

The Great Red Dragon. Part I. The Roman Catholics' Auricular Confession



Continued from [The Great Red Dragon; Or The Master Key to Popery.](#)

THE GREAT RED DRAGON.

PART I.

OF THE ROMAN CATHOLICS' AURICULAR CONFESSION.

auricular /ô-rik'yə-lər/

adjective

1. Of or relating to the sense of hearing or the organs of hearing.
2. Perceived by or spoken into the ear.
"an auricular confession."

Auricular confession being one of the five commandments of the Roman Catholic church, and a condition necessarily required in one of their sacraments; and being too an article that will contribute very much to the discovery of many other errors of that communion, it may be proper to make use of the Master-Key, and begin with it; And first of all, with the Father confessors, who are the only key-keepers of it.

Though a priest cannot be licensed, by the cannons of their church, to hear men's confessions, till he is thirty years, nor to confess women till forty years of age, yet ordinarily he gets a dispensation from the bishop, to whom his probity, secrecy, and sober conversation are represented by one of the diocesan examiners,* his friend, or by some person of interest with his lordship; and by that means he gets a confessor's license, most commonly, the day he gets his letters of orders, viz: some at three-and-twenty, and some at

four-and-twenty years of age, not only for men, but for women's confessions also. I say, some at three-and-twenty: for **the Pope dispenses with thirteen months, to those that pay a sum of money**; of which I shall speak in another place.

*Those that are appointed by the bishop, to examine those that are to be ordained, or licensed to preach and hear confessions.

To priests thus licensed, to be judges of the tribunal of conscience, men and women discover their sins, their actions, their thoughts, nay, their very dreams, if they happen to be impure. I say, judges of the tribunal of conscience; for when they are licensed, they ought to resolve any case (let it be ever so hard) proposed by the penitent: and by this means it must often happen, that a young man who, perhaps, does not know more than a few definitions (which he has learned in a little manual of some casuistical (the use of ethical principles to resolve moral problems) authors) of what is sin, shall sit in such a tribunal, to judge, in the most intricate cases, the consciences of men, and men too that may be his masters

I saw a reverend father, James Garcia, who had been eight-and-twenty years professor of divinity in one of the most considerable universities of Spain, and one of the most famous men for his learning, in that religion, kneel down before a young priest of twenty-four years of age, and confess his sins to him. Who would not be surprised at them both? A man fit to be the judge, to act the part of a criminal before an ignorant judge, who, I am sure, could scarcely then tell the titles of the Summae Morales. (I think the author may be referring to Aquinas' Summae Theologiae.)

Nay, the Pope, notwithstanding all his infallibility, doth kneel down before his confessor, tell him his sins, heareth his correction, and receives and performs whatever penance he imposeth upon him. This is the only difference between the Pope's confessor, and the confessor of Kings and other persons, that all confessors sit down to hear Kings and other persons, but the Pope's confessor kneels down himself to hear the Holy Father. What, the holy one upon earth humble himself as a sinner? **Holiness and sin in one and the same subject, is a plain contradiction in terms.**

If we ask the Roman Catholics, why so learned men, and the Pope, do so? They will answer, that they do it out of reverence to such a sacrament, out of humility, and to give a token and testimony of their hearty sorrow for their sins. And as for the Pope, they say he does it to show an example of humility, as Jesus Christ did, when he washed the apostles' feet.

This answer is true, but they do not say the whole truth in it; for, besides the aforesaid reasons, they have another, as Molina tells them, viz : That the penitent ought to submit entirely to his confessor's correction, advice, and penance; and he excepts nobody from the necessary requisite of a true penitent. Who would not be surprised (I say again) that a man of noted learning would submit himself to a young, unexperienced priest, as to a judge of his conscience, take his advice, and receive his correction and penance?

What would a Roman Catholic say, if he should see one of our learned bishops

go to the college to consult a young collegian in a nice point of divinity; nay, to take his advice and submit to his opinion? Really, the Romans would heartily laugh at him, and with a great deal of reason; nay, he could say, that his lordship was not right in his senses. What then can a Protestant say of those infatuated, learned men of the church of Rome, when they do more than what is here supposed?

As to the Pope (I say) it is a damnable opinion to compare him, in this case, to our Saviour Jesus; for Christ knew not sin, but gave us an example of humility and patience, obedience and poverty. He washed the apostle's feet; and though we cannot know by the Scripture whether He did kneel down or not to wash them: suppose he did, He did it only out of a true humility, and not to confess His sins. But the Pope doth kneel down, not to give an example of humility and patience, but really to confess his sins: not to give an example of obedience; for being *supreme pontifex*, he obeys nobody, and assumes a command over the whole world: nor of poverty, for **Pope and necessity dwell far from one another**. And if some ignorant Roman Catholic should say, that the Pope, as Pope, has no sin, we may prove the contrary with Cipriano de Valeria, (a Spanish Protestant reformer who lived 1531–1602) who gives an account of all the bastards of several Popes for many years past. The Pope's bastards, in Latin, are called *nepotes*. Now mind, O reader, this common saying in Latin, among the Roman Catholics: *Solent clerici filios suos vocare sobrinos aut nepotes*: That is, the priests use to call their own sons cousins or nephews. And when we give these instances to some of their learned men (as I did to one in London,) they say, *Angelorum est peccare, hominumque penitere*, i. e. It belongs to angels to sin, and to men to repent. By this **they acknowledge that the Pope is a sinner, and nevertheless, they call him His holiness, and the most Holy father**.

Who then would not be surprised to see the most holy Jesus Christ's vicar on earth, and the infallible in whatever he says, and doth submit himself to confess his sins to a man, and a man too that has no other power to correct him, to advise and impose a penance upon the most holy one, than what his holiness has been pleased to grant him? Everybody indeed that has a grain of sense of religion, and reflects seriously on it.

I come now to their *Auricular Confession*, and of the ways and methods they practice and observe in the confessing of their sins. There is among them two ranks of people, learned and unlearned. The learned confess by these three general heads: thought, word, and deed, reducing into them all sorts of sins. The unlearned confess the ten commandments, discovering by them all the mortal sins which they have committed since their last confession. I say mortal sins, for as to the venial sins or sins of a small matter, the opinion of their casuistical authors* is, they are washed away by the sign of the cross, or by sprinkling the face with holy water. To the discovery of the mortal sins, the father confessor doth very much help the penitent; for he sometimes, out of pure zeal, but most commonly out of curiosity, asks them many questions, to know whether they do remember all their sins or not? **By these and the like questions, the confessors do more harm than good, especially to the ignorant people and young women**; for perhaps they do not know what simple fornication is? What voluntary or involuntary pollution?

What impure desire? What simple motion of our hearts? What relapse, recurrence, or reiteration of sins, and the like; and by the confessor's indiscreet questions, the penitents learn things of which they never had dreamed before; and when they come to that tribunal with a sincere, ignorant heart, to receive advice and instruction, they go home with a light knowledge, and **an idea of sins unknown to them before.**

* *Pares, Irribarren, and Salasar*, in his *Compend.Moral.* Section 12, *devitiis et peccatis*, gives a catalog of venial sins, and says, among others, that to eat flesh on a day prohibited by the church, without minding it, was so. To kill a man, throwing a stone through the window, or being drunk, or in the first motion of his passion, are venial sins, &c.

I said, that the confessors do ask questions most commonly out of curiosity, though they are warned by their casuistical authors to be prudent, discreet, and very cautious in the questions they ask, especially if the penitent be a young woman, or an ignorant; for as Pineda says, "It is better to let them go ignorant than instructed in new sins." But contrary to this good maxim, they are so indiscreet in this point, that I saw in the city of Lisbon, in Portugal, a girl of ten years of age, coming from church, ask her mother what "deflowering" was? For the father confessor had asked her whether she was deflowered or not? And the mother, more discreet than the confessor, told the girl, that the meaning was, whether she took delight in smelling flowers or not? And so she stopped her child's curiosity. But of this and many other indiscretions, I shall speak more particularly by and by.

Now observe, that as a penitent cannot hide any thing from the spiritual judge, else he would make a sacrilegious confession; so I cannot hide any thing from the public, which is to be my hearer and the temporal judge of my work, else I should betray my conscience: therefore, (to the best of my memory, and as one that expects to be called before the dreadful tribunal of God, on account of what I now write and say, if I do not say and write the truth from the bottom of my heart,) I shall give a faithful, plain account of the Romans' auricular confession, and of the most usual questions and answers between the confessors and penitents; and this I shall do in so plain a style, that everybody may go along with me.

And first, it is very proper to give an account of what the penitents do from the time they come into the church till they begin their confession. When the penitent comes into the church, he takes holy water and sprinkles over his face, and, making the sign of the cross, says, *per signum crucis de inimicis nostris libera nos Deus noster: In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.* – Amen. i. e. By the sign of the cross, deliver us, our God, from our enemies, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost–Amen. Then the penitent goes on, and kneels down before the great altar, where the great host, (of which I shall speak in another place) is kept in a neat and rich tabernacle, with a brass or silver lamp, hanging before it and burning continually night and day. There he makes a prayer, first to the holy sacrament of the altar (as they call it) after, to the Virgin Mary, and to the titular saints of the church. Then turns about upon his knees, and visits five altars, or if there is but one altar in the

church, five times that altar, and says before each of them five times, *Pater noster*, (Our Father) &c. and five times *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) &c. with *Gloria Patria* (Glory be), &c.

Then he rises and goes to the confessional: i. e. the confessing place, where the confessor sits in a chair like our hackney chairs, which is most commonly placed in some of the chapels, and in the darkest place of the church. The chairs, generally speaking, have an iron grate at each side, but none at all before: and some days of devotion, or on a great festival, there is such a crowd of people that you may see three penitents at once about the chair, one at each gate, and the other at the door, though only one confesses at a time, whispering in the confessor's ear, that the others should not hear what he says; and when one is done, the other begins, and so on: but most commonly they confess at the door of the chair, one after another; for thus the confessor has an opportunity of knowing the penitent. And though many gentlewomen, either out of bashfulness, shame, or modesty, do endeavor to hide their faces with a fan or veil, notwithstanding all this, they are known by the confessor, who, if curious, by crafty questions, brings them to tell him their names and houses, and this in the very act of confession, or else he examines their faces when the confession is over while the penitents are kissing his hand or sleeve; and if he cannot know them in this way, he goes himself to give the sacrament, and then every one being obliged to show her face, is known by the curious confessor, who doth this not without a private view and design, as will appear at the end of some private confessions.

The penitent then kneeling, bows herself to the ground beside the confessor, and making again the sign of the cross in the aforesaid form; and having in her hand the beads, or rosary of the Virgin Mary, begins the general confession of sins, which some say in Latin, and some in the vulgar tongue; therefore it seems proper to give a copy of it both in Latin and English:

Confiteor Deo Omnipotenti; beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaeli Archangelo, beato Joanni Baptistae, Sanctis apostolis Petro et Paulo, omnibus Sanctis, et tibi. Pater: quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo et opere, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa : Ideo precor beatam Mariam semper Virginem, beatum Michaelem Archangelum, beatum, Joannem Baptistam, sanctos apostolos Petrum et Paulum, omnes sanctos, et te, Pater, orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum. Amen.

I do Confess to God Almighty, to the blessed Mary, always a Virgin, to the blessed Archangel Michael, to the blessed John Baptist, to the holy apostles Peter and Paul, to all the saints, and to thee, O Father, that I have too much sinned by thought word, and deed, by my fault, by my fault, by my greatest fault. Therefore I beseech the blessed Mary, always a Virgin, the blessed Archangel Michael, the blessed John Baptist, the holy apostles Peter and Paul, all the saints, and thee, O Father, to pray to God our Lord, for me. Amen.

(Note: Thankfully I didn't have to say all this to the priest when I went to confession! I just said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been (# of weeks/months/years) since my last confession. I ...[list of my sins]. I was fearful that if I wasn't perfectly honest, I would die without confessing

some mortal sin and wind up in hell.)

This done, the penitent raises him from his prostration to his knees, and touching with his lips, either the ear or the cheek of the Spiritual Father, begins to discover his sins by the ten commandments: And here it may be necessary to give a translation of their ten commandments, word for word.

The commandments of the law of God are ten: The three first do pertain to the honor of God; and the other seven to the benefit of our neighbor.

- I. Thou shalt love God above all things.
- II. Thou shalt not swear.
- III. Thou shalt sanctify the holy days.
- IV. Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother.
- V. Thou shalt not kill.
- VI. Thou shalt not commit fornication.
- VII. Thou shalt not steal.
- VIII. Thou shalt not bear false witness, nor lie.
- IX, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.
- X. Thou shalt not covet the things which are another'.

These ten commandments are comprised in two, viz.: To serve and love God, and thy neighbor as thyself. Amen,

Now, not to forget any thing that may instruct the public, it is to the purpose to give an account of the little children's confessions; I mean of those that have not yet attained the seventh year of their age; for at seven they begin most commonly to receive the sacrament, and confess in private with all the formalities of their church.

There is in every city, in every parish, in every town and village, a Lent preacher; and there is but one difference among them, viz. : that some preachers preach every day in Lent, some three sermons a week; some two, viz.: on Wednesdays and Sundays, and some only on Sundays, and the holy days that happen to fall in Lent. The preacher of the parish pitches upon one day of the week, most commonly in the middle of Lent, to hear the children's confessions, and gives notice to the congregation the Sunday before, that every father of a family may send his children, both boys and girls, to church, on the day appointed in the afternoon. The mothers dress their children the best they can that day, and give them the offering money for the expiation of their sins. That afternoon is a holy day in the parish, not by precept, but by custom, for no parishioner, either old or young, man or woman, misseth to go and hear the children's confessions. For it is reckoned, among them a greater diversion than a comedy, as you may judge by the following account.

The day appointed, the children repair to church at three of the clock, where the preacher is waiting for them with a long reed in his hand, and when all are together, (sometimes 150 in number, and sometimes less,) the reverend father placeth them in a circle round himself, and then kneeling down, (the children also doing the same,) makes the sign of the cross, and says a short prayer. This done, he exhorteth the children to hide no sin from him, but to

tell him all they have committed. Then he strikes, with his reed, the child whom he designs to confess the first, and asks him the following questions:

Confessor, How long is it since you last confessed?

Boy, Father, a whole year, or the last Lent.

Conf. And how many sins have you committed from that time till now?

Boy. Two dozen.

Now the Confessor asks round about.

Conf. And you?

Boy. A thousand and ten.

Another will say, a bag full of small lies, and ten big sins; and so one after another answers, and tells many childish things.

Conf. But pray, you say that you have committed ten big sins; tell me how big?

Boy. As big as a tree.

Conf. But tell me the sins.

Boy. There is one sin I committed, which I dare not tell your reverence before all the people; for somebody here present will kill me if he heareth me.

Conf, Well, come out of the circle, and tell it me.

They both go out, and with a loud voice, he tells him, that such a day he stole a nest of sparrows from a tree of another boy's, and that if he knew it, he would kill him. Then both come again into the circle, and the father asks other boys and girls so many ridiculous questions, and the children answer him so many pleasant, innocent things, that the congregation laughs all the while. One will say that his sins are red, another, that one of his sins is white, one black, and one green, and in these trifling questions they spend two hours time. When the congregation is weary of laughing, the Confessor gives the children a correction, and bids them not to sin any more, for a black boy takes along with him the wicked children: Then he asks the offering, and after he has got all from them, gives them the penance for their sins. To one, he says, I give you for penance, to eat a sweet cake; to another, not to go to school the day following; to another, to desire his mother to buy him a new hat, and such things as these; and pronouncing the words of absolution, he dismisseth the congregation with *Amen* so be it, every year.

(Wow! Times have changed! The priest didn't do this when I was a kid!)

These are the first foundations of the Romish religion for youth. Now, 0

reader ! You may make reflections upon it, and the more you will reflect, so much more you will hate the corruptions of that communion, and it shall evidently appear to you, that the serious, religious instruction of our church, as to the youth, is reasonable, solid, and without reproach. Oh! that all Protestants would remember the rules they learned from their youth, and practice them while they live! Sure I am, they should be like angels on earth, and blessed forever after death in heaven.