first having acquired the requisite amount of knowledge; for God has put limits to the authority which he has bestowed on him. “Because”, He says to such, “because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will reject thee, that thou shalt not do the office of priesthood to me” (Osee 4:6). Observe that God does not say, “that thou shalt not be a priest”. He does not strip him of the sacerdotal character; but He says: “I will reject thee, that thou shalt not do the office of priesthood to me”. He forbids him to exercise its functions without having first acquired the necessary amount of knowledge, on account of the danger to, which he would otherwise expose both his own soul and that of his penitent, and the respect due to the sanctity of the sacraments. Study, then, I repeat, my dear sirs; let not **a single day** pass without examining some practical case. The *Roman Ritual* prescribes and teaches that every confessor is bound to be acquainted with the entire Christian doctrine, and to be possessed of all the information that will enable him to administer the great sacrament of penance with wisdom and safety. “He will strive to become acquainted with all the teaching about this sacrament, and with other things that that are necessary for the correct administering thereof” (From the Rubrics of this Sacrament).

TWENTY SEVEN: Amongst those things about which the confessor should be informed, it is important that he should understand how to assign suitable and proportionate penances. The Council of Trent (sess. 14, can. 8) warns confessors to be careful not to give too light a penance for very grave faults, and wishes that the penance enjoined should always bear some proportion to the sins committed and to the ability of the penitent. The recitation of one Our Father and Hail Mary would assuredly be a very little penance for one who had committed a considerable number of sins of impurity; or a *Miserere* [Psalm 50] for one who had inflicted a great injury on his neighbor in his property or reputation: and from this would ensue the disorder pointed out by the same council, namely: that men would cease to entertain a due horror for sin; that they would thereby come to regard it as a matter of no consequence, and thence take occasion of committing most grievous crimes. Penance, then, should be neither too light by reason of the sin, nor too heavy by reason of the sinner, fearing lest the burden should be disproportioned to his strength. From all this we are to conclude that the confessor requires to consider maturely the nature of the penances he imposes, and that he is not to enjoin the same penance indiscriminately on all, but rather to act like the physician, who would not think of prescribing the same remedy for all manner of diseases. The holy council says that the true designators of salutary and just penances are the Spirit of God and the prudence of his minister. How then comes it that some persons impose them with so little reflection?

Let confessors beware how they leave themselves open to the reproach of imposing extravagant and indiscreet penances. By extravagant penances, I mean all those that are foreign to the usage of the Church, or not in accordance with the practice of holy and wise confessors. I know of no more suitable means for throwing some light upon a subject wherein otherwise everything is left to the judgment of the priest who administers this sacrament, than to take as a guide the practice of the Sacred Penitentiary. It is the most secure rule and best authority that we can follow. We find that for occult sins, even the gravest, the tribunal prescribes no other penances than prayers, fasting, and alms deeds, when such

is in the power of the penitent. The apostolic tribunal of the Sacred Penitentiary has been instituted as the forum of conscience: therefore it ought to serve as a guide to all confessors in those things that have reference to that forum. Following this guidance, they will avoid imposing indiscreet penances, such as obliging a servant to hear a certain number of Masses, or to perform some other work of piety prejudicial to the service of his employer; a woman who is pregnant, or is suckling an infant, to fast for several days; a young girl, to make a visit to some distant and solitary church; a married woman, to practice certain corporal austerities that might displease or arouse the suspicions of her husband; and other penances equally inconvenient and disproportioned, by reason of not taking into consideration the time, place, age, condition, or strength of the person on whom they are enjoined. What sort of penances ought then to be given? It seems to me that, apart from the general rule already indicated, of choosing those that are opposed to the sins for which they are enjoined, as for example to bind the avaricious to bestow alms, or those given to sensuality to perform some act of mortification, the most suitable, speaking generally, would be those that, besides serving as punishment for past sins, are calculated to preserve the penitent from relapsing into them. Consequently, if the penitent be a relapsing sinner, the penance ought to be one of some duration. "Not only to heal the wound, but also to heal the scar", as Saint John Chrysostom remarks (Homily 2 on Psalm 1.); since a wound is all the more effectually cured by the more frequent application of the proper remedy. This is the course adopted by the Sacred Penitentiary; it imposes a penance extending over several years only in **very rare** instances; it requires ordinarily only one of **some days**, or, at most, of some months, according to the requirements of the case.

To come to practice. When the confessor has heard the confession of his penitent, he ought to address to him a few words of fervent exhortation, putting before him the gravity of his sins, according to the advice of Saint Charles, and informing him of the severe penances formerly imposed by the penitential canons for even one such sin those that he has committed; he will then say kindly: "No doubt your sins are deserving of a rigorous penance but

I will be content with enjoining a light one upon you"; and thus by gentleness of word and manner he will dispose him to accept with readiness the penance he imposes on him. In the ordinary cases the most suitable penances, in my opinion, are the following, not, of course, to be imposed all together, but sometimes one, sometimes another, according to the condition and particular necessities of each individual.

TWENTY EIGHT: First, suppose that the penitent has committed a great many grievous sins, it will be very advantageous to subject him to recite for eight or fifteen days a third part of the rosary, and to particularly aim at reciting it with compunction, imploring of the blessed Virgin to obtain for him the pardon of his sins and the grace to avoid them for the future. If he is an habitual sinner and is making a general confession which has become necessary on account of his having through false shame concealed sins in confession, or from any similar cause, this penance can be prolonged for two or three months, more or less, according to the nature of the evil habit he has contracted. It frequently occurs that a penitent having thus got accustomed to the daily recitation of the rosary, will continue it, to his very great advantage, during the remainder of his life.

Second, that the penitent will say each morning and evening three Hail Marys in honor of the immaculate purity of the blessed Virgin; he will, moreover, make an act of contrition, and form the firm purpose, in the morning, that he will avoid sin during that day; in the evening, that he will pass that night without offending God. He can be directed to perform this exercise in a kneeling posture, or one that in some other way will be attended with some personal discomfort. This penance might be imposed on all penitents, varying it as to the length of time it is to be continued. It is a most efficacious remedy for curing souls of their vicious habits.

Third, that the penitent will assist at a certain number of Masses, always provided, as we have already observed, that his doing so does not interfere with his ordinary duties. He might be recommended to hear these Masses on festival days, if such be more convenient for him.

Fourth, that he shall make each morning the act of oblation: "Humbly prostrate, etc.," [see page 65] or any similar form of prayer which contains the acts of faith, hope, and charity; and to make in the evening an examination of conscience—the time to be determined during which he is to continue these Christian exercises.

Fifth, that the penitent shall say each day for a particular time five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys in honor of the wounds of our Lord, pausing at each wound, and reflecting on our blessed Lord's passion; that he be directed to pay so many visits to a church noted for some special devotion; that he read, if capable, a pious book during a certain time.

The penances indicated so far may be enjoined on all classes of penitents. Care should be taken to inform the penitent that if he should chance to forget his penance on any of the appointed days, he need not be concerned about it, as he can perform it another day instead, and that if an unforeseen circumstance should prevent his fulfillment of his penance, he is not to suppose that he has been guilty of a grievous sin. By this means the conscience of the penitent is not burdened with an obligation, whilst the application of the remedy calculated to be of such advantage to it is prolonged.

There are other penances which are usually imposed on particular classes of persons, as for instance, on ecclesiastics or those more enlightened and better instructed, to **meditate** for half an hour for a certain number of days on some eternal truth; to a person of plethoric constitution, having nothing to prevent him, that he should fast a certain number of Saturdays; to the head of a family, to recite the Rosary each evening for his household; to a blasphemer, that he make as many crosses on the ground with his tongue; to a drunkard, to abstain from drink, or to take only a small quantity diluted. It is useful to impose on the more gross-minded, some sort of penance that will move them through the senses; for example, to recite so many Our Fathers and Hail Marys over a grave, thinking that they may die at any moment. Let, however, the observation already made be always kept in mind, that the confessor should never impose

extravagant and indiscreet penances, which would deter penitents from approaching the sacraments, and bring reproach upon the holy ministry.

TWENTY NINE: The question is sometimes asked, which is best, a severe or a light penance? To this I answer, that, provided the general rules which have been referred to be not infringed, it is best to incline to the side of **lenience**, particularly when the penitent does not appear disposed to accept willingly a considerable penance, or when there is reason to apprehend that he will not fulfill it; in such circumstances a lighter penance can be substituted for the previous one, or it can be given without strictly binding the penitent to its discharge under pain of mortal sin, as we have remarked before; except when dealing with relapsing or habitual sinners. With such as these it is requisite to use greater rigor, and rather to leave them, as an experienced casuist remarks, in danger of neglecting the penance, “than for them to despise the sins and to commit them more often, and to confess them without true sorrow, which is often to be feared in the case of such penitents” (Conink., *De Sacramentis*, dist. 10, dub. 8, num. 73). There are, however, cases in which the confessor ought to act indulgently, by enjoining much lighter penance, particularly when the penitent manifests great contrition for his sins; the penance then should be proportionately less, according to the teaching of Saint Thomas. “The greater the contrition, the more he reduces his punishment and becomes subject to a lesser penalty” (in 4. dist. 15, *quest.* 1, art. 3). We have heard the example related in the life of Saint Vincent Ferrer. The saint had imposed a rigorous penance of three years on one who had been a great sinner, when the penitent, being penetrated with contrition, cried out that his penance was much too light; whereupon the saint reduced it from three years to three days. The penitent at once implored him to increase it, saying that with so trifling a penance, he feared he could not be saved; when the saint again diminished it to the recitation of three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys. The penitent upon this was overcome with so lively a contrition, that he expired on the instant, and his soul was seen ascending to heaven without having to pass through

purgatory. To relieve confessors, as well as penitents, of scruples with regard to penances being more or less than is proper, it will be sufficient to make use of indulgences. This again is taught us by Saint Thomas: "That indulgences are effective both so far as the Church's forum is concerned and so far as God's judgment is concerned for the remission of the punishment remaining after contrition and confession." (in 3. dist. 20, q. 1, art. 3). It is generally agreed that on the occasion of a jubilee, or when the penitent can gain a plenary indulgence, a much lighter penance may be enjoined, which still is not disproportionate by reason of the merits of Jesus Christ, which the Church takes from her treasury, and applies in satisfaction for his sins. This is the reason why, in all our missions, we recommend the holy exercise of the Way of the Cross to which the sovereign pontiffs have attached such ample indulgences. Through this means penitents can readily make satisfaction for their sins, and confessors have in it an opportunity for being more indulgent in the imposition of penances. For two reasons the devotion of the Holy Way of the Cross is one of the most salutary penances that confessors can assign: First, on account of the holy indulgences, which are sufficient to satisfy for all the temporal punishment remaining due to their sins; secondly, because it recalls the memory of the passion of our Lord, so sovereignly satisfactory in itself, as Blossius remarks, since to reflect piously for even a short space of time upon the passion of our Redeemer, is more profitable and a work of greater merit, than to fast on bread and water, to use the discipline even to blood, and to recite the entire Psalter; and it is also a most effectual preservative against future relapses. Therefore, I entreat of all confessors to avail themselves of so precious a treasure — one so full of graces and merits for their penitents — by imposing on them the salutary penance to perform the Stations of the Cross a certain number of times. After that they need not give themselves very much concern to decide whether the remaining penance is, or is not, proportionate, as this one alone supplies the place of much besides. They should also be careful not to impose too severe a penance on a penitent who undertakes a general confession as a matter of counsel and for his greater spiritual advantage; both because on such occasions the penitent has usually a deep sorrow

for his sins, and also as he is not under an obligation of confessing his sins anew, so neither is the confessor bound to assign a penance proportioned to their gravity. As to the conditional penances frequently enjoined on relapsing sinners, for instance, to fast or give alms each time that they should happen to relapse, Diana (Antonio Diana, Palermo, 1586-1663 - Theatine moral theologian) and others approve of this practice. There are, however, two things to be observed with regard to such penances — first, that they be not too difficult, fearing lest the penitent, having failed once in performing them, and thereby judging that he had broken his compact with his confessor, should lose courage and return to his former sinful ways; secondly, to see that penitents do not regard them in the light of a **tax**, which they have only to pay (so to speak), and then they may continue to sin as grievously as before. It is necessary, then, to act with much prudence and circumspection, and to **instruct** those on whom such penances are imposed, in the manner in which they should be fulfilled. The confessor will take the greatest care, when he imposes an obligation of almsgiving or procuring masses, to avoid assigning them to the benefit of his own church or order; this should be left altogether to the option of the penitent, as various councils have ordained. In conclusion, I advise you to consult often together, in your customary conferences, as to the mode to be observed in the direction of your penitents, so that we may all be uniform in practice, whether as to imposing of penance, the nature of the advice to be given, or anything else relating to the guidance of souls. Be assured that you will derive the greatest profit from following this course.

THIRTY: As the complement of our conference, we will briefly consider the subject of the sacramental seal. I will set down the substance of some observations suggested by prudence and practical experience; they will help us to understand our obligation, and prevent us from straying from the right course to the prejudice of conscience. Now, by reason of the seal of confession, to the observance of which we are bound by the natural, the divine, and the ecclesiastical law, I say that we should adopt as an axiom that everything revealed through confession

should be as if it had never been heard. We cannot help censuring the imprudence of those who are so utterly indiscreet as to relate things which they have heard in confession as freely as if they had acquired a knowledge of them in the public marketplace. I am willing to concede that their motive is blameless, and that there is no manner of danger that the person concerned could be recognized; but, even so, under no circumstances should we give grounds for anyone to suppose that we would refer to things known through the medium of confession, and every confessor should be fully impressed with the wisdom of the saying of canon law: "That which I know through confession, I know less than that which I do not know." (*Cap. Si Sacerdos. de Offic. Jud. Or.*) For this reason, says Pope Eugenius, that which is confided by means of confession, the confessor knows as God [*i.e.* by virtue of his sacramental action *in persona Christi*], whilst outside confession he speaks only as man. Saint Thomas explains this very clearly: "As man", he says, "the confessor can always affirm that he knows not that of which he has acquired the knowledge whilst holding the place of God: so much so, that as a man he can swear without injury to his conscience that he does not know what he knows only as God" (*Quodlib.* 12, art. 16, sup. 3). How then is a confessor to act when he meets with cases which he cannot venture to decide of himself, and has need of advice? I reply that the canon "*Omnis utriusque*" (*de Pœnitentia*), authorizes the confessor to speak in these circumstances, provided he do so with such circumspection as to say nothing that could give any possible clue from which the penitent could be traced. In fact, what need is there for referring to it as having occurred in confession? Expose it as a difficulty that has or may have presented itself to the minds of others as well as to yours. Where there are a great many priests present, as on a mission, do not speak of such cases publicly; content yourself with confiding it to some one who is best qualified to give you advice, and refrain altogether from using certain expressions, which should never be heard from the lips of a confessor, such as the following: "The first penitent whose confession I heard today; the first female whom I confessed on yesterday; this morning I met an awful

case in confession; a young man who made a general confession to me in such a place; a man of rank who came in search of me on such a mission; I am accustomed to give such a penance to those who have been guilty of grievous sins; the first female whose confession I heard on this mission was an adulteress; out of the large number of penitents whom I heard on today, I found only two who had but venial sins to confess”, etc. Do you not perceive that in using such expressions you indicate your penitent so plainly, that a person might readily come to know who was meant, and you expose yourself to the risk of violating the seal? Moreover, as to the question whether it be not contrary to the sacramental seal to speak even in general terms of sins heard in confession, even without indicating the penitent, or running any danger of making him known, we will find several standard authors who distinctly hold the affirmative, though others hold the contrary. Fagnanus decides that to speak about sins, of which one has acquired knowledge by means of the confessional, although with the perfect certainty that the sinner can never be known, “should be done infrequently by a very serious man, even more infrequently by a serious man, and very infrequently by a frivolous man.” (*Cap. Officii, de Pœn. et Rem.*). We are to conclude, therefore, and keep constantly in mind, that this is a matter of grave importance; that in our intercourse with the penitent, we cannot betray the least indication of any sin which we know from his confession, and much less speak of it openly to him, without permission freely given, clearly and expressly on his part, for a tacit consent is not sufficient; that preachers, when inveighing publicly against vices, ought to guard against making the least allusion that would tend to the supposition that they were making use of the knowledge they had obtained by means of confession; that confessors are not justified in making the defects of their penitents a subject of conversation amongst themselves; that still less can superiors turn to account information obtained through the confessional for the purposes of the external government of their religious community, even though it be unattended with inconvenience to the penitent. In fine, the confessor ought to be ever reserved

and circumspect. He should speak in so low a tone as not to be audible to those about him, from respect for the sacredness of the sacramental seal, and have constantly present to his mind the maxim already quoted: That everything with which he has become acquainted by means of confession should be regarded as if absolutely unknown.

THIRTY ONE: Our conference, my dear sirs, is now come to a close. Allow me to conclude with an example known to many, but yet not often enough brought to mind. A certain man of rank, who lived in the proximate occasion of sin with a depraved female, had found, to his great misfortune, a confessor singularly complaisant and ever ready to give him absolution. This gentleman's wife, a lady of great piety, failed not from time to time to stimulate the conscience of her husband, and to lead him to suspect the validity of all those absolutions thus given without the proximate occasion being removed. He only turned her efforts into ridicule. "Do you want to become a theologian?" he said to her. "Take care of your own soul; leave me to mind mine; if my confessor was not warranted in absolving me, he would not do it". He continued to live just as before, and to confess after the same fashion; and at his death his confession was in keeping with those he had been accustomed to make during life. One day his widow was engaged in prayer in her oratory, when, of a sudden, she saw before her a monster in human shape surrounded with flames, and borne on the shoulders of another man. The good lady would have fled. "Stop!" he cried out to her; "know that I am the soul of your husband condemned to hell, and that he who bears me is my confessor; we both are damned — I for making unworthy confessions, and he for unworthily absolving me". He then disappeared. Our ministry, my dear sirs, is one of great labor and trouble; how sad if it only serve to conduct the souls of our penitents the more readily to hell! How sad, I repeat, how very, very sad! "Well, since it is thus", someone, perhaps, will say, "let him who will, devote himself to the labor of the confessional; as for me, I will look to my own soul,

and not expose myself to all this danger". What! And is this the fruit you derive from our conference? Truly, I am amazed. Is this how you appreciate the opportunity of cooperating in the salvation of the souls so dear to God? What occupation can you find more noble, more heroic, more holy, than that of aiding and saving souls? "The most divine of things divine is to cooperate with God in the salvation of souls" (*Dionysius the Areopagite, de Cœlest. Hier.*, c. 3). Believe me, you will acquire more merits in one single morning consecrated to God in the confessional in the work of the salvation of souls, than you would gain in a whole year spent in the performance of other works, however good or holy you may suppose them. I will venture even to declare to you, that it is often better to interrupt prayer, lecture, the Divine Office, and every other sacred function, than to neglect the hearing of a confession. I would not commit myself to this assertion but that I find it warranted by an example of the very highest authority. Do you know anything more august, more sublime than the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, wherein is offered to God the Father the body and blood of his divine Son? Well, let me tell you what Cardinal Baronius relates as having occurred in the year 1304. The holy father was officiating solemnly on Monday in Easter week. Just as he had concluded the reading of the gospel, a pilgrim, animated by great contrition, cast himself at his feet, exclaiming: "Mercy! Most holy father, mercy! I wish to confess and to get pardon for my sins". Who would not have supposed that the pope would have reminded him that it was neither the time nor the place to hear his confession: that he should retire, and return at another time? But not so: the sovereign pontiff interrupted the mass, heard the confession of the pilgrim, and it was not until he had consoled him and given him absolution that he resumed the oblation of the sacred host. This is related by the Annalist as an edifying fact. "I shall relate this for your edification"; and he enforces it by the authority of Saint Gregory: "Because, according to Gregory, no sacrifice more pleasing to God is offered than the salvation of souls and the very conversion of sinners." What do I say?

That it is better to interrupt prayer or any other occupation, how holy soever, in order to attend to the salvation of souls? More than that, I maintain that we ought willingly to defer even the sight of God, when there is question of consoling poor sinners. Saint Ignatius protested that for the sake of contributing to the salvation of one soul, he would joyfully postpone the possession of eternal glory; and that he would be content to remain without full assurance of being saved, provided that by so doing he could open to others the gates of heaven. One of our religious used frequently to say: "If at the moment that I had the happiness of setting foot in paradise, some poor sinner plucked me by the robe and asked me to hear his confession, I would instantly draw back, and would not hasten to the enjoyment of eternal glory, until I had consoled the poor sinner".

Does not this move you? Do you not feel your zeal enkindled? Are you not terrified by the condemnation pronounced in the Gospel upon him who turned not to profitable account the one talent of silver that has been confided to him? Would you who have received not merely one, but three, four, perhaps ten talents, would you let them remain unemployed and profitless? If so, what, think you, shall be your fate when you appear before the judgment seat of God?

Perhaps you will say to me that if our functions are holy and most holy, still that they are surrounded with many dangers? Oh! Courage! "You tremble for fear where there is no fear" [*cf.* Ps. 13:5]. Put away vain terrors; have confidence; put all your trust in God; you will find all your wants most amply supplied. The object of our conference is now accomplished: we have found our way to the solution of the difficulties that at first seemed so formidable. Be circumspect in the direction of sinners from habit and from proximate occasion; these are the two rocks upon which confessors most frequently strike and make shipwreck. When you meet with embarrassing cases, such as of simony, unlawful contracts, matrimony, collation to benefices, and the like, do not pronounce upon the point until you have cleared your mind of doubts by painstaking examination, and,

if necessary, by consulting those competent to give you advice; and be assured that by attending to the directions we have laid before you, you will arrive happily in port, secure from all danger. But if unfortunately you are of the number of those who “do not think to act well”, who, paying no attention to the considerations now put before them, are intent only on giving absolution indiscriminately to all, at the risk of losing their own souls, I will say to you boldly and without reserve: Give up your sacred functions, they do not suit you; the abuse of a ministry so holy cannot otherwise result than in charging you with the guilt of the loss of innumerable souls whom you will have precipitated into hell. I am happy to believe that in a pious assembly such as the present, we have none such unworthy confessors; on the contrary, I hope that you all know better how to act than I to instruct you, and that in devoting yourselves with great zeal to the sanctification of the souls of others, you will secure your own salvation. God grant you all this grace. Amen.

Act of Oblation to be Made Each Morning.

Humbly prostrate in the presence of thy infinite majesty, I adore thee, O Lord my God, and offer to thee all my thoughts, words, and actions. I desire to do nothing save for thy honor and glory, for the accomplishment of thy divine will, to praise and bless thee, to become better instructed in the truths and duties of our holy religion, to promote my salvation, to have my trust in thy infinite mercy renewed, to make atonement for the many gross and grievous sins of which I have been guilty, to assist the poor suffering souls in purgatory, and to obtain the grace of true conversion for all sinners. I desire, in a word, to perform all my actions in union with the most pure intentions of Jesus and Mary during life, and all the saints in heaven, and all the just on earth. Would that I could subscribe this intention with my blood, and that I could repeat it each instant of my life, as often as there are moments in eternity. Receive, O God of my heart, this good intention, and give me thy divine blessing, with the efficacious grace that will prevent me from ever again offending thee by mortal sin, and particularly this day. I desire to gain all the indulgences of which I am capable, to assist at all the Masses that will be celebrated today throughout the universe, and to apply them in suffrage for the souls in purgatory, that they may be delivered from their sufferings. Amen.

Indulged Prayer to be Said by Confessors Before Hearing Confessions.

Our present Holy Father Pius IX., by a decree of the S. Congregation of Indulgences, dated March 27th, 1854, grants an indulgence of 100 days, to be gained once a day, by all confessors who with contrite hearts and devotion shall recite the following prayer before taking their seats in the tribunal of penance to hear confessions:

“Oratio.

“Da mihi Domine, sedium tuarum assistricem sapientiam, ut sciam judicare populum tuum in justitia et pauperes tuos in judicio. Fac me ita tractare claves Regni Cœlorum, ut nulli aperiã cui claudendum sit, nulli claudam cui aperiendum sit. Sit intentio mea pura, zelus meus sincerus, charitas mea patiens, labor meus fructuosus. Sit in me lenitas non remissa, asperitas non severa; pauperem ne despiciam, diviti ne aduler. Fac me ad alliciendos peccatores suavem, ad interrogandos prudentem, ad instruendos peritum. Tribue, quæso, ad retrahendos a malo solertiam, ad confirmandos in bono sedulitatem, ad promovendos ad meliora industriam: in responsis maturitatem, in consiliis rectitudinem, in obscuris lumen, in implexis sagacitatem, in arduis victoriam; inutilibus colloquiis ne detinear, pravis ne contaminer; alios salvem, me ipsum non perdam. Amen”.

Give me, O Lord, the wisdom that sitteth by thy throne, that I may be enabled to judge thy people with justice, and thy poor and humble ones with true judgment. Grant me so to handle the keys of the kingdom of heaven that I may open it to none who ought to be shut out, nor shut out any to whom I ought to open. Let my intention be pure, my zeal sincere, my charity long-suffering, and my labor fruitful. Let me be kind without laxity, severe without harshness; let me not look down on the poor man, nor flatter the

rich man. Give me sweetness that I may draw sinners unto thee; give me prudence in asking questions; give me skill in instruction. Bestow upon me, I beseech thee, zeal in withdrawing sinners from evil courses, diligence in establishing them in goodness, and earnestness in moving them to a better life: maturity in my answers, rightness in my counsels, light in obscure matters, victory over all difficulties; let me not be involved in useless talk, nor corrupted by shameful avowals; may I save others, without myself becoming a castaway. Amen.