



# The Double Cure



Canon Eric James

Especially produced by S. Thomas the Apostle, Elson. Lent 2008

It is nearly 25 years since this booklet was first published. It has been out of print some years, and I have been persuaded to publish it again much as it first appeared.

It was written to meet a need and to respond to a particular occasion. After four years in a busy central London parish as assistant-curate - St. Stephen's, Rochester Row, Westminster - I became Chaplain of Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1955. Soon Dr. Billy Graham came to Cambridge to conduct a Mission at Great St. Mary's. During that week many young undergraduates gave their lives to the Lord; but it wasn't long before they realised that they were still much the same people, and they needed something to cope with their continuing selves.

I felt that I had to do everything possible to proclaim that the sacrament of Confession was available to them in the Church of England - available to all. So I gave what is now this booklet as a talk in my rooms in Whewells Court. It seemed to be what the situation required, and I have had enough letters since the booklet was published to confirm my conviction that what is here described is for people of greatly differing temperaments and needs. I knew then, and I know now, that there are many more who need this sacrament, but are held back from using it by some fear, lack of knowledge, or prejudice. Seldom is it mentioned in Confirmation preparation, and lasting loss is caused.

My special purpose then, and now, is to make it clear that this sacrament does not belong to one part of the Church alone. It is the point at which both Catholic and Evangelical can meet. To put it technically: it mediates 'Justification by Faith' in sacramental form.

Before this booklet first appeared, I had shown the script to Cuthbert Bardsley, then Bishop of Coventry, who had helped me so much on my own spiritual journey; to Canon Eric Abbott, who had helped me no less and helps me still today in his retirement from the responsibilities of Dean of Westminster; to Kenneth Carey, then Principal of Westcott House, later Bishop of Edinburgh; to my friend and colleague at Trinity, Simon Phipps, now Bishop of Lincoln; to George Reindorp, now Bishop of Salisbury, who had been my vicar in Westminster when I was a curate; and to the Revd. Reginald Somerset Ward, the spiritual guide of so many in those days. I mention them now because I feel it is as much their booklet as mine. In the intervening years I have been Vicar of St. George's, Camberwell, Director of 'Parish and People', a Residentiary Canon of Southwark and now Canon Missioner of St. Albans. In all these jobs, in all these years, it has been a great privilege to hear Confessions, and time after time making my own Confession has been just what I needed, I therefore publish this 'little book! again not least out of gratitude.

ERIC JAMES, Ascension Day, 1980

## The Double Cure

FEW subjects have more prejudice surrounding them than has the sacrament of Confession. People still say - as an accusation '*It's Roman Catholic*', or: '*It's High Church*'. The point of this booklet is to tell you why this sacrament should be available for every Christian in Christ's Church, and therefore perhaps how you can use it.

There will not be space here to describe how in other denominations this sacrament is coming back into use, but I can tell you of its use in the Church of England. The

best-known example of a person wanting to receive forgiveness is the story of the Prodigal Son. That story can help us a good deal to understand the sacrament of Confession. You will remember that the Prodigal got tired of 'the far country'. He was fed up with sin. He wasn't getting out of it what he had anticipated. I suppose this is about the lowest possible reason there can be for repentance. But it's very true to life. Boredom with sin sometimes starts us back on the road to God. It dawns on us, suddenly or slowly, that sin just isn't giving us what we thought it would give us.



The second reason for the Prodigal's repentance was his thoughts of home. He remembered his father, and his brother, and the hired servants (and perhaps even the fatted calf! ) all happy together. He remembered the kind of life he was meant to be living, and the kind of happiness he was intended to have.

A glance back home to 'Our Father' and the heaven we were made to enjoy - not simply as something in the future, but beginning now - that's a second reason for our repentance: "Just think what you're missing!" This is still quite a low reason. There's no suggestion that the Prodigal saw what his father had done for him, realised how much he had loved him, and began to want to love him in return, But again it's very down-to-earth, and the kind of reason which makes us think about repentance and confession.

There is a third reason which sometimes moves us to desire forgiveness. We sin, and we are filled with borrow and remorse at what we have done. But we are not told the Prodigal had any remorse. There may be a reason for this. If we continue to sin, if we make it a habit, we get used to it. Habits kill horror of sin. Perhaps the Prodigal had been so long in the far country that he had no horror of it left. But thank God if you have any horror, any remorse left. It may lead you back home.

There are many other reasons for repentance. We may, for instance, see the harm we are doing to other people, as well as to ourselves. But however few our reasons, and however low, they may bring us to our senses. 'He came to himself', is the way the parable sums it up. And he wanted to make his confession.

'I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him: Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee.'

But the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. He was by no means safe home yet. Let us make a list of some of the dangers which still lay across the path of the Prodigal's repentance:

- His desire to confess might have been simply emotional - the result of a mood, feeling 'fed up'. 'I will arise', he might have said to himself with an almost noble and dramatic intensity; but - sheer emotion, all of it. With the passing of the mood the willingness to confess passed also. Sometimes during a religious service our emotions are whipped up, and we want to confess; but the intention does not really affect the depths of our personality.
- There is a kind of intention to repent which never gets there. It delays on the road. 'O God, make me pure - but not yet' said St. Augustine before he was converted. Once you start delaying and looking back, your chances of really making your confession rapidly diminish. From ten miles away the 'far country' from which you are returning begins to look 'not so dusty after all'; and you are

back there in no time. 'Not yet' is the Devil's anti-confession device.

- Another kind of danger is best indicated by the remark of a psychiatrist: 'Healing seldom takes place in the consulting room.' A person suffering from claustrophobia may in the analyst's room quite genuinely say: 'I'm better'. But then, as soon as he gets back into the streets, he may feel the tall buildings on either side of him collapsing on him. We need therefore to confess our sins and to receive forgiveness in a manner which will really enable us to deal with the grip sin has on our future as well as our past. As the hymn 'Rock of Ages' expresses it,

'Be of sin the double cure,  
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.'

If the cure isn't 'double', the Prodigal will just 'pop home', make his confession and be on his way back to the far country in no time.

- It makes a great deal of difference how the Prodigal really admits his failings. Supposing he were to use the very general phrase 'I have sinned against Heaven' as a kind of cloak to cover his refusal to admit to his father the depths of his degradation. Supposing, in fact, he were to use it as a substitute for realising how low he has sunk; so he never bothers to face the fact that not only has he 'wasted his substance' but that in very definite ways he has injured his father, and others, and himself.
- General confession may conceal a refusal to take sin seriously. Our receiving forgiveness depends on our repentance. A shallow repentance is a refusal of forgiveness. It is easy to escape selfknowledge and to fail to appropriate the fullness of forgiveness by a too general confession. The Prodigal can avoid the depths of penitence and forgiveness by saying:

"Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from  
Thy ways like lost sheep..."

- Note that not only are the words of confession general, but there is also the additional possibility of escape into 'the crowd. 'I have sinned' becomes 'We have erred and strayed'. In so escaping repentance at depth the Prodigal may leave his sins below the surface, not brought into the open; and there they will continue their evil work.
- Have you ever thought that the Prodigal might have simply written a letter to his father? But owning up to his face was not only more costly, it resulted in a deeper reconciliation. Sometimes our confessions to God are not 'to His face'. He is far less real to us than a human being. He is - conveniently - 'Immortal, Invisible'. But God was made Man. And any confession to God which is less real than if it were confession to a man should at least make us think whether in fact we are evading speaking to Him face to face. And remember that in a real sense God has willed to remain visible in the Church. It is the Body of Christ.
- The last danger to be mentioned has been hinted at already. Supposing the journey to the far country for the Prodigal was a habit - like the journey to the bottle for an alcoholic. One meets people whose repentance is genuine, but who are in the clutches of some habit. Sometimes they weary of seemingly ineffective repentance and confession. It is dangerous and unreal to offer forgiveness in a way which ignores habit. Habits are like pieces of wire which have become coiled up like watch-springs. It's

unlikely they will be straightened out with one pull.

- This list of dangers in the way of repentance is by no means exhaustive, but it will serve to indicate some of our needs in relation to confession and forgiveness. Is there a 'means of grace', some way of receiving the 'benefits of His Passion' which will enable our Repentance:
  - to be more than merely emotional;
  - to resist the temptation to slip back to the far country;
  - to release us from the guilt and power of sin;
  - to be particular, and not just vague and general;
  - to be 'face to face' with God;
  - to deal with our habits?

I believe that sacramental Confession is a gift of Christ to help us in just these ways, and in many others.

## ***Let me describe quite simply how it is practised in the Church of England.***

First of all, set aside some time when you can be quiet by yourself. Be quite definite how much time you can spend - perhaps three-quarters-of-an-hour. This is your time for preparation, and for self-examination. It is important that you should not exceed the time set aside, for it would be quite wrong to let self-examination degenerate into morbid introspection.

Remember that repentance is not a concentration upon self but upon God. It centres upon the mercy and the love of God. It regards sin not primarily as breaking the law but as breaking a relationship. The closer we get to God the more we see our faults, so we concentrate upon Him who is Light and Love. Therefore, say a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking him to guide you and reveal to you how you are failing to be what Christ means you to be.

To be definite, and systematic, and businesslike, take a paper and pencil. Then one way of preparing is to write down the Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5.19) and think upon each one of them separately. Another way is to read through I Corinthians 13 slowly and thoughtfully.

As you think, your particular sins will come to mind

- failure to have the honesty of Christ,
- the sincerity of Christ,
- the purity of Christ,
- the selflessness of Christ,
- the love of Christ, for His Father.

You will find yourself made aware of your failure in prayer, in your work, in your home, in your speech, in what you do with your money and your time, and so on. When you make your first Confession it is easiest to divide your life into sections; your childhood until you went to school; from school to business; from then until

marriage. From the earlier parts of your life confess those things which still stand out in your mind as 'on your conscience'; but when you reach the present then be detailed and definite. Don't be vague - for your own sake (you may be tempted afterwards to feel you made a dishonest Confession) and for the priest's - (you may force him to ask what should be unnecessary questions).

Then we are prepared for Confession. Or are we? There is a real sense in which we can never be prepared. Our sin has blinded us to our sins, and we can never see ourselves as Christ sees us. But here again, incidentally, is another reason for sacramental Confession. Within the sacrament itself the priest will most probably be able to lead us into a deeper understanding of what we need to confess, an understanding which we would not have reached unaided. So we are prepared, let us say, as best we can, for Confession.

At some Churches there are advertised times for the hearing of Confessions. If times are not advertised, you can make an appointment with your parish priest as you would with your dentist. He will then be waiting in Church, probably wearing a white surplice and a purple stole - the colour of penitence, the colour used in Church during Passiontide. He will be seated, and there will probably be a prayer-desk next to him at which you can kneel. On the prayer-desk there will be a printed card giving you the Form of Confession. It is often like that found in the Prayer Book service for the Visitation of the Sick. (Note from this not only how clearly sacramental Confession was taught in the Prayer Book, but that it is seen to be the work of Christ, the great Physician, in the realm of sin and forgiveness, Christ who preserves body and soul unto everlasting life):

'I confess to God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, through my own grievous fault; wherefore I pray God to have mercy on me. And especially I have sinned in these ways . . .

Read out quietly but clearly your list of sins.

When you have made your Confession, the priest will

- give you advice
- suggest a 'penance'
- pronounce in the Name of God your absolution.

The advice the priest gives you will not be infallible. You are not absolutely bound to take it, though naturally you will give it very serious consideration. He will have prayed that he may be given the right advice for you. He will have the accumulated experience and wisdom which comes not only from his reading but also from hearing the confessions of many like yourself. It is his task to help you to discover the poison which is most hindering your spiritual growth, and to strengthen the most healthy elements in your spiritual life. As we have said, one of the greatest benefits of the advice of the priest is that you are calling to your aid the help of another who may be able to see things in quite a different and unbiased light. We often have quite the wrong idea about the things that are hindering us. Too often, for instance, a person is dominated by his sense of failure in the realm of sex, but has little or no sense of failure in the realm of prayer. though the latter may be a primary cause of the former. Again, we ourselves are often conscious of our sins, but sometimes only the

advice of another can help us to see the fears which lie at the root of the sins, and which must be dealt with if the sins are finally to be conquered.

In his advice the priest will probably be able to suggest a number of ways in which our spiritual growth may be set forward. I think it is while we are speaking of the advice of the priest that a question which is often raised can best be dealt with. 'I don't really feel the need of Confession' say some, 'I haven't anything big to get off my mind. Do you really think, then, that this sacrament is for me?'

'Cleanse me from its guilt and power'. Now guilt is not a matter of feeling. Criminals don't necessarily feel guilty, but they are. And guilt concerns not only what we have done wrong, but what we have failed to do right. 'We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done.' This sacrament is as much to do with things not done as with things done. And very often the power of sin is greatest in its hold over us in the things we leave undone - the prayers unsaid; the growth in the whole life of prayer we have failed even to consider as possible for us; the failure in equipping ourselves to be able to proclaim and defend what we believe; our refusal through fear to do a work for God which takes us right out of the sheltering fellowship of fellow-Christians into the world. Within this sacrament it is possible and right and natural for the whole of your life in its relationship to God to be reviewed. So quite certainly it cannot be thought of as 'not for me' by those who feel they have no great sin to confess. By reviewing their life with the help of a priest they may indeed be led to new depths of penitence, and be liberated for new service of God.

From advice the priest will proceed to suggesting a 'penance'. So often in popular thought a penance is a kind of punishment. Alternatively it is thought of as in some way earning forgiveness. Certainly in the Church of England the penance is neither of these. It should be thought of simply as some small but real way of saying 'Thank you' to God for His forgiveness, declared to you here on earth.

Most probably the penance will bear some relation to what the priest has judged to be the heart of your Confession. He will choose it because it will assist the 'cure' of the soul. It may be a prayer, or a verse of a hymn, or a verse from the Bible to be said or some small action, the very triviality of which will remind you that it is no way of earning forgiveness. Sometimes you will be able to perform it before leaving the Church, at other times not until later.

Then, finally, there will be the declaration of Absolution. The form of it is again likely to be similar to Absolution in the Prayer Book service of Visitation of the Sick:

'Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences. And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'

Before pronouncing the Absolution, you will often find that the priest will spend some time reminding you that Christ is the minister of this as of every sacrament. You are making your Confession to Christ in the presence of a priest. You are receiving Christ's Absolution voiced by a priest. It is particularly sad that the sacrament has come to be thought of by many as 'High Church', for no sacrament

could be more 'evangelical' than this: it could not be more a preaching of the gospel.

'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

Sometimes a priest will have to try and convince a whole congregation of the reality of Christ and His Cross. In this sacrament the priest 'preaches' to a congregation of one person. And what can he preach about but the Cross? He must try and make the person making his Confession realise that Christ is absolving him. It is as though Christ spoke from the Cross, giving His forgiveness at the cost of the Cross. Of course, sometimes you may feel little different after your Confession. Just as guilt is not simply 'feeling guilty', so absolution does not necessarily mean a tremendous 'feeling'. Many people do in fact feel very different after Absolution. But it has to be said emphatically that Absolution is an act on God's part, not a feeling on our part. He absolves from the Cross.

So the sacrament ends. You return to your place in the body of the Church as soon as the Absolution has been given. You have been restored to the fellowship. Once more Christ has 'set the captive free'.

You will have many questions. I am going to anticipate some of them.

First of all, I think I ought to point out 3 very significant differences between the way the sacrament has been practised in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Church of England.

**1 In the Church of England it is voluntary; in the Roman Catholic Church it is compulsory.**

'All may, some should, none must' go to Confession is how we think of it. This enormously heightens both spiritual freedom and responsibility. If you do not use this method of repentance it means that by implication you are saying that your self-knowledge, your penitence, and your appropriation of Christ's forgiveness would not be increased by it. This may be true; but it is as well to realise the responsibility which is yours.

**2 In Roman Catholic Churches the place where you make your Confession,**

the 'Confessional', used most often to be a large wooden box divided into two sections. In one sat the priest, in another you knelt, talking to the priest (whom you could not see) through a small grill. This visual difference revealed a significant difference of emphasis until recently. In the Church of England the primary way of regarding the priest is as a physician of souls. There has been a far more personal relationship than there was in the Roman Church, until 'Vatican II', where the priest was conceived of primarily in this sacrament as an impersonal judge. Of course, the hearing of confessions demands that, in a sense, the priest should be as God's instrument a judge - it is a sacrament of God's judgment and of His mercy: the penitent asks for judgment and forgiveness. The Confession in the open Church - now encouraged in the Roman Catholic Church as well - is in some sense a return to the early Church, where Confession was made before the whole assembly of Christ's Church.



### 3 The penance is thought of popularly as a punishment,

and as a means of earning forgiveness, only because in much popular Roman Catholic theology and practice it has been so regarded. I think you will probably have understood from what I have said that the priest is only present in this sacrament, as when he occupies the pulpit, to make you more aware of God. Does he come 'between me and God'? Yes, he does, in a sense, as he does at Baptism, Holy Communion, or Marriage. But that question is probably asked more frequently and more urgently of this sacrament, because it involves such an overthrow of pride to make confession in the presence of another human being, however sympathetic and judicious. We shrink from having the truth about ourselves known. It is primarily pride which puts the question.

But what of sins you confess by yourself, or in the General Confession at Morning and Evening Prayer and Holy Communion? Are those sins forgiven? Certainly they are. Christ on Calvary was the means of the forgiveness of all sins – sins of the past, sins of the present, sins as yet uncommitted. It is not a question of the forgiveness of sins. Christ made on Calvary 'a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world'. It is a question of the declaration of that forgiveness, relating it to particular sins, and of our appropriation of that forgiveness. We can compare the relation between General Confession and Sacramental Confession with our daily washes and care for bodily health and the periodical check-up with the physician to whom the whole state of our body is exposed. The question really is whether sacramental Confession will deepen our repentance, and by a deeper repentance increase our consciousness of Christ's forgiveness and our receiving His message to us.

There is this to be said as well. Sins are not just something between myself and God alone. If I fail to pray for and relate my life to, for instance, the Church in South Africa, my Christian brothers in South Africa suffer, for 'we are members one of another'. Even our most private sins 'let the side down' - the side of the Body of Christ, the Church. And holiness is not simply self cultivation:

'For their sakes I sanctify myself'. We are bound together in sin and holiness. Isn't it right then that we should acknowledge this in the presence of the representative of all those whom we have injured by our sins? A priest 'represents God to man, and man to God'. He represents Christ in His Church.

But isn't Confession something new, not in the Bible, and not really a Church of England thing at all? The answer to this is surprising, perhaps, but true. There has always been Confession in the Church, but in its earliest days it was even more demanding than the method outlined here. When Christians fell into gross sin, causing public scandal, Confession had to be made publicly to the bishop or his delegate. This ancient system of public penance (the beginnings of which are clearly evident in the New Testament) gradually gave place to private Confession in the presence of a priest.

At the Reformation, Protestantism was bound to abandon Confession in so far as it was bound up with those aspects of mediaeval priesthood which the Protestants repudiated. But keeping priesthood as it did, even though correcting it' and making it exceptionally 'pastoral', the Church of England was bound to keep Confession. The commission of Christ to His Apostles: 'Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven: whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained' was of set purpose made an essential part of the Ordination of Priests in the Prayer Book. (It may be that the commission was to the Disciples, including the women, and not just to the Apostles.

The point remains unchanged. The commission was given to the Church, which was to be the society in which and by which the forgiveness of Christ was declared; and by their ordination priests are specially given the commission as representatives of the whole society.) The sermons of the great Reformer Latimer contain many exhortations to Confession. Cranmer recommended those who would be helped by the sacrament to resort to it. Hooker maintained that it was 'not only lawful but behoveful for God's people'. Laud, Jeremy Taylor and Ken all resorted to it.

In the 18th century, as with so much else in the Church of England in that age, sacramental Confession fell into disuse, and so at its revival in the middle of the 19th century it was greeted with opposition as an innovation when it was but a restoration. A great deal of the Englishman's prejudice against this sacrament is directly related to this temporary decay in its use, and then the surprise and unfamiliarity its restoration occasioned. But why is it called a sacrament? It is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. It is true it is not a 'sacrament of the Gospel' as are Baptism and Holy Communion, both instituted by Our Lord Himself, but it is deeply 'of the Gospel' for it brings each of us to the foot of Christ's Cross. The words of Absolution are sacramental of Our Lord's own word of authority and power 'Your sins are forgiven you'; 'go and sin no more'; 'go in peace.' Perhaps, last of all, it is worth saying that not only is this sacrament hallowed by antiquity, but by common consent it has the very greatest psychological value.

I think you will have seen that this sacrament of Confession can affect the whole of your life. It permanently binds you to Christ, for the future is envisaged as repentance upon repentance, confession upon confession, 'grace for grace.'

It is not simply to deliver us from evil: it is to help us cleave to that which is good, to God Himself. It is to help us 'come to ourself', our true self. This sacrament enables repentance to be increasingly deep. It is - like 'spring-cleaning' - systematic and business-like, and not at the mercy of the emotions. I myself know of no way of receiving forgiveness which so assists one to a fuller vision of Christ; to a deeper self-knowledge and penitence; steadily deals with one's habits at their roots; binds one to continuous growth in Christ; draws one to receive yet more and more of the benefits of Christ's Cross and Passion.

'Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and power'.

**Canon Eric James**

**END**



Fr. Simon is available for the sacrament of reconciliation at all times.

Please contact him on 07976 802123 or via email on [simon@rundell.org.uk](mailto:simon@rundell.org.uk) to arrange. You might want to meet for a chat about it, or anything that this booklet brings up first, and then arrange a subsequent date for the sacrament.



# S. Thomas the Apostle, Elson

on the corner of Elson Road & Elson Lane  
Mass: Sundays at 8am and 10am; Weds at 7.30pm; Fri at 10am  
Web: [www.saintthomaselson.org.uk](http://www.saintthomaselson.org.uk)