

The Good Confessor, According to St. Alphonsus...

The New Theological Movement reported on August 1, 2011:

St. Alphonsus teaches that there are four roles which the priest must perform with excellence in order to be a good confessor: He is a father, a physician, a teacher, and a judge. To fulfill these aspects of his duty as a confessor, the priest must, of course, be holy – but personal holiness alone will not suffice. Indeed, the confessor must be well-learned in the matters of moral theology. Here, we recall that St. Teresa thought it better to have a confessor who was learned but not holy, than one who was holy but not learned.

On the feast of the Doctor of Moral Theology, we consider the advice which St. Alphonsus gives to confessors. We should hope that priests would find a renewed zeal to read the works of the Patron Saint of confessors.

Summary of St. Alphonsus' advice to confessors

1. It is extremely dangerous to hear confessions. A priest will have to render an account to God for every confession he has heard. Without holiness and learning, the priest puts both his soul and the souls of his penitents in grave danger. Indeed, it would be better if such priests did not hear confessions at all.
2. Knowledge: The priest must be learned in order to hear confessions well – this applies especially to his role as teacher. It will not be enough for the confessor to have simply a general knowledge of moral theology, rather he requires a good understanding of applied morals and of the cases discussed in the manuals. For a priest to hear confessions without having consulted the classical works of moral theology (among which, St. Alphonsus' hold primacy of place) is an act of grave presumption – he risks not only his soul, but also the souls of his penitents.
3. Charity and firmness: The confessor must be filled with charity, which means he must be holy. He is to receive all persons (both saints and sinners, the wise and the ignorant, the rich and the poor) with kindness and to advise them without fear or concern for personal gain. Particular care is required when hearing the confessions of women, since there is danger of impurity.
4. Fortitude: The confessor must know when and how to withhold (i. e. differ) absolution. A confessor exposes himself to grave danger of damnation by either being too rigorous or too lax. As one confessor sins by being too harsh, so too the priest who absolves a penitent who is not disposed for absolution is certainly guilty of sin. “Generally speaking, the greater the rigor with which the confessor treats his penitents, when there is question of the danger of formal sins, particularly against chastity, the more he will promote their sanctification.”

Above all else, the confessor must be filled with a zeal for the salvation of souls!

Excerpts from “The Dignity and Duties of the Priest” by St. Alphonsus

The danger to which a priest exposes himself by hearing confessions:

The great Pontiff, St. Pius V, said: “Give us fit confessors, and surely the whole of Christianity will be reformed.” He who wishes to be a good confessor must, in the first place, consider that the office of a confessor is very difficult and dangerous, and that on account of its difficulty and danger the Council of Trent has called it an office to be dreaded even by angels.

“And what,” says St. Laurence Justinian, “can be more perilous than to assume the responsibility of rendering to God an account of the life of others?” St. Gregory says that no error is more dangerous than that which is committed in the direction of souls. It is certain that if a soul be lost through the fault of her confessor, God will demand of him an account of that soul. [...] Hence, according to St. Gregory, a confessor has to render to God an account of as many souls as he has penitents.

This is not applicable to those good priests who, penetrated with a holy fear, labor to qualify themselves for this great office, and afterwards devote themselves to the exercise of it, through the sole desire of bringing souls to God. It is intended only for those who undertake to hear confessions through worldly motives, or temporal interest, or self-esteem, or, as sometimes happens, without the necessary learning.

The knowledge required to hear confessions well

St. Laurence Justinian says: “Many graces and not a little knowledge is needed by him who desires to raise souls to life.” He, then, who wishes to hear confessions, stands in need of extensive knowledge. Some imagine the science of Moral Theology to be easy, but Gerson justly says that it is the most difficult of all sciences. And before him St. Gregory said: “The directing of souls is the art of arts.” St. Gregory Nazianzen writes: “To direct men seems to me to be the greatest of all sciences.”

St. Francis de Sales also used to say that the office of confessor is of all offices the most important and the most difficult. It is the most important, because on it depends the eternal salvation of souls, which is the end of all the sciences. It is the most difficult, because the science of Moral Theology requires a knowledge of many other sciences, and embraces an immense variety of matter. It is also most difficult, because different decisions must be given, according to the different circumstances of the cases that occur; for, a principle by which a case involving a certain circumstance may be decided will not answer for the solution of another case containing a different circumstance.

Some disdain to read the works of the moralists, saying that to hear confessions is enough to know the general principles of Moral Theology, by which, they add, the particular cases may be resolved. I answer: It is certain that all cases must be decided by means of

principles, but there is great difficulty in applying to particular cases just principles, of solution. This the moralists have done. They have labored to explain the principles by which many particular cases may be resolved. [...]

We must, then, be persuaded that to hear confessions great science and also great prudence are required; for with knowledge without prudence a confessor shall do but little good, and to some his ministry will be more injurious than beneficial.

The charity and firmness that the confessor should have

Sanctity is still more necessary, on account of the great fortitude which a confessor requires in the exercise of his ministry. “Only he that, is a great saint,” says St. Laurence Justinian, “can without injury to, himself occupy himself with the care of souls.”

A confessor requires a great fund of charity in receiving all — the poor, the ignorant, and the vicious.

Some hear the confessions only of pious persons; but when a poor peasant comes with a conscience loaded with sins, they hear him with impatience, and send him away with reproaches. [...] When a sinner comes to confession, the more abandoned he is, the more [the good confessors] labor to assist him, and the greater the charity with which they treat him. “You are not,” says Hugo of St. Victor, “appointed judges of crimes, to chastise, but, as it were, judges of maladies to heal.”

It is indeed necessary to admonish the sinner, in order to make him understand his miserable state, and the danger of damnation to which he is exposed; but he must be always admonished with charity, he must be excited to confidence in the divine mercy, and must be taught the means by which he may amend his life . And though the confessor should be obliged to defer absolution, he ought to dismiss the penitent with sweetness; fixing a day for him to return, and pointing out the remedies that he must practise in the mean time, in order to prepare himself for absolution. Sinners are saved in this way, but not by harshness and reproaches, which drive them to despair. [...]

On allotting enough time for the hearing of each confession

But some will say, if we treat sinners in this manner a great deal of our time will be taken up, and others who are waiting cannot be heard. But in answer I say, that it is better to hear one confession well than to hear a great number imperfectly. But the most appropriate answer is, that the confessor has not to give an account to God of the persons who are waiting, but only of the person whose confession he has begun to hear.

Fortitude is required of the confessor

The confessor also stand in need of great fortitude: And this first of all in hearing the confessions of women. How many priests have lost their souls in hearing these confessions! We must treat in the confessional with young girls and young women; we

must hear their temptations and often the avowal of their falls; for they also are of flesh and blood. [...]

On refusing absolution

Great fortitude is necessary in correcting penitents and in refusing absolution to those who have not the requisite dispositions, without any regard to their rank or power, or to the loss or injury which the confessor may sustain, or to the imputations of indiscretion or of ignorance which may be cast upon him. “Seek not,” says the Holy Ghost, “to be made a judge unless thou hast strength enough to extirpate iniquities, lest thou fear the person of the powerful.”

A Father of our Congregation had occasion to hear in the sacristy the confession of a priest, whom he refused to absolve. The priest, rising up in a proud and haughty manner, said to him: “Be-gone! You are a brute.” But there is no remedy: confessors must submit to such inconveniences and insults. For it often happens that they are bound to refuse or to defer absolution, either because the penitent will not do what they require of him, or because he is a relapsing sinner, or because he is in the proximate occasion of sin. And here it is necessary to examine how a confessor should treat relapsing sinners, and those who are in the occasion of sin. For, in order to save his penitents, the confessor should attend with the greatest care to relapsing sinners, and to those who are in the occasion of sin.

Danger in being too harsh as well as in being too lax

But, before we enter on this subject, it is necessary to remark, that a confessor exposes himself to as much danger of damnation by treating his penitents with too much rigor as he does by treating them with excessive indulgence.

Too much indulgence, says St. Bonaventure, begets presumption, and too much rigor leads to despair. [...] There is no doubt that many err by being too indulgent: and such persons cause great havoc—and I say even the greatest havoc; for libertines, who are the most numerous class, go in crowds to these lax confessors, and find in them their own perdition. But it is also certain that confessors who are too rigid cause great evil. [...] Too much rigor, says Gerson, serves, only to bring souls to despair, and from despair to the abyss of vice. [...]

Such also is the doctrine of St. Raymond, “Do not be so prone,” says the saint, “to declare mortal sins, unless it be clear from Scripture.” St. Antonine teaches the same. “It is very dangerous,” he says, “to decide whether or not something is mortal, if this be not clear from the authority of Scripture, of a canon, or of an evident reason.” “For,” as the saint adds, “he who, without some of the above-mentioned grounds, pronounces an action to be a mortal sin, exposes, souls to the danger of damnation.” [...]

Finally, the same doctrine has been laid down more clearly by Gabriel Biel, who flourished in the year 1480. “The opinion,” he says. “that is more probable to me is, that

we must never condemn as a mortal sin anything for which we cannot allege either a very evident reason or the formal testimony of Scripture.”