

IN NOMINE JESU

## OFFICE OF THE KEYS, CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Our homily for this Wednesday in Lent is taken from our inspired readings, with our thoughts guided by this verse:

*Blessed be the one forgiven the lawlessnesses, and whose sins are covered.<sup>1</sup>*

Of the six Chief parts of Dr. Luther's Small Catechism, the Fifth Chief Part, "The Office of the Keys/Confession and Absolution has fallen into the most disuse in our day. There are many reasons why, but a prime one is the spirit of our age. That is, those who live in an era of increasing lack of personal responsibility, are less likely than our Lutheran forefathers (and by that I mean confessing Christians) to confess our sins using the treasures of the Church given to her by Christ Jesus. Specifically, the priceless consolation of these words by individuals before their pastors and/or confessors is missing from most of our lives:

*Jesus says, Truly I say to all of you, whatsoever things you may have bound upon the earth will be having been bound in heaven; whatsoever things you may have loosed upon the earth will be having been loosed in heaven.<sup>2</sup>*

General Protestant understandings about the means of grace, and Christ's own gifts to the Church have fully and almost completely infected the confessing congregations of our day. That is the spirit that holds to misbelief about Holy Scripture maintains that it is not necessary, nor even salutary or helpful, for a Christian

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<sup>1</sup> *Psalm 32:1.*

<sup>2</sup> *Matthew 18:18.*

to confess his or her sins to a pastor in order to hear Christ's Word of Holy Absolution. However, that is not the traditional position of the Church with regard to the free promises of the Good News of individual forgiveness that may be declared in the Church. Our confession of biblical truth, your confession if you are honest and stick to the clear meaning of the texts for today, stands as it has for centuries:

*Since absolution or the power of the keys, which was instituted by Christ in the Gospel, is a consolation and help against sin and a bad conscience, confession and absolution should by no means be allowed to fall into disuse in the church, especially for the sake of timid consciences and for the sake of untrained young people who need to be examined and instructed in Christian doctrine.*<sup>3</sup>

That last part is exactly what we have been doing in our catechism classes here. It is why we choose to review the Catechism's pure doctrines on these Wednesdays of Lent. And, it is why we, by no means, have abandoned the salutary practice of private confession and absolution in this place. In the spirit of the Confessions, guided by the clear, inerrant, inspired Word of God, individual absolution is available here whenever a repentant sinner so desires the sacrament. In so making confession, our practice is to follow the guidelines of the ancient confessions of the Church, in particular as they are declared now:

*However, the enumeration of sins should be left free to everybody to do or not as he will. As long as we are in the flesh we shall not be untruthful if we say, "I am a poor man, full of sin. I see in my members another law," etc. (Rom. 7:23). Although private absolution*

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<sup>3</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church.* Fortress Press: Philadelphia

*is derived from the office of the keys, it should not be neglected; on the contrary, it should be highly esteemed and valued, like all other functions of the Christian church.*<sup>4</sup>

For many people, I fear, private absolution is viewed with even more terror than with disdain for the gift Christ means it to be. That is, many may think that they dare not speak of their sins before their pastor or confessor, for they believe that he will think the worse of them for their confession. However, the opposite cannot be more true. It is with great honor and respect for the penitent sinner that the pastor/confessor hears the confession. It is the confessor's privilege to announce Christ's own words of forgiveness to the one who has just confessed his or her sins. After all, receiving the Absolution (forgiveness) of Jesus is the only reason one confesses sins. This is summarized in the words that several of our youth have newly memorized:

*Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself, by no means doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.*<sup>5</sup>

Some among us cringe at that confession of the truth. They may be thinking something like, "who is he to advocate I bare my sins in his presence, he's just a man." The last part is true. The first part is misdirected. For the true pastor/confessor knows that he is the one called by Jesus to hear the sins of repentant

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<sup>4</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

<sup>5</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

sinner. He knows what you called him to do, that is to stand in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, to absolve the sins of repentant sinners, and to bind the unrepentant in their sins. That means that the pastor, and you who would be truly biblical hold a very high view of the Office of the Holy Ministry. We recognize that this Office is the only office established by Christ to represent Him to His people in the Church on earth. This is summed up in your public confession of the faith as you hold it to be true from the Bible and taught in the *Small Catechism*:

*What is the Office of the Keys?*

*The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.*

*Where is this written?*

*This is what St. John the Evangelist writes in chapter twenty: The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

*What do you believe according to these words?*

*I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.<sup>6</sup>*

Those words are not optional teachings for those who would be Christian and hold to the fullness of the faith. When Jesus established the Office of the Holy Ministry, He did so that His priceless treasures – of Law and Gospel proclaimed; of

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Luther's Small Catechism, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005. P. 29.

the Sacraments of Holy Baptism, of the Altar, of Holy Absolution – that His forgiveness of sins be publicly declared to the assembly of believers. Those who stand in the Apostolic band, the spiritual descendants of the Twelve, are the men whom God has called to pronounce His blessed gifts to His people. And, by His call, they are the ones to whom He has given the authority, with the personal pain that goes with it, to withhold said forgiveness to the unrepentant.

Those true teachings from Scripture ring foreign to ears accustomed to hearing about the importance and worth of the individual, and his or her freedom to approach God, on his or her terms, without any interference by anyone. And that attitude is foreign to the writers of the inspired Word, and contrary to Jesus' teaching. Lest you be thinking that you have nothing to confess before your confessor, St. John declares:

*If we might say that we have no sin, ourselves we deceive, and the truth does not remain in us. But, if we confess our sins, faithful He remains and just, that He might forgive us the sins, and He might cleanse us from every unrighteousness.*<sup>7</sup>

That having been said, what sins should you confess before your pastor or confessor?

*Before God we should acknowledge that we are guilty of all manner of sins, even those of which we are not aware, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. Before the confessor, however, we should confess only those sins of which we have knowledge and which trouble us.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I John 1:8-9

<sup>8</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church.* Fortress Press: Philadelphia

For those who are unfamiliar with the Order of Private Confession and Absolution used here, a copy may be provided to you at your request. This is a form that is not necessary for memorization. (Who would be able to work through a memory verse when he or she has worked up enough nerve to confess before the Lord's called servant?) Rather, it is a form that begins with the Word of God, continues with His Word throughout, and ends with the blessing:

*The God of peace will sanctify you wholly and keep your spirit, soul, and body sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. Go in + peace.*

The treasure is God's gift to you. The forgiveness is His for you. It is the pastor's calling to encourage, beseech and exhort you to hold fast to His means of grace. The use of the precious gift of Holy Absolution is yours, and Christ Jesus died to ensure that you will have it available all the days of your mortal life.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Lent V Wednesday

II Samuel 11:26-12:15; I John 1:5-10; Matthew 18:15-18

April 1, 2009

*Pastor Michael A. Morehouse*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**

*What are such sins?*

*Answer: Reflect on your condition in the light of the Ten Commandments: whether you are a father or mother, a son or daughter, a master or servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, lazy, ill-tempered, or quarrelsome; whether you have harmed anyone by word or deed; and whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted anything, or done other evil.<sup>9</sup>*

To begin with, I have said that in addition to the confession which we are discussing here there are two other kinds, which have an even greater right to be called the Christians' common confession. I refer to the practice of confessing to God alone or to our neighbor alone, begging for forgiveness. These two kinds are expressed in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," etc. Indeed, the whole Lord's Prayer is nothing else than such a confession. For what is our prayer but a confession that we neither have nor do what we ought and a plea for grace and a happy conscience? This kind of confession should and must take place incessantly as long as we live. For this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life, to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace.

Similarly the second confession, which each Christian makes toward his neighbor, is included in the Lord's prayer. We are to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come into God's presence to beg for forgiveness. Now, all of us are debtors one to another, therefore we should and we may confess publicly in everyone's presence, no one being afraid of anyone else. For it is true, as the proverb says, "If one man is upright, so are they all"; no one does to God or his neighbor what he ought. However, besides our universal guilt there is also a particular one, when a person has provoked another to anger and needs to beg his pardon. Thus we have in the Lord's Prayer a twofold absolution: our debts both to God and to our neighbor are forgiven when we forgive our neighbor and become reconciled with him.

Besides this public, daily, and necessary confession, there is also the secret confession which takes place privately before a single brother. When some problem or quarrel sets us at one another's throats and we cannot settle it, and yet we do not find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith, we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our complaint before a brother, seeking his advice, comfort, and strength. This kind of confession is not included in the commandment like the other two but is left to everyone to use whenever he needs it. Thus by divine ordinance Christ himself has entrusted absolution to his Christian church and commanded us to absolve one another from sins. So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires consolation, it has here a sure refuge when it hears in God's Word that through a man God looses and absolves him from his sins.<sup>10</sup>

Thus we teach what a wonderful, precious, and comforting thing confession is, and we urge that such a precious blessing should not be despised, especially when we consider our great need. If you are a Christian, you need neither my compulsion nor the pope's command at any point, but you will compel yourself and beg me for the privilege of sharing in it. However, if you despise it and proudly stay away from confession, then we must come to the conclusion that you are no Christian and that you ought not receive the sacrament. For you despise what no Christian ought to despise, and you show thereby that you can have no forgiveness of sin. And this is a sure sign that you also despise the Gospel.

In short, we approve of no coercion. However, if anyone refuses to hear and heed the warning of our preaching, we shall have nothing to do with him, nor may he have any share in the Gospel. If you are a Christian, you should be glad to run more than a hundred miles for confession, not under compulsion but rather coming and compelling us to offer it. For here the compulsion must be inverted; we must come under the

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<sup>9</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

<sup>10</sup>Tappert, T. G. 2000, c1959. *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia

command and you must come into freedom. We compel no man, but allow ourselves to be compelled, just as we are compelled to preach and administer the sacrament.

Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian. If I bring you to this point, I have also brought you to confession. Those who really want to be good Christians, free from their sins, and happy in their conscience, already have the true hunger and thirst. They snatch at the bread just like a hunted hart, burning with heat and thirst, as Ps. 42:2 says, “As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.” That is, as a hart trembles with eagerness for a fresh spring, so I yearn and tremble for God’s Word, absolution, the sacrament, etc. In this way, you see, confession would be rightly taught, and such a desire and love for it would be aroused that people would come running after us to get it, more than we would like. We shall let the papists torment and torture themselves and other people who ignore such a treasure and bar themselves from it. As for ourselves, however, let us lift up our hands in praise and thanks to God that we have attained to this blessed knowledge of confession.<sup>11</sup>

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